

Georgian President Cries Foul After Ally's Arrest

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New government accused of launching crackdown on Mikheil Saakashvili's team.

The arrest of former government minister Bacho Akhalaia has prompted claims that the new administration of Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili is out to get its predecessors after beating them in last month's election.

Akhalaia is accused of abuse of office in relation to an investigation into mistreatment of soldiers when he was defence minister between 2009 and July 2012.

The chief of the armed forces' general staff, Giorgi Kalandadze, and 4th Brigade commander Zurab Shamatava were arrested the same day, November 6. They were later released on bail; Akhalaia remained in custody.

Members of President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement, UNM, now a minority in the legislature, are boycotting parliament in protest at this and other moves by the new government.

Until very recently, the political transition after the UNM's election defeat on October 1 seemed to have gone remarkably smoothly. After all, some analysts had warned of riots if the outcome was contested.

In July, Akhalaia switched from defence to the interior ministry. Members of Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition have accused him of abusing prisoners as well.

The UNM has accused the incoming administration of using its newfound power to settle old scores.

"It bears all the hallmarks of them using the prosecutor for political ends," said Giga Bokeria, secretary of the National Security Council, a presidential advisory body.

On November 8, a group of UNM parliamentarians met foreign diplomats in Tbilisi to outline their concerns about the arrests. President Saakashvili visited Kalandadze's family and spoke by phone to relatives of Akhalaia and Shamatava.

"These recent events concern me, because today as never before we rely on the rule of law," the president said in a televised address. "European integration and Georgia's progress and development are not mere words; they are assessed according to specific criteria, which include above all respect for the rights of our citizens, establishing supremacy of the law at all levels, and respect for institutions."

Georgian Dream leaders denied there was any political subtext to the arrests, saying instead that they formed part of the "restoration of fairness" which the bloc made one of its campaign slogans.

"As long as the law is being broken - and in my opinion it is - the law-enforcement agencies will continue to establish laws and order in this country," Ivanishvili said.

The arrests are not the only problem the UNM has with its victorious rivals.

Under the constitution, Saakashvili retains his full range of powers until a presidential election next year, when most of them will pass to the prime minister.

Saakashvili's allies accuse Georgian Dream of trying to curtail his powers prematurely.

A reform proposed by the new justice minister, Tea Tsulukiani, would mean that both the president and the head of the Supreme Court would no longer appoint the members of the Supreme Council of Justice, which in turn appoints the country's judges.

The government's 2013 budget slashes funding for the National Security Council by more than tenfold, and also significantly reduces the discretionary fund at the president's disposal.

The arrests, the budget cuts and a tax audit of the Georgia's national broadcaster have all been cited as reasons for the UNM's boycott of parliament.

"We have declared a political boycott and we do not intend to return to the Georgian parliament," UNM member David Darchiashvili said, adding that he and his colleagues felt the new government had launched a crackdown on its opponents.

Some observers like Soso Tsiskarishvili of the Independent Experts' Club argued that members of the

previous government were just upset about losing power and influence.

“I don’t think the boycott will last long,” he said. “At the moment, the public feels very hostile towards the old government.... Of course, the former officials don’t like this, but they can’t expect any concessions until everyone has let off steam.”

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