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Thousands Protest in Georgia After Opposition Leader Arrested

By Irakli Metreveli for AFP

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A Georgian opposition supporter holds a national flag during a rally following the arrest of the leader of the United National Movement (UNM) in Tbilisi on Feb. 23. **Vano Shlamov / AFP**

Thousands of anti-government protesters rallied in Georgia on Tuesday after the arrest of an opposition leader, deepening a political crisis that erupted after disputed elections last year.

Hundreds of riot police used tear gas against Nika Melia's supporters who were camped out at his United National Movement party's headquarters in the capital Tbilisi before he was arrested in an overnight police raid and placed in pre-trial detention.

The move sparked swift condemnation from the opposition and Western diplomats, as fears mount over the ex-Soviet nation's fragile democracy.

In the afternoon, several thousand anti-government protesters rallied outside the parliament building in central Tbilisi to denounce Melia's arrest and demand early elections. They also

blocked traffic along the city's main thoroughfare.

"We urgently need free and fair elections to get rid of a government that is destroying democracy," Ilia Togonidze, a 20-year-old student, told AFP at the rally.

Scores of Melia's supporters were also detained in the morning raid and the leader of the opposition Lelo party called for "a peaceful, unwavering struggle to defend Georgian democracy."

"Liberation of political prisoners and snap parliamentary elections are the only possible way out of the crisis," Mamuka Khazaradze said, speaking to journalists on behalf of all opposition leaders.

At the afternoon rally, opposition leaders called for a mass protest march in Tbilisi on Friday.

'Moved backward'

The United States led the chorus of international condemnation of Melia's arrest.

Its embassy in Georgia said in a statement it was "deeply concerned by the government's decision to detain the head of a major opposition political party."

"Force and aggression are not the solution to resolving Georgia's political differences. Today, Georgia has moved backward on its path toward becoming a stronger democracy in the Euro-Atlantic family of nations."

Irakli Kobakhidze, chairman of the ruling Georgian Dream party, defended the police raid.

"Polarisation is a result of criminals being in politics, not of so-called politicians being in jail," he said in a televised statement.

Georgia has been in the grip of a political crisis since parliamentary elections in October, which opposition parties slammed as rigged after Georgian Dream claimed a narrow victory.

Opposition members have refused to take up their seats in the new parliament, in a boycott that has weighed heavily on the ruling party's political legitimacy.

On Thursday, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned over Georgian Dream's plans to arrest Melia.

'Organizing mass violence'

A court in Tbilisi last week had ordered Melia to be placed in pre-trial detention after he refused to pay an increased bail fee ahead of hearings in a case related to anti-government demonstrations in 2019.

He has been charged with "organizing mass violence" during the protests and faces up to nine years in prison.

Melia, 41, rejects the case as politically motivated.

Georgia's new Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, who was confirmed by parliament on Monday, had said in an address to lawmakers Melia "will not manage to hide from justice."

Garibashvili is a loyal lieutenant of the powerful oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who founded Georgian Dream and is widely seen as the man in charge in Georgia, despite having no official political role.

Critics accuse Georgia's richest man Ivanishvili of persecuting political opponents and creating a corrupt system where private interests permeate politics.

In power since 2012, Georgian Dream has seen its popularity fall over a failure to address economic stagnation and perceived backsliding on commitments to democracy.

The move to arrest Melia may further stoke anger against the party.

At Tuesday's protest, 49-year-old painter Manana Tkeshelashvili told AFP that "Georgian Dream had dug its own political grave today by arresting Melia."

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