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GEORGIA: "Orchestrated reaction" against religious minorities' buildings

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

Georgian politicians and the Georgian Orthodox Church continue to deny the continued impossibility for religious minorities to openly build places of worship, Forum 18 News Service has found. "The difficulties we face are linked not to laws, but to a climate that has been artificially created and which forces us – in order not to stir up aggression – not to undertake construction," Catholic Bishop Giuseppe Pasotto told Forum 18. Amongst religious minorities facing this intolerance are Baptist churches, Pentecostals, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the True Orthodox Church. Elene Tevdoradze, Chair of the Parliamentary Human Rights and Civic Integration Committee, denied to Forum 18 that problems exist, as did the Deputy Chair of the Committee, Lali Papiashvili. She told Forum 18 "No, no, that's not true. It's obviously not true." Zurab Tskhovrebadze of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate also denied that religious minorities face obstruction in building.

Three years after the change of regime that saw the end of most violent mob attacks on religious minorities, Georgia's political class remains in denial about the continued impossibility for religious minorities to build new places of worship openly, religious minority leaders have complained to Forum 18 News Service. "Especially in places which had Catholic churches which have been confiscated by the Orthodox, the Catholic faithful have the right – as a minimum – to have a church. But up till today this remains impossible," Georgia's Catholic bishop Giuseppe Pasotto told Forum 18 from the capital Tbilisi [T'bilisi] on 19 October. He said there has been no improvement since 2003.

Forum 18 has found that while some faiths can quietly build unobtrusive places of worship under the guise of private homes or offices – as long as they do not look like places of worship – religious communities whose places of worship are distinctive and indeed almost any place of worship of a minority faith in a small village face obstruction or de facto bans.

"In the major centres all construction recognised as Catholic arouses an orchestrated reaction," Bishop Pasotto complained. "The difficulties we face are linked not to laws, but to a climate that has been artificially created and which forces us – in order not to stir up aggression – not to undertake construction."

This is a long standing problem facing religious minorities within Georgia (see F18News 14 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=184). A major factor behind it is that some Georgian Orthodox priests persistently incite mob violence against religious minorities (see eg. F18News 25 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=569). Intolerance of religious minorities is widespread within Georgian society, despite some legal improvements (see F18News 24 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=568).

Typical of the "aggression" Bishop Pasotto complained of was a mob invasion in September and subsequent petition campaign against the completion of an Assyrian Catholic centre in Tbilisi. This will also include a sanctuary for religious worship (see F18News 19 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=857).

In 2005, a church that a Baptist community was trying to build in Zestafoni, a town 45 km (30 miles) east of Kutaisi [K'ut'aisi], was attacked. "We laid the foundations, but as soon they found out, the Orthodox priest came with others and broke them down," Pastor Levan Akhalmosulishvili, a leading member of the independent Association of Christian-Baptist Churches, told Forum 18 on 18 October. "The Orthodox told us openly: 'Society, government and parliament support us!'" Building work has still not been able to resume, he added.

Also forced to a halt was construction of a home for a Baptist deacon, in the village of Velistsikhe in Gurjaani district of eastern Georgia. This was attacked by mobs in 2004 (see F18News 5 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=446). "The district and village authorities have told us not to use the half-finished building," Pastor Akhalmosulishvili reported. "Criminals threatened to destroy it if we resume building. The authorities told us they would not defend us."

Asked what officials say when congregations of his Association ask if they can build places of worship, Akhalmosulishvili

responded: "They look at us as though we're mad. It's fantasy to even think of building."

Giorgi Khutsishvili, head of the Tbilisi-based International Center of Conflict Negotiations, is blunt. "Can religious minorities build places of worship? No," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 18 October. "This becomes such a hot topic." He attributes this to the "mentality of the majority" who, he says, regard the Orthodox Church as having the status of a state Church. "The Orthodox can build any church anywhere, but all others are alien."

Khutsishvili says every time "fundamentalists" learn a non-Orthodox place of worship is being built they move in. "The government is quiet and does nothing," he told Forum 18. "It tries to mediate, calming the fundamentalists and the religious minorities. But it doesn't resist the fundamentalists, so they continue their activities."

He added that the lack of a religion law that would allow religious minority communities to gain legal status as religious organisations (only the Orthodox Patriarchate has such legal status) also hinders building minority places of worship.

Bishop Pasotto complains that in recent years all the Catholic Church has been able to build is "tiny places of worship in out of the way villages". He expresses frustration that officials – who he says are not opposed to Catholic activity – tell them they cannot change the situation. "The most unpleasant thing is that from the political side, for all religious problems – such as over a law on religion – there is complete inaction. Is this from incompetence? Is this from fear?"

Bishop Pasotto's frustration is echoed by Archbishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Georgian Baptist Church, the largest Baptist church in the country. "Everyone has the right to build a church, mosque of temple, but this is impossible at the moment," he told Forum 18 on 4 October. "Religious communities cannot build a place of worship, only an NGO office."

But Elene Tevdoradze, a parliamentary deputy who chairs its Human Rights and Civic Integration Committee, denies this. "There's no such law that bans non-Orthodox faiths from building – if minority faiths do everything according to the law, they can build places of worship," she claimed to Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 18 October. "They shouldn't be afraid. The policy of the government is clear: everyone has the right to carry out their faith." But she dismissed the experience of religious minorities of repeated obstruction and threats of aggression when they try to build.

Her lack of concern was shared by the Deputy Chair of the Committee, Lali Papiashvili. Asked by Forum 18 why religious minorities cannot build places of worship she responded: "No, no, that's not true. It's obviously not true." She said no religious minorities have complained to her about this. "The government's doesn't have a policy not to allow other faiths to build. Until we get complaints that they have problems I can't believe this." Asked whether she has talked to religious minorities she said "No."

Zurab Tskhovrebadze, spokesperson for the Orthodox Patriarchate, equally denies that religious minorities face obstruction in building. "Any churches can be built," he insisted to Forum 18 on 19 October. "There is no law that says the Georgian Orthodox Church has to agree any such building." Asked why this happens in practice, he responded: "When we meet people of other faiths, they don't complain to us about this."

One community that has not tried to build any new places of worship in the past fifteen years but which faces absolute refusal to return its historic places of worship confiscated during the Soviet period is the Armenian Apostolic Church. Levon Isakhanyan, assistant to the Armenian Bishop of Georgia, Vazgen Mirzakhanyan, said his Church is currently seeking the return of six churches, five in Tbilisi and one in the southern town of Akhaltsikhe [Akhalts'ikhe], which has a majority Armenian population. "All these churches, that served the Armenian community for centuries, are today shut and made no use of whatsoever by any denomination," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 25 October. "The condition of these churches is appalling."

Isakhanyan cited the diocese's lack of status as a legal entity – a problem shared by all non-Orthodox religious communities that refuse to register as non-profit entities – as an excuse officials use to refuse to consider such applications. He also complained that politicians and nationalists who oppose the churches' return often claim that their ownership is "disputed". He insists the Georgian government has responsibility to resolve the Church's problems.

Likewise, Bishop Pasotto complains that six Catholic churches in major towns – the port of Batumi [Bat'umi], Kutaisi [K'ut'aisi], Gori, Ivrita, Ude and Akhaltsikhe - were "illegally" given to the Orthodox and have not been returned, a problem he points out is shared by the Armenian Apostolic Church. By contrast, he says the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate has been able to recover its property confiscated during the Soviet period.

Asked why he believes non-Orthodox cannot build places of worship, Bishop Pasotto responded: "The idea that a church that is built would be a public sign which could influence people and be a source of proselytism against the Orthodox Church."

Forum 18 could find only a handful of non-Patriarchate places of worship now being openly built without problems. Fr Gela Aroshvili, a True Orthodox priest under the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Ephraim Spanos of Boston, USA, reported that two of his congregations that had long been obstructed from building can now do so.

He said the Tbilisi congregation began work on a small church in February in the city's Saburtalo district with permission from the local authority, though the church is registered as a private house. He said the exterior is now complete, but the interior is not yet ready to allow services to take place. "It looks like an Orthodox church, but there's no sign outside saying it's a True Orthodox church," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 18 October. "I don't know if the Patriarchate complained, but we've faced no problems." Fr Aroshvili added that their congregation in Kutaisi has also gained permission to build a house. He insisted they would build it in traditional Orthodox church style with a cross on the top.

However, he said there has been no progress in rebuilding their church destroyed by a mob in the village of Shemokmedi in south western Georgia in October 2002 (see F18News 7 April 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=27). "We're not hurrying, but we do want to rebuild," Fr Aroshvili told Forum 18. "But the authorities are still not responding."

One other minority place of worship that is being openly built is a new church for a Russian-speaking Pentecostal congregation in Tbilisi, which was repeatedly prevented by the police and by violent mobs from holding services in the home of the pastor, Nikolai Kalutsky. Pastor Kalutsky won an eventual victory in the Constitutional Court in May 2005 that such bans, attacks and obstructions violated his religious freedom (see F18News 25 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=569). Following this court victory, a Presidential Decree awarded the congregation land in Tbilisi's Isani district to build an alternative place of worship.

Kalutsky told Forum 18 that official registration of the land as his property was completed at the beginning of October, and work began immediately. "Permission was given for a private house, but the building will look like a church from the outside," he told Forum 18 from the building site on 24 October. "We couldn't do it any other way because we have no legal status as a religious community." He said the Prosecutor's Office had summoned him to tell him that, if the community faces any obstruction, it is to notify the Prosecutor immediately. Pastor Kalutsky was told that the Prosecutor will then take appropriate measures to allow building to proceed.

Asked why his congregation is now able to build on land given free of charge by the state, after so many years of harassment, Kalutsky responded: "What happened to us reached the outside world – everyone had heard of them. Politicians realised this."

Bishop Oleg Khubashvili, who leads the Pentecostal Union to which Kalutsky's congregation belongs, told Forum 18 that the Union has been able to buy a building in Tbilisi to turn into its offices. (The Union has legal status as a non-profit organisation). "Later we plan to turn part of it into a sanctuary," he told Forum 18 on 24 October. "If we built a church from scratch, I can't say what the reaction would be."

The Jehovah's Witnesses – who suffered more than a hundred violent attacks, mostly unpunished, between 1999 and 2003 – say that they have been able to build Kingdom Halls across Georgia in the last few years, including about ten in Tbilisi. "It's strange, given all the attacks," Jehovah's Witness leader Genadi Gudadze told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 24 October. "Sometimes life is surprising," he added, laughing.

But the Jehovah's Witnesses have been careful. "We don't advertise that we're building Kingdom Halls, but everyone round about knows what they are," Gudadze reported. "They deliberately aren't large or lavish, so don't attract attention."

Like other faiths, the Jehovah's Witnesses choose not to place signs outside their places of worship. "We understand that in a normal country there should be such signs," Gudadze added. "But we don't want extra attention." (END)

For the comments of Georgian religious leaders and human rights activists on how the legacy of religious violence should be overcome, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=499

For more background see Forum 18's Georgia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=400

A printer-friendly map of Georgia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=georgi>

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