

## GEORGIA'S REVOLUTION Laudable Accomplishment, Real Challenge

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The peaceful revolution in Georgia that culminated on Sunday with the resignation of President Eduard Shevardnadze was nothing short of spectacular.

The day before, tens of thousands gathered with a singular goal: not to allow the parliament elected in a highly disputed November 2 vote to convene.

As the police stood aside, the masses stormed the parliament building, many with flowers in hand. Inside, an enfeebled Shevardnadze continued to read his opening speech before being hustled out to a waiting car. While the leader of the opposition, Mikheil Saakashvili, reminded his followers the world was watching, Nino Burjanadze, fellow opposition leader and outgoing parliamentary chairwoman, announced her constitutional responsibility to temporarily assume the presidential post. President Shevardnadze resigned the next evening.

What occurred in Georgia was truly a people's revolution. The streets were filled with city-dwellers and villagers, pensioners and students, individuals of divergent ideological bents. Whatever happens next, demonstrators and those who led them have won recognition for their commitment to non-violent protest and their ability to hew to a peaceful course of action, even as they stormed the parliament building and the presidential offices.

Those in the government who chose to accede to the will of the demonstrators rather than put down the uprising by force must also be lauded. If, in the end, Shevardnadze controlled any levers of force, then his final decision to resign rather than bring in the guns was an admirable one. Even before then, however, many individuals in the police and armed forces had already expressed their intent not to intervene. This determination to withhold support from a teetering government—and the political culture that enabled them to consider abstinence an authentic choice—are really what made this “flower revolution” possible.

The actions of the Russian government must also be considered. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov not only flew immediately to Tbilisi, where he served as an unsolicited mediator between Shevardnadze and the opposition, he personally addressed the crowd with terms of great respect, eliciting their applause. Ivanov rejected the notion that what had occurred in Georgia was a coup d'état. After meeting with regional leader Aslan Abashidze in Ajara, he repeatedly stressed the importance of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Russian president Vladimir Putin later cautioned that those who engineered this transfer of power had taken on an “immense responsibility” before the people of Georgia. “We would like to hope,” Putin said, “that the country's future



legitimately-elected leadership will do all it can to restore [the] traditions of friendship between our countries.”

Whatever Russia’s long-term strategy in the Caucasus, these public statements were at least consistent with its vision of constructing a “liberal empire” in the post-Soviet states through economic levers and other means of persuasion, and not military force. Whether Georgia can or should resist Russia’s future advances is a question for a later debate. For now, Moscow’s immediate response to the crisis was more helpful than any one could have hoped.

With the events of the weekend, Georgia has the opportunity to move forward again. Practically, little has changed. The government that is elected next will still need to turn the lights on, root out debilitating corruption, continue to normalize relations with Russia, solve two territorial conflicts (in South Ossetia and Abkhazia), and prevent a new conflict from occurring in Ajara. How well it is going to be able to do all this is anyone's guess.

Moreover, we still do not know if the transition period itself is going to proceed orderly. As happens when governments are overthrown, the legality and scope of the interim administration’s power are not entirely clear. There are likely to be spoilers in the wings waiting to see how to sabotage the government’s plans. While presidential elections are scheduled to be held within 45 days, it is still not clear when or how the results of the last parliamentary election are to be nullified and new elections to that body held. For the fall of Shevardnadze to lead to a properly institutionalized democratic system, interim president Nino Burjanadze and National Movement head Mikheil Saakashvili will have to ensure that it is in the interest of almost everyone else in the Georgian political system—the parliamentary opposition, supportive members of the former government, the power ministries, and the courts—not to obstruct the developing transition.

Whatever happens next, the events of this weekend hinted at the intangible qualities that just may allow Georgia to turn itself around. The people who participated in these events—both on the streets and in the halls of government—asserted their right and responsibility to collectively shape Georgia’s political fate. If these actions lay the foundation for a responsible and committed public-spiritedness in Georgia, then the country will be on the right track.

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