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CHURCH-STATE TENSIONS IN ARMENIA: THE ARF'S HARSH RESPONSE AND ITS REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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Tensions between the Armenian government and the Armenian Apostolic Church reached a new peak in mid-October with the arrest of several priests. During this period, the gesture of extending a hand for dialogue from Aram I -the spiritual leader of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia located in Antelias/Lebanon- to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and the sharp condemnation of this move by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF -- Dashnak Party), revealed internal fractures within the Church as well as the depth of political polarization. These events can be seen as a contemporary reflection of Armenias historical struggle between efforts toward secularization and the power of traditional religious institutions.

On 14-15 October 2025, six high-ranking clergymen, including the Bishop of the Diocese of Aragatsotn Mkrtich Proshyan, were detained. The official justification was their call for participation in opposition rallies during the 2021 elections. Circles affiliated with the Armenian Catholicos of Etchmiadzin Karekin II (also referred to as the Catholicos of All Armenians), described the arrests as politically motivated persecution, and in a statement released on 16 October declared that full responsibility lies with Prime Minister Pashinyan. That same day, Archbishop Shahan Sarkissian of the Catholicosate of Cilicia conveyed to Pashinyan a commemorative book marking the 30th anniversary of Aram Is enthronement, along with the Catholicoss blessings and greetings.[1] Later that evening, however, the said catholicosate publicly announced its condemnation of the arrests.

The ARF, on the other hand, issued a statement evaluating Aram Is contact with Pashinyan. In the statement released on 17 October, the party accused Pashinyan of a coordinated attack on the Armenian Church and stated that Aram Is gesture was unacceptable. The statement also asserted that These attacks on the Church by the authorities pose a threat to national identity and called for the two Catholicosates (Etchmiadzin and Cilicia) to act together for a joint defense. While the ARF interpreted Aram I's contact with Pashinyan as an attempt to create a rift within the church, this

development has had a broad repercussion among the Diaspora public. Traditionally positioned along a church-nationalism axis, the ARF has openly expressed that it regards Pashinyans reform initiatives as anti-national.

The relationship between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the state dates back to the power struggle between King Tiridates III, who declared Christianity the official religion in 301, and Saint Gregory the Illuminator. Throughout the centuries of administration under the Sasanians, Byzantines, Arabs, Seljuks, Ottomans, and Russians, the Church has functioned as a state within a state that preserved Armenian communal unity. Steps such as the establishment of the Armenian Patriarchate of İstanbul (Constantinople) in 1461 during the Ottoman period and transfer of Caucasian Albanian church properties in 1836 under the Tsarist Russia, further consolidated the Armenian Apostolic Churchs political influence. After Armenia gained independence in 1991, the Church maintained its privileged status as the national church within the constitution. The Pashinyan administration, however, is seeking to limit the power of this structure.[2]

Although Pashinyan reiterates that he respects the Church as an institution, he has called for the resignation of Karekin II, pointing to the Catholicoss personal record. This approach targets the internal hierarchy of the Church while claiming to preserve the institution itself. In this respect, Pashinyans visit to the Vatican during the same week (20 October) can be interpreted as a strategic move. In his meeting with Pope Leo XIV, the canonization of Maloyan, the role of the Mekhitarist clergy, and the need for lasting peace in the South Caucasus were emphasized. The official statements highlighted the traditional closeness of Armenia-Vatican relations. While criticizing the Church leadership domestically, Pashinyan has strengthened his image as a messenger of peace within the international Christian community.

Armenias internal political crisis is critical for regional stability. Pashinyans efforts toward normalization with Türkiye and Azerbaijan -border delimitation, communication channels, and diplomatic contacts- have been met with the Church-centered oppositions accusations of betrayal. However, while the government defends the peace process on the grounds of economic development and sustainable security of Armenia, from Türkiyes perspective, Pashinyans secularization and normalization-focused administration offers a constructive basis for regional cooperation. While a deepening church-state confrontation may increase domestic polarization in the short term, it could enhance Armenias capacity to act as a rational foreign policy actor in the longer term. In this regard, Türkiyes support for the normalization process contributes to regional stability and opens a window of opportunity for building mutual trust.

Aram Is outreach to Pashinyan has produced fractures rather than unity within the Armenian Apostolic Church. The ARFs reaction demonstrates the diaspora-nationalist wings loyalty to Etchmiadzin, while Cilicia (Antelias)s dual position of condemnation + dialogue reflects a search for strategic balance. As will be recalled, Pashinyans stated support for regional peace has long been unsettling for the ARF. In its recent statement, the ARF has targeted Pashinyan not directly but indirectly through Aram I, and by pointing to the rift within the global Christian community, it has argued that Pashinyan is disrupting not only regional politics but also the global religious order. By contrast,

Pashinyan has strengthened his international legitimacy through his peace messages in the Vatican. Despite his difficulties in managing Armenias domestic political crisis, being received by the Pope has been a significant development. As Pashinyan continues his struggle for regional peace, the church-state tension in Armenias internal politics stands out as another front from which he hopes to emerge victorious.

*Picture: https://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/36067/papa-14-leo-ve-ermenistan-basbakani-pasinyan-gorustu

[1] Catholicos Aram I reaches out to Pashinyan as church-state confrontation deepens (updated), *Civil Net*, civilnet.am, October 17, 2025, https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/980349/catholicos-aram-i-reaches-out-to-pashinyan-as-church-state-confrontation-deepens/.

[2] İlaha Khantamirova, Ermeni Kilisesinin Sivil Yönetim Karşıtlığına Ait Bir İnceleme, *AVİM* , avim.org.tr, September 22, 2025, https://avim.org.tr/tr/Analiz/ERMENI-KILISESININ-SIVIL-YONETIM-KARSITLIGINA-AIT-BIR-INCELEME.

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