

Mosque Dispute Shows Church's Backwardness

By [Paul Rimple](#)

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Media reports that a mosque is going to be built in Batumi has got some Georgians in a tizzy, including the leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Patriarch Ilia II stated that this mosque could provoke tensions between Christians and Muslims, and he's right.

The reconstruction of the Azizie Mosque, which burned down some 70 years ago, is part of a deal the Georgian government has been working on with Turkey for several years. In exchange for the restoration of four medieval Georgian monasteries in Turkey, three mosques, two baths and the Azizie would go up in Georgia. A similar deal was in the works three years ago, but the government buckled to pressure from the church and dropped the plan.

The patriarch is upset he was excluded from the latest negotiations and thinks it's unfair that the mosques will be owned by Muslim organizations, while the Georgian complexes will remain in Turkish hands. Moreover, since UNESCO expects all states to be responsible

for preserving cultural heritage on their territory, the deal, he says, was unnecessary.

Opposition parties allied to the church have jumped into the fray, as well as xenophobes, who have threatened to bulldoze the mosque as soon as it's built. One lawmaker, Jondi Baghaturia, fears a new mosque could even lead to separatism.

President Mikheil Saakashvili has called these people "un-Georgian," reminding everybody that there are more than 200,000 Muslims living in Georgia. "If we want to have a state, we should grow up, instead of playing on cheap demagogy," he said.

The last time Saakashvili dissed the church was in July, when parliament adopted the law on the status of religious minorities, which gave five religious groups "with historic ties to Georgia" legal status. Although Georgia's constitution bans religious discrimination, Georgian Christians continue to harass minority religions, including Muslims.

In September last year, two fascist fundamentalist groups, the Society of St. David the Builder and the Union of Orthodox Parents, prevented Azeri villagers from building a roof on their 100-year-old mosque by threatening violence.

The issue with the mosque reflects the backwardness of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which still views Georgians of other faiths as guests. Stating that tensions could arise can be construed as a thinly veiled threat by an institution that has never admonished those violent fundamentalists that have attacked people in the name of the church.

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