

Clinton Urges Georgia to Keep Elections Clean

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BATUMI, Georgia — Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Tuesday urged Georgia to hold free and fair elections, and she also underlined U.S. rejection of Russia's "occupation" of two separatist Georgian regions.

Visiting the Black Sea resort of Batumi, Clinton made it clear that the United States hopes to see democracy strengthened after Mikheil Saakashvili's two terms as president end next year.

While praising Georgia's economic reforms and anti-corruption push, U.S. officials fear that the dominance of Saakashvili has made it hard for other leaders to emerge ahead of October's parliamentary vote and the 2013 presidential poll.

Saakashvili was elected after peaceful protests in 2003, an event dubbed the Rose Revolution.

"Though you did make history with the Rose Revolution, the more difficult and ultimately the more important work may well be ahead: the work of building the habits and practices

that sustain democracy over time," Clinton said in a speech.

Among the areas included in that work, she cited labor rights, independence of the judiciary and media freedoms.

"We urge Georgia's leaders to ensure that it will be a competitive campaign and that elections are free and fair, both on election day and in the months running up to it."

One possibility that worries officials in Washington is that Saakashvili, 44, might emulate Russian President Vladimir Putin by shifting to the prime minister's post to retain power when his presidential term expires.

A senior U.S. State Department official declined specific comment on Saakashvili's plans but said the United States had repeatedly emphasized to Georgian politicians "that the next transition should be a genuine one."

Critics accuse Saakashvili of curbing freedoms and leading Georgia into war with Russia in August 2008, when Georgian forces were routed in five days.

Moscow swiftly recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states and maintains military contingents in the breakaway regions.

Russian recognition of the two as independent countries has clouded Saakashvili's hopes of bringing Georgia into NATO and the European Union, which may be loath to accept a member with territorial disputes with Moscow.

"We reject Russia's occupation and militarization of Georgian territory, and we call on Russia to fulfill its obligations under the 2008 cease-fire agreement, including withdrawal of its forces to pre-conflict positions and free access for humanitarian assistance," Clinton said.

In the middle of a three-day trip to the South Caucasus, Clinton met five Georgian opposition members as a way of illustrating the U.S. desire to see competitive elections.

Billionaire politician Bidzina Ivanishvili did not attend, although there was representation of his Georgian Dream bloc, which has pledged to beat Saakashvili's United National Movement.

The high-level U.S. visit to Batumi, a booming beach town where five-star hotels are being built and real estate mogul Donald Trump plans to invest, aimed in part to illustrate the contrast between Georgia and the isolated Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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