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Georgia Scraps 'Blasphemy Bill'

By Giorgi Lomsadze for Eurasianet

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Participants march on the street during a religious procession to celebrate Orthodox Christmas in Tbilisi, Georgia.

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Georgia has dropped a proposed anti-blasphemy bill ardently opposed by freedom-of-speech activists. With a stated goal of protecting the feelings of Christian believers, the bill pitted civil liberties against faith in this passionately Christian nation.

The draft appeared to be causing a split in the ruling Georgian Dream coalition – never desirable in a parliamentary election year. Saying that the bill needs more work, parliamentarian Soso Jachvliani on February 15 withdrew his own proposal, which already had been conditionally approved by parliament's human rights committee. Parliamentary Speaker Davit Usupashvili announced that the legislature has stopped discussion of the legislation.

The proposal to set fines for religiously insulting words and behavior was criticized for its potential to make the Georgian Orthodox Church, seen by many as the embodiment of

Georgia’s national identity, all but immune to criticism. The Church earlier had asked for legal defenses against insults, but now distanced itself from the bill. The Patriarchy, the holy see of the Georgian Orthodox Church, is known for thin-skinned reactions to criticism and to any sort of irreverent take on Christian beliefs.

Some liberal clerics, however, spoke against the bill. One Georgian Orthodox priest in Germany described it as absurd. “Who can define religious feelings? What judge can rule on whether a certain action is insulting to someone’s religion?” Deacon Tamaz Lomidze asked in a recent sermon, PalitraTV reported.

A bishop from Georgia's minority Evangelical-Baptist Church said that even Jesus Christ would get fined under such a law. “Jesus was doing lots of provocative things, spoke to women...the Holy Scripture is full of actions that would entail 300-lari penalties,” Rusudan Gotsirdize said in an interview for a Rustavi2 news-show.

There were also fears that the law would shackle the activity of minorities that are at odds with the Church. Amnesty International said that the bill threatened to “outlaw criticism of religious leaders and institutions, and suppress free speech on topical political and social issues, including the rights of women, of lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex people, and of religious minorities.”

Rolling back the legislation averted a deeper confrontation, but the national debate, often defined as a contest between hopes for European integration and civil liberties and respect for Georgian traditions, is far from over.

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