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## Opponents of Georgian President Begin Protest

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Sergei Grits/Associated Press

Opposition supporters took part in a rally in front of the parliament in Tbilisi on Thursday.

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY  
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TBILISI, [Georgia](#) -- Tens of thousands of protesters gathered in front of Parliament on Thursday to demand that President [Mikheil Saakashvili](#) resign and to hear opposition leaders describe him as a tyrant who had mishandled the war with Russia.

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While the event was held amid rising tensions, it began without incident. People streamed along Rustaveli Avenue, one of the main roads here in the capital, bearing signs and chanting slogans against

Mr. Saakashvili, who took office five years ago with promises of a progressive, pro-Western government.

Opposition parties have asserted that they will not halt their protest until Mr. Saakashvili steps down. "We are here because there is no other way to do this," said Levan Gachechiladze, an opposition leader. "We need to stay here until the end. He must go!"

Irakli Alasania, a former ambassador to the [United Nations](#) who broke with Mr. Saakashvili over the war, told the crowd that Mr. Saakashvili had spurned the values of the democratic movement that brought him to power.

"The whole world is watching us now," Mr. Alasania said. "We are here to show our government and other countries that this is the only way to have real change."

The government under Mr. Saakashvili carried out a violent crackdown on a similar demonstration in November 2007, drawing widespread international criticism, including from the United States, the president's most prominent backer.

Apparently chastened, the government has taken pains this time to make clear that it

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The opposition has been fragmented among several political parties, and it is not at all clear that there is widespread public support for Mr. Saakashvili's resignation.

The opposition called the rally for April 9 because it is a holiday in Georgia that marks the anniversary of clashes between protesters and Soviet troops in 1989 that left 20 people dead.

Mr. Saakashvili and some opposition leaders attended a ceremony earlier in the day in honor of the holiday.

"No matter how our positions and views may differ, we have one motherland, we need unity for the sake of this motherland," Mr. Saakashvili said. "We need to accomplish our struggle for eventual liberation of Georgia and for eventual establishment of a democratic, free, European state."

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