

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

Georgian Parliament Confirms State of Emergency

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Friday, November 9, 2007

MOSCOW: The Parliament in the republic of Georgia Friday approved a decree by President Mikheil Saakashvili to keep the nation under a state of emergency for as long as 15 days, resisting calls from inside and outside the country to restore personal and political rights.

The decree was approved by a vote of 149 to 0 in a session of the 235-seat Parliament that was boycotted by the opposition. Its approval was a rebuff to international organizations and foreign governments, including the United States, that had urged the government to end emergency rule.

The legislators met as prosecutors announced that they had opened a criminal investigation against Badri Patarkatsishvili, a wealthy Georgian who had pledged financial support to the opposition, on the grounds that he had plotted to overthrow the state.

Patarkatsishvili, who has been traveling in Israel this week, was on an airplane Friday and not immediately available for comment, a member of his staff said.

Saakashvili issued the emergency order Wednesday night after a police crackdown on an opposition demonstration in Tbilisi, the country's capital, led to demonstrations and clashes with police.

The decree banned public assembly, limited political speech and closed independent news television stations. The police seized the offices of the country's most popular station, the opposition Imedi-TV, which remained entirely off the air Friday.

A senior member of government said by telephone that the station was under criminal investigation, accused of collaborating with Patarkatsishvili and actively inciting unrest, and had little prospect of reopening soon, even after the state of emergency ends.

Under Georgian law, the order required parliamentary approval within 48 hours. The parliamentary vote Friday, with only a few hours remaining, effectively extended the state of emergency until Nov. 22, giving Saakashvili the option of exercising the full 15-day period allowed by the country's laws.

The speaker of Parliament, Nino Burdjanadze, said the order could not yet be lifted because there had been a coup attempt and the state remained at risk. "The threat that existed until now is still present despite the calm that has been restored," she said, according to wire reporters present at the session.

Saakashvili and other government officials had said earlier that the state of emergency could be ended before the full term, and Giga Bokeria, a member of Parliament and one of the president's close allies, said the government would in the days ahead almost certainly consider lifting the emergency.

"We are sure that it will be lifted sooner," he said by telephone after the vote.

On Thursday, Saakashvili called for a special presidential election on Jan. 5, saying he would test whether he retained a mandate, and for a referendum on the same day to determine the timing of parliamentary elections, which the opposition had demanded for next spring.

The surprise announcement marked an effort to alleviate the domestic unrest and international concern after the police action in Tbilisi, the country's capital, and the suspension of civil liberties. More than 500 people were injured in the crackdown and clashes, none of them fatally, the government said. In the aftermath, public assembly was banned by Saakashvili's emergency order and two opposition television stations were forced off the air.

Imedi-TV was occupied by special forces officers. The government accused it of inciting unrest after it broadcast a statement from Patarkatsishvili, calling for the end of Saakashvili's government.

Appearing on national television at 7 p.m. on Thursday, three hours after calling the American ambassador in Tbilisi and notifying him of his plans for snap elections, Saakashvili both defended the police action and expressed a degree of regret.

He said he had been forced to act against a plot organized by Russia to destabilize Georgia and threaten its independence and its experiment in democracy, and insisted that he was protecting the country and not his own power.

"My chair is worth nothing to me; we care about countries, not chairs," he said. "Demand and you will receive. You demanded early elections. Here they are: early elections. Come and decide who you want to vote for.

"I do not want to be the president of a country that limits mass media and that declares emergency rule," he added. "I can only rule the country if I have a renewed mandate from the people."

He called on international organizations to send as many election observers as possible to ensure that the campaign and the voting would be free, fair and clean.

Russia has denied playing a role in the protests, which Saakashvili has said were coordinated in part by Russian intelligence officers working with several opposition leaders.

"This is nothing but an attempt to cover their own helplessness in resolving internal problems," said Mikhail Kamynin, Russia's foreign ministry spokesman, on Russia's national nighttime news.

Relations between the Kremlin and Georgia, which was occupied for decades by the Soviet Union, are bitter. Saakashvili, in his nearly four years in office, has made membership of NATO and the European Union among his top foreign policy goals, and had eagerly developed relations with the United States.

The opposition has also said it was determined to remain free of Moscow's influence and protect Georgian independence.

Saakashvili's announcement of elections effectively shaved nearly a year off his presidential term. It also marked a sharp shift from his emphatic refusal to change election dates or compromise with opposition demands.

The opposition accuses Saakashvili, an energetic politician, of running Georgia through a clique and of punishing dissent and using the police, prosecutors and judges for political tasks. It also says that Saakashvili has hoarded power and become aloof in the four year since peaceful protests led to the collapse of the post-Soviet government of Eduard Shevardnadze and brought him to office.

The government clearly hoped the announcement would shift the opposition from a protest stance to a campaign stance, and demonstrate to voters and Georgia's international allies alike that Saakashvili, under intense pressure, was committed to democracy and had not chosen an autocratic path.

Although it was not clear whether Saakashvili's concession would calm the anger among Georgia's citizens after the events of the previous day, the declaration of a special election was cheered by opposition leaders, who called it a victory and vindication of their protests.

"Saakashvili, I think, understood when he woke up that he basically fought against the whole country," Tina Khidasheli, a leader of the Republican Party, one of the many parties in the opposition movement, said by telephone. "I think that is what broke him finally the reaction of the people."

There has not been an opposition politician in Georgia of Saakashvili's stature since he rose to power. But opponents said he had severely miscalculated with the crackdown, and that voters would reject him at the polls on Jan. 5. "I believe he is done," Khidasheli said. "I believe he has no chances."

Patarkatsishvili, the co-owner of Imedi-TV and widely seen as Georgia's wealthiest man, cautioned the opposition and its supporters against overconfidence. He issued a statement from outside the country warning that much remained uncertain about how the election would be conducted, and predicted that Saakashvili's government would prevent prominent candidates from seeking office.

Some of the potential candidates are too young under the election law, he said, and one, Salome Zourabichvili, a former foreign minister, has not held citizenship long enough to seek the office. In what appeared to be a reference to himself, he predicted that others would be declared "enemies of the state."

"The authorities are doing their utmost to prevent the real opposition from participating in the elections," Patarkatsishvili said, and added that the opposition "must consolidate and nominate a single candidate with a clear program."

One Western diplomat said that while Saakashvili's future as president was not guaranteed, he appeared for the moment to remain the country's pre-eminent politician. The diplomat expressed relief that Saakashvili had offered a political solution to the crisis.

"As I understand it, this was the result of a lot of discussion within the government," the diplomat said by telephone; he requested anonymity in keeping with diplomatic protocol. "There is obviously a calculated risk here. But he has reversed course."

Many questions remained about the campaign and election ahead. Lincoln Mitchell, a Columbia University professor who closely follows Georgian politics and lived in

Tbilisi from 2002 through 2004, said, for example, that to ensure a chance at a fair election Imedi-TV would have to be allowed to broadcast as an independent station. The station remained off the air tonight.

He said that Saakashvili had assessed the political field and scheduled an election that would be difficult to lose. "This election is not the election the opposition wants, because one-on-one no one can beat Saakashvili," he said by telephone. "Is this really a gesture? Or is it a clever trick?"

The shift in the government's position was made as Saakashvili and his government faced mounting international dismay. Aside from the question of who would win the election on Jan. 5 was the question of whether Saakashvili had tarnished his image permanently.

Witnesses, diplomats, journalists and demonstrators described a frightening clampdown, as riot police used tear gas, rubber bullets, batons and water cannon to chase demonstrators from the streets of Tbilisi. There were reports and video recordings of police officers beating demonstrators who offered no resistance and of demonstrators in custody or prone on the ground. The police also attacked some of the journalists on the streets, and seized or destroyed their equipment. There was also a brief clash Thursday between demonstrators and the police at a university in Batumi, on the Black Sea.

The United Nations, NATO, the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe all expressed concern at the country's descent into official violence or the imposition of a state of emergency. Thomas Hammarberg, the commissioner for human rights of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, decried the crackdown.

"My reaction is that, obviously, according to the reports we have received, there was excessive use of violence by the police against the demonstrators," he said by telephone.

Hammarberg said he was also alarmed that Georgia's human rights ombudsman, Sozar Subari, was severely beaten by the police, even after he identified himself, and that independent news sources had been shut down.

He said that international human rights observers remained uncertain how many people had been arrested and how they had been treated. "The blockade on news is a problem there, because the facts did not come out," he said.

There were indications that the authorities themselves, while they said that police action was justified, were disturbed by elements of the events.

Shota Utiashvili, a senior official in the Interior Ministry, said that the ministry planned to investigate allegations of police misconduct and brutality once the state of emergency was lifted. "We will sit down and investigate these cases once the crisis is over," he said by telephone.

He added that officers who beat journalists and seized or damaged their equipment had acted illegally. "Every officer had clear instructions not to touch the journalists, which they did not all follow, and we will investigate," he said.

Utiashvili said none of the opposition leaders were in custody. He added that a few dozen demonstrators had been arrested and would be charged in administrative court with charges, including hooliganism, that carry fines or sentences of not more than 30 days in jail.