

Georgia's Saakashvili: Freedom Fighter or Rights Abuser?

By Tom Lasseter

04/10/08 "McClatchy Newspapers" -- - TBILISI, Georgia — An influential group of Georgian opposition leaders has mounted a blistering political campaign against U.S.-backed President Mikheil Saakashvili, accusing his government of running an autocratic regime that tramples human rights and stifles democracy.

The timing could embarrass the Bush administration, which is pressing NATO members to approve an action plan for Georgia — a key step toward full membership — at the organization's meeting in December.

The claims by many in the opposition, some of which have been affirmed by a top Georgian human-rights official, go to the heart of Washington's rationale for backing Saakashvili as a democratic force in a region where Russia is trying to re-establish dominance.

Saakashvili had widespread support even among the opposition immediately after the August war with Russia, but the country's domestic problems were quick to resurface, said Salome Zurabishvili, who previously served as foreign minister under Saakashvili.

"The balance has shifted," she said. "The main problem for Georgia is a lack of democracy."

Zurabishvili, like other opposition leaders, emphasized that she's pro-Western and doesn't support Russia, which seized two Georgian rebel enclaves and marched its forces within 25 miles of Tbilisi during the invasion.

"I think the big confusion in the American policy . . . is to confuse support for a country and its democracy with the support for a small group of people," Zurabishvili said of Saakashvili, a U.S.-educated lawyer, and his allies.

The U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi, which monitors the government's human rights record, had no comment for this story.

Other opposition members, especially those in parliament, strike a softer tone.

"Of course we disagree about a lot of things with the president's party, but we agree about" the need to maintain cooperation with Saakashvili after the war with Russia, said Gia Tortladze, an opposition member in parliament.

Saakashvili has said repeatedly that he's committed to building a democratic state. He told the U.N. General Assembly last month that his government is launching "expanded democratic initiatives" that include greater independence for the parliament and judiciary, greater funding

for opposition parties and a series of legal reforms including jury trials and lifetime judicial appointments. It will amount to a "Second Rose Revolution," he said, referring to the 2003 movement that ousted pro-Russian leadership.

His opponents are unconvinced, however.

While Georgians have more freedoms today than they did under Soviet rule, Saakashvili's critics say that in the years since the Rose Revolution, he's dramatically consolidated state power under his office, taken control of national television and demonized his opponents.

"He is building an authoritarian regime here," said Levan Gachechiladze, an opposition candidate for president earlier this year who finished second with about 25 percent of the vote. "The West closed its eyes because they were not ready . . . to change their so-called democratic star."

Saakashvili's unchecked centralization of power, people such as Gachechiladze maintain, allowed the president to launch an ill-advised military strike against the separatist region of North Ossetia in August. That move led to a five-day war with Russia that ended in crushing defeat.

Shota Utiashvili, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry, warned that the dissenters could give Russia the opening to try to depose Saakashvili and destabilize Georgia, which it failed to achieve during the war. Utiashvili said the opposition leaders appeared to be acting on their own domestic agendas, but that there was a risk that Russian intelligence services could try to manipulate them.

"It's part of a broader campaign. For us it's clear that the FSB" — the successor to the KGB — "in Russia is handling the Georgia issues," Utiashvili said. "They are trying to start things by pulling these different strings."

Repeated attempts to interview Saakashvili or his advisers for this story were unsuccessful.

Officials in the Interior and Foreign ministries said that the opposition was trying to take advantage of the aftermath of the war — which they say was started by a Russian advance into their country — to gain political support. They also pointed out that opposition members of parliament had been far more conciliatory than the parties that either lost their seats in a May election or refused to accept them in protest of alleged government coercion of voters.

Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria said that polls he'd seen suggested that there was little support for the "radical opposition" compared with approval ratings for Saakashvili, which hover around 70 percent, a figure that the president's opponents dismiss as propaganda.

Interviews around the streets and shops of the capital this week suggested that public opinion is shifting slowly against Saakashvili, compared with conversations in late August.

"Saakashvili should resign, because we don't trust him anymore," said Muradi Kalandishvili,

who was sitting in his small hardware shop in west Tbilisi. "After people died in the war, he sponsored a rock concert and said that we won."

Kalandishvili also mentioned a date that several others who were interviewed in Tbilisi repeated: Nov. 7, 2007. During a government crackdown on opposition protests last November, police beat unarmed protesters, shot at them with rubber bullets and unleashed fire hoses.

Human Rights Watch released a report on the incident in which it said that the West previously had ignored "warning signs that the government was not only failing to live up to the principles of the rule of law and human rights it espoused during the Rose Revolution, but taking many serious steps to undermine these principles."

That included "quick resort to use of force by law enforcement agents," the report said.

Sozar Subari, the Georgian government's human-rights ombudsman, has documented what he terms severe human-rights abuses by government forces as well as elections in which police intimidated voters on a widespread basis and a corrupt elite that's allowed to use state offices to its own ends.

In several cases, Subari said in a report to parliament, armed men in ski masks beat up the administration's political enemies. He named two high-profile cases in 2005 and 2007. Subari said it was clear that the attackers were being protected from prosecution in such a way "that implies the involvement of several high-rank(ing) officials."

A Western diplomat in Tbilisi, a supporter of Saakashvili, said that the government had hurt itself by not dealing with those accusations publicly.

"There were reports . . . of the guys in the ski masks exacting punishment. I don't feel like we ever got good answers to those," said the diplomat, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject. "Without some evidence that in fact they were investigated and . . . getting some results that are made public, it only feeds the idea that these guys are operating outside of the law."

In an interview, Subari said that his reports mostly had been ignored by government officials or criticized for being overly political.

"They cannot agree with my reports, because if they say that it's true, or that one-half of it's true, if one-fourth of it's true, it means there is no democracy in Georgia," Subari said.