INTERNAL TURMOIL IN GEORGIA

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Georgia woke to the news on Tuesday (February 23) of the newly elected chairman of the United National Movement, i.e., Nika Melias arrest. That day, an operation involving hundreds of police officers was undertaken at the opposition headquarters, and the leader of Georgias main opposition party was arrested using tear gas. On the same day afternoon, thousands of people, including the supporters of the party and leaders of other opposition parties, gathered in the center of Tbilisi, and the protest has started. The rally began at the building of the Georgian government, then the protestors passed through the central streets of Tbilisi and moved to the parliament building. While the demonstrators held banners with the words Georgia will not return to the Soviet Union; the opposition party leaders were shouting, Release Nika Melia and call snap elections.[1] The carried banners, shouted slogans, and the demands of the opposition leaders in reaction to Nika Melias arrest demonstrate that after the parliamentary elections in October 2020, the political tension in Georgia did not vanish.

The events that led to the arrest of Nika Melia date back to 2019. On June 20, 2019, Sergei Gavrilovs appearance (a member of the Russian State Duma) at the meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy in the Georgian parliament caused hundreds of thousands of people to take to the streets of Tbilisi. On that day, together with the other opposition party members, Nika Melias participation in these protests led him to be accused of inciting violence during the June 2019 protests. Melia was detained on this charge and then released on bail. In the atmosphere that the political crisis was expanding, the October 2020 parliamentary elections were held in Georgia. According to the October 31 vote, the Georgian Dream won 90 seats in the 150-member parliament. However, the leaders of all eight opposition parties accused the Georgian Dream party of rigging the poll and refused to attend parliamentary sitting; meanwhile, 45,000 supporters were gathering outside the parliament building.[2] Our ranks will not waver, our protests will continue until we achieve the holding of free and fair elections in Georgia, Nika Melia told the crowd regarding the recent election in the country.[3]

In the days when the parliamentary elections were being protested in the streets, Nika Melia removed and threw away the monitoring bracelet (another act that the court was put the charge against him) as a symbol of injustice. Tbilisi City Court increased the amount of bail; however, Melia refused to pay the bail, and this was the official reason for

his arrest, according to *Jamnews*.[4] Nevertheless, according to the oppositional figures in Georgia, his detention was neither legal nor politically independent.

Last week, over the court order to arrest Nika Melia for allegedly failing to post bail, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced his resignation. According to Gakharia, who does not think the same with his party (Georgian Dream), the courts decision could lead to political escalation.[5] I believe that confrontation and rivalry within the country endanger the future of Georgias democratic and economic development. Therefore, I have announced my resignation in the hope to reduce polarization and deescalate the situation, he tweeted on February 18.[6] According to Reuters, the Ministry of Interior announced that decision to arrest Melia was temporarily postponed following his resignation. Upon this announcement, the supporters of Nika Melia gathered around his partys offices for a celebration and On behalf of all opposition parties, I declare: lets sit at the negotiating table with representatives of this government and start negotiations on new early elections, Nika Melia said.[7]

On Monday (February 22), Irakli Garibashvili was voted as the new prime minister in the parliament, and his government won a vote of confidence with 89 votes.[8] The day after Garibashvili was named as new prime minister by the parliament, the police stormed the United National Movement partys headquarters and arrested the chairman, Nika Melia. Now thousands of people have poured into the streets of Tbilisi, demanding that Melia be released.

In 2020, after the recent elections in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, people took to the streets to protest the elections. The protests following the arrest of the opposition politician Alexey Navalny are continuing in Russia. Lastly, the political crisis in Georgia reveals that the events taking place in Russia and the surrounding countries and the reactions of the international community to these events will be analyzed in detail in our future articles. For now, how the Western partners of Georgia will respond to the events in the country, and according to the reactions, whether Georgian Dream will decide to hold early elections seems two important questions waiting for answers.

**Photo: Daily Sabah*

[1] Protests in Tbilisi after special forces arrest of opposition leader, *JAM news*, February 23, 2021, https://jam-news.net/protests-in-tbilisi-after-special-forces-arrest-of-opposition-leader-photo-report/.

[2] For a previously written commentary writing on the events mentioned in this paragraph, please click on the following link: https://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/THE-TURBULENT-POLITICAL-CLIMATE-AND-THE-PROTESTS-TAKING-PLACE-IN-THE-STREETS-OF-TBILISI-OVER-THE-31-OCTOBER-PARLIAMENTARY-ELECTIONS.

[3] Georgia opposition defies crackdown, stages new protests, *EURACTIV*, November 10, 2020, https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/georgia-opposition-defies-crackdown-stages-new-protests/.

[4] Georgias political crisis explained, *Jam news*, February 25, 2021, https://jam-news.net/georgias-political-crisis-explained/.

[5] Nika Melia, Georgian opposition leader, is arrested at party HQ, *BBC*, February 23, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56167147.

[6] Giorgi Gakharia, Twitter post, February 18, 3:30 p.m., https://twitter.com/GakhariaGiorgi.

[7] Georgias prime minister resigns, opposition calls for early election, *Reuters*, February 18, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-politics-minister-idUSKBN2AI0X5.

[8] David Kachkachishvili, Georgias new premier, cabinet win confidence vote, *Anadolu Agency*, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/georgias-new-premier-cabinet-win-confidence-vote/2153747.

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