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Protests Intensify in Georgia Over Prison Abuse Videos

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TBILISI, Georgia — Street protests against the brutal abuse of prisoners escalated Thursday in the Georgian capital, fueling anger against the Western-allied government and possibly boosting support for the opposition before a hotly contested parliamentary election.

Two days after television stations aired videos of guards beating inmates and raping them with truncheons and brooms, thousands rallied outside the Interior Ministry and the Tbilisi prison where the abuse occurred. The demonstrators, some carrying brooms, demanded the ouster of the interior minister.

Veriko Kapanadze said her son looked scared and tense when she last visited him in prison.

"Now I understand why. It's like a Gestapo prison," she said.

"I'm awfully worried for my son," said another protester, Nargiza Georgadze.

President Mikheil Saakashvili has sought to defuse tensions by accepting the resignation of a

minister in charge of penitentiaries and completely reshuffling prison personnel. But the simmering public anger threatens to damage his party in the Oct. 1 parliamentary vote and may boost support for the opposition Georgian Dream coalition, led by billionaire philanthropist Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Saakashvili, who has led Georgia since 2004, has remained popular thanks to economic reforms, anti-corruption efforts and moves to integrate closer with the West. But his image was dented by his handling of a disastrous war with Russia in 2008. The opposition has also accused Saakashvili of a systematic clampdown on dissent and independent media.

Ivanishvili, Georgia's richest man, who sold his extensive business assets in Russia to enter Georgian politics, said the videos had confirmed his longtime suspicions about Georgian authorities' brutality.

Saakashvili and his allies have described Ivanishvili as a Moscow pawn who aims to take the tiny nation on the Black Sea back into the Russian fold. Ivanishvili has rejected their allegations, pledging to continue a course toward integration with the West while moving to normalize ties with Russia, which have remained frozen since the war.

Georgian prosecutors arrested 12 prison officials, and Saakashvili vowed that all those responsible will be severely punished. At the same time, the Interior Ministry said Saakashvili's political foes staged the videos, alleging that prison officials were paid by an inmate with connections to Ivanishvili to orchestrate and film the abuse. Ivanishvili rejected that assertion.

The prison abuse videos were broadcast by the Maestro and Channel 9 television stations; the latter belongs to Ivanishvili. The stations said they got the videos from a prison official who had fled abroad.

Some analysts said the incident will play into Ivanishvili's hands in the polls.

"The prison torture videos have dealt a serious blow to the ruling party's authority," said Irakly Menagarishvili, a former Georgian foreign minister who now heads the Center for Strategic Research, an independent think tank.

He said Saakashvili now needs to act quickly to save his party from being beaten, and he added that the government has failed to contain the fallout.

Alexander Rondeli, an independent political expert in Tbilisi, agreed that the scandal would take a toll on Saakashvili's United National Movement.

Stakes in the parliamentary vote are high. Saakashvili is serving his second and final term, which expires next year. He has pushed through laws that give more authority to the parliament and make the prime minister more powerful than the president. If Ivanishvili's coalition wins, he would become prime minister.

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