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Armenian church upset with Georgian Government's actions on religion law

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The Messenger Online (14.07.2011) / HRWF Int. (29.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The law regarding the religious faiths adopted lately by the Parliament and especially the explanation note of the law has disappointed the Armenian Church - founder of the Armenian community in Georgia Arnold Stepanian told The Messenger, on July 13.

"The new amendments leave the registration right to the religious organizations but deprive them of the wider rights. The law and especially its explanation note directly says that on any religious issue we will have to talk with the Georgian church and not with any other institution. The consensus eased inner tension between the government and orthodox church, but brought serious damage to the Armenian church, that will not be able to apply to return Armenian churches, while we had certain hopes in this direction", Stepanian says.

Stepanian also explained the reason why their connection with the Georgian Government would have been easier, "it is difficult to talk with the Georgian Church as it has its demands and as far as I know they are against delivering churches to the Armenian side, that is why it would be easier for us to deal with the Authorities and not with the Church, as the Government is a more liberal body than the church. To my mind, hasty adoption of the law was also related with the following responses of the law, as if some referendum would have been held on the issue, the position of the Georgian church and society would be negative and Georgian authorities knew this, however the outcome of all this was not in our interests."

As Stepanian told The Messenger, the anti-Armenian mood has increased in Georgia in the last four days while the law concerned other religions too. Namely, Stepanian's organization registered 38 cases, when representatives of religion, culture and politics had anti-Armenian protests. Stepanian says he is going to submit an application to the public prosecutor's office and to present the facts to Ilia the Second, "it is the first time we are going to appeal to the Holy Synod regarding the issue. At the same time, there is a newly opened Ethic Council within the Georgian Patriarchate (we welcome the existence of such a body) and we would present the facts against it. Herewith, we have just completed our report regarding the recent events and we are going to deliver it to the international organizations."

As for the Georgian Church's position, it has several times stated that the issue needs discussions, the Church representatives have frequently mentioned that some commission should be created which will work on identifying which are Armenian churches and which are Georgian. The Georgian Church was not against adopting such a law, it demanded preliminary discussions on the issue and the same status for the Georgian Church in other countries, including Armenia.

As analyst Gia Khukhashvili told The Messenger, the Georgian Church has clearly fixed its position regarding the Armenian Church and on the issue, from the beginning, "it has been very clearly stated by the Georgian Church that it was not against the law, however the decision should be made based on bilateral agreement, as Georgia also has the same problem in Armenia where there are Georgian churches. The Georgian Patriarchate was not against delivering churches if it is confirmed that they are Armenian, however the Georgian Government with this law has tried to leave the Patriarchate without its main lever, to hold negotiations and the issue was to be solved through consensus. Only the following actions of the society have forced the authorities to make an unprecedented decision." It is also unclear for the analyst which hopes were broken for the Armenian side, when the position of the Georgian Church was very obvious from the beginning, "I can say clearly that the Georgian authorities, by their unwise action have artificially created tension with Armenia, putting themselves in a hard situation and have also created problems for the Georgian Church. " The analyst also commented Stepanian's suggestion that an anti Armenian mood was surfacing in Georgia, "may be, in some small parts of Georgian society such a mood is really increasing and its growth, to my mind is related with the Georgian Government's unacceptable action, when they have tried to ignore the Georgian Church. Also, the actions of the Armenian Patriarch Garegin II, during the meeting with Ilia II irritated Georgian society. However, all this is emotional as such ill feeling is not in Georgian character and there are very few Georgian people who expressed protest in this way."

Georgian church slams government over religion law

AFP (06.07.2011) / HRWF Int. (12.07.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Tbilisi, Georgia - The powerful Georgian Orthodox Church strongly criticized the country's pro-Western government on Wednesday after a law was passed allowing minority faiths to claim legal status.

The Georgian Patriarch – the single most respected person in the ex-Soviet state – issued a statement saying that the legislation "contradicts the interests of the Church and of the country".

"We believe that there will be negative consequences in the near future and the authorities will bear responsibility for that," the statement published on the Patriarch's website said.

The new law, which was approved by parliament on Tuesday, allows other religious groups to be legally registered in the overwhelmingly Orthodox country which has Muslim, Armenian Apostolic, Jewish and Roman Catholic minorities.

"Georgia is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country and every citizen of this country, regardless of what religion he belongs to, must have equal rights," said senior governing party lawmaker Nugzar Tsiklauri.

But he said that the Georgian Orthodox Church would retain its special status which is guaranteed by a constitutional agreement with the state.

Orthodox Christianity has undergone a major revival in Georgia since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Patriarchate – seen by many people in the country as above any criticism – has become hugely influential in everyday life, wielding political as well as ecumenical power.
