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Georgia's Melting Pot Tested by Xenophobia

By Paul Rimple

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Tbilisi is perhaps most renowned for its melting-pot legacy, where in a few short blocks in the Old Town you will see an Armenian Apostolic Church, Georgian Orthodox Church, mosque and synagogue. Some Georgians don't understand just what this implies, like a taxi driver who recently told me: "These people have lived in our country in peace. Georgia is a tolerant country."

"Our country" represents the chauvinistic conviction that Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, used to divide and destroy his country in the early 1990s. The Georgian Orthodox Church adopted the same archaic nationalistic orientation after the yoke of communism vanished. Instead of continuing Georgia's proud traditions of tolerance, political and religious leaders are repeating past mistakes by dividing Georgia along ethnic and religious lines.

In June, a local Muslim religious leader, Hajji Suliko Khozrevanidze, was forced to leave his

community in east Georgia because he feared for his life. For weeks, up to 200 local Georgians calling themselves Christians would block the prayer house each Friday to prevent the Muslim community from holding prayers. At one point, the so-called Christians went to the Muslim leader's house and beat his wife. Such anti-Muslim hysteria has been observed nationwide.

Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II said he would not let Muslims be oppressed. But not everybody heard him. Last week, a fight broke out in Pankisi Gorge allegedly between Muslim and Christian youths. This would be the first known religious confrontation between local Georgians and Kisti, ethnic Chechens who settled in the region 180 years ago.

If this is the kind of behavior we are seeing between Georgians, what kinds of intolerance should we expect as more Asians, Africans and Middle Easterners settle in the country?

In July, parliament passed a law forbidding the sale of agriculture land to foreigners in response to the 2,000 Punjabi farmers that have immigrated and bought land in east Georgia. The same month, Levan Vasadze, a religiously conservative millionaire, became head of the Demographic Renaissance Foundation of Georgia, which was established to prevent an oncoming "demographic disaster." Vasadze fears the Georgian gene pool is threatened.

In their zealous craze to protect Georgia's traditions from outside influence, Georgian leaders are trampling its most distinguished heritage of tolerance, forgetting that justness, liberalism and understanding are the virtues of the tolerant society they claim to be safeguarding.

Paul Rimple is a journalist in Tbilisi.

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