

*English translation of an opinion piece published in the newspaper 24 Saati on 1 October, 2007. It provides analysis of the possible fallout of the arrest on 27 September of Irakli Okruashvili, former minister of defence turned leader of a new opposition party.*

By Ghia Nodia

**Playing with Fire**  
*or Who Is Going to Win the Losers' War*

Irakli Okruashvili's short-lived career as an opposition leader has given a new dynamism to political processes in Georgia and aroused the heretofore bored public. This is the only good thing that can be said about the events of the past few days. All the players in the new political game which kicked off with Okruashvili's arrest are going to lose. The government will hardly be able to convince the Georgian public, including citizens who are relatively neutral or supportive, that Okruashvili's arrest was not politically motivated. Okruashvili's arrest is a strong trump card for the opposition, while the government does not look to have an ace in the hole. But the opposition is not on firm ground either. The authorities can easily produce enough evidence to prove charges of corruption and abuse of office against Okruashvili, as well as demonstrate that the opposition is simply a group of "nomadic unprincipled politicians" who rallied to the defence of the very man they had earlier fervently demanded be prosecuted.

The loser is the democratic process in Georgia. Democracy requires a certain level of credibility on the part of the political elite in the eyes of the citizens. The lower the public's confidence, the greater the cynicism towards politics and politicians. I do not think such attitudes had been in short supply anyway, but there is always room for worse.

Having said this, I by no means intend to add my voice to the doomsayers who claim that democracy has no chance of succeeding in Georgia and thus join ranks with preachers of nihilism. What we are seeing now is a sort of political crisis and, if what I said above is correct, a step back for democracy. Within the larger picture, however, this may be within limits of normality as well. After all, who said that Georgia's path to a bright democratic future was going to be smooth and trouble-free? What we need now is to assess how deep the crisis is and how we can get out of it with minimal losses.

**An unexpected gift**

The first question to be answered is "Why did the government do what it did?" One should distinguish between the general decision to bring criminal charges against Okruashvili and the way this decision was implemented. In retrospect, it is obvious that Okruashvili was not arrested because of his scandalous accusations against President Mikheil Saakashvili. It would be too stupid of authorities to do that. The chain of causes and effects appears to have worked in the reverse order: Okruashvili rushed to make public allegations because he understood that his arrest was imminent. The detention of Dimitri Kitoshvili, the president's parliamentary secretary, was the last warning for Okruashvili, one which prompted him to hurriedly arrange the launch of his new party. In their initial comments, analysts compared Okruashvili's first public appearance to the reaction of a man who had his back against the wall. A respectable political leader with long-term strategy would not have embarked on a political campaign with the gravest possible accusations, which he could never possibly prove and which actually tarnished his own image as well (and Okruashvili was never considered stupid). The first reaction of the government to Okruashvili's allegations, voiced by senior ruling party MP Giga Bokeria, confirms the same assumption: He said that the only goal of Okruashvili's statements was to secure immunity from

prosecution. No doubt, both Bokeria and Okruashvili knew perfectly well at that time what was obvious for everybody today.

But this analysis is of only theoretical significance now. Opposition leaders probably understand very well that this is the way the events unfolded, but they keep claiming that his arrest was nothing other than the government's response to his public allegations. Why? Firstly, because it is politically advantageous for them to say this, and secondly, because the government is unable to disprove these allegations. If the opposition is less than fully sincere here, it is hard to reproach them, as they are, after all, politicians. Okruashvili's arrest has turned into a major embarrassment for the government and one cannot be surprised that the opposition was happy (if not grateful) to receive such a precious gift. From a sheer Machiavellian viewpoint, if the government had been planning to apprehend Okruashvili, it should have acted earlier and in a smarter fashion. In the mass perception, the government's actions invoked the simple principle of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*: first Okruashvili comes out with harsh accusations against the president, and two days later he is arrested. Therefore – so the logic goes – the allegations were not entirely groundless, and/or the government was anxious to silence him in order to prevent him from voicing further allegations.

But the above still does not answer the main question: Why did the government decide to imprison Okruashvili at all? In theory, one could imagine that at some point this summer (or, maybe, in early September) prosecutors just happened to uncover some evidence about Okruashvili's criminal activities and launched a rigorous investigation into the case – as a government known for its anti-corruption stance is supposed to do. It was sheer coincidence that Okruashvili began to set up his opposition party right at that time. That is my point. Will the government be able to convince the majority of citizens that it was really only a coincidence? I do not think so. It does not have arguments to refute the simple premise that Okruashvili may have committed crimes, but it was not for them, or not only for them, that he was imprisoned. His re-emergence in politics as an opposition leader was the real reason. Had he not done that, nobody would have started investigating him.

This is the perception which is going to stand, and it constitutes a serious political setback for the government. Using corruption charges selectively against political opponents – even if there is enough evidence to charge them in a particular case – is a very strong accusation against a government that claims to be a “beacon of democracy”. Unfortunately, I do not think that the government can do anything to help it any more. But this is not the end of the road either. The ruling party must do its best to avoid making even worse blunders when trying to resolve the situation. The recipe is so obvious it is embarrassing to mention: the government must strictly adhere to democratic norms in its efforts to quell the wave of protests that ensued following Okruashvili's imprisonment. To be sure, it must also be firm in preventing every attempt to be overthrown by force. But its handling of the problem must be in full compliance with the law. It is also obvious that the charges against Okruashvili should be compelling and well documented. But however important this may be, it is not sufficient.

I understand that the government does not need my advice in this respect. It is well aware that all of its actions are closely monitored from many quarters, especially by sponsors of Georgia's bid to join NATO. However, there is often nothing more to say than to repeat the conventional wisdom.

This applies to the government rhetoric as well. I recognize that it is hard to expect restrained language from a government whom the opposition continuously labels as a bunch of murderers and robbers (I will leave out remarks where the wording is even stronger). Nevertheless, I do think that it is not in the government's interest to dub the opposition “petty traitors” [as President

Saakashvili recently did] – and this is not only because NATO keeps a close watch on developments in Georgia. The government must confront the opposition's ultra-radicalism with a well-balanced and confident stance: Yes, we may not be blameless, but at least we can maintain a common-sense and civilized approach.

### **Opposition euphoria**

Obviously, the government will also take advantage of the opposition's weaknesses. What do I mean? At present, the opposition is in a state of euphoria, It could hardly have dreamt of getting such a gift from the government. The number of citizens who showed up at the first protest rally on September 28 exceeded all expectations and contributed to the euphoric mood even more. The greatest success is the fact that a majority of the opposition parties managed to unite. This improves their electoral prospects. But this is also where problems start: what is the basis of the newly acquired unity and how sustainable is it?

Admittedly, the united opposition makes no secret of its ambition to stir up a new revolution in the country. Pushing for a snap vote one year ahead of the scheduled elections hardly implies anything less. This may be viewed as a circuitous indication that all along, the opposition had been looking for a pretext to start its revolutionary campaign and, presto, it got it. There is little point in criticising its stance on this, as revolutionary zeal seems to be the only factor capable of cementing a coalition of opposition parties, while they have no chance to succeed without some sort of unity. But most important is what lies ahead. The opposition will undoubtedly keep up its revolutionary rhetoric. I hope, however, that its leaders understand (or will soon understand) that the new revolution project has few chances to succeed. Therefore, their strategy should be to win the elections to be scheduled within constitutional limits by a president they have dubbed a "murderer". Getting out of the revolutionary euphoria with minimal losses is the biggest challenge for the opposition.

The personality of Irakli Okruashvili is a rather questionable asset. The common denominator that has brought the opposition groups together is the idea that Okruashvili's arrest was politically motivated. OK, granted. It implies that the fight for democracy against what they consider an authoritarian government should be the unifying platform for the opposition parties. That sounds logical as well. But can Okruashvili be used as a banner in this supposedly anti-authoritarian resistance movement? I am afraid that is a politically absurd idea. Okruashvili may have other strong qualities – for instance, he may be excellent as a symbol for championing patriotic values – but making him represent values of democracy and the rule of law is a really hard sell. The opposition may hope that the people are too dumb to grasp such "delicate nuances". Maybe some really are. But quite a few can see a problem here.

An honest democrat would say here: "Heaven forbid Okruashvili indeed comes to power; jail may be exactly where he belongs, but in the given context he was treated unfairly and this is what concerns us." Can the united opposition agree on such an assessment of events? I doubt it. Whatever the opposition leaders say about "collective leadership" these days, they will need a hero anyway. And for the time being, the imprisoned Okruashvili is the only available hero. Will the opposition have enough strength to resist the temptation of honouring Okruashvili as an innocent martyr of democracy? The problem is, without such a myth it will be more difficult to mount a serious campaign of street protests. On the other hand, trying to sell such a myth for short-term political gain can only erode the opposition's credibility in the eyes of those people who understand a thing or two about democracy. It will not be an easy task for the opposition to solve this dilemma and stay unified at the same time.

If this analysis is right case, the opposition is more likely to call Okruashvili a “hero” and condemn Saakashvili as a “murderer and robber”. At least this is what we have been seeing so far. By doing so, however, the opposition parties make themselves vulnerable to accusations from the government that a common hatred is the only basis of their unity and that their pro-democracy rhetoric is nothing more than mere window-dressing.

I might have somewhat exaggerated the opposition’s problems. I can only hope that my subtitle on “the losers’ war” will be proven wrong. I have to excuse myself for ending the article by stating another banality: We need a strong opposition capable of challenging the government. The opposition is invigorated by this gift it has received from the government. The gift, however, has mines hidden in it. It will require lots of skill to avoid detonating them.