

A Monopoly Over Georgian National Identity Unfair to Georgian Muslims

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Georgia is one of the most multi-religious societies in the South Caucasus. According to a 2014 census, 83.4% of the Georgian population identified themselves as Eastern Orthodox Christian, 10.7% Muslim, 3.9% Armenian Apostolic, and 0.5% Catholic. Georgia is predominantly an Orthodox-Christian country and the Orthodox Church is arguably the most influential institution.

Historically speaking, since the 8th century, Georgia always had a significant Muslim minority. By the end of the 18th century, ethnic Georgians living in the Adjara region converted to Islam, by the time, Adjara was under the direct rules of the Ottomans. After Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878, Adjara returned to Georgia. Followed by a long campaign of conversion to Christianity in the Adjara region. During these times, Iliia Chavchavadze, the most prominent Georgian public figure and the “Father of the Nation” was actively promoting democratic and liberal thinking across Georgia. In his work “Converting Muslims to Christianity”, the author strongly opposes the pressure of Christianization of Adjarian Muslims. Chavchavadze says that faith is a matter of conscience and that men must be free to choose their own religion. “Which faith man follows does not matter, important is to be a good, honest man, hardworking

and useful for himself and the country. Can not a man be neither a Christian, nor a Muslim, nor an idolator, but be a good man?" till many Georgians believe that orthodoxy has a monopoly on Georgian national identity. Georgian society's perception of Islam and Muslims remains outdated.

Over the last years, in alignment with its Europeanisation process, Georgia ratified the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 2005 and adopted the National Concept and Action Plan for Tolerance and Civil Integration in 2009 and since then, has made notable efforts to improve its legislative framework for promoting religious diversity. The constitution of Georgia guarantees religious freedom and equality for all citizens, regardless of faith. However, the privileged position of the Georgian Orthodox Church is evident. Historically, religion has played an important role in the Georgian national identity and consciousness and was seen to determine ethnicity, which have entailed the essentially exclusive association between Georgian orthodoxy and Georgian national identity.

According to "Georgia's Minorities: Breaking Down Barriers to Integration" research done by "The Levan Mikeladze Foundation": "Ethnic Georgians who were baptized into the Armenian Apostolic or Gregorian Church were considered Armenians, while Georgian Catholics in southern Georgia were called "French." All Muslims, regardless of their origin—Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, or Turkey—were considered Gypsies. In modern Georgia, around 83 percent of the population belongs to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Most Armenians belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, while Azerbaijanis and a significant minority of Georgians practice Islam. Yet the ethnic background of Muslims is largely irrelevant; Georgian and non-Georgian followers of Islam are both discriminated against."

The Autonomous Republic of Adjara is home to a large ethnic Georgian Muslim community and while Adjara's Islamic identity has been in decline, Islam is still widely practiced in Khulo, Shuakhevi and Keda districts of Adjara. Adjara's Muslim community has long expressed their frustration with the state discrimination. Namely, resulting in lack of state funding for local Islamic institutions. Furthermore, the state's support to orthodox-centric nationalist discourse has created an exclusionary social environment, where the modern conception of Georgian national identity has come to be associated almost exclusively with Orthodox Christianity and Georgian Muslims are not perceived as legitimate members of Georgian nation by the society. As strange as it may sound, a lot of Georgian Orthodox Christians consider Georgian Muslims as "Semi-Georgians", "Incomplete Georgians" since they do not share the same religion. But at the same time, Adjarians are perceived as not completely 'other' either. Notably, many people in Adjara are converting to Christianity, this is connected to social status, largely in order to be perceived as more legitimate members of the Georgian nation and to avoid social exclusion. Social exclusion of Georgian Muslims is undeniable. An essential aspect of successful nation-building is unity of the society and full integration of minorities in the country's political, economic and social life. Yet, social, political and economic exclusion remains a significant challenge to members of minorities living in Georgia today.

Still, Georgia has not found a way out of the Soviet influence. The roots of minority isolation in Georgia originate from the USSR. The USSR emphasized religion and ethnicity before the citizenship as the ultimate badge of belonging. The legacy of Soviet policies left a mark. To this day, Georgian Orthodox Christians find it difficult to view Georgian Muslims as equal members of the society. According to "Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara", research done by Thomas Liles, "Soviet atheist policy and the orientation of regional and local power structures had consequences for Islam. Local authorities were of a decidedly more anti-Islamic orientation as well, in many cases transforming mosques into storage sheds. Moreover, Soviet nationality policy led to the construction and entrenchment of a Georgian national identity."

Ethnic Azerbaijanis and Kists are another Muslim group living in Georgia. According to the most recent 2014 census, there are 233,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis and 5,700 Kists living in the country. These minority communities are spread out in Kvemo Kartli and Pankisi. Interestingly, while all three of these groups are Muslim, ethnic Azerbaijanis and Kists are still perceived and treated differently in Georgia compared to Muslim Adjarians. Existing different treatment towards ethnic Georgian Muslim community and ethnic Azerbaijani and Kists community actively demonstrates that many ethnic Georgian Christians find it difficult view ethnic minorities as a part of equal members of the country. “Better” treatment of Adjarian Muslims is undoubtedly influenced by the fact that they are ethnically and culturally speaking- Georgian. Another important playing factor is that Adjarians speak Georgian as a first language. Small nations have often prioritized language in the building of their identities and because the Soviet Union did not recognize religion, the language acquired even greater importance.

Although the notable number of Adjarians, especially the ones from the younger generation, are reconfiguring their religious identity to better integrate into the Georgian society, there remains a great number of populations that want to preserve their Muslim identity. These people are loyal to the Georgian nation. Yet, are repeatedly suspected of disloyalty. There must not be any contradictions between Muslim belief and Georgian identity. It is time for effective civic integration and the development of civic nationalism that is not based on religion. Georgian Muslims must be treated respectfully and fairly and they should be regarded as equal and legitimate members of society.