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GEORGIA: Will Shevardnadze's fall bring religious freedom?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

President Shevardnadze's resignation will not bring an immediate improvement in the religious freedom situation, Forum 18 News Service has been told. "Although the new leaders are not interested in supporting religious violence, at the same time I don't think fighting it will be a priority - it is not a popular cause, unfortunately", said Dr Gia Nodia, of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development. Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, as well as describing the Baptist role in the protests which led to Shevardnadze's fall, told Forum 18 that new elections will allow more democratic politicians to be elected. "In accordance with the results of the falsified elections, more than half the members of parliament would have been hardliners, including Guram Sharadze and others who had been openly supporting religious terrorism," he stated. Dr Nodia also told Forum 18 that the most influential politicians supporting religious violence and restrictions on minority faiths were allied with the former government. Some religious minorities are adopting a wait-and-see attitude, or are sceptical, pointing to opposition leader Mikhail Saakashvili's role as minister of justice when many of the attacks on religious minorities were taking place.

Religious minority leaders and commentators have told Forum 18 News Service that they do not believe the 23 November resignation of President Eduard Shevardnadze after mass street protests in the capital Tbilisi heralds any immediate improvement in the religious freedom situation for minority faiths. "I don't expect it to improve soon," Dr Gia Nodia, director of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, a Tbilisi-based think tank, told Forum 18 on 26 November. "Although the new leaders are not interested in supporting religious violence, at the same time I don't think fighting it will be a priority - it is not a popular cause, unfortunately." He believes that the public mood against religious minorities will eventually change. "But you can't change it overnight."

Levan Ramishvili, director of the Liberty Institute, a human rights group, points out that the political situation remains unstable. "The revolution is not yet finished," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 25 November. "Only after the elections will the situation stabilise." He said he thinks it unlikely that the long-promised religion bill will reach parliament before the next parliamentary elections, due next year. Without a religion law, no religious group can register with the authorities so none have been able to gain legal status as religious communities (except the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate, which gained legal status with its own concordat with the state in October 2002).

In the past five years, Georgia's religious minorities - including Baptists, Pentecostals, Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses - have suffered hundreds of physical attacks from self-appointed and self-styled Orthodox vigilantes. Only in November were five of the attackers given suspended sentences, while all the other attackers - allegedly including priests of the Orthodox Patriarchate - have gone unpunished. Religious minorities are mostly unable to build places of worship, unable to publish or import religious literature and often forced to send their children to compulsory Orthodox lessons in schools.

The ousting of Shevardnadze, which was followed by the resignation of several ministers closely associated with him, was masterminded by three opposition leaders: a former justice minister Mikhail Saakashvili, former parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze and an earlier parliamentary speaker Zurab Jvania. They were protesting against widespread rigging in the 2 November parliamentary elections. Burjanadze is now acting president until a new presidential poll, which parliament has called on 4 January. New parliamentary elections will follow later.

Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, leader of the Baptist Church, described Shevardnadze's resignation as a "positive development". "We thanked the Lord for the bloodless resolution of the political crisis that had been going on for a couple of weeks," he declared on 25 November. "There was incredible joy and celebration in front of the parliament building in Tbilisi. People were singing and dancing, drinking and enjoying themselves."

He said that although the falsified elections were the spark, there were many other issues that brought people onto the streets. "They had been fed up with years of poverty, corruption, hypocrisy, social injustice, unfairness, communist manner of doing things, and the violation of human rights and religious liberties." He said the Baptists had been "actively involved" in supporting the protest movement. "They participated in the demonstrations and in the non-violent takeover of the Parliament building and the State Chancellery." They had distributed hot drinks and food to the demonstrators during the cold nights on the streets. Bishop Songulashvili also spoke on television about the role of the church at a time of national crisis. Also appearing on television to call

for a peaceful resolution was Orthodox Patriarch Ilya. "Government television kept replaying his statement, but I don't think the patriarch had great influence over the course of events," Nodia told Forum 18.

Bishop Songulashvili noted that in the early days of the street protests, pro-governmental forces were "furious" about the Baptist Church's involvement. Sulkhan Molashvili of the State Control Chamber declared on television that "one of the main ideologists of the national movement in Georgia is Malkhaz Songulashvili, the Baptist Bishop". Also critical of Baptist support for the protests was Shalva Natelashvili, chairman of the Labour party.

Gari Azikov, a Lutheran pastor in Tbilisi, said that in the wake of the president's resignation, his church had hosted an ecumenical service on 24 November in thanks for the peaceful change of power. But he added that only the Baptists and Lutherans participated. "The Armenians and the Catholics had agreed to come, but for some reason they didn't," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 26 November. "The Orthodox were also invited, but they never come."

Bishop Songulashvili is optimistic that the change in the leadership "will certainly promote greater democracy" and "therefore it will also promote religious liberty". He believes the new parliamentary elections will allow more democratic politicians to be elected. "In accordance with the results of the falsified elections, more than half the members of parliament would have been hardliners, including Guram Sharadze and others who had been openly supporting religious terrorism," he declared. "We still do not understand how President Shevardnadze could have promoted such people through the governmental party list!"

Others are more sceptical that the religious liberty situation will improve. "I don't see any changes," Pastor Azikov told Forum 18. "It is unknown what will happen until there are new presidential and parliamentary elections. After that? Let's wait and see." He remained highly suspicious of the new leaders. He pointed out that during his address to the crowds outside parliament on the night of 23/24 November, Jvania had declared in connection with the visit Patriarch Ilya was about to make to Russia: "Orthodoxy is our traditional religion and we should cherish it."

Also adopting a wait-and-see attitude is Tony Kennedy, regional officer for Georgia of the Salvation Army. "I don't believe there will be any immediate changes," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 26 November. "We are in a transition period and everything will depend on what happens in the next elections."

Other religious leaders point out that Saakashvili was minister of justice when many of the attacks on religious minorities were taking place, while Jvania and Burjanadze were successive speakers of parliament. "When he was justice minister, Saakashvili showed a strong inclination to be close to the Patriarch," Nodia agreed. "Certainly he didn't focus on bringing to justice those responsible for the religious violence, although in law he had no power over the judicial authorities. But as a politician he should have spoken up."

Some find it hard to believe that the three leaders have suddenly become more democratic. "Before the elections, all parties including the so-called democrats made nationalist remarks about Georgia for the Georgians," Azikov complained. "Politicians change their words every ten minutes."

But Nodia believes the most influential politicians supporting religious violence and restrictions on minority faiths were allied with the former government, especially the parliamentary deputy Sharadze. "Guram Sharadze was the main ideologist, and he was in the government bloc." Although he believes all politicians, including the new leaders, want to be close to the Patriarchate, the Patriarchate's power may diminish.

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=georgi>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY