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CRISIS OF SECULARISM AND LOYALTY TOWARDS THE
DOMINANT GROUP: THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE
2012-2013 RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA

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Abstract

The paper presents findings of the research of the religious conflicts in Georgia which erupted between November 2012 and December 2013. The research aimed to assess the causes of the religious conflicts between the Muslim minority and Orthodox Christians in the villages of Nigvziani (Lanchkhuti district), Tsintskaro (Tetritskaro district) and Samtatskaro (Dedoplistskaro district) in Georgia; as well as to analyze government policies enacted for the peaceful and just resolution of the conflicts. The study revealed the social and political contexts that were influencing the conflicts and conditioning them. The article is an analysis of the political aspects of the conflict and the problems related to the national-religious identities.

Introduction

In the short period following the parliamentary elections of October 2012 in Georgia, several local religious conflicts - in different geographical zones - unfolded and created the need to further examine these in a broader perspective. Despite the fact that government officials kept referring to conspiracy theories or claiming the conflicts were artificial and not admitting the reality of the problems at hand, initial observations of the conflicts showed they were not sporadic, but rather the result of systematic problems relating to the protection of freedom of religion within the country (this, in the end, was also proved through this research). The perceptions and attitudes of the different religious groups in the conflict lead to alienation among
the local Christian and Muslim communities. Consequently, it proved to be necessary to study the conflicts locally and in a broad perspective.

In addition, prima facie evaluations of the development of the conflict and of the policies enacted to solve it showed that, in the case of the first conflict, the unjust and non-secular policies of the government determined the spreading of the conflict to other regions and further expanded the restriction of freedom rights. In light of recent developments in Georgia, the claims of losing the balance between the Church and the state have acquired more empirical evidence and gained special importance in the course of the analysis of the above-mentioned conflicts. This imbalance was demonstrated when the government failed to respond adequately to the violations, and when it trusted and delegated the conflict resolution function to the religious actors.

**Overview of the Religious Conflicts in Three Villages of Georgia**

Following the Parliamentary elections in October 2012 in Georgia there have been several cases of Muslim communities in Georgia being attacked by Orthodox Christians. Three locations of the major conflicts were the villages of Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtatskaro. Nigvziani is a part of the Guria region and is situated in the Lanchkhuti Municipality. The village has some 1,300 families. The majority of the population consists of Orthodox Christians who are followers of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Around 35 percent of the population are eco-migrants who resettled from the mountainous region of Adjara in 1970. A large number of the population in Adjara identify themselves as ‘Georgian Adjarians’, however, some Adjarians were converted to Christianity. Eco-migrants after resettling in Adjara, managed to integrate into the local community and engage in economic activities. Moreover, Adjarians managed to form neighborly relations with the local population. There have been some mixed marriages; however, a deep analysis of their interaction showed that the social and economic differences have drawn these communities apart. Apparently, alienation has not been openly manifested prior to the conflict.

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1. This refers to the counter-manifestation organized by the church on the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, May 17, and the demolition of a Minaret in the village Chela, Adigeni Municipality, as well as the usage of disproportionate force against local Muslims by the police.
The conflict on religious grounds became apparent on October 26, 2012, when during the Bayram celebrations, 150 members of the Christian Community have blocked the way of Muslims returning from prayers. Members of the local Christian community demanded to dismantle the prayer house. The prayer house that was opened two months prior ago hosted around 50-70 Muslims regularly. According to the Muslims, the decision to open the prayer house was made by the Mufti governance and local Municipality. On the 25 of October, 2012 neighboring villagers joined the Nigviani Muslim community in celebrating Bayram together at the local prayer house. The first day of the celebration was peaceful. However, on October 26, Christian residents of the village blocked the roads to the visiting worshipers and barred them from visiting the village again. The conflict led to a verbal assault. According to Muslim witnesses the police was around, but did not try to stop Christians from assaulting Muslim residents.

Another village that marked the location of a similar conflict was Tsintskararo. Previously, this village was largely populated by ethnic Greeks. Soon after most of them left Georgia, ethnic Azerbaijanis moved there. In 2005 eco-migrants from the high mountainous regions of Adjara and Svaneti started settling here. As of today there are around 600 families living in the village, out of which 100 families are ethnic Azerbaijanis and the rest are Adjarians and Svans with equal numbers. Most Adjarians converted to Christianity, but some twenty families preserved the Islamic religion. Adjarians are Sunni, while Azeris are Shi’a. This means their religious practices differ from one another and they do not pray together. The Muslim and Christian communities have been interacting peacefully and mixed marriages have been documented. A precondition to form a family, however, is to have a common religion. Despite the peaceful co-existence in previous years, the religious conflict of 2012 revealed the tendencies of an estrangement between these two communities. The local Azerbaijanis have not participated in the conflict. The attitudes towards them from the side of the parties involved in the conflict is neutral, which can possibly be explained with the fact that Azerbaijanis pertain to a different ethnic group and locals are more distanced/alienated from them.

The prayer house in Tsintskararo was established in the beginning of November 2012 with the assistance of Mufti governance of Georgia. Before, for attending the prayers the local Adjarian Muslims would go to Marneuli or the neighboring village of Kosalara to attend prayers. This was a financial burden to them. Issues of this nature would often make were making their
participation in collective prayers impossible. The information on establishing a prayer house was available to the residents already in the beginning of November, 2012, although there had been no resistance to it from their side before. The first incidents happened only when the crosses of common Muslim and the Christian cemetery gates were cut down. Although, the analysis of the statements of the local population shows that despite the fact that cutting the crosses was only the reason to initiating the conflict, the local Christian community had substantial resistance towards opening a Muslim prayer house in the village.

The third village of conflict was Samtatskaro. It borders Azerbaijan and is populated by Ingilo migrants from Azerbaijan and eco-migrants who traveled there from Adjara. Ingilos started moving to Samtatskharo in the 1930s, and in the beginning of the 1980s many Adjarian Muslim families were forced to move there as well. There are 480 households in the village in total; the majority of them (approximately 2/3) are Adjarians. Some Adjarians, especially the youth, converted to Christianity, while the rest are still preserving their faith in Islam, and identify themselves as “Georgian Muslims”. The majority of Ingilos are Christians.

The first prayer here was to take place on May 24, 2013. This prayer was attended by the representative of the Muslim governance. The information on the scheduled prayer had been delivered to the village trustee, Gulnara Nadirashvili. At about twelve thirty, when the Muslim parish was reading the Quran in the prayer house, a group of local Christians (around 50 people) intruded and abused the Muslims. The following Friday, on May 31, 2013, the local Christians still did not allow the Muslims to carry on with their prayers. Samtatskaro residents did not let the Muslim governance representatives enter the village and sent them away using force and threats.

On June 7, local Muslims still could not hold their traditional Friday prayer together due to incoming threats. The Muslims who gathered in front of the prayer house dispersed before the start of the prayer. The statement published by the Public Defender later, said that on June 7, the MIA personnel, taking the local hoja (Muslim leader) to the department, threatened him with detainment, told him, he would “rotting in prison”, and spoke to him in a sarcastic manner. What is more, the local hoja was evicted and had to leave the village on July 8, 2013.

In all three cases the enacted policies were far from that of a secular state. The reasons why the policies the state enacted with the purpose of resolving the conflict can be assessed as unfair is that the state denied the real existence of the conflicts, as well as the fact that the
dominant religious groups were violating the rights of Muslim community and in addition to that that the state itself ignored the real problems at spot, the different conspiracy theories being the underlying reasons. The state denied the real existence of the conflicts and ignored the fact that dominant religious groups were violating the rights of Muslims. The state relied exclusively on political rhetoric, disregarded the legal dimension, and therefore failed to enact the policies respecting justice and principles of human rights. After analyzing the problems identified throughout the conflicts, it became obvious that on a political and social level there is intolerance against a specific religious group. Even though these attitudes should be altered, it is not likely that the State has any plans to do so. During our analysis, it became clear the State has unfair funding policies towards the different religious groups. It also ignored the principles of religious neutrality and neglected the practices of indoctrination of Adjarians as well as proselytism in the public schools of Tsintskharo and Samtistkaro.

The most critical reality is that the state has delegated its role to settle the conflict entirely to religious actors, while to itself it only assumed the functions of a facilitator. Despite the fact that the terms of the agreement (the agreement reached in Nigvziani and Tsintskaro prohibited Muslims from different villages to pray in the established prayer houses either in Nigvziani or in Tsintskaro) or the actual situation on ground (in Samtatskaro Muslims refused to open a prayer house due to pressure and threats) after the conflict were representing the violation of the rights of the minority after and during these conflicts, the government neither ensured the fulfillment of its positive responsibilities nor did it bring them in line with the human rights standards.

Analysis of Social and Political Contexts of the Conflict

The influence of the political context on the religious conflicts was revealed with different implications. The dominant group, including the state authorities and the clergy, used the rhetoric that the conflict had been artificially inflated and that it had been used for political purposes.

Local Christians in Nigvziani and Tsintkaro villages often indicated that the previous government promised a prayer house to the Muslim community in exchange of electoral support.

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It was also alleged that the religious conflicts are the result of political confrontation. These allegations are further reinforced by statements made by Archbishop Joseb and Father Saba Zhghenti. On a similar note, Priest Giorgi observed that the previous government limited the Church and the Church had been liberated after the elections.

The theory that the conflict was inflated by the United National Movement (UNM) (a ruling party in Georgia between 2003-2012) is widely shared in the current government, highlighting the fact that the State authorities and its affiliated groups had artificially provoked the conflict to let the situation escalate. The State authorities, however, did not submit any evidence to support this allegation.

It was not the aim of the research to test the validity of the given thesis; however, the systematic analysis of the conflict revealed that this theory is rather controversial. The influence of the given theory is smaller within the dominant discourse - and in case of Samtatskaro is almost non-existent. Contrary to what the dominant religious groups say, the members of the Muslim community, including the local religious servicemen, criticize the previous government and indicate that under its rule they did not have the right to open a prayer house. Moreover, the Muslim community is happier with the current government. Despite the opposition from the Christian community, the current government has set a precedent and allowed the new prayer house to be opened. This theory, however, has lost its popularity in June 2013. In Tsintskaro, unlike Nigvziani, this theory is less prevalent and here a nationalist discourse is used. In Samtitskaro, this theory is not at all discussed, whilst according to the member of district Municipality, the local hoja felt free to start planning the prayer house he had long wanted to open.

The factual controversy of this theory lacks validity, although it had widely been used by the government and the dominant religious group. Under this model, the previous ruling party was allowed to hide the underlying reasons of the conflict and avoid legal and political responsibilities.

The controversy that exists around the given theory raises questions of its authenticity. The frequent reference by the Orthodox Church and the government representatives to the

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3Note: on October 11, 2013 the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church issued a statement on its assessments of the religious conflicts – where it stated that the conflicts were artificially inflated and were aimed on setting of the two traditional religions and its representatives against each other. The Holy Synod addressed the government to
given theory can only be explained with their pragmatic approaches – this model of explanations is allowing them to deny the existence of real structural systemic problems and to avoid the political and legal responsibilities.

The talks regarding the possibility of links between the religious conflicts and the power transition can be explained by the nearing of the election period - the society attached political and social meaning to it. The power transition occurred when the political order was being systemically revised and massive civic upheaval was taking place. The transition went beyond changing the political elites only and caused the political-ideological paradigm to shift. In this respect, several theories are relevant and have their empirical proofs.

Beating the old government in elections had particular reverberations on the local level. The dissatisfaction of the society with the previous government was later projected on the United National Movement as the major enemy. When the ruling party lost the elections, the public felt triumphant and sought political revenge against the Muslim community for its supposedly conformist approach to the previous government. Attempts of the dominant religious group to demonstrate its power was underpinned by the fact that the public felt alienated and suffered from identity crises. This type of alienation could have been a result of the political systems that had been monopolizing public spaces; a lack of communication between public and political elites; and a result of constant process of dehumanization of the system in the name of order and modernism.

To explain the conflicts from a more global perspective we can refer to the new attitudes that exist between the Church and the State. For analyzing the given topic we will discuss the situation before and after the 2012 parliamentary elections.

The previous government often demonstrated courtesy towards the Church, and thus has been violating the principle of secularism. This has been evidenced through many legal and financial privileges the Church enjoys. Other than these entitlements, it had also received funding from the reserve funds and other resources from the local self-government bodies.

investigate cases and take adequate measures. One can access the Synodal statement at: http://www.netgazeti.ge/GE/105/News/24410/

5 Note: Survey conducted by International Transparency-Georgia shows that during 2002-2013, direct funding allocated to the Church by the Ministry of Finance made up GEL 160,672,200. In 2002, at the time of signing the Constitutional Agreement, the Ministry allocated the Apostolic Church GEL 857,600. In the aftermath of the “Rose
When claiming the legitimacy of the state, the latter has used the historic and religious forms of legitimization. Through its use, the State violated the principles of secularism that require the deconstruction of a theology-centered ideology and the establishment self-legitimizing mechanisms by the political state. During the previous government, it was impossible to review the religious politics that would have addressed these legislative and factual inequalities between the dominant Church and the religious minorities. The State had weak policies regarding the protection of religious freedom and proved to be ineffective in addressing crimes motivated by religious hatred and indoctrination practices at school.

After the Rose Revolution of the State’s modern and liberal discourses, aggressive repression as well as an open confrontation with religious leaders have laid out the foundation for religious conflicts. Throughout this period, there have been a number of open confrontations with the Church, including the dismantling of the church on Peria Mountain in 2007. There were also the arrests of the Orthodox Parents Union after an incident at the TV channel Kavkasia (2010) and the permission given to religious organizations to register as legal entities of public law (2011). The configuration of the powers between the State and the Church can be explained through self-limitation and balanced politics.

After the 2012 elections, the state lost its balanced approach and the Church openly manifested its powers. The new government could not maintain the power balance which can be explained through several reasons.

1. Fearing that the State might make similar mistakes, it refused to use modern language and oppressive measures that naturally weakens the State. 2 During the pre-election period,
bonding closer ties with the Church, which who was a major opponent to the government, was strategically important. After the political party came into power, it was bound by its own past.12 One can use a pessimistic argument, arguing that the current loyalty to the Church is a result of the State’s ideology. During the pre-election period, the State could not create a new political ideology (this can be explained by a non-homogeneous nature of the political mainstream). The new government therefore built its platform full of confrontational politics with the previous government. Moreover, in its fight for power, government authorities often used nationalistic, xenophobic, and homophobic statements.13 This was in open conflict with the modern liberal values and made them the ideological allies of the Church. Through this the failure of the new government to protect secular and liberal values can be easily explained.

After the religious conflicts, the events of 17 May and dismantling the minaret in Chela had further aggravated the criticism and had caused crises of secularism.

The Analysis of Different Aspects of Secularism Determined in the Course of the Research

The process of secularization is linked to the period of the formation of contemporary nations. The political systems have started to become self-legitimizing, devoid of religious influences and the Church/God, as a legitimate subject, is being replaced by the people/the nation.14

The model of secularism implies in itself the differentiation of social processes, and as a result of which religion is losing control over numerous social processes. Religion is privatized and finds its place within an individual’s personal space. Religion becomes the person’s identity. In a modern, secular society the nature of faith becomes relative. Democratization reaches into the space of religion – the believer is not choosing the religion for its universal truth, but for identifying the self, its subjectivity. 15

This research showed that in Georgia there is a critical problem with the nation as a political entity. In all three regions the cause of the conflict was that the dominant religious

12Towards a dynamic theory of ethno-religious conflict, Jonathan Fox, department of political studies, Bar Ilan University, Roman Ganm Israel, Nations and Nationalism 5 (4), 1999.
13See Father Jacob preaching http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7NXv1YuqvE
14http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w6t91sMDff
15Secularization and the Birth of the Nations, Gigi Tevdzade, “Secularization: Concept and the Contexts”, 2011, Tbilisi
group was not willing to accept the identity of a “Muslim Georgian”. In their perceptions the national/political identity should coincide with the religious (Orthodox Christian) belonging and attempts to force out individuals of different identities from public spheres. The idea of a public political sphere where each citizen has a place and grants them equal rights and freedoms is rejected here. The local Christians said Muslims can pray in privacy, in their houses, but cannot have their place in public space. In the perceptions of the dominant religious groups the land is sacred and this never allows it to be shared with “others”. Sharing creates fears associated with conquest, while the fight against it gains a heroic meaning. It is important to mention here that throughout the course of the conflicts in every village the idea of evicting, banishing the Muslims from the village was prevalent.

Despite the fact that both dominant religious groups as well as the Adjarian Muslims are eco-migrants, the Christians are openly insisting on sole ownership of the land and the village. This, in general, creates a problem of identity.

The discourse analysis of the local Christians’ interviews vividly shows that their collective consciousness and behavior is fed by historic narratives. Social life is still dominated with ideas such as that Adjarians were forcefully converted to Islam, that Turkey is a conqueror, that Georgians have been thrown out from Saingilo, and that Azerbaijan is a neighboring enemy. Self-identification through these projections of the past gives the acts of the dominant group an irrational and inadequate character. The research demonstrates that cultivation of the mentioned narratives is being assisted by the Christian clergymen and the indoctrination by teachers at public schools.

The usage of the mentioned historic narratives against the Adjarian Muslims contributes to their stigmatization—which in turn causes their self-victimization. It is noteworthy that the places where the Muslim community is socially and economically well-established, as well as integrated, Muslims deal with the process of stigmatization and indoctrination relatively easily and realize the importance of fighting for their rights (e.g. Nigvziani Village).

The narratives of the past and their traumatic fixations create a prevalent ideological system which is an upshot of what the Church does and, in numerous cases, what the political authorities do. Any type of disagreement with this ideology is regarded as an offense and reproduces violence. The theory of religious conflicts explains that when the knowledge/value
system the Church offers to people is threatened, the justification of violence becomes possible.\textsuperscript{16} The public policies enacted in the society by the Orthodox Church (the ways the Church is presenting itself to the public) are devoid of ethics, theological meanings and in most cases encourage nationalistic beliefs. Consequently, offences against this ideology automatically imply the beginning of a conflict based on religion. It can be a separate topic of research to learn how quietist or violent the theological doctrine of Orthodox Christianity can be. The discourse analysis of the statements by the clergymen within the conflict context shows that their preaching is dominated by ideas of intolerance towards different religious groups, their discreditation, and the thought of the Georgian Orthodox Church as being superior to others.

The research showed that the dominant religious groups find it hard to identify themselves with the liberal and secular order and what is more, they are in conflict with it. It is exactly the crisis of secular nationalism that gives the rise to religious and ethnic identities. Social theories provide explanations for the fact that have answers to what the reasons are that society is losing its belief in secular nationalism. The following are noteworthy for the context discussed: 1. Secular nationalism promises political freedom, economic prosperity and social justice, but the State that carries this ideology is incapable of responding to these challenges. Its failure, as such, causes the system’s illegitimacy. 2. For many non-European countries secular nationalism is regarded as a foreign, imposed ideology without any legitimacy or authenticity on the ground. 3. Secular nationalism is identified with cultural colonialism, along with the fear of losing traditions and identity, which is felt even more dramatically when it occurs together with modernization (abolishment of traditional links, collective values, and atomization of societies).\textsuperscript{17}

The proposed theoretical models are quite accurate in explaining Georgian reality well, as well as the religious conflicts here and the general challenges that the country faces in respect to secularism. The reasons for of the crisis of secularism can be found within political systems which failed to consolidate society under one national narrative. Devaluation of the declared liberal-democratic values occurred when no free political space was offered and no social justice ensured.

\textsuperscript{16}Secularization or Desecularisation, Giga Zedania, “Secularization: Concept and the Contexts”, 2011, Tbilisi
\textsuperscript{17}Secularization or Desecularisation, Giga Zedania, “Secularization: Concept and the Contexts”, 2011, Tbilisi