

CHURCH INTERFERENCE IN ARMENIA'S NORMALIZATION POLICIES

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The Nikol Pashinyan government of Armenia is currently in the midst of a difficult normalization process with its neighbors Türkiye and Azerbaijan. After the defeat suffered during the Second Karabakh War of 2020 and Azerbaijan taking back full control of Karabakh in September 2023, the Pashinyan government was forced to acknowledge that the intransigent stance of the previous Armenian governments has led to Armenia being cut off from its most logical access route (Türkiye) to Western countries, has isolated Armenia from regional cooperation frameworks in the South Caucasus, and has made it overly reliant on Russia. To rescue itself from this predicament, Armenia needs to establish diplomatic relations with Türkiye and sign a peace treaty with Azerbaijan, while trying to alleviate the concerns of the nationalistic segments of Armenian society who argue that the Armenian government is giving too many concessions to its historic enemies. One of the staunchest critics of the Pashinyan government in this regard is not a political actor, but rather the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Like all other Orthodox churches for their respective countries,[1] the Armenian Apostolic Church is the national church of the Armenian people and has, throughout history, played a significant role in the formation, promotion, and protection of Armenian identity. It is therefore natural for the Church to express concern for any development that it considers to be harmful to the interests of the Armenian people. However, ever since Nikol Pashinyan came to power in 2018, the relationship between the Church and the Government in Armenia has steadily deteriorated. By 2023, the Church began to behave more like an opposition party rather than a religious institution when it came to the Pashinyan governments policies. Church officials have also begun to meet with the officials of opposition parties with the hopes of presenting a united front against the Government.[2]

The central point of contention between the Church and the Government is about Armenias efforts to repair its bilateral relations with both Türkiye and Azerbaijan. This

involves Armenia recognizing its current borders with Türkiye, refraining from making references to Western Armenia (Eastern Anatolia of Türkiye), stopping the use of genocide allegations as a foreign policy tool against Türkiye, recognizing the Karabakh region as belonging to Azerbaijan, and carrying out border demarcation and enclave-exclave exchange with Azerbaijan. All of these are made complicated by the entrenched, irredentist political rhetoric in Armenia that leaves little room for compromise. A significant portion of the Armenian public has been indoctrinated into believing that large swathes of land that covers Türkiye and Azerbaijan (also Georgia and Iran) historically belong to the Armenians. The victory attained during the First Karabakh War solidified in the Armenian people the notion of might makes right and that irredentist policies could be pursued indefinitely with bearable costs. However, the defeat suffered during the Second Karabakh War snapped many Armenians out this unreasonable and destructive mindset, which gave Nikol Pashinyan enough public support to pursue a reformist agenda.

Standing in Pashinyans way is the difficult task of changing the 1995 Armenian Constitution that references the 1990 Declaration of Independence, which in turn references the 1989 Unity Law. Considered together, these documents deny Azerbaijans territorial integrity in Karabakh, reject the 1921 Moscow and Kars Agreements with the territorial claim of Western Armenia and do not recognize the border with Türkiye. On the other hand, [they stipulate] the international recognition of the 1915 genocide of Armenians as one of the main duties of Armenia.[3] While these documents are in effect, Armenias Constitutional Court could derail the efforts to resolve issues that arise from these items, which is what happened to the 2009 Zurich Protocols that were to be implemented between Türkiye and Armenia.

Armenian Apostolic Church officials, foremost being Karekin II (head of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin in Armenia) and Aram I (head of the Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias/Lebanon) are staunchly opposed to any policy or legal changes along the above-mentioned lines and advocate for the regionally destabilizing status quo in favor of Armenia that existed prior to the Second Karabakh War. They firmly believe that Armenia could have sustained the previous status quo indefinitely by continuing to bear the crippling costs (regional isolation, overdependence on Russia etc.) associated with it. It has been known for a long time that Karekin II and Aram I are both power-hungry, ruthless, and Turcophobic individuals who behave more like politicians than priests.[4] Their line of politics will only serve to perpetuate Armenias antagonistic relations with both Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Despite the ruckus caused by the Church and the opposition, the elections in Armenia that are due in two years will reveal just how much this line of politics has supporters among the electorate.[5]

Since the end of last year, three events in Armenia have clearly demonstrated the level of antagonism between the Government and the Church:

1. Despite the Church holding a very esteemed place in Armenian culture both in Armenia and the Diaspora, Karekin IIs customary New Years message was not allowed to be broadcasted on state television on 31 December 2023.[6] In retaliation, speaking at a religious ceremony on 6 January 2024, Karekin II openly indicated the Churchs support for the oppositions position concerning peace negotiations with Azerbaijan.

2. During the official 28 May Republic Day celebration ceremony, Karekin II was temporarily stopped by security forces from entering the ceremony area. This caused an uproar both in the opposition forces in Armenia and the militant Diaspora organizations aligned with the opposition. Even the Armenian Patriarchate of İstanbul, which maintains its distance from the Turcophobic discourse of certain elements of the Armenian Apostolic Church, expressed solidarity with Karekin II. The Patriarchate indicated, without getting into the politics of Armenia, that Karekin II should be respected because he is the embodiment of the conscience and liberty of the Armenian Apostolic Church and all its children dispersed around the world.[7] While the Patriarchates emphasis on showing respect to a high level Armenian church official is understandable, with its statement, the Patriarchate has unfortunately created the risk of getting sucked into the Armenian governments and Diasporas efforts to diasporize Turkish Armenians and misuse them for their ill-intentioned political goals.[8]

3. The Armenian Apostolic Church has openly shown support for Archbishop Bagrat Galstanian, the highest religious authority of Armenias Tavush region.[9] Galstanyans protest movement began in April 2024, demanding an end to the demarcation process with Azerbaijan. The movement then quickly expanded in scope and began demanding the resignation of the Pashinyan government. It should be noted that Galstanian is affiliated with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF-Dashnaktsutyun), a violent and extremist political party with branches both in Armenia and the Diaspora. This Armenian supremacist party is notorious for having resorted to terrorism since its inception, including establishing the Justice Commandoes of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG) that murdered many Turkish diplomats in the 1970s and 1980s. It is thus not surprising that Galstanian has been criticized for making bombastic statements and offering no clear, sustainable alternative to the Pashinyan governments foreign policy direction. Galstanian even posed with and praised Hampig Sassounian, [the JCAG] terrorist who ruthlessly murdered Kemal Arıkan, who was the Consul General of Türkiye in Los Angeles, on 28 January 1982.[10] In the minds of Galstanian, his supporters, and the Church that is backing his movement, gaining Western support for Armenia through Christian solidarity and warring again with Azerbaijan seems to be a preferable foreign policy. Although the number of people showing up for his protest activities have been on a downward trend, Galstanian has made it clear that he has no plans to end his protest movement[11] and has indicated that he is willing to run against Pashinyan in the upcoming elections.[12]

There is no doubt that the officials of the Armenian Apostolic Church believe that they are acting in accordance with the best interests of Armenia and the Armenian people. The fundamental issue here is something that affects all Orthodox-majority countries; Church officials are people versed in the ways of religion rather than politics. Unlike government officials, Church officials have no political accountability, so they are not required to personally bear the consequences for supporting imprudent foreign policies. For Armenia in specific, Church officials are failing to understand that it was the previous governments that put Armenia in the difficult position that it is in now. They are harshly criticizing the Pashinyan government, but are offering no alternatives other than war with Azerbaijan

and perpetual antagonism with Türkiye. On top of this, the Church has thrown its weight behind Archbishop Galstanian, a man known to have ties with extremist circles. In the end, rather than acting in the best interests of the Armenians, the Church is encouraging them to create more problems for Armenia in its already problematic bilateral relations.

Picture: Archbishop Galstanyan is leading anti-government protests - Source: CSI/Bagrat Galstanyan X (Twitter) account

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