

On the Phenomenon of the Mosakdre (Eng. Co-regent) in the Church of Georgia

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to elucidate the way in which the status of locum tenens functions in the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church and its canon law. The article provides a brief overview of the relationship between the bishop and the local Church since the Apostolic fathers, to argue that the perception of the phenomenon of the mosakdre (Eng. co-regent) in the Orthodox Church of Georgia (since 1917 until today) is not in accordance with the holy canons and tradition.

Whilst recognizing the immense impact of Russian influence, this article examines the questions and problems which dominate the Orthodox Church of Georgia and connects them with the tradition of electing bishops.

Attempting to move beyond dated documents and existing practices in Georgia, this article seeks to make room for other documents and practices concerning the governance of the local Orthodox Church. According to this article, it is not canonical for the patriarch to elect or elevate a bishop without others and when in the same city there are two governing bishops (in this case the patriarch and his co-regent).

In accordance with canon law, Church history and the tradition of electing bishops, the paper concludes that the manner of the election of Metropolitan Shio (Mujiri) as the "Mosakdre" (Eng. co-regent), his status, and authority do not conform to the holy canons and must be changed.

KEYWORDS

Orthodox Church of Georgia, patriarch, locum tenens, co-regent, canon law.

On November 23, 2017, the Patriarch of Georgia issued an order for the appointment of SHIO MUJIRI (Metropolitan of Senaki and Chkhorotsku) as Co-regent of the Patriarch.¹ The announcement was received with surprise by both bishops and theologians, a result of the non-canonical nature of the current form of appointment of co-regents. Yes, no more and no less: its non-canonical nature. This fact also caused astonishment in other Orthodox Churches. Many of my clerical friends (including bishops), asked me in amazement what the phenomenon of the *mosakdre* (Eng. co-regent) meant, and how it functioned.

The term “co-regent” itself is thought to be related to the Greek “*Τοποτηρητής*” (*locum tenens*),² a Church tradition whereby the person in the position of *locum tenens* becomes active when the head of the Church dies or resigns (Ζαχαρέγκας 2014). The function of the *locum tenens* is to prepare the patriarchal elections and conduct them fairly. In layman's terms, he is the chairperson of the *Central Election Commission*. As he manages the election process, he does not take part in the elections themselves. This description, which I openly shared, elicited great dissatisfaction in the Georgian Patriarchate (Barnovi 2019). The same evening they asked me to come to the Patriarchate and explain my opinions there. I politely refused, and offered to meet on neutral territory, to which they agreed. The meeting took place with Archpriest Andria Jagmaidze.³ I talked to him for quite a while on the topic, but without success. For the Patriarchate, the phenomenon of the co-regent was canonical, because, as Father Andria proclaimed, it was guaranteed by the *Statute of the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church* (1995, 14-15). During this meeting, I told him that this particular part of this *Statute* needs to be corrected, because it fundamentally contradicts the Canons of Ecumenical Councils and is completely unacceptable. On that note, our meeting ended. We are often asked about the co-regent by people who are interested in the definition of such a strange phenomenon in the life of the Orthodox Church.

As mentioned, the term co-regent corresponds to the *locum tenens* in ecumenical Church practice. But why is this form of co-regent (as it is in the Orthodox Church of Georgia) unacceptable?

Let us start from the early centuries. After the era of Ignatius of Antioch, the status of bishop was established in the Church, and the power of bishops greatly increased. It is known from the “*Apostolic Constitutions*” that the bishop was chosen by the people: he was presented three times before the people during the Eucharistic service, and his testimony was requested for his selection. ([Διαταγαί Αποστόλων 1946, 26](#)) The people, if in agreement, confirmed the suitability of the new bishop. The newly elected bishop became the head of a specific local Church. In general, the unity of the bishop and the local Church is like the unity of Jesus Christ and the Church. (Ιγνατίου Αντιοχείς, Προς Φιλαδελφείς 4; Προς Συμυρναίους 8, PG 5, 822-828; 852). The unity of the bishop and the local Church should not be understood as the unity of bodies separate from each other (the clergy and the people), but as an organic unity in the body of the same Church, which is personified in the bishop. The relationship of the bishop and God (Christ) mentioned in the epistle of Ignatius of Antioch [“...you are subject to the bishop as unto Jesus Christ...”] is interesting (Ιγνατίου Αντιοχείς, Προς Τραλλησίους 2, PG 5, 777-780). The celebration of the liturgy, which is the highest service in the Church, is not an action by the bishop for the local Church, but the action of the Church through the bishop, who is the head of this local Church.

As mentioned above, there is a similar unity and connection between the bishop and the local Church as between Christ and the Church. It is impossible to separate Christ and the Church. The “*ego*” of the Church is Jesus Christ. Therefore, just as the Church is the bride of Jesus Christ, so is the bishop's bride his local Church. Consequently, there is a kind of union between the bishop and his local Church which is similar to marriage. When the bishop of the local Church is being elected, he is “*married*”,

¹ Sruiliad Sakartvelos Katolikos-Patriarkis Kadageba Giorgobis Dgesastsaulze“. 23.11.2017. https://patriarchate.ge/news/1999?fbclid=IwAR3JmgUHeSNwC6_9qw5vveo9QT3pDg7uVJH56kVD4zOU2rMgx0sSkL3EC7Y. (Date of retrieval 10 November 2022).

² Τοποτηρητής - Locum Tenens. In the Orthodox Church, the temporary ruler of the widowed throne until the new head of the Church is elected. He is elected by the local synod after the death of the head of the Church (Καρανικόλα, 1995, 449; Kazhdan, 1991, 2095).

³ Archpriest Andria Jagmaidze – spokesperson of the Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church of Georgia.

i.e., organically united in one body with this Church. That is why in the case of the death of a bishop, it is clearly stated in ecclesiastical terms that the throne is “widowed”, (Pάλλης 1852, 133-136) and not empty, because the relationship between the bishop and his local Church is like that of spouses. Based on this principle, the rule of such a relationship was also strengthened by canons. For example, the 8th Canon of the First Ecumenical Council categorically affirms that there should not be two bishops in any one city.⁴ Any other bishop in the same city is anti-canonical, and if such a thing happens, that bishop is immediately considered as deposed. That is why the Church in the diaspora, in any case, violates the 8th canon of the First Ecumenical Council, because in one city there are sometimes more than two and sometimes up to ten bishops.

It is clear that, based on this principle, it is impossible to have this form of co-regent in Church practice, which in itself means holding a position that is concurrent with the Church throne. Such a phenomenon never existed in any Orthodox autocephalous Church. If we look at the *Statutes* of the all-Orthodox Churches, it is clearly and unambiguously written everywhere that the *locum tenens* (Greek: Τοποτηρητής) is appointed only after the death or resignation of the patriarch, at a synod session (Ζαχαρέγκας 2014). Otherwise, the 8th Canon of the First Ecumenical Council would be violated. In the ancient Churches, the *locum tenens* became the elder bishop by chirotony, (Ζαχαρέγκας 2014, 60) although this is not mandatory. The function of the *locum tenens* is to ensure the proper conduct of the election of the new patriarch. He does not have the right to determine important issues of Church governance, and even less to change anything in the *Statute*. The *locum tenens* temporarily occupies the episcopal throne until a new patriarch is elected.

The fact that there is no similar phenomenon in other Orthodox Churches certainly raises questions about its origins in the Georgian Church. In 1917, a strange definition appeared in the *Statute* that “*the metropolitan of Tbilisi, as the closest local bishop of the Catholicos, is the Co-regent of the Catholicos*” (Jafaridze 2017, 297-298). The then Metropolitan Leonide of Tbilisi was appointed as Co-regent of the Catholicos.

The moment of the establishment of this term and institution of the Church of Georgia is a mystery. Although it has a terminological counterpart in old Georgian theological literature, the meaning is completely different. The discussion of the present examples will convince us of this. In the “*Khelnatsera agtseriloba*” (“*Description of Manuscripts*”) we read: “...of the Mosakdre [Co-regent] of Apostle Clement, Pope of Rome” (Tsagareli 1886). One of the earliest and most interesting cases of the mention of *mosakdre* (co-regent) can be found in the inscriptions of the Gareji Mravaltskharo Monastery (IX-XIII centuries). The monks from Gareji wrote: “*The co-regents [mosakdreebi] of the twelve apostles became the bearers of the crown with them*” (Silogava 1999, 256). From this passage it can be seen that all the priests (not only the patriarch and the bishop) are the co-regents of the apostles. In the testament of Kvipriane Samtavneli,⁵ we read that “*by the order of the blessed Patriarch, brother and the co-regent [mosakdre] with me, the king's brother, Domenti the Ninth*” (Bulletin of the Museum of Georgia 1957, 88). In the testament of the copyist of Gregory of Nazianzus' writings, we read: “*Christ, the Lord of glory, Praise the Patriarch Zacharia in the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth, and make him a co-regent [mosakdre] with St. Athanasius and Gregory*” (Bregadze 1988, 82). Interestingly, this term is also recorded by Ioane Sabanisdze:⁶ he writes about the Byzantine Emperor that: “*And these towns and places are under the sway of the servant of God, the Emperor of the Ionians, whose residence is [“romeli mosakdre ars”] in the great city of Constantinople*” (Marshall 1956, 120). In the Georgian dictionary

⁴ Canon 56 of the Council of Carthage has the same content: “That bishops who were ordained for dioceses shall not choose for themselves dioceses.” Similarly, in the life of St. Augustine, it is written that “Valerius, on the ground that his own age and infirmity rendered the assistance of a conductor necessary, desired that Augustine might be consecrated as his colleague in the See of Hippo; and Augustine was obliged to yield. Both he and Valerius were at the time ignorant that the Eighth Nicene Canon forbade the establishment of two bishops in the same city.” (Weller 1827, 338; Robertson 1858, 399).

⁵ Kvipriane Samtavneli – Georgian translator and a bishop of Samtavisi Diocese (XVIII century).

⁶ Ioane Sabanisdze – Georgian writer and hagiographer (VIII).

created by Sulkhani-Saba Orbeliani,⁷ we read: “*Primata – first co-regent [mosakdre]*” (Sitkvis Kona 1993, 327). There is a reliable report in “*The Georgian juridical texts*” [Qartuli samartlis dzeglebi]: on July 27, 1792, Patriarch Maksime Abashidze (who was in exile) wrote a letter (which is referred to as a testament) from Astrakhan to the future catholicoses of Abkhazia, in which he testified that he [Maksime] may not be able to return, but when they [the Catholicoses] return to Bichvinta, they will again be the true co-regents [mosakdreebi] of Andrew the Apostle. The patriarch says to them:

“Pay special attention to the Christianization of Abkhazia and the revival of the Bichvinta Church. Now is the right time. I know you can go there and you will be well received. Thanks to this, you will become the Co-regent [mosakdre] of the Apostle Andrew, glorified and truly the First-Called” (Dolidze 1970, 1016).

This information confirms that the catholicoses of Abkhazia were called the co-regents [mosakdreebi] of St. Andrew, but they were in fact ordinary bishops occupying the throne.

There is also some interesting information about this term in the chronicle of Alexander Cyprian,⁸ where we find the use of the term Homothronos (Greek: Ὁμόθρονος): “*Thou Holy Trinity... equal with Nature and Throne...*” That is, the term “*mosakdre*” is also used to describe the relationship between equal persons of the Trinity, that is, the Son also owns the throne of the Homotheos as the Father. From this it can be seen, at best, that the Georgian term “*mosakdre*” means directly having a throne. Thus, the term “*mosakdre*” refers to a legitimate clerical and secular authority who does not share this authority with anyone. His deputyship is only of a sacred nature - for example, the patriarchs of Georgia were considered to be co-regents [mosakdreebi] of St. Andrew, i.e., the guardians of the throne. The term “*mosakdre*” personifies the unity of any throne, in this case, the unity of the throne of St. Andrew in Georgia, from which it necessarily follows that only one person can be considered a “*mosakdre*”, the head of this Church (Tsagareli 1886). Any other interpretation of the Georgian term “*mosakdre*” in relation to the patriarchal throne fundamentally contradicts its understanding in the tradition of the ancient Church of Georgia, according to which only the head of the Church can be called a “*mosakdre*” in relation to the patriarchal throne. If another bishop is indicated by this term, it means multi-government and the breaking of the unity of the Church, because the patriarch loses the honour of personifying the unity of the Church as a “*mosakdre*.” However, as we mentioned above, since 1917, this term and phenomenon has been established in Georgian Church reality by a total misunderstanding and misinterpretation, according to which each patriarch determined a co-regent for himself. It should be noted that co-regents have sometimes occupied the patriarchal throne and sometimes not. It is interesting that the Co-regent of Patriarch Davit V (Metropolitan Ilia of Tskhum-Abkhazia, who officiated on November 9, 1977, after the death of Patriarch Davit V, at the synodal session),⁹ is the current Patriarch of Georgia. We note here that in the *Statute of the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church (1920)*, the appointment of a co-regent is made after the death of the Catholicos (Jafaridze 2017, 310-311). Also, in the *Statutes of the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church* of 1927 and 1937, the co-regent was elected after the death or serious illness of the Patriarch (Ibid. 325-327; 339-340). In 1995, a strange change was made in the *Statute of the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church*:

“If death, resignation or any other reason makes it impossible for the Catholicos Patriarch to fulfill his duties, the Co-regent of the Patriarchal Throne (who is appointed by the Catholicos Patriarch) shall govern the Church until a new Catholicos Patriarch is elected” (Ibid. 356).

As we can see in the *Statute of the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church*, it is written “*Co-regent of the Patriarchal Throne*”, but in the Patriarch's order of November 23, 2017, we see the appointment of

⁷ Sulkhani-Saba Orbeliani – Georgian writer and diplomat (1658-1725).

⁸ Alexander Cyprian – The monk of St. Barnabas monastery in Salamis, Cyprus (VI century).

⁹ Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II. <https://patriarchate.ge/sinodi/member/1>. (Date of retrieval 10 November 2022).

Reverend Shio as “*Co-regent of the Patriarch*”. The discrepancy is obvious.¹⁰

What are the objections to Chapter IV Clause 4 of the *Statute of the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church* (1995)? This clause not only violates the decisions of the previous *Statutes* of the Orthodox Church of Georgia, but also contradicts the canonical norms of the Orthodox Church. In particular, the **23rd Canon of the Council of Antioch** mandates that:

“It shall not be lawful for a bishop, even at the close of life, to appoint a successor to himself, and if any such thing should be done, the appointment shall be void. Ecclesiastical Law must be observed: a bishop must not be appointed other than by a synod and by decision of the bishops who have the authority to promote a man who is worthy, after the falling asleep of he who has ceased from his labours” (Tanner 2017, 110).

Canonists interpret this law as follows: Theodore Balsamon, the titular Patriarch of Antioch,¹¹ says that: “*A bishop does not have the right to appoint someone else to succeed him*” (Pάλλης 1853, 166).

Aristenos:¹²

“A bishop, before his death, should not nominate another bishop to replace him, as he was ordained by the bishops of other dioceses. If the bishop, before his death, nominates another to take his place, the law of succession will be approved. The Church of God should not be inherited” (2017, 166).

Joannes Zonaras:¹³

“Bishops are not allowed to appoint others to their position at their own will. If they do not even have the right to leave property accumulated during their bishophood (except for property inherited from parents, as the 33rd Canon of the Council of Carthage says), how can they transfer that bishophood to another, as if it is a doctrinal power? Or the legacy of managing the property of the poor? It is not right to do such a thing, and those who do so should be deposed. Bishops must be appointed by the councils” (Zonaras 390-391).

Yet, since the issue of the election of a new patriarch is directly related to the election procedure, then why is it necessary to select a co-regent during the lifetime of the patriarch, whose function is only the chairmanship of the election commission? Should not the synod be able to do this after the death of the patriarch? What were the motives for naming and establishing a co-regent when the only motive should be death or resignation or reasons that make it impossible for the Catholicos-Patriarch to fulfill his duties.

None of the reasons given are relevant to this latest case, which means that there was no legal basis for establishing this Co-regent of the Patriarchal Throne. That is why we say unequivocally that, according to canon law, the naming of a co-regent during the patriarch's lifetime has no legal basis, especially since this fact allows the existence of two bishops on one throne, which, as mentioned, is a gross violation of the 8th Canon of the First Ecumenical Council. That is why, according to the *Statutes* of all Orthodox Autocephalous Churches, the *locum tenens* (and not the co-regent) becomes active only after the death or resignation of the patriarch, and his election is the prerogative of the synod alone. Obviously, the change in this article served some purpose. In any case, during the lifetime of the patriarch, the naming and the establishment of his co-regent indicates the strengthening of the influence of the patriarch on the election of the future patriarch. Many see the Russian factor in this action, that the future patriarch should

¹⁰ However, personally, I do not see a big difference between the “Co-regent of the Patriarchal Throne” and the “Co-regent of the Patriarch”, because in both cases it is against the holy canons of the Orthodox Church.

¹¹ Theodore Balsamon – Canonist of the Orthodox Church and the titular Patriarch of Antioch (XII century).

¹² Alexios Aristenos – Canonist of the Orthodox Church (XII century).

¹³ Joannes Zonaras – Canonist of the Orthodox Church, historian and theologian (XII century).

be a person close to Russia, especially considering the Russian influence that the Georgian Church is currently subject to. Confirmation of this can be found in the fact that the delegation of the Georgian Church did not attend the Holy and Great Council of Crete: in not doing so, our Church expressed its clear support for the Russian Church and its boycott, to say nothing of their view of the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, seeing the representatives of the Patriarchate of Georgia repeat one by one the “arguments” of the representatives of the Russian Church against that autocephaly.

Another serious problem arises here: the Patriarch did not elect a co-regent in agreement with the Holy Synod, but on his own, during the Eucharistic service. The bishops learned about it through the TV channels.¹⁴ And this is a sad case of ignoring the Holy Synod, because Canon 34 of the Apostles clearly says that

“The bishops of every nation must acknowledge him who is first among them and account him as their head and do nothing of consequence without his consent; but each may do those things which concern his own parish alone, and the country places which belong to it. But neither let him (who is the first) do anything without the consent of all, for thus there will be unanimity, and God will be glorified through the Lord in the Holy Spirit.” (Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils 2017, 596).

Canon 9 of the Council of Antioch repeats the same argument:

“It behoves the bishops in every province to acknowledge the bishop who presides in the metropolis [that is, the head of the local Church], and who has to take thought for the whole province [...] other bishops do nothing extraordinary without him [...] neither the latter [the bishop of the metropolis] without the consent of the others” (Ibid., 112).

As we can see, this one, seemingly simple, order has revealed many inconsistencies in relation to the canons of the Orthodox Church.

No matter how surprising, the article of the *Statute* [1995] does not explain clearly what rights the seat appointed during the patriarch's lifetime will have (namely the article: “the co-regent appointed by the Catholicos-Patriarch governs the Church until the election of a new Catholicos-Patriarch”). Co-regent Shio could not even answer the journalist's question about the duties of the newly appointed co-regent. How would he, when it is not defined in the *Statute*?

And one more detail: in the 6th article of Chapter IV of the *Statute* (1995), we read:

“After the death of the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia, the predominant bishop of the Holy Synod, in the presence of the majority of the members of the Synod, will open the will left by the Catholicos-Patriarch and announce the identity of the Co-regent of the Patriarchal Throne”. (The Statute of the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church 1995, 14-15)

Article 7 of the same chapter states that: “canonical obedience to the Co-regent of the Patriarchal Throne established by the will of the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia is the duty of every member of the Church of Georgia” (ibid, 15). A will necessarily means the transfer of something as an inheritance,¹⁵ e.g. a father bequeaths property to his children, each according to his own decision. But what is the substance of the will of the Church in general? What legacy exists in the Church that a bishop can transfer? The only succession that exists under the authority of a bishop is the apostolic succession, which refers to the teaching and tradition of the truth of Christ's revelation. The bishop does not have the possibility to transfer his inheritance to anyone else, especially since, according to the 12th Canon

¹⁴“Tavisufali iko tu ara Patriarki Mosakdris Dasakhelebisas?”. https://on.ge/story/16513-მიტროპოლიტი-კრიგოლი-თავისუფალი-იყო-თუ-არა-პატრიარქი-მოსაყდრის-დასახელებსა?fbclid=IwAR1q_hlegJ4CdfPCsPCmjTKlqdB6iYKVYxpl4vDy1PLd3u6Zp9IQ2XqsPA. (Date of retrieval 10 November 2022).

¹⁵ Inheritance Law. <http://www.legalaid.ge/en/p/69/inheritance-law>. (Date of retrieval 10 November 2022).

of the Quinisext Council, a bishop is forbidden to have a wife. (Γεωργιος at al. 1852, 330-333). If we return to the 23th Canon of Antioch, it is clearly stated that a bishop cannot appoint a successor during his lifetime, and after death, it is absolutely impossible to do so. Therefore, we may ask what power the will of a deceased bishop holds when he is forbidden from doing something during his lifetime? If the Church canons clearly determine the selection of the bishop through elections, then what is the significance of his will in the Church of Georgia? Is there a legal basis for the existence of a will in the canon law? As can be seen from the laws, the answer is no. Nor does any canon speak about a will. Therefore, the topic of the will should be deleted in the last *Statute of the Georgian Church*, because it also contradicts canon law. This topic is also foreign to the practice of any Orthodox Church, as is confirmed by the *Statutes* of these Churches.

This clearly shows the decline of the synod as the highest body of the local Church. The election of the patriarch is the prerogative of the synod as the highest administrative body of the Church, which, as we have seen, is approved by the canons of the ecumenical and local councils. It is the prerogative of this synod in the event of the death of the patriarch to elect, without any will, a *locum tenens* (and not a co-regent). Therefore, we believe that the above-mentioned articles of the *Statute of the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church* (1995) should be corrected by the synod (with the participation of authoritative theologians, canonists, and other competent persons) and brought into conformity with the canonical rites of the Orthodox Church, as is the case with all other Orthodox Churches.

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