Former Georgian Prime Minister Detained

By The Moscow Times

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TBILISI, Georgia — Two allies of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili — a former prime minister and a provincial governor — have been charged with embezzlement and abuse of office in another sign of an ongoing power struggle between the country's top two officials.

Former Prime Minister Vano Merabishvili, who currently leads Saakashvili's party, is accused among other things of taking on the payroll in the Labor Ministry nearly 22,000 party activists whose only job was to canvass for the party in the run-up to last October's parliamentary elections.

Former Labor Minister Zurab Chiaberashvili, who currently serves as the governor of the Kakheti region, was arrested along with Merabishvili on the same charges Tuesday.

Merabishvili's lawyer said he rejected all the charges.

Saakashili said the decision to arrest Merabishvili was "made on a political level" and warned that it will tarnish Georgia's image in the West.

His rival, Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, rejected political motives behind Merabishvili's arrest. "It's a pity that we lost [a chance] to get such a president," he said in a sardonic reference to Merabishvili's alleged intention to run for president in an election later this year.

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