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Georgia's Homophobic Church

By Paul Rimple

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"Why is everybody so aggressive?" I asked two priests standing at a bus stop as thousands of people ran by me in pursuit of gay activists. "Is this Christian behavior? Is this what Jesus would do?"

They did not answer, let alone look me in the eye. I'd meet another priest later, after I had barely escaped a savage mob of Georgian Orthodox Christians, who had no qualms explaining why people had every right to beat homosexuals. "It's because they do it in public," he said, simulating the act of sex with his hands and hips. "They are spreading propaganda and want to destroy Georgian traditions."

Last year, when Georgia's LGBT community held the first rally to mark International Day Against Homophobia, it ended in a scuffle with a handful of Orthodox Christian extremists who blocked their march. This year, the rally ended when a mob of over 20,000 bloodthirsty homophobes — led by cursing priests — broke through police barriers and chased a handful of demonstrators into the city streets, shouting, "Kill them!"

Friday's obscenity in the name of the Lord was not about the Church's stance against homosexuals as much as it was a manifestation of its power. Two days after Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili stated that sexual minorities were equal citizens of this country and that society would "gradually get used to it," the patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Ilia II, called on the government to prohibit the demonstration. He said homosexuality was an "anomaly and disease" and that the rally would be "a violation of majority's rights" and "an insult" to Georgian tradition. Church leaders then mobilized young men to assault homosexuals, much in the same way Nazis orchestrated mobs to attack Jews.

"We distance ourselves from violence," Patriarch Ilia II said on television Friday. But distance is relative. I saw a priest stand proudly by as a throng of halfwits threw stones at 10 women and spit in the face of a female photographer — Georgian chivalry sanctioned by the church.

Ivanishvili issued the routine condemnation of violence and vowed that perpetrators will be punished, but nobody in Georgia is going to lay a hand on the Georgian Orthodox clergy responsible for Friday's bestiality because they fear the church's influence. There is truly something amiss when a government is impotent to a religious institution whose merciless leaders incite intolerance, hatred and murder against its fellow countrymen.

While the church's goons were mopping up Tbilisi of its homosexual riffraff and helping homophobes attack people suspected of being gay, church leaders called on people to convene at The Holy Trinity Cathedral, which was built with Ivanishvili's money. There, Bishop Jakob basked in the glorious victory of the day. He boasted that the Georgian nation showed a moral example of its strength and that the church was a political entity to be reckoned with.

"You know very well that [Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's] United National Movement required two and a half months to gather 5,000 people [for its April 19 rally]," Bishop Jakob said, adding that the church could have gathered a million people, if needed.

Ivanishvili is facing his first real test as a leader against a dangerous theocratic movement that speaks in Old Testament language of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. The authorities' utter failure to prevent the violence means these extremists will become more emboldened.

The government talks of European integration, but Georgia will remain isolated in the Dark Ages of irrelevance until its leaders have the guts to stand up for the equal rights of all its citizens and confront the dark forces of evil masquerading as Georgian Orthodox Christians.

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