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GEORGIA: Will violent Old Calendarist priest now be punished?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Violent Old Calendarist priest Fr Basil Mkalavishvili could soon be in the dock after he and his key associates were seized when police stormed his church in the capital Tbilisi on 12 March. Mkalavishvili and seven associates are now in three-month pre-trial detention. Baptist Alexei Ordjonikidze, who witnessed Mkalavishvili ordering his supporters to beat his fellow Baptists and burn all the Bible Society literature in their lorry in 2002, told Forum 18 News Service that under the law Mkalavishvili should get at least seven years in prison. Human rights activist Levan Ramishvili believes the end of the reign of terror against religious minorities is one step closer. "When he and his colleagues are convicted by a court, a line will be drawn." He believes Mkalavishvili might do a deal with the court to reduce his sentence by naming those in the old government who might have sponsored his violent campaign. No priests of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate alleged by religious minorities to have organised similar attacks have been arrested.

Victims of violent Old Calendarist priest Fr Basil Mkalavishvili during his four-year-long reign of terror against Georgia's religious minorities have welcomed his 12 March detention, together with seven alleged associates - including Petre Ivanidze. "According to the law, Mkalavishvili and his associates should get at least seven or eight years in prison," declared Alexei Ordjonikidze, a Baptist who watched in horror in March 2002 as Mkalavishvili and his associates stopped their lorry, beat his colleagues, then burnt the Bible Society literature the lorry contained. "Mkalavishvili didn't conduct the beatings himself, but he organised the group and issued instructions as to who they should beat. Ivanidze was particularly bad," Ordjonikidze told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Tbilisi on 17 March. "They didn't beat me because of my age."

"The Baptist Church of Georgia shares the satisfaction of the rest of the progressive-minded population who were delighted to hear of Mkalavishvili's arrest," Baptist leader Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 17 March. He said this was not out of feelings of revenge, but out of the "enormous need" for the country to see that justice is being restored. He reported that television stations have been replaying the video of Mkalavishvili's attack on a Baptist warehouse in 2002, during which Bible Society books - including Bibles - were burnt. "The film shows Mkalavishvili directing the mob to burn the books and issuing instructions."

Also welcoming the move was Jehovah's Witness lawyer Manuchar Tsimintia. "Mkalavishvili and his associates should have been arrested and sentenced a long time ago," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 17 March. "I can't say why it wasn't done before." The Jehovah's Witnesses were particularly targeted in dozens of raids led by Mkalavishvili, with believers being beaten, meeting places wrecked and their literature burnt. Mkalavishvili and his followers often recorded their attacks on video and proudly sent them to local television stations.

Levan Ramishvili, the head of the Liberty Institute, a human rights group in Tbilisi which was attacked in July 2002 by other self-appointed vigilantes in retaliation for its work for religious freedom and human rights, said Mkalavishvili's detention brings the end of the era of religious violence in Georgia one step closer. "When he and his colleagues are convicted by a court, a line will be drawn and a page of history will be closed," he told Forum 18 on 17 March. He said his eventual conviction would serve a dual purpose: to punish Mkalavishvili and to be an important symbol to restrain others from committing similar religiously-motivated violence.

He believes Mkalavishvili was not the prime organiser of the religious violence. "He was not a real fanatic. He was just a puppet," Ramishvili insisted. "The violence was pragmatic: to divert public attention from the old government and to shift the blame for its failures onto minorities." He said recent changes to the criminal code allow for plea-bargains, where those convicted can get reduced sentences in exchange for naming others. "If Mkalavishvili is pressured sufficiently, he will name those in the government who supported and encouraged him. I believe he will do anything to save himself."

Ramishvili said Mkalavishvili had only just returned from Georgia's autonomous Adjara region (which is at odds with the central Georgian government) when he held an 11 March press conference outside the public defender's office where he denounced the government of President Mikhail Saakashvili for "protecting sects and undermining Orthodox Christianity". Ramishvili said a police officer Mikhail Giorgadze was present at the press conference and was heavily criticised for failing to arrest Mkalavishvili.

In the morning of 12 March police stormed Mkalavishvili's church of the Iveria Icon in the Gldani district of Tbilisi where he and his supporters had barricaded themselves in. More than a hundred riot police destroyed its door with lorries, before deploying tear gas and batons in a clash with Mkalavishvili's supporters, leaving dozens injured. Mkalavishvili, Ivanidze and six others were seized. The press representative of Mkalavishvili's Gldani diocese, Mikheil Nikolozivishvili, was detained the following day.

Mkalavishvili was immediately taken into three-month pre-trial detention in line with a court order in June 2003 (under former President Eduard Shevardnadze the police failed to detain him in accordance with the order, despite his whereabouts in Tbilisi being widely known). At a closed hearing on 14 March Judge Manuka Nozadze of Tbilisi's Vake-Saburtalo district court ordered that seven Mkalavishvili associates be held in pre-trial detention for three months. Another suspect, Fr Gabriel Nemeiridze, was released under house arrest.

Immediately after the arrests, President Saakashvili denied that the new authorities are undermining Orthodoxy and justified Mkalavishvili's arrest as a move to "defend" the Georgian Orthodox Church. "Extremist religious groups threaten the Orthodox Church," he declared. "My supreme goal, as an Orthodox Christian and as president, is to defend my religion. I call on the people to support my efforts. The State should protect the Church from negative foreign influence and the activities of extremist groups."

The Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate issued a statement on 12 March stressing that Mkalavishvili is not a patriarchate priest (it defrocked him in 1996). However, it condemned the "arrest with the use of force" as "unacceptable", adding: "Georgian law enforcers could have arrested Mkalavishvili without clashes."

Reached on 17 March, Zurab Tskhovrebadze, chief spokesman for the Patriarchate, referred Forum 18 to the earlier statement and declined to discuss whether the Patriarchate believes others who committed or incited violence against religious minorities - including those within the Patriarchate alleged to have been involved - should also be detained and tried.

Mkalavishvili's detention was condemned by some opposition leaders. Irakli Mindeli of the Socialist party claimed on 12 March that the new authorities "are trying to weaken the Georgian Orthodox Church".

Old Calendarist Bishop Ambrose (Agiokypriantis) of Methoni in Greece, who oversees foreign parishes on behalf of Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili and therefore oversees Mkalavishvili, complained to Forum 18 of the police's "violent incursion" into the church and what he called the "large-scale persecution" of church members. He believed the violence used to detain Mkalavishvili was unacceptable. "I don't object to Fr Basil's undergoing a trial," Bishop Ambrose told Forum 18 on 17 March, "but Georgia is not a western country. You can't expect the judicial system to be uninfluenced by political considerations." He objected that most of those who have been detained have not been charged with any offences.

Bishop Ambrose insisted that there is no evidence that Mkalavishvili had been involved in physical violence against religious minorities. Told that Forum 18 had spoken to victims of violence from his supporters and seen video footage of Mkalavishvili and his supporters attacking religious minorities, violently breaking up court proceedings and burning religious literature, Bishop Ambrose said he had seen video only of the Jehovah's Witness literature burning. He said he had attended court hearings in Tbilisi twice, including a June 2003 hearing. "I observed no disorder whatsoever."

Bishop Ambrose said he did not believe that Mkalavishvili had been involved in burning Bibles, despite testimony from Baptists that he was behind the attacks on the warehouse and on the Bible Society lorry in 2002, during which Bibles and other Christian books were burnt. "Our people assured us that no Bibles were ever burnt."

Asked how he viewed the burning of other religious communities' literature, the bishop responded: "My opinion is that we would not do this in Western Europe, let alone Greece. As a gesture in local circumstances, though, it is not inappropriate." He appeared to regard the issue as minor. "Certain standards of Christian behaviour are universal, others are cultural." Bishop Ambrose declined to say whether Metropolitan Cyprian had ever disciplined Mkalavishvili for his violent attacks or anything else. "It is an issue of internal church administration whether he has been disciplined under church law or not."

The new Georgian government, appointed in the wake of Saakashvili's landslide election in January after the ousting of Shevardnadze, has been under strong international pressure to punish those responsible for years of violence. The record so far has been pitiful: five members of a violent vigilante group Jvari (Cross) - including its leader Paata Bluashvili - were sentenced on 4 November in the town of Rustavi for their role in attacking Jehovah's Witness meetings. All received only suspended sentences (see F18News 13 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=182).

Patriarchate spokespersons have always claimed that the religious violence came from those expelled from the Georgian Orthodox Church. However, Bluashvili identified Metropolitan Atanase Chakhvashvili of Rustavi and Marneuli as one of Jvari's co-founders in 1998 and local priest Fr Teimuraz as the group's spiritual father - both of them part of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate. Patriarchal clergy were behind an attack on a Catholic pilgrimage in Western Georgia in 2002, after which senior Patriarchate officials are alleged to have telephoned Catholic leaders to threaten them with serious consequences if they ever reported the attack. Patriarchal clergy were also allegedly behind the demolition of a True Orthodox church being built in the village of Shemokmedi in eastern Georgia in 2002.

The Jehovah's Witnesses report that they have documented numerous cases where priests of the Patriarchate have organised and led violent attacks on their meetings. Tbilisi-based Pentecostal pastor Nikolai Kalutsky also claims that it was a Patriarchate priest who organised the mobs that blockaded his home to prevent his Church from meeting there for worship, most recently last October. He showed Forum 18 last year copies of Bibles that had been torn into pieces by rampaging mobs.

"I have not heard that any priests of the patriarchate have been arrested," Tsimintia of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

"The old regime did nothing to crack down on the religious violence," Kalutsky told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 17 March. "The new government has demanded that the law be carried out and has taken decisive measures. I believe things will be better." However, he added that he does not know whether if he tried again to hold services in his home mob violence against the Pentecostals would resume.

In the absence of a law on religion, no religious communities have legal status (except the Orthodox Patriarchate), while minority faiths have been prevented from building or acquiring places of worship, or publishing or importing religious literature. Bishop Songulashvili, for one, believes such problems may now be in the past.

On religious violence see:

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=182

On the difficulties over places of worship see:

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=184

On the difficulties over religious literature see:

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=191

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=192

On the lack of legal status see:

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=185

A printer-friendly map of Georgia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=georgi>

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