

The Fate of Armenian Apostolic Church in Recent Armenian Politics



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One of the most trusted institutions in the Armenian value system, the Armenian Apostolic Church remains an indivisible part of the Armenian narrative, its national identity, history, statehood, and, indeed, society. The Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) has always been, and continues to be, a force for Armenian nationalism. The AAC is not like other universal churches, such as Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox, that welcome and call for people to join from different ethnic and racial backgrounds; rather, from its establishment, it has been an ethnically based institution. Throughout history, the Armenian minority (for example, under the rule of the Ottoman Empire) has been managed by religious hierarchs. Ever since, even secular nationalists have come to the common conclusion that the Church is a driving force for the preservation of ethnic consciousness and the legitimization of nationalism. Coinciding with this vision, the religious elites also set out to serve that Armenian nationalism. According to Vigen Guroian, this was realized through the creation of the religio-national myth that also comprised modern ideas of nationhood.¹ Hence, an embrace of Christianity corresponded with the dawn of the Armenian nation and nationalism. In the late 1980s, the then Catholicos of All Armenians, Vazgen I, outlined how the national identity and national ethos of the Armenian nation, the very national ideology of the Armenian people, had been established in the fabric of the Holy Church.



The parade of Armenian clerics, 15 Oct 2015

Source: <https://minval.az/news/123502125>

However, since independence, with the exceptions of the Karabakh wars, the Armenian Apostolic Church has not been deeply immersed into Armenian politics. On the contrary, many berated the Church for its neutrality towards both Robert

¹ Guroian, Vigen (1994) "Religion and Armenian National Identity: Nationalism Old and New," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Kocharyan's and Serj Sarkisyan's administrations. In the 1990s, in a miscalculation, Levon Ter-Petrosyan decided to opt out of playing the religious card, but in vain; the role of the Church in Armenians' lives was much stronger than expected. This state of affairs has now been shaken with the Armenian defeat and capitulation in the Second Karabakh War, which has substantially affected the Church's involvement in temporal issues. Nevertheless, as an ethnically based Church, the AAC has been an important player in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia and has profoundly inspired the occupation, ethnic cleansing, and other war crimes. It is worth remembering that the Armenian Apostolic Church had an active role in destructive warmongering during the First and Second Karabakh Wars as well as the military escalation of 2016. The Armenian Apostolic Church still provides the army's Chaplaincy Program with a 50-member officer unit that supplies military chaplains and clergy to the army as well as fight side-by-side with Armenians. Simultaneously, among the variables triggering the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict from the onset was precisely the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The Armenian Apostolic Church and its public image

According to the last official census, in 2011, the Armenian population was roughly 3.1 million, with ethnic minorities making up just 1.7% of that figure and Armenians more than 98%. Armenians usually identify religion with nationality, therefore the statistics provided on nationality will likely match strongly with individuals' religious affiliations. Armenia is the second most religious country in the world, with 93 percent of Armenian people confirming they are religious according to a study from 2015 published by WIN/Gallup International.² The majority of Armenians are steadfast supporters of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Curiously, even atheists associate themselves with the Armenian Apostolic Church. In a 2018 study by the International Republican Institute (IRI), 94% (one of the highest percentages in the world) of the Armenian population affiliated themselves with the Armenian Apostolic Church, with 2% Catholic, 3% other, and 1% with no allegiance. In a further survey conducted in 2018 by the Pew Research Center, 82% of Armenians considered Christianity to be “a very important and/or somehow important” factor in being truly Armenian.³

Mkoyan writes that, nowadays, the religiosity of the younger Armenian generation is much higher than that of the older one that grew up in an atheist spirit. Nevertheless, that younger generation does not often go to Church, and a growth in the number of sects and the people enrolled in them has been observed.⁴ In recent years, active discussions on social networks regarding the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Catholicos have affirmed the fact that the Church is noticeably weakened (compared with past centuries). The reason behind this is the inability of the Church to realize reform in all spheres of Church life and the impact of its resulting irrelevance for society. Thus, the challenges the Church faces today were predictable even years ago.

²<https://epress.am/en/2015/04/13/armenia-is-the-second-most-religious-country-in-the-world-gallup.html>

³<https://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>

⁴Mkoyan, G. S. (2018). “Armenian apostolic church and spiritual values of two generations in modern Armenian society,” *Humanistyka i Przyrodoznawstwo*, (Num. 24), 335-345.

The function of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia

The Armenian Constitution highlights the significance of the Church in Armenia. Article 8.1 states: “The church shall be separate from the State in the Republic of Armenia. The Republic of Armenia recognizes the exclusive historical mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church as a national church, in the spiritual life, development of the national culture and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia.” Albeit its constitution makes Armenia a secular country and separates church and State, the Armenian Apostolic Church is still granted a special status and perceived as a State/National Church. Thus, Armenia is one of the most unusual countries in the world, where the constitution grants a privileged status to a specific Church and distinguishes that ethnically based Church from other religions. The Church is seen as an “untouchable” organization, keeping secret its income and expenditure (the AAC has an exclusive right to arrange public fundraising efforts and receive donations without external oversight).

The Armenian Apostolic Church owns the Shoghakat TV Company, the history of which goes back to 1995. The Shoghakat Company enables the Armenian Apostolic Church to freely disseminate its ideas and doctrines in Armenian society through various tools.⁵ Other religious organizations in Armenia are deprived of such an opportunity. In addition, it should be noted the Armenian Apostolic Church expends significant funds on the maintenance and support of the “Gevorgyan” Seminary in Etchmiadzin and the Vaskenian Theological Academy of Sevan (a seminary on the shore of Lake Sevan in Armenia), including large-scale publishing, staff salaries, and other expenditures to ensure the normal functioning of their institutions. It is clear that such expenses would have been impossible without the corresponding income.

According to the law of the Republic of Armenia regulating the relationship between Armenia and the Armenian Apostolic Church, the government officially recognizes the latter as autocephalous (self-governing) within its own scope. The same law gives grants to the AAC for:

- a. establishing and funding kindergartens and elementary, secondary, and high schools, universities and other educational institutions;
- b. teaching an “Armenian Church History” course, with appropriate textbooks and the instructors provided by the Church itself;
- c. matching funding for institutions created by the AAC equivalent to what the government allocates to other private institutions; and
- d. organizing volunteering courses.

Moreover, the law establishes that:

- e. all statements made by the Armenian Apostolic Church must be reported in media outlets without any alteration or supplementation; and
- f. the state pledges to provide a right for voluntary religious education in the country.⁶

⁵<https://www.shoghakat.am/>

⁶https://www.legislationline.org/download/id/7241/file/Armenia_Law_State%20and%20Holy%20Apostolic%20Church_2007_en.pdf

Another step towards rapprochement between State and Church after 2008 was an unprecedented decision by the Armenian government that five major religious holidays were declared as non-working days. This decision became possible owing to the special attitude of the former prime minister, Tigran Sargsyan, towards the AAC. During the main religious holidays, members of the country's leadership, headed by the president and chairman of the National Assembly, attended Sunday liturgy, which was broadcast by almost all TV channels.

The fate under the new order in Armenia

From the onset of the nationwide protests in Armenia in 2018 that brought Nikol Pashinyan to power, there has been a tense atmosphere prevailing between the new cabinet and the AAC. The AAC leaders, including Catholicos Karekin II and Aram I, openly congratulated the former prime minister, Serj Sargsyan, on the election and wished him “fortitude, strength, patience, and endurance”.⁷ With the beginning of the mass protests, Karekin II appealed to the authorities and the opposition to act within the law.⁸ Back in Sargsyan’s and Kocharyan’s presidencies, the official Armenian Apostolic Church position, in regard of which Catholicos Karekin II should be specifically noted, inclined to preserve political closeness and avoid any escalation of disputes or controversial issues with the government. His support of the previous authorities could be counted as one of the reasons why Pashinyan wishes to depose Karekin II.

Targeting the Catholicos of All Armenians, Karekin II

Armenians suffering from the long-lasting oligarchic system and hoping to defeat the “old structures” targeted the AAC, particularly the unpopular leader, Karekin II. A “New Armenia, New Pontiff” initiative was established, demanding the immediate resignation and replacement of Karekin II. During the riots, Armenians frequently utilized the slogans “New Armenia, New Pontiff”; “Free and independent Holy Mother See”; “Get out Karekin”; “Step down! Leave the Holy See”; and “Karekin leave! Join Serjik!”⁹ Armenian journalists believe that police inaction when the Catholicos was harassed in Vayk and when campaigners erected tents on the border of the Echmiadzin campus were deliberately preplanned acts, strongly encouraged by the authorities.¹⁰ The protesters prevented the Catholicos’s entry to the monastery, insulted him, and threatened to capture him (despite the presence of police, whose behavior was indifferent). The movement was being led by a theological hardliner, the Abbot of the Gndevank Monastery, Koryun Arakelyan. Curiously, another of the leaders of the initiative “New Armenia, new Patriarch,” Karen Petrosyan, a few days after his anti-church protests was, on July 12, 2018, appointed temporary acting director of the Gyumri branch of the Armenian State Economic University.¹¹ Consequently, according to the judgements of a wide range of commentators, this movement arose at Nikol Pashinyan’s behest.

⁷<https://armenianweekly.com/2018/04/20/sarkisian-meets-with-catholicoi/>

⁸<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Armenian-Katolikos-Karekin-II-calls-for-national-reconciliation-43777.html>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVrL44XjLVA>

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2692788.html>

The campaigners against the Catholicos in Etchmiadzin questioned the method and procedures of his election to the throne, while implicitly putting forward another candidate for his position. According to the Armenian media, there was a plan to appoint Aram I to take over the Holy Church in Etchmiadzin. Armenians believe that former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan had an identical project, but lack of awareness of the role of the church in the life of Armenians led that initiative to fail.¹² My Step alliance representatives Alen Simonyan, Lena Nazaryan, and Hratchia Hakopyan had flown to Lebanon to examine the feasibility of the possible plot. Members of the alliance were mapping out how to extend the “revolution” to the church. Following the futile mission of the delegates, while taking part in the celebration of the Aram I’s 50th anniversary of priesthood, Nikol Pashinyan personally asked Catholicos replace Karekin II. Nevertheless, the Catholicos Aram I refused the prime minister’s offer.

Direct confrontation occurred when Catholicos Karekin II issued a statement calling for former President Robert Kocharyan to be released from prison to protect him from COVID-19. (Kocharyan has been in prison for what are popularly known as the March 1 events). Back in 2008, Catholicos Karekin II had approached Levon Ter-Petrosyan with the objective of building dialogue. It was later revealed that the visit was previously agreed between Robert Kocharyan and Karekin II. Criticisms followed from various high-level government officials, including Alen Simonyan and Mane Gevorgyan. In a mirror image, several high-level clergymen criticized government officials for coming forward with accusations against the Catholicos. On the other hand, the government proceeded with its policy of dislodging the Armenian Apostolic Church from its supremacy in the social life of Armenians.

Weakening the position of the Armenian Apostolic Church

Several media analysts believe that minority religious groups, or sects, have been heading nationwide protests and these sects continue to exert domination over the new administration.¹³ This narrative is actively circulating on Armenian social media platforms, and asserting that one factor in identifying the Armenian Apostolic Church as one of the main value systems targeted for destroying.

On the initiative of former minister Arayik Harutyunyan, it had been planned to remove the subject “History of the Armenian Church”, which was introduced in 2003 by agreement of Catholicos Karekin II and Prime Minister Andranik Markaryan, from Armenian schools. People familiar with the program of this course are aware of its primarily purpose of promoting religion in school. There were even cases when children were forced to pray. However, the new government intended to integrate this course into lessons on general Armenian history, which in fact meant invisibly giving up teaching religion at school.

The authorities, in turn, have made different types of claims against the church. Thus, the leadership in Yerevan became interested in the plots of vacant land that the previous leadership had allocated to the AAC for the construction of churches in Yerevan – at the expense of the green areas of the city. In August, municipal deputy Levon Zakaryan of My Step proposed returning these lands to the municipality.¹⁴

¹² <https://mirrorspectator.com/2019/02/07/church-politics-and-political-church/>

¹³ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/armenia/>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/levon.zakaryan.35/posts/2965695050169271>

Escalation emerging after the Second Karabakh War

The joint agreement signed on November 10 between Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and Russian President Vladimir Putin sparked acute discontent and subsequent protests in Armenia. The wave of calls for Pashinyan's resignation were also joined by Karekin II¹⁵ and Aram I.¹⁶ Karekin II believed that the rapid increase in public tension in the country, serious internal and external difficulties, and falling public confidence should show the way for Pashinyan to voluntarily resign and take responsibility for what had happened.¹⁷ "We expect that an interim government of accord led by a new elected prime minister will prioritize holding without delay early elections of parliament," said Aram I, adding that Pashinyan's decisions had led Armenians to a loss of national dignity and pride.¹⁸

The clergy coordinated their position with many secular politicians. The leadership of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) discussed the desired resignation of Pashinyan with President Sarkisyan, Speaker of the Parliament Ararat Mirzoyan, and even with Pashinyan's supporters from the My Step parliamentary faction. Communicating with the latter, Karekin II asked the parliamentarians to "listen to the opinion of the people" and agree to fulfil the previously voiced demands to elect a new prime minister and form a government of national accord.

In December 2020, during Pashinyan's visit to Syunik, where he was not welcomed, the prime minister entered the church but the local priest avoided shaking his hand and advised the prime minister to wait for God's judgment. Threats were immediately spread on social media against the priest who dared to not shake hands with the prime minister as well as against the Armenian Apostolic Church as a whole. Moreover, several protests against Karekin II, who had previously urged Pashinyan to resign, have been unsuccessfully planned and never realized.

In addition, the head of the Shirak Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Mikael Adzhahapyan, refused to participate in the memorial service in Gyumri on the anniversary of the Spitak earthquake. On this day of the 32nd anniversary of the earthquake a mourning ceremony was held in the Church of the Holy All-Savior. Traditionally, the ceremony is chaired by the head of the local diocese, but this year he was replaced by one of the abbots. As it turned out, Adzhahapyan refused to participate in the ceremony owing to the presence of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. According to Adzhahapyan, a member of clergy is not obliged to serve anywhere at "someone's behest." On social networks, diverse clerics also set out to express their discontent again Nikol Pashinyan.

On January 7, the head of the spiritual office of the AAC, Archbishop Arshak Khachatryan, announced the necessity for Nikol Pashinyan to leave the post of Prime Minister of the Republic as soon as possible, referring to the demand of the

¹⁵https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEUYUdSEB8s&ab_channel=%D4%BC%D5%B8%D6%82%D6%80%D5%A5%D6%80

¹⁶https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=My22WSBj7xs&feature=emb_title&ab_channel=CiliciTV

¹⁷<https://asbarez.com/199029/karekin-ii-urges-pashinyan-to-step-down/>

¹⁸<https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1037090.html>

Catholicos of All Armenians, Karekin II, who had called on Pashinyan to resign. The AAC believes that Pashinyan is personally responsible for the defeat of Armenia in the Second Karabakh War. Nikol Pashinyan did not himself comment on the words of the Armenian clergy in any way. But the clergy argue that, in the current political situation, “the Church cannot be an outside observer.”

Earlier, Karekin II (although it could not be said about the Armenian Apostolic Church as a whole) had mostly only had an observer-peacemaker function in domestic politics. The participation of the Catholicos was limited, in discussions on the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict, to meeting with the head of the Azerbaijani Muslim clergy and the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. Nevertheless, the recent behavior of the Church, the politicians it keeps in touch with, and the public discourse demonstrate that the Church is, in fact, not a supporter of “peace,” as it was presented for decades after the First Karabakh War, but rather a backer of revanchism and promoter of the resurgence of war.



The abbot of the monastery, a gun-wielding Armenian Priest Hovhannes Hovhannisyan throughout the Second Karabakh War¹⁹

Source: <https://twitter.com/armenia/status/1310165919344320513>

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¹⁹ Priest Hovhannisyan personally took part in the occupation of Kalbajar region of Azerbaijan in 1993 and also took up arms with Armenian soldiers during the April Clashes of 2016