

The Anatomy of the "Georgian Dream" Regime in the Courtroom

Tamar Ketsbaia¹

Tbilisi City Court, much like Rustaveli Avenue, has become a central gathering place for those protesting the Georgian Dream regime. Every day, demonstrators and their families assemble in the court's courtyard or halls, awaiting the "guilty verdict."

Most of them do not expect any outcome other than what has already been delivered in hundreds of similar cases. Still, they continue to attend and participate in a process they no longer trust. So, why do they keep participating?

Their motivations vary. For some, the court serves as a platform to voice dissent or is driven by a commitment to exhausting all legal avenues within the country. For many, it is also a chance to witness firsthand the anatomy of the system - to observe how the regime operates and to identify its core pillars, which are most starkly revealed within the space of the courtroom.

Those present at the hearings have the opportunity to observe the court as an institution - to study the behavior and psychology of its participants, including reflecting on their own attitudes, emotions, and responses toward the judicial system.

This experience allows citizens to critically assess the roots of their negative perceptions of the court - whether related to its efficiency, independence, or fairness - and to determine for themselves whether the long-standing concerns raised by legal experts, watchdog organizations, and researchers truly reflect systemic problems.

This opinion paper examines behavioral patterns observed during dozens of similar proceedings and offers possible explanations from the author's perspective, as both a participant and an observer.

This analysis does not claim to represent an absolute truth. On the contrary, some readers - including, at times, even the author - may find this portrayal of the system's "intelligence," where every detail appears calculated in advance and individual behavior seems strictly shaped by the regime, to be exaggerated. Yet

¹ Research Institute Gnomon Wise, Email: t.ketsbaia@ug.edu.ge

it is precisely within this ambiguity that the strength of authoritarian systems is manifested: the regime is everywhere - and at the same time, nowhere.

The behavior of officials involved in the process largely reflects the will of the system. However, it remains unclear whether their actions are the result of direct orders, expressions of personal conviction, or a form of mimicry - a repetition of behaviors the regime implicitly demands.

It is worth noting that the names of the judge and representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs are deliberately omitted in this paper. The aim is not to critique specific individuals or to analyze their personal traits or motivations. Rather, the central argument is that the striking similarity in their behavior renders individual identification unnecessary. From the author's perspective, each of them performs a predefined and tightly scripted role - even in the absence of an official script, they follow it intuitively. Even their seemingly natural reactions (if any) appear anticipated and calculated in advance by the regime itself.

„All Seats are of the Accused“

An observer in a courtroom may have a strong feeling that people who sit in the seats for the indicted in administrative offense cases for participating in a protest are no different from other participants in the process, because all other seats are also perceived as belonging to the accused.

In particular, observing the processes, one gets the feeling that any other person participating in the session - be it a judge, a representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or their witnesses - is being punished for their participation in this case. Even if at first glance it seems as if they are singled out by the regime for having been entrusted with such a high-profile case, we soon discover that everything is the opposite. These officials do not feel rewarded and have no reason to feel so. This is not the carrot mechanism of accountability that the regime offers, but the stick.

Only a few people work on hundreds of cases, who, for months, have to participate in dozens of processes every day (including even during non-working hours). In such conditions, working on identical cases (identical from their point of view, because they do not take into account the individual circumstances of the case) on a conveyor belt is, to put it simply, tiring. However, along with the fatigue, it may also be demeaning to realize that in the long run, this “devotion” will still harm them, because the archive stores their name, word, and signature on each case.

Constrained and Controllable Conflicts between the Judges and the MIA Representatives

The above-mentioned factor is also reflected in the court session itself and is manifested in every action of the representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the judge, who often display an aggressive attitude - even towards each other. This attitude is sometimes artificially performed, although at times it is entirely sincere and logical.

For example, a judge may begin the session (or use this method moderately during the process) with a strict and rude address to a representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, accompanied by gestures aimed at asserting dominance.

This may be part of a tactic - in doing so, judges attempt to demonstrate power, as if by adopting a strict approach toward the Ministry of Internal Affairs, they are signaling that they can be even more ruthless toward the potential offender standing before them and the people present in the courtroom, who were warned at the very beginning of the session that any emotional expression could come at a high cost. It is also an attempt to demonstrate "independence" from the executive branch, which often amounts to nothing more than this one-time, symbolic act. In the course of the proceedings, their forced harmony completely erases boundaries between these two branches of government.

The humiliating act committed by the judge against the representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in the presence of the opposing party and the audience, leaves a small - albeit short-lived - mark on them. The maximum level of respect shown by the representative is usually limited to addressing the judge as "Your Honor." The irreparable errors in the case materials are so "elementary" that they appear more like a trap deliberately set for the judge than mere negligence on the part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

It is the judge who is obliged to turn a blind eye to: discrepancies between the dates indicated in the evidence; the fact that a protocol can be drawn up by one person and signed by another; the absence of neutral evidence; the fact that the Ministry of Internal Affairs, aside from the video, does not know or possess any significant details about the case (particularly relevant in cases involving artificially blocking traffic); or that a completely unrelated video may be presented - or an excerpt so limited that even by the court's own standards, it is impossible to fully investigate the circumstances of the case. When summoned to testify, the judge must also overlook the contradictory and incorrect information provided by other representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (which, had they wished, could easily have been coordinated in advance) and pretend not to be troubled by such irresponsibility and attitude.

This is the rare instance when the judge spontaneously expresses brief aggression toward the representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs - but quickly regains composure and convincingly echoes the representative's explanation that the inconsistencies and errors in the case are merely technical flaws, caused by the workload and fatigue of Ministry employees. In this way, by shifting full responsibility to the judge, the Ministry of Internal Affairs quietly emerges as the winner in this small, imperceptible confrontation.

Strategy of the MIA: Discrediting the Process

Although the MIA representatives rarely attack verbally the judges and thus does not openly show disrespect toward them, their contemptuous behavior and attitude during the trial, their remarks to the opposing party, and body language demonstrate absolute disrespect for the entire process and the court as an institution.

In particular, the MIA representatives look at their mobile phones throughout the entire trial, which may, at first glance, create the impression that they are avoiding embarrassment or are unable to look the opposing party in the eye. However, this impression quickly fades after attending several trials. In fact, this behavior is anything but an expression of embarrassment.

The mobile phone is a necessary tool, as the representatives may need to receive certain instructions at any time. However, it also serves another purpose. By shifting attention to their phones, appearing to communicate with someone else, and periodically laughing, the representatives attempt to create the impression that the process is unimportant to them (either because they expect the judge to rule in their favor regardless, or because, for that very reason, the process truly is unimportant) and that they can have fun at the same time. This, in turn, serves to emotionally unsettle the opposing party and throw them off balance.

Psychological Pressure and Emotional Traps

In some trials, the relationship between the judge and representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs takes on a familiar form. There are cases when representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs speak with the session secretary or the judge before the trial begins, or remain with them after the trial. Perhaps a pre-existing fear, or even the behavior of the judge and the Ministry representatives during the trial - such as simultaneous use of mobile phones or exchanged glances - creates the impression of

communication between them. Since this is difficult to prove, raising such suspicions by other participants in the trial would also create an awkward situation for them. It is also possible that Ministry representatives deliberately mimic such behavior to further undermine the opposing side and convince everyone that “they are the ones who call the shots.”

Some representatives, even in the presence of the stakeholders and the audience, do not hide their exaggerated sense of their own role and power and dare to give direct instructions to judges or interfere in their work. For example, a representative might stop a party instead of the judge, decide when and what they can say, or annoy the judge with long explanations, calling for more brevity and focus on the case. Of course, such interventions do not result in even a verbal warning, let alone a fine or expulsion from the courtroom.

This behavior by the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ representative evokes a feeling of pity - both for the judge and, above all, for oneself as a citizen left to hope in this powerless institution. It may also be a trap designed to provoke the indicted into showing disrespect for the judge, which will inevitably lead to even harsher punishment.

The selection criteria for the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ representatives are also interesting and may be part of a strategy to inflict the most severe injustice on the opposing side. The Ministry does not assign its best personnel to this process. On the contrary, it allows the most inexperienced staff to participate - those who will never be drawn into a prolonged chain of questions and answers that might lift the curtain and expose the main pillars of the system. This does not happen because these representatives naturally remain silent when questioned by the opposing side (although, presumably, they are obliged to answer), simply because they do not have the answers. The Ministry of Internal Affairs does not invest resources in presenting legally weighty arguments or evidence; by doing so, it aims to demonstrate how ineffective the opponent’s efforts are, while simultaneously showing how cost-effective its own approach is.

Their silence - or every word with which they undermine their own position - convinces any objective observer that the Ministry of Internal Affairs has been defeated in the competitive process. This raises the expectation that the court, which the opposing party has expressed complete distrust of before the trial, will behave differently in this case. Of course, exceptions are ruled out, and this trial will end in the same - perhaps even worse - than the others. In such a situation, what often provokes more anger than the outcome itself is, on one hand, a sense of naivety: the momentary belief that legal arguments matter in

this courtroom, and on the other hand, an attempt to elevate oneself above others by assuming that the problem lies not in the court, but in those individuals and lawyers who failed to present their case effectively.

Policy of Verbal Warning - Seemingly “Humane” Instrument and In Fact the Regime’s Strategic Weapon

These thoughts are prompted by the court’s practice of issuing verbal warnings - a practice whose underlying logic is difficult to decipher, if it is based on any logic at all.

Once the regime succeeded in normalizing the idea that case termination - and, accordingly, the non-recognition of a person as a violator - was no longer an option, the focus shifted to how far a party could "get away" with just a verbal warning. Some lawyers also joined this "game," using the number of verbal warnings as a measure of success.

The actions of a small group among them give the impression that they are closely aligned with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the court, and thus act according to a shared (even if uncoordinated) strategy. However, as practice shows, this is no guarantee of success. Lawyers focused on "good statistics" and seemingly anticipating a "victory" are often disappointed when a judge rejects their client’s apology and confession on the grounds of insufficient sincerity.

A logical question arises here: is it a bad thing if we “outsmart the regime” and escape this already lost game by paying less money? No - minimizing financial loss is a reasonable tactic. However, in doing so, we must recognize that we are not truly outsmarting the system; rather, we are following its script. The regime needs this script: 1. to create statistics that present it as “humane” and attentive to individual circumstances; 2. to obtain as many apologies and admissions as possible from participants in the demonstration, which, in turn, will further undermine the “truth” of other participants and intensify the feeling that the decisions made against them are fair; 3. to use these statistics to position itself within the country or in the European Court.

Even the mechanism known as exemption from responsibility is applied arbitrarily by judges, often appearing to be based on random selection. At times, it may even seem that a verbal warning is used to punish a representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as if to assert dominance over them. While this can happen, the regime has also anticipated this and provided “free space for action” for the accumulated aggression in the court, except in cases where the punishment of a specific person is so important that a

verbal warning is not an option. Accordingly, the judges' use of this least restrictive measure is not related to a fair hearing or a dangerous "silent rebellion" on their part against the system.

Internal Competition and Incentives

It is interesting that there is also internal competition among judges (who are assigned to such disputes), which becomes noticeable when one mentions to the judge hearing the case what decision his/her colleague made in a similar case or how he/she conducted the trial. Accordingly, such remarks by the party require great caution, as this may not be the right strategy.

A similar situation exists among representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and it is easier to explain, since they are only at the initial steps of the career ladder. To advance on this ladder, they need to demonstrate special strength, the possibility of which increases with participation in high-profile cases or trials involving famous individuals, and by showing maximum "cruelty" and indifference during these proceedings.

However, this is a tightrope and a great emotional test for young representatives who are still "less experienced." To demand punishment without evidence for someone who may once have been their favorite actor, musician, dancer, a well-known figure, or even a politician requires significant psychological readiness. Therefore, the regime does not rely on just one representative at such special trials, but allows several at once, also trying to ensure the presence of uniformed Ministry of Internal Affairs' employees in the courtroom. The purpose of the latter is to control the situation as much as possible, to provide support to the Ministry representatives and the judge, and, given their "human nature," to protect them from unforeseen developments.

It is interesting that, in order to "reinforce" the MIA at the trial, we may also see other representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (representatives in the court) who are present only as spectators in the courtroom. This can be seen as a sincere display of solidarity among employees, although it is also a calculated move by the system, since both those directly participating in the process and the representatives present are always mindful of internal competition.

“Actors” of the System, their Fear and Leading Role

It is clear that in the microcosm of this process, where every detail is carefully calculated, everyone has their own predetermined role and plays it - regardless of whether they like their character or not. Accordingly, those who today seem to be in an advantageous position - the executors and symbols of the regime - are, in fact, the primary victims of the same system. What they fear most is that others will see this truth. They would rather be seen as cruel in the eyes of society than be pitied by the people they are treating unfairly.

However, once they decide to serve the system in any form, they no longer have the freedom to choose how. Their main task is to behave in such a demonstratively unfair and illogical way that a person leaving the courtroom loses all desire to return to any role within it - to feel that there is no institution in the country where they can not only prove their truth but even voice it. The goal is for the citizen to see and recognize authoritarianism once and for all, to face it - and to stop resisting. Accordingly, the regime's intention is for the protester to become exhausted not on the street, at a rally, but in court - to give up, and to lose the will to fight in any form.

The Court as a Tool to Study the Regime

The ethnographic picture seen in the courtrooms clearly shows that the trials against demonstrators are trapped in a legal black hole - the legal dispute has no realistic chance of success. In this context, breaking the dynamic of emotional defeat imposed by the regime is crucial to preserving the ability to resist.

Accordingly, the goal of the battle in court (for those who choose to engage in these proceedings) should not be a legal victory - which is practically unattainable and emotionally draining - but rather to use the courtroom space to study the regime's pillars and tactics. To record and collect all hearings, decisions, replies, reactions, and facial expressions as material evidence of the regime's operation. In this process, it is essential to preserve what the regime seeks to neutralize - or destroy - emotional control, and in return, to identify their weak points as accurately as possible.

Such observations and analyses are necessary not only to understand what has sustained the regime's viability so far - and therefore how those pillars can be dismantled - but also to determine what the initial steps of democratization should be, and what demands the public must make of any future government regarding the judiciary.

Accordingly, the information gathered through monitoring court hearings and participants' behavior can be useful for the longer-term strategy of the struggle. However, the theoretical possibility - no matter how implausible or difficult it may seem - of the regime's collapse through these very processes should not be ruled out.