

Ivanishvili Is Georgia's Chavez

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Weeks after the Georgian Dream coalition took power in Georgia, Bacho Akhalaia, a former interior and defense minister, was personally arrested by the prosecutor general and the justice minister at 3 a.m. in Tbilisi. As part of the same case, the head of the General Staff, Georgy Kalandadze, and 4th Brigade commander Zurab Shamatava were also arrested but later conditionally released.

Since the prosecutor and the justice minister went to the trouble of arresting the trio in the middle of the night, in the best Stalinist tradition, it would seem logical that we know what crimes they were charged with. Unfortunately, that information has been slow in coming.

On Tuesday, prosecutors accused Akhalaia of imprisoning, beating and starving 17 servicemen in an unheated banya in 2010.

The announcement came as pressure grew on new Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, who after arresting Akhalaia promised to divulge the full story within hours.

Instead, Akhalaia was charged with giving a tongue-lashing to six officers in his office about a year ago and hitting one of them on the head with a knife handle. The six officers were then

— and get this — taken to the Vaziani military base, "where they were again subjected to physical abuse, this time in front of a formation of soldiers."

Excuse me, but for what offense were the officers physically reprimanded? This was not a personal dispute. Such treatment is usually reserved for anyone who insults the honor of their uniform. Am I correct in understanding that Akhalaia is charged with punishing six lowlifes for insulting the honor of their uniform?

And a second question: Even if Akhalaia did hit an officer on the head with a knife handle, were the head of the General Staff and the 4th Army commander implicated in the same crime simply because they were standing next to Akhalaia when it happened?

Even Russia does not use such repressive measures against political opponents. Despite harassment by the authorities, anti-corruption whistle-blower Alexei Navalny and opposition activist Sergei Udaltsov both remain free. After 12 years in power, even President Vladimir Putin has not sunk to the same level of arbitrary rule that the popularly elected Ivanishvili has demonstrated after just one month in office. And this is a prime minister who promised to lower prices, triple pensions and rule Georgia from his personal mansion.

I think Georgia has suffered a catastrophe comparable to the one that befell Germany with the election of Adolf Hitler and Chile with the election of Salvador Allende.

There is no doubt that Ivanishvili will do two things. First, he will destroy the state machinery that President Mikheil Saakashvili created and that had done such a good job of serving people's interests. Second, he will have to find some way to distract Georgian voters who are waiting for him to fulfill his grossly exaggerated campaign promises. Georgians have stopped paying their taxes and paying off their loans. Georgian taxis stand idle while drivers wait for the price of gasoline to fall 30 percent. Some citizens are probably even waiting for Ivanishvili to raise the dead.

But the only thing that can distract the people is a witch hunt. Unfortunately, with the aid of democratic elections, Georgians have put their country in the same league as Venezuela, Iran and Russia.

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