

Georgia: Protesters Demand Shevardnadze Resignation

Author: [Giorgy Lomsadze](#)

Georgia's opposition has begun its parliamentary election campaign early.

Georgia's divided opposition managed to come together this week for a street rally in the centre of Tbilisi, which forced the head of the Central Electoral Commission to offer his resignation.

The opposition is putting pressure on President Eduard Shevardnadze's administration to reform the electoral system ahead of parliamentary polls due this November. It was buoyed by a report from the Council of Europe which criticised the government for failing to reform its electoral laws.

The June 3 demonstration began modestly. Despite assurances given by opposition leaders the day before that upwards of 5,000 people would be there, only a quarter of that number turned up. A steady drizzle further dampened the protestors' enthusiasm.

However, the crowd grew in strength throughout the day. The demonstrators ranged from enthusiastic young people to members of the Tbilisi intelligentsia. Brandishing flags and slogans, they applauded opposition leaders who gave rousing speeches from a makeshift podium in front of the parliament building.

Significantly, the rally brought five opposition parties together for the first time under a new umbrella organization. The leaders of the United Democrats, the New National Movement, the New Rights Party, the Traditionalists and the People's Party held hands to show their solidarity with one another.

But their newfound togetherness began to wear thin as the different opposition leaders showed impatience to get to the microphone ahead of their allies. Three other influential opposition parties were also notable by their absence, drawing accusations of treachery from the organisers.

The opposition certainly needs to stick together if it is to stand a good chance in a ballot, which is likely to be weighted against it. Mikheil Saakashvili, former justice minister, now head of Tbilisi city council and the most popular opposition leader, told the crowd that their differences counted for less than their common ground.

"We may differ in terms of our political agendas and financial support, but we are unanimous that it is absolutely imperative to put an end to the practice of vote-rigging and that our voices must be heard," he said. "If we stand together, they [the government] will have to listen!"

As the day wore on, people from outside the capital and a couple of popular singers joined the protest. Numbers were swelled by activists from the protest movement Kmara (Enough), which is reportedly led by Saakashvili and the former speaker of parliament, Zurab Zhvania.

"I just want to be sure that my vote will be counted in the elections and that there will be a legally elected government," said Giorgi, a student, whose head was wrapped in a headband with "Kmara" written on it. "Enough of this fraud."

A bystander named Manana Gorgiladze, a teacher, was not convinced. "This is nothing but a performance," she said. "They're talking about democracy and lofty principles. However, all I see is just a group of people

desperately vying for power.

"They swear at the government and the government swears back. In my opinion, they deserve each other."

The primary demand made at the rally was for the current Central Electoral Commission, CEC, to be disbanded on the grounds that it is too biased. They want each party to have its own representative on the commission.

Rally leaders rejected a compromise offered by state minister Avtandil Jorbenadze, who had said that any party which had picked up a certain percentage of the vote in the last two elections could have a place on the commission. Jorbenadze insisted that the chairman of the commission should be appointed by the president, something the opposition would not accept.

In the early afternoon, the CEC's current head, Jumber Lominadze, tendered his resignation and was followed by six others on the 18-member commission. However the final decision on their status will be taken by parliament.

The crisis over the electoral commission coincided with a visit by a Council of Europe delegation. Council of Europe rapporteur Matyas Eorsi told a press conference on June 4 that the council was disappointed by Georgia's failure to implement its recommendations on electoral reform by the beginning of June.

The street scenes of June 3 were mirrored inside parliament, which debated the same issue furiously all day. Speaker Nino Burjanadze failed to mediate between government and opposition as they traded accusations with each other.

"Mr. Zhvania, weren't you the one who approved each member of the current CEC in your day?" asked Vitaly Kazaradze, head of the Citizens Union of Georgia, which supports Shevardnadze.

"This is all for show," said another loyalist deputy, Irakli Mindeli, stepping up the attack on the opposition. "I don't believe that you want fair elections. All you want is for Shevardnadze to step down so you can come to power ahead of time."

His accusation was partly on target. As dusk fell, opposition deputies came out of parliament to join the demonstrators, and they began to call for the president's resignation. Presidential elections are not due until 2005.

"The government has once again proved that it's not interested in the voices of its citizens," Saakashvili thundered. "There is only one way to move forward - Shevardnadze should resign!" His statement set off a round of boos from the protestors. "Down with Shevardnadze! Resign, resign!" they chanted.

In the evening, groups of demonstrators moved the protest onto the square in front of Shevardnadze's offices, the State Chancellery. "Let's break the railing! Let's topple Shevardnadze!" they shouted, but no one made a move against the building.

Eventually the rally broke up, but the new united opposition - pleased with how the day had gone - pledged that this was only the beginning of a nationwide campaign to force Shevardnadze to step down.

Giorgy Lomsadze is a reporter with Georgia Today and Panorama

Location: Georgia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgia-protesters-demand-shevardnadze>