

Georgia Opposition Sees Model in Egypt Uprising

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KIEV — Georgian opposition leader Nino Burjanadze says the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia are a model for deposing President Mikheil Saakashvili, a one-time ally whom she accused of manipulating previous elections.

The former speaker of parliament said she would on May 2 announce plans for a campaign of civil disobedience to force the government to call early presidential and parliamentary elections. Burjanadze, 46, said she would run for president.

"We, of course, hope for the understanding of the international community as it was in Egypt and Tunisia," Burjanadze said in an interview this week in Kiev.

Saakashvili, who was swept to power in the so-called Rose Revolution in 2003, has been under pressure since 2007, when protests turned violent as opponents accused him of political persecution and failing to raise living standards. NATO and the European Union criticized him for declaring a state of emergency that restricted public gatherings and broadcasters.

In response to the crisis, Saakashvili called an early ballot, winning re-election in January 2008 with 53.5 percent of the vote. His main opponent, Levan Gachechiladze, received 25.7 percent.

While the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said the contest was "in essence consistent" with standards for democratic elections, it noted "widespread allegations of intimidation and pressure" and shortcomings in vote counting and the post-election complaints process.

"We will set up real Western values, which are important for a normal country's development," Burjanadze said. "In Georgia, there is no freedom of speech; there is no freedom of justice. There are people and businessmen who lost their properties" illegally, she said.

Fifty-six percent of Georgians backed Saakashvili and 29 percent opposed him in a poll of 1,500 citizens conducted between Sept. 27 and Oct. 7 by the Tbilisi-based Institute of Polling and Marketing for Baltic Surveys/Gallup. The survey had a margin of error of 2.5 percentage points.

Saakashvili, 43, earned his law degree at Columbia University in New York and has sought closer ties with the European Union and NATO. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline crosses Georgia on its way to the Mediterranean, allowing Caspian Sea oil to bypass Russia.

//Misleading Comparison

"There is very little chance for Burjanadze to mount a serious challenge against Saakashvili's government," said Arastun Orujlu, head of the Center for Eastern and Western Studies in Baku, Azerbaijan's capital. "Unlike the authoritarian and corrupt regimes in the Mideast and North Africa, Georgia is a law-governed state."

Burjanadze has been one of Georgia's most radical opposition figures, calling for the overthrow of the government, said Lawrence Sheets, Caucasus project director for the International Crisis Group in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital.

"This statement about running in elections may reflect the fact that most people in Georgia don't want to see another revolutionary scenario," he said. "However, it is hard to believe the government will agree to early elections, which are already not that far off anyway."

Parliamentary elections are scheduled for next year, with a presidential vote in 2013. Burjanadze said the presidential election should be held before the parliamentary poll so Saakashvili can be removed before he has the chance to influence the legislative contest.

//Repairing Russia Ties

Burjanadze, who led Saakashvili's National Movement party in parliament until May 2008, moved into opposition after Georgia's five-day war with Russia in August of that year.

Russia sent troops into Georgia in what it said was a response to Georgia's offensive in the breakaway region of South Ossetia, where most people hold Russian passports. Russia recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, another Georgian region,

drawing condemnation from world leaders, including then-U.S. President George W. Bush.

Burjanadze met with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in March 2010 during a visit to Moscow. Repairing ties between Georgia and Russia is in the interests of both countries, she said at the time.

"We will develop a dialogue with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and we will conduct a dialogue with Russia," Burjanadze said Monday. "The situation is difficult. We seem to be in a dead end, but we need to find a way out. The aim is territorial integrity."

Burjanadze said she wouldn't block Russia's bid to join the World Trade Organization if she's elected president. Georgia, a WTO member, has the power to veto new applicants.

Russia has had "18 bloody years of negotiations" and has now "finalized all negotiations with all partners except Georgia," Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov said April 8.

Russian membership in the WTO "is a question of talks," Burjanadze said. "The membership will benefit not only Russia but the whole world."

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