

## SCHISM IN THE BULGARIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

by Spas T. Raikin

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The democratic government of Bulgaria, headed by Philip Dimitrov, for some unexplained reasons, under the pretext of decommunization, declared war on the Bulgarian Orthodox Church [hereafter BOC] in May, 1992. A pseudo-synod was appointed by the Office of Religious Affairs at the Council of Ministers, and the reigning Patriarch Maxim and the entire Holy Synod of the Church were dismissed by government order. The schismatic, government-supported Metropolitans, had been known as the most zealous collaborators of the old Communist regime. Though signs of abatement of the crisis began appearing in October, especially after the fall of the Cabinet of Dimitrov on October 27, 1992, at the time this statement was prepared in November 1992, the schism was still going strong.

The events leading to the *raskol* (schism) began with a challenge to the legitimacy of the present Patriarch Maxim and his election to the office in 1971. Four Metropolitans, Pimen of Nevrokop, Pankrati of Stara Zagora, Kalinik of Vratsa, and Stefan of Turnovo claimed that the election of 1971 had not followed the procedures of the by-laws of the Church (imposed on the Holy Synod by the former Communist regime in 1951) and constituted themselves as pseudo-synod on May 19, 1992. One of the Bishops, Stefan of Turnovo, had been relieved of his administrative duties for some time by the entire Synod for physical and mental incapacity.

On May 25, 1992, the government's Director of Religious Affairs, Metodi Spasov, issued an order declaring Patriarch Maxim and the entire Holy Synod illegitimate and illegal. He made this ruling on behalf of "The Office of Religious Affairs at the Council of Ministers as a state agency vested with powers by the law." He further proclaimed that "At the present the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has no government" and proceeded to confirm, "Until a Church National Council is convened, the proposed Holy Synod of the BOC, made up of the following religious leaders: Metropolitan Pimen, Acting President, the Metropolitans Stefan, Pankrati, Sofroni, Kalinik; Bishops Antony, Hilarion, Nestor, Nahum and Galaktion; and Christopher Subev."

Spasov justified his action--appointment of a new Synod--with the assumption that "According to the by-laws of the Church, the Holy Synod is the basic organ to call the Church National Council." He further explained that in the absence of "any other procedural possibility, as well as of customary law to be applied in this situation," the Office of Religious affairs had decided upon the course of action taken by him: appointing a new Synod.

The reason for the illegitimacy of the Patriarch and the Metropolitans of the Holy Synod Metodi Spasov traced to the practice of the Communist regime to put in leading positions in the church prelates loyal and dedicated to the Communist Government, inferring that Maxim and the rest of the Metropolitans had been that kind of church leaders. He charged that Patriarch Maxim and his colleagues in the Synod had been elected in violation of the procedures prescribed by the by-laws of the Church and mandated by the Law on Religions, and, furthermore, that they had not been registered with the Office of Religious Affairs, as stipulated by the same law. The Holy Synod was never called to explain these failures of procedure, which the dissident bishops had readily accepted for two decades. No parliamentary hearings were ever held on this subject.

No sooner was this order issued, however, and the Metropolitan of Russe, Sofroni, charging that he was misled, withdrew from the pseudo-synod. Bishops Nestor, Nahum, and Hilarion, likewise, charged that their names had been used without their consent and refused to join. The pseudo-synod ended with three Metropolitans (not counting Stefan for his physical and mental disabilities) and two bishops. Christopher Subev was ordained Bishop the next day.

Opposed to the order of the Government were Patriarch Maxim, seven other Metropolitans, and eleven bishops at large. It is a misrepresentation that the 700-member Union of Priests has backed the schismatics. Besides the self-proclaimed leadership of the non-existent Union, led by Prof. Radko Poptodorov and a group of disgruntled priests, the overwhelming majority of the priests stayed with the Patriarchal Synod. Bishop Kyrill of the Orthodox Church of America, whose condemnation by the Bulgarian Church in 1963 was withdrawn by Patriarch Maxim

sometimes in August 1992, also supported the Synod.

Following these events, on May 31, 1992, a band of armed men, led by Christopher Subev (elevated by the schismatic Metropolitans to the rank of archimandrite on May 21, and to the rank of Bishop on May 26th) invaded the Headquarters of the Holy Synod, barricaded themselves inside, placed armed bodyguards to protect them, and barred the Patriarch and the other Metropolitans from their offices. The Attorney General of the country and police authorities refused to intervene.

The power behind all these events was Christopher Subev. A graduate of the Sofia University in Physics, he has specialized in the former Soviet Union in nuclear physics. As a member of student youth organizations, he had led a group of sympathizers of Che Guevarra. After being married and divorced twice--one child known to have been born and surviving--he expressed interest in monastic life. After spending a month in a small monastery studying Church-Slavonic, he had been ordained and served several parishes in the Turnovo diocese. He registered in the Sofia Theological Academy as a correspondent student where he graduated in 1985. Subsequently he was dismissed as a parish priest for inappropriate behavior. He joined the clergy of the Vratsa diocese, but two months later, March 1989, was expelled from there too. He then joined a group of dissidents, was jailed for a while, and after the change in November 1989, emerged as a key political figure. In October 1991 he was elected to the National Assembly with the Union of Democratic Forces and became Chairman of the Assembly's Committee on Religious Affairs. He then had his associate in party politics, Metodi Spasov, appointed Director of Religious Affairs, and it is through him that he is managing and manipulating the crisis in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

In his designs to capture the Patriarchal position Christopher Subev obtained the cooperation and the collaboration of Metropolitans Pimen, Pankrati, and Kalinik. Hopelessly compromised as the most loyal supporters of the old Communist regime, especially its policies towards the Church, they joined with Subev in the hope of attaining their rehabilitation. Instead, they found themselves outside the church and leaders of the *Raskol*. On July 22, 1992, Patriarch Maxim Convened an Arch-Hierarchical Council--a *Sobor* of all Bishops of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Metropolitans, and bishops at large--which, acting as the Highest Court of the Church, decided to defrock Pimen, Pankrati, Kalinin, Stefan, Anthony, and Galaktion, and to excommunicate Christopher from the BOC.

Meanwhile Patriarch Maxim had appealed to the President of the Republic to exert his influence to stop the arbitrary acts of the authorities against the Church. Dr. Zheliu Zhelev referred this appeal to the Constitutional Court, which ruled on June 11, 1992, that the actions of Metodi Spasov had been in violation of the constitutional provision for separation of Church and State but left it for the Supreme Court to decide on the legitimacy of the Patriarch and the Synod. The Supreme Court ruled on July 2, 1992, that it could not consider the appeal of Patriarch Maxim because his petition-appeal had been submitted to the Court one day beyond the seven-day period stipulated by the law and continued to argue that since he had not been registered with the Directorate of Religious Affairs, according to prescribed procedures by the Law on Religions, he was illegitimate and illegal, and was not entitled to petition the Court.

Following this decision of the Supreme Court, Pimen, acting as Acting President of the Holy Synod (His Synod), issued a series of orders. He requested that the Attorney General send him armed support to take possession of the offices of the Sofia Diocese where the Patriarch was making his temporary headquarters. He requested the mayor of the city of Sofia to do the same. Though the mayor of Sofia registered a schismatic Diocesan Council for Sofia, no physical force was sent to convey the Headquarters to Pimen. Neither did such help materialize on behalf of the Attorney General, though he openly took the side of Pimen. Pimen further issued a written order to Maxim to vacate the premises and go to the Troyan Monastery in exile. He issued similar orders to the General Secretary of the Holy Synod, Bishop Neofit, sending him to the Glozheski Monastery, and Bishop Nathaniel, Vicar of the Sofia diocese, sending him to St. Marina Monastery. None of these orders were carried out.

The forces of Pimen attempted and succeeded in evicting the Metropolitan of Lovetch, the Vicar of Turnovo diocese, and the Metropolitan of Varna from their headquarters in the diocesan buildings. They attempted to seize some monasteries. The most dramatic was their failed attempt to seize the Patriarchal Cathedral of Alexander Nevsky. They also failed to take control of the Cathedral of St. Nedelia in Sofia and the Offices of the Plovdiv Diocese. In August and September the Offices of the Dioceses turned into armed camps; on one side were the schismatics, and on the other, the defenders of the canonical Synod.

The climax of the conflict took place in the first half of September, 1992. Pimen's Synod appointed Prof. Radko Poptodorov as a new rector of the Sofia Theological Seminary. On August 31, during the night, the retired professor of Canon Law led a group of hired armed bodyguards. They climbed over the walls with guns in their

hands, disarmed the personnel of the seminary, and occupied the offices. The Rector of the School, Bishop Gregory, attending a conference in Prague, immediately returned and declared that the school year would begin, as scheduled, on September 13th. He was not admitted into the school. He called upon all seminarians to report at the Seminary at 2:00 p.m. They did. While the Bishop was delivering a speech at the chained iron gates, some thirty or so students had climbed over the wall in the back, charged the building, disabled the posted guards there, and took control of the building. Somehow the chained gates were forced open, and in a few minutes it was all over. Hundreds of seminarians, along with their parents and foreign and domestic reporters were streaming to the entrance doors. The church bells were ringing in triumph. The seminarians were shouting victory and were singing the troparion of St. John of Rila, patron of the seminary. The new Rector, Prof. Poptodorov, shaking and disheveled, was surrounded by upset seminarians. This event, the liberation of the Seminary, turned the tide. The schismatics lost their momentum. With the events at the Seminary, the cause of the schismatics was doomed. A Committee set up by the Prime Minister to mediate the crisis composed of supporters of the schismatics went out of business.

The last most disgraceful attempt of the schismatics was their attack on the Sofia Diocesan Headquarters. A band of armed men, with guns and tear gas canisters, entered the building at 8:00 a.m., October 1. At gun point they seized the receptionist and grabbed her by the throat, cut the telephone lines and proceeded in taking control of the building. The Patriarch and the clergy at that time were celebrating liturgy in the city. It was the feast of the Protection of the Theotokos. Very soon the raid became known in the nearby Theological School, and students, reinforced later by Seminarians, pursued the invaders who used their tear gas canisters. The news spread all over Sofia and the Church bells, led by the Church of Alexander Nevsky, sounded by now the familiar funeral tune. It was realized that the Church was under another terrorist attack. Members of the National Assembly appeared at the scene to witness the incident. One of them, Emil Kapudaliev, of the governing Party, UDF, was reported to have said: "Stop these bells. We cannot think." A priest retorted, "You are not capable of thinking, period!" The Police intervened to protect the invaders from the students. By noon they had been evicted. This was a tragic moment for the church.

Presently, the schismatics lost the momentum, but they still have the support of the government, prodded by Christopher Subev. On September 22, Subev was reported to have said:

God will reveal the truth that is not us who are acting with violence, but the people of Maxim. This is why they are so viciously defended by the yellow-red press. You should understand that when election time comes, the DPS (Party of the Turks) have their religion and their temples. UDF (The Union of Democratic Forces) should also have their church. It needs religious support. It is not a question of mixing religion and politics. Tell me, when new election come for whom will the people of Maxim vote? They will vote for the BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party, the former Communist party). They are in symbiosis, let our people have no illusions. No contact whatsoever is possible with Maxim. The UDF needs us.

On September 19 the UDF held a national conference. The last item of the program adopted at its conclusion, stating the objectives of the organization, read as follows: "Decommunization of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church." The paradox of the whole thing was that the prelates chosen by the UDF for regeneration of the Church--Metropolitans Pimen, Pankrati and Kalinik--were the worst offenders as agents of the Communist Party for over forty years. This would explain why the overwhelming number of metropolitans, bishops and priests chose to side with the Patriarchs, against the *Raskol*.

The legal and the canonical aspects of the crisis are too complex to summarize. Suffice it to say that when everything is said, and argued, one fact stand out with starkly: the Government of Bulgaria and their hand picked Synod have made use of a legal instrumentarium designed by the Communists to insure state controls over the Church to subjugate the Church to the State. These controls and this subjugation were affected by way of legally mandated procedures of registration and election of the church officials. In the course of time, both State and Church had allowed these procedures to lapse.

Having tamed the Church with terror and brutalities, and having reduced its leaders to a totally submissive robot-like lackeys, the Communists dispensed with all prescribed procedures of the law. The election of diocesan and patriarchal electors and the holding of quadrennial Church-National Councils were abandoned as an useless charade. No such elections and no such Councils were held after the first such event in 1953 which elected Patriarch Kiril. The Church reverted to its old canonical practices where the episcopate would perform these functions and formalize the elections as best as they could to satisfy the law always in tune with the wishes of the government. Implementing the prescribed procedures, subject to manipulation by the civil authorities, would not produce different results. To claim, as it is claimed now by the schismatics, that the Church could exercise freedom of

choice, is a misrepresentation of realities in Bulgaria of the times when these events were taking place.

The Government of Philip Dimitrov in Bulgaria chose to interpret the requirement for registration of newly elected or appointed Church officials as a procedure of legitimizing them and went on dismissing Metropolitans, Synods and the Patriarch himself, as well as appointing new Synods and designating their members. Legal authorities in Sofia have pointed out that the prescribed procedures for registration are designed for information purposes, and not as a means of State intervention in Church affairs.

The canonical ramifications of this attitude of the Government are of devastating importance for the Church. By choosing to interpret the Law on Religions as superior to Canon Law, where Church authorities are legitimized by the state, both the government of the country and the schismatic bishops endorsed the doctrine of caesaropapism, subjecting the church to the state. Back in 1971, at the time of the election of Patriarch Maxim, Metropolitan Pimen and two other prelates, Paissiy of Vratsa and Iossif of Varna, both now deceased, while aspiring for the Patriarchal position at that time, signed an "Exception" as addendum to the Synodal decision on procedures. They rejected the majority decision on the ground that it did not conform to the provisions of the by-laws of the Church. These by-laws had been forced on the Church by the Communist regime in 1951 and had defined a procedure which provided the governments with the opportunity to control the elections of Metropolitans and Patriarchs. Contrary to Canon Law, which vests the episcopate as the foundation of church government along the lines of apostolic succession, the three Metropolitans argued:

The most fundamental requirement for this Council which would elect the Patriarch is that the present Orthodox Christians are given the opportunity to participate in the election. This participation of the Christians is affected through the Elections of Parish Councils, which elect, through their representatives, the diocesan electors, who in turn elect patriarchal electors to elect the diocesan electors, who in turn elect patriarchal electors to elect the Patriarch. The foundation of this electoral pyramid are the Parish councils.

Obviously, the senior Metropolitans of the BOC in 1971 had held a Protestant, Congregationalist, and Lutheran doctrine of the church as a society of believers. The government of the Bulgarian State in 1992 had no difficulty in intervening in the life of the Church on the basis of such a doctrine of the Church held by the leader of the dissident Metropolitan Pimen. Without realizing it, more because of ignorance of the Orthodox doctrine of the Church as a continuity of an apostolic tradition than deliberate intent, the schismatics in Bulgaria have initiated a Protestant reformation in Sofia, which, if it succeeds will take the BOC out of the fold of the Ecumenical Church of the East.

As a final addendum to all references to facts and actions on June 3, 1992, Metodi Spasov, the Director of Religious Affairs, blocked the bank accounts of the Patriarchal Synod and left the Holy Synod of the Patriarch without means to carry on with their activities. It is difficult to predict for how long the patriarchal church could survive without its financial assets. By the same order the financial assets were made available to the schismatics.

All in all, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church found itself under a severe persecution by the authorities of the new democratic government. It is being terrorized by armed bands led by Christopher Subev. As things stand now, only the fall of the government and a change of policies, beginning with the dismissal of Metodi Spasov and cancellation of his orders, may restore the peace of the Church.