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Georgia's Anti-Muslim Crusade Gains Force

By Paul Rimple

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Imagine a church has erected a 10-meter cross in a little Georgian village and a month later, police come to dismantle it and take it away, claiming it was erected illegally. Visualize a mob of angry Christians trying to prevent the desecration and getting arrested for hooliganism. We know such vagary is inconceivable in Georgia, not because 85 percent of the people claim to be Orthodox Christians, but the church is sacrosanct in Georgia. Islam, however, is open game.

Last week, authorities brazenly pulled down a minaret in Chela, a village near the Turkish border. The revenue service claimed customs formalities had not been performed on the pre-fab structure. Rather than consult local Muslims, however, officials demonstrated a show of force with helicopters and special security forces, provoking resistance and the indignation of Georgia's Muslim population.

This imprudent move is the latest in a series of anti-Muslim crusades that have occurred across the country since deputy head of parliament, Murman Dumbadze, lead a protest

against the construction of a mosque in Batumi last year before parliamentary elections. He has since rescinded his views, but anti-Muslim sentiments have only grown.

Three days after being impounded, the minaret was returned to a site near Chela, but a group of Orthodox activists blocked the road in neighboring Akhaltsikhe to prevent its restoration. They also demanded a referendum on the construction of minarets in Georgia, which was a concept introduced the previous day by Tea Tsulukiani, the justice minister.

The Georgian Patriarchy claims outside forces are provoking Christians and Muslims against each other to discredit the church and state. But the biggest force instigating division is the church itself.

Remember the priests who lead tens of thousands of people to violently attack LGBT activists in May? The same Bishop Jakob, who boasted of the success of that pogrom, applauded the group of Akhaltsikhe protesters and "guaranteed" that the minaret will not be rebuilt. He said this after high ranking Georgian Orthodox and Muslim clerics discussed the return of the minaret and its re-erection after legal matters are resolved.

The church is not pacifying anybody by meddling in an issue that is clearly between the state and the Muslim community. As long as the Georgian Church remains inviolable, there is very little the state will be able to do to guarantee religious freedom in Georgia.

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