Georgia's prime minister resigns, opposition calls for early election

19/02/2021 16:19 by admin

Gakharia, who had held the post since 2019, said he was stepping down because of a disagreement with his own team over the detention of Nika Melia, a prominent opposition politician.

Georgia's Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia speaks to the media as he visits a polling station during a parliamentary election in Tbilisi, Georgia October 31, 2020. (REUTERS/Irakli Gedenidze/File Photo)

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced his resignation on Thursday, prompting celebrations from the opposition, which called for an early election.

Gakharia, who had held the post since 2019, said he was stepping down because of a disagreement with his own team over the detention of Nika Melia, a prominent opposition politician.

â€œI believe that confrontation and rivalry within the country endanger the future of Georgiaâ€™s democratic and economic development,â€• Gakharia wrote on Twitter.

â€œTherefore, I have announced my resignation in the hope of reducing polarisation and de-escalating the situation.â€•

Gakharia had said Meliaâ€™s detention was unacceptable if it threatened to fuel political divisions in the South Caucasus country of 3.7 million people.

The U.S. State Department said it was â€œdeeply concernedâ€• by recent developments in Georgia and called on â€œall parties to exercise restraint and avoid any actions or rhetoric that could escalate tensions or result in violence.â€•

â€œWe will continue to work with Georgia, our strategic partner, to promote the rule of law and accountable institutions,â€• department spokesman Ned Price said in a statement.

Melia, chairman of the United National Movement (UNM) opposition party, had been accused of inciting violence at street protests in June 2019, a charge he has dismissed as politically motivated.

A court in the capital Tbilisi on Wednesday ordered that Melia be taken in to custody for allegedly failing to post bail.

Following Gakhariaâ€™s resignation, the Interior Ministry announced it was postponing carrying out the order to take Melia into custody.

A crowd gathered outside his partyâ€™s offices and waved Georgian flags in celebration, according to Sputnik Georgia.

Inside UNM headquarters, Melia called for an early election.

â€œOn behalf of all opposition parties, I declare: letâ€™s sit at the negotiating table with representatives of this government and start negotiations on new early elections,â€• Melia said.

Georgian Dream won the parliamentary election in October last year, but the opposition said the vote was rigged and marred with violations.

Melia said at the time that his party did not recognise its outcome and called for a re-run.

Irakli Kobakhidze, chairman of Georgian Dream, said it was putting forward Defence Minister Irakli Garibashvili as a candidate to replace Gakharia, TASS news agency reported.

- Reuters