

Georgia Hit by Wave of Political Turmoil

Author: [Sofo Bukia](#)

Opposition furious with government's handling of street protests sparked by arrests of leading sportsmen. Georgia saw one of its most turbulent weeks since the 2003 "Rose Revolution", as police used force to break up an impromptu street protest and fistfights broke out in parliament.

The country's fragmented opposition parties declared they would join forces to oppose President Mikheil Saakashvili, after the controversial arrest of several high-profile sports figures on racketeering charges.

The arrests sparked a chaotic protest by about 50 Georgian sports figures - and some opposition activists - on June 30. Interior ministry police armed with automatic rifles and dressed in riot gear beat some of the protesters with truncheons after they blocked traffic along the busy Rustaveli Prospekt thoroughfare. Several people were reported to have received minor injuries, and the police made ten arrests.

The protesters were demanding the release of several champion Georgian wrestlers, whom the country's Supreme Court ordered to be held for three months in pre-trial detention. The wrestlers are accused of extorting 8,000 US dollars from an ethnic Georgian citizen of Greece.

After the Supreme Court refused bail for the accused, some of their supporters smashed up furniture in the courtroom before pouring onto Rustaveli, just a short distance away.

The next day, opposition party leaders and activists gathered in Vera Park. Observers estimated the crowd at between 500 and 1,000 people. The groups included long-time Saakashvili foes like the Labour Party and the National Democratic Party, as well as new opponents, such as the New Rightists and the Republican Party.

That rally followed a raucous day in parliament in which a session degenerated into fistfights and shoving matches over how police broke up the street rally the day before.

Opposition politicians claimed the government deliberately let the protesters take over the street, in an effort to find a pretext for a public show of force.

"Even under Shevardnadze the authorities never dared to threaten protesters with (automatic rifles)," said David Berdzinshvili, a leader of the Republican Party and a former Saakashvili ally.

Opposition leaders, during their rally the following day, declared they would coordinate their activities against what they called the "antidemocratic" Saakashvili leadership. They also called on Saakashvili to sack Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili, whom they accuse of exceeding his authority.

Saakashvili's reply to that demand was terse. "Any attempts to rattle the authorities or public order will be cut off at the root," he told reporters at a US embassy reception marking the American Independence Day.

The president can probably take comfort from the fact that Georgia's opposition parties as yet command only a small fraction of public support. A new poll by the US-based International Republican Institute showed Saakashvili's National Movement with almost 57 per cent support among respondents, while even the most popular opposition party, the New Rightists, had just 5.4 per cent backing.

Political commentators said the opposition's rallying behind the alleged racketeer sportsmen was a clumsy political move that would do little to increase its support.

"Political players should display more principle. To support some sportsmen who've smashed up a courtroom – that's shameful," said Gia Nodia, director of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development.

Gia Bugadze, a well-known Georgian artist and pundit, told Georgian television that the opposition's backing of the alleged racketeer sportsmen was a sign of weakness.

"Even though the popularity ratings of the authorities are much lower than what they were in the first few months, the opposition is so weak that it has no electorate," said Bugadze. "Therefore they join forces with other people's causes."

Well-known political analyst Alexander Rondeli said the grouping of opposition parties – including two that were once formally allied with Saakashvili, the Conservatives and the Republicans – were too weak and disparate to pose any danger to the government at present. Rondeli said the July 1 opposition rally was "more a letting off of steam" than a coordinated political act.

The various opposition leaders have very different ideas as to how to move forward.

Republican Party leader Berdzhinshvili calls for engagement with the Saakashvili government, "We intend to actively work with the government as part of the process of national rebuilding."

But Labour leader Shalva Natelashvili poured scorn on any suggestion of contacts with the government, "I am categorically against any dialogue with the dictatorial regime of Saakashvili."

"The opposition should unite in order to peacefully change this government, which came to power through force."

Until now, the opposition parties had found no single big issue to rally around. Some have criticised Saakashvili's hard-line policy towards the breakaway region of South Ossetia as counterproductive. Others have decried sweeping reforms to the educational system in which some university teachers lost their jobs. Some opposition figures have also lambasted Saakashvili's anti-corruption campaign for using what they see as capricious methods.

One question opposition parties are united over is the government's refusal to allow direct elections to choose the mayor of Tbilisi. The government instead got a proposal approved in which the city council (or Sakrebulo, as it is known in Georgian) will choose the mayor instead.

The central elections commission is considering opposition demands for a public referendum on the question. The opposition is threatening a boycott of local elections if no plebiscite on direct election of the Tbilisi mayor is held.

Some political observers, however, say efforts by the opposition to find common ground seem mostly geared toward this autumn's parliamentary by-elections, and therefore any alliance will probably be short term in nature. Even some opposition leaders and supporters agree.

"It's very early to talk about the formation of a new opposition union," said Tinatin Khidasheli, a Republican leader. "The opposition is very loose and I think every party much find its own place in the new realities."

Sopo Bukia is a reporter for 24 Saati newspaper in Tbilisi.

Location: Caucasus
Stavropol
South Ossetia
North Ossetia

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgia-hit-wave-political-turmoil-0>