

Tbilisi Violence Follows Mounting Protests

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Heavy-handed police action against demonstrators follows days of opposition protests. The violence that hit the streets of Tbilisi on November 7 as riot police used baton charges and tear gas in clashes with opposition supporters was preceded by several days of peaceful street demonstrations challenging the rule of President Mikheil Saakashvili.

The opposition was deliberately mimicking the street protests of the “Rose Revolution” of four years ago, to try and force concessions from the president.

On November 2 the opposition mustered the largest crowds since the November 2003 protests, with around 50,000 people gathering on the capital’s main thoroughfare, Rustaveli Avenue.

The rally organisers, many of them former allies of Saakashvili, called for his resignation, an early parliamentary election next April, changes to the election rules, and the release of people they see as political prisoners.

Although the protest was supposed to be a one-day action, several thousand protestors were still gathered in front of parliament four days later, sheltering under umbrellas and polythene tents from the incessant rain. On November 6, a group of around 20 opposition activists pitched tents outside the parliament building and declared a hunger strike.

“Today around 200 people said they are willing to join the hunger strikers,” said opposition leader and former conflict resolution minister, Giorgi Khaindrava, who was detained the following day, November 7.

Young people wearing white headbands saying “I’m not afraid!” formed into what they called “corridors of shame” outside government buildings, calling on the officials who worked there to resign.

The Georgian authorities rejected the protestors’ demands and accused former defence minister Irakli Okruashvili and media magnate Badri Patarkatsishvili of masterminding the protests.

“‘Badriotism’ won’t replace patriotism in Georgia,” said Tbilisi mayor Giorgi Ugulava.

“Presidential and parliamentary elections will be conducted simultaneously next autumn, as is scheduled by the constitution,” Saakashvili said, calling the opposition’s protests “a pale imitation of the Rose Revolution”.

The president hinted that Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky, formerly a close associate of Patarkatsishvili, was orchestrating the protests.

The upsurge of protests began with the September 27 arrest of Okruashvili, who had earlier accused the

president of a string of crimes including allowing corruption to flourish and ordering the killing of Patarkatsishvili.

Okruashvili was arrested, and while in detention withdrew his allegations and was released on an unprecedented bail sum of ten million laris (some six million US dollars).

By then, though, the opposition had already galvanised into a new anti-Saakashvili movement.

On November 5, the ex-minister – who had fled to Germany – made another dramatic move. In a televised address relayed to protestors in Tbilisi, he said the confession that led to his release had been made under duress. Okruashvili said that he was now ready to prove his original allegations.

Deputy prosecutor general Nikoloz Gvaramia responded by dismissing Okruashvili's latest statement as "lies".

"He is still being prosecuted and is out on bail," said Gvaramia. "If he doesn't return to Georgia as soon as investigators demand, the bail money will pass to the state, the punishment against him will be made harsher and he will be declared a fugitive from justice."

The Georgian media was then given what was said to be a compromising tape in which Okruashvili ostensibly offers to call off the rallies in Tbilisi in exchange for his own appointment as prime minister.

Protests have been occurring outside Tbilisi as well, with opposition activists saying they were blocked from travelling to the capital.

"During the first days of the action, people could not go to Tbilisi, as trains, buses and minibuses were not running," said Temuri Jgarkava, 52, who lives in the western town of Zugdidi.

The 3,000 traders at the Khopi market, the largest in the Black Sea city of Batumi, showed their support for the protests by staying away from work.

Some experts said the opposition's ambitions were too unfocused for the kind of people who were joining the protests.

"The leaders set out demands that were of little interest to most of the people standing there," said analyst Mamuka Areshidze. "The majority of those who joined the protests did so because of social problems, and they don't why it should be so important to hold early elections. People came there to hear how their everyday concerns – pensions, salaries, unemployment and other social issues – would be addressed. The opposition's political demands sound somewhat abstract to them."

Events of recent days have divided Georgia. An "information war" is being waged between two leading TV companies – Rustavi-2, which the opposition says is controlled by the authorities, and Imedi, the creation of Patarkatsishvili, who recently sold his share in the company to Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation.

Chito Margvelashvili and Makvala Kuchukhidze are neighbours living in Georgia's second largest city Kutaisi. Four years ago, they sat in front of the television watching scenes in front of the parliament building in Tbilisi that led to the Rose Revolution.

The two women no longer agree, as Margvelashvili's views have changed dramatically over the past four years. "I was the first to support the election of Misha [Saakashvili] as president," she said. "I believed he would take care of people and lead the country out of crisis. I must admit now that I was mistaken, and that nothing has changed in people's lives."

Kuchukhidze disagreed, insisting that it will simply take more time to achieve change.

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