

Georgia: "Rose Revolution" Destabilizes Southern Caucasus

Part 1

By Simon Wheelan

Georgia's so-called "rose revolution," instigated in Washington and executed in Tbilisi, has not stemmed the country's malaise. Instead, the usurping of President Eduard Shevardnadze's regime with one even more firmly orientated towards Washington has intensified the struggle between Russia and the United States to dominate the strategically crucial southern Caucasus region.

The geo-political significance of Georgia cannot be underestimated. It sits astride the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines, situated between the Black and Caspian seas, containing two, possibly three breakaway provinces, and borders Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The construction of the oil and gas pipelines, shifting Caucasus energy resources away from Russia and Eurasia towards Western markets, must travel more than 1,000 miles through three unstable countries, skirting predominately Kurdish southeast Turkey and passing within 60 miles of Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, which borders Chechnya. Consequently, the geo-political struggle for control of the region has led to the resurrection of "The Great Game" as a term to describe the struggle between the Bush and Putin governments to dominate the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Regional commentators have remarked upon the relative inexperience of the interim government trio of Mikhail Saakashvili, acting president Nino Burdzhanadze and Zhurab Zhvania. These three former underlings of Shevardnadze will most likely make up the forthcoming government, with Saakashvili crowned president. Their overt reliance upon the Bush administration in Washington and their plans for the reintegration of Georgia can only further destabilise the Caucasus.

Saakashvili is threatening to reintegrate the province of Ajaria back into Georgia, by force if necessary. After taking power, he growled, "The revolution continues and will only be over when Georgia becomes happy, successful and fully

formed."

This threat equally applies regarding the longstanding breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Aslan Abashidze, the Ajarian governor who threw his lot in with Shevardnadze during the November elections, says the province will boycott the upcoming January 4 presidential and parliamentary elections called by the interim government.

Until shortly before the November election, Abashidze and Shevardnadze were archenemies while Saakashvili was one of the then president's golden boys. Abashidze has close relations with the Putin government, and Russian troops are stationed in the Ajarian capital of Batumi. Saakashvili is vowing to expel all Russian troops from Georgian soil.

Whilst campaigning in Batumi for November's election, Saakashvili's henchmen clashed with Ajarian security forces. Handguns were drawn, but nobody was seriously hurt during a mass brawl.

Abashidze recently spent time in Moscow with Russian political and business leaders, also visiting Armenia and Azerbaijan on Shevardnadze's behalf before he was deposed. Rail and air links between Batumi and Tbilisi are severed. Both Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities put their armed forces on alert once news from Tbilisi confirmed the success of the coup.

In addition, the country is fraught with numerous divisions upon which demagogues can flourish under circumstances of want and inequality. Georgia's ethnic Azeri-dominated area of Kvemo Kartli and the ethnic Armenian region of Samtke-Javakheti, where Russia also has troops stationed, are unstable. The breakaway province of Abkhazia is pre-

dominately Muslim, whilst the Orthodox Georgian and Russian church dominates in Tbilisi. Many South Ossetians have a greater affinity with the Russian region of North Ossetia than with Tbilisi.

The Georgian economy is at serious risk of financially defaulting, with debts accounting for 60 percent of GDP. The provisional government has continued with the austerity policies of its predecessor Shevardnadze and vowed to adhere to the demands of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, not to mention Washington. The administration, its key members nurtured under the tutelage of Shevardnadze, has warned Georgians to tighten their belts and not to expect any dramatic progress in living standards.

Emulating the Shevardnadze regime, the interim government shared out official posts between their relatives and close associates. Even then, some elements were dissatisfied and tension emerged between the various factions.

Tensions Grow Between Russia and the United States

Since the ousting of Shevardnadze, the Russian and American governments' struggle for Tbilisi has accelerated. Bush apparently told Georgian interim leader Nino Burdzhanadze, "If you have a problem, call the White House and we will help immediately." For his part, the Russian president Vladimir Putin has put the new Tbilisi incumbents under pressure at every possible opportunity.

US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld recently completed a regional tour of the Caucasus and Central Asia. He was originally scheduled to fly from Baku, Azerbaijan, to visit the Uzbeki leader Islam Karimov, but thick fog over the

Uzbek capital Tashkent prevented any landing. Instead, Rumsfeld was flown to Tbilisi to visit those who, with the assistance of his government, had unseated Shevardnadze.

Speaking aggressively on behalf of the new comprador regime in Tbilisi, Rumsfeld informed Moscow in no uncertain terms that it must immediately abide by the Istanbul Accord of 1999 to withdraw its troops from Georgia. To which Igor Ivanov, the Russian foreign secretary retorted, "As a professional diplomat, I recommend everyone read the documents, preferably the original." The Putin government claims to require at least a decade to withdraw from Georgian territory, and that the accord allows it to retain a smaller number of troops in the country.

Rumsfeld continued by praising Georgia as "a staunch friend of the West," commending its contribution towards the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan. (Shevardnadze dispatched a special operations forces contingent to Iraq after the coalition invasion.)

As Rumsfeld visited, a team of State Department, Pentagon, Treasury and National Security Council officials were already in Tbilisi consulting with the interim administration over future policies.

Rumsfeld also found time to visit the Train and Equip military complex where the Bush regime has special operations and marines training four battalions of Georgian troops. Acting president Burdzhanadze took the occasion to express her deepest wish that the two-year \$64 million programme will continue in the future, eventually leading to the training of a mechanised army unit. Using this foothold, the Bush administration intends to keep military advisers and troops permanently in Georgia.

Meeting with Secretary of State Colin Powell in Maastricht, just after the Tbilisi coup, at a meeting of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Burdzhanadze called for

Continued on Page 4

If the capture by American forces of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein on December 13 is of any contribution to the Iraq quagmire, it is a further inflection of an already augmented array of paradoxes.

Saddam remains a symbol of the vicious dictator who brutally crushed any hint or suggestion of dissent. The survivors and the descendants of these victims are now dancing in the streets of Iraq, celebrating the end of an era, but they are hardly celebrating the dawning of a new one.

Indeed, Iraqis must find themselves caught up in their own web of contradictions; they aspired to end the reign of the disposed Iraqi regime, and now they find themselves obligated to initiate a new fight, a much more arduous and grueling one.

Nothing sums up this grotesque contradiction that Iraqis experience like a giant banner with a boldly inscribed slogan: "No to Saddam, No to Occupation." Behind this banner marched thousands of Iraqis, only days after the fall of Baghdad last April. The banner communicated what was once assumed a transitory adjustment to concede to the new Iraq reality. Later, it exploded into full-fledged guerrilla warfare, and the end is nowhere in sight.

As if the incongruity were not absurd enough, governments around the world, including countries whose records

The Capture of Saddam: Is it Really Over?

By Ramzy Baroud

are dotted with every human rights violation conceivable, hailed the capture of Saddam as a victory for peace, justice and humanity as a whole. This includes countries with very real, not alleged, weapons of mass destruction. It includes occupiers who have violated international law more times than one can count. The irony is unequalled.

In the center of the paradox, however, resides President George W. Bush's government, uncontested. Running quickly out of pretexts for a war that has brought untold pain and suffering to the already starving Iraqis and to the families of American casualties, the capture of Saddam Hussein might offer a temporary sense of validation, a fleeting boost to the President's approval rating in the advent of an expectedly challenging presidential run.

"We just had no choice in Iraq. The country swims in oil," Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz told an Asian economic summit last June, words that still define the ill-advised and patently flawed Iraq war. Wolfowitz's words stand at odds with President Bush's response to the capture of the haggard-looking,

Iraqi ruler: "A dark and painful era is over. A hopeful day has arrived."

But an equally dark era has also arrived, a fact omitted by the government's official declarations, yet well documented by internationally respected human rights groups, of whom Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are the meager minority. The New York-based HRW said in a report released on December 12 that more than 1,000 Iraqi civilians were killed or wounded by the coalition's use of only one type of weapon, 13,000 cluster munitions, containing nearly two million submunitions. Even the capture of Saddam can hardly ease such a reality.

The dramatized, Hollywood-like conclusion of the Saddam Hussein episode, aside from its infusion of the unavoidable paradoxes, will not be the winning card needed to quell the raging insurgency in Iraq. Sen. Jay Rockefeller, the vice-chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, was one of the very first to come to terms with this.

"Given the location and circumstances of his capture, it makes it clear that Saddam was not managing the insurgency, and that he had very little con-

trol or influences," according to Rockefeller. "That is significant and disturbing because it means the insurgents are not fighting for Saddam; they are fighting against the United States."

But will the capture of Saddam resolve any of these dilemmas? Will it inspire a case of collective self-reflection among rulers as brutal as the Iraqi leader was? Will it help Iraqis reconcile their differences and set forth a national agenda based on a future free of tyranny and oppression? Will it deprive the United States government of its last pretext to justify its occupation of Iraq or to explain the causes of the unavoidably authentic resistance? Will it bring an end to the war or the bloodshed?

It is not the apprehension of "a tired man" living in a dirt room underground that will matter; it is the future of a nation that finally climbed out of a hole, only to fall into a bottomless abyss. Who will define this future: the occupier or the occupied? At the end of the day, an honest answer to this seemingly effortless question is really all that matters.

Ramzy Baroud is an American-Arab journalist and the editor-in-chief of the Palestine Chronicle online newspaper. This article was published in Yellow Times on December 29, 2003.