

THE ELECTION PROCESS OF THE ARMENIAN PATRIARCH OF ISTANBUL HAS BEEN RESET

Mehmet Oğuzhan TULUN

Analyst

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Turkeys Armenian community has been unable to complete the election process of a new Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul. This process has led to a number of arguments, tensions, and divisions within the Armenian community of Turkey.[1] On the other hand, Armenia and certain sections of the Armenian diaspora have attempted to intervene in this process that constitutes a domestic issue of Turkey.[2]

AVİM has had a close interest in this subject and many articles have been published regarding it in the Armenian media. At this stage, it will be helpful to provide some reminders on the process and highlight the turning points:

- October 1998: Mesrob II Mutafyan was elected as the Istanbul Armenian Patriarch, and took office in November 1998.

- 2008: Mesrob II became unable to carry out his duties due to his frontotemporal dementia illness. In the approximately 550-year history of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, patriarchs had either passed away while on duty or had resigned. This was the first time that a patriarch in office had become unable to carry out his duties. Disputes began among Patriarchate officials and the Armenian community on what should be done regarding this situation.

- July 2010: Archbishop Aram Ateshian came into office with the title General Vicar (Acting Patriarch) to carry out patriarchal duties. Disputes began over the title General Vicar, since such a title had not been used before in the history of the Patriarchate. This dispute continues to this day.

- October 2016: The Clerical General Assembly of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul decided to retire Mesrob II by giving him the title Retired Patriarch and stated that elections would be held for a new patriarch. Disputes began upon the question can the patriarch be retired for not being able to cary out his duties despite being still alive?[3]

- February 2017: Bishop Sahak Mashalyan, the Head of the Clerical Council of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, expressed harsh criticisms in both content and wording towards various sections of the Armenian community due to obstructions in the patriarch election process, and announced his resignation and withdrawal from patriarch candidacy. While Mashalyans move was considered by some sections of the Armenian community as a noble act, other sections considered it be inappropriate. The Mashalyans resignation statement added urgency to the patriarch election issue in the eyes of the community (later on, Mashalyan expressed regret for his statement and retracted his resignation).[4]

- March 2017: A *değabah* (trustee, traditionally known as *patrik kaymakamı* in Turkish) election was held in the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul (the trustee is tasked with running the patriarch election process). Archbishop Karekin Bekchian, the spiritual leader of the Armenian community in Germany, won the election. However, the Governorship of Istanbul made a written statement that the trustee election was invalid and that General Vicar Ateshian continued to possess his official title. Despite everything, some sections of the community, citing the holding of the trustee election, began to demand for the resignation of the General Vicar Ateshian. On the other hand, despite government officials having indicated that the trustee election had been invalid, Bekchian attempted to continue serve as a trustee.[5] An Enterprising Committee was formed to assist Bekchian in the election process endeavors. However, the past and present conduct of Bekchian and some of the members of the Enterprising Committee caused discomfort amongst government officials.

- June 2017: General Vicar Ateshian, who did not resign despite the pressure from Armenia, the Armenian diaspora, and some sections of the Armenian community, was removed from office by the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbuls Clerical General Assembly (whether Ateshian could be removed from office in such a manner is a matter of dispute). At the same time, in this meeting, Archbishop Bekchian was given patriarchal authorities until the holding of the patriarch election.[6] Thus, Bekchian gained a level of power that exceeded the scope of his actual duty (being a trustee). Following this development, mutual accusations were expressed between Ateshian and the Patriarchate controlled by Bekchian.[7] Armenian media become involved in these mutual accusations and related arguments.[8] The anticipated date for the patriarchate election, the last months of 2017, were thus passed without an election.

- February 2018: The Governorship of Istanbul issued a written statement regarding the patriarch election process. In brief, the statement indicated that, in the framework of the 1961 Patriarch Election Bylaw, "a new patriarch election is possible in case of the death or resignation of the patriarch, or other reasons, and that health problems are not sufficient for the holding of a new patriarch election. In this framework, the Governorship stated that the retiring of Mesrob II, the election of Archbishop Bekchian as the trustee and Bekchians decisions taken in his capacity as the trustee (*patrik kaymakamı*) were invalid. Lastly, the Governorship highlighted that the Turkish government continues to recognize Archbishop Ateshian as the General Vicar.[9]

- February 2018: After a meeting of the members of the Clerical Assembly of the

Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, it was confirmed that Ateshian continued to be in office as the General Vicar, and regarding the patriarch election process, it was stated that it would proceed in unison with the government.[10] In March, General Vicar Ateshian formed an Advisory Committee for the carrying of the Patriarchates affairs.[11]

- February 2018: Archbishop Bekchian had previously stated that he would be a candidate in the patriarch election and that he would stay in Turkey even if he lost the election (he has a Turkish citizenship). But despite this statement, following the statement of the Governorship of Istanbul, Bekchian left Turkey in February. Bekchian claimed that he did not want excuses to be made over him to stall the patriarch election and that he was leaving the country for this reason.[12]

- April 2018: On April 24, in a letter of condolence he sent to the ceremony held by the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğans confirmed through his wording that Archbishop Ateshian is recognized by the Turkish government as the General Vicar.[13] Thus, the highest official of the government put an end to the question of who, in the absence of Mesrob II, is going to head the Patriarchate until the patriarch election is completed.

With Archbishop Aram Ateshian returning to his position as the General Vicar and the forming of an Advisory Committee, the process of electing a new Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul has in effect been reset. Everyones common opinion, including government officials, is that the patriarch election should be carried out as soon as possible. However, given the current situation, no date can be given regarding when the election will take place.

Furthermore, due to the patriarch election disputes that have been going on since 2008, the Armenian community in Turkey has somewhat gone through a division. On one side of the argument are the board of directors Agos newspaper (and its supporters) who have adopted the Armenian diasporas anti-Turkey mentality as a publishing policy since the murder of Hrant Dink. The Agos newspaper has praised Archbishop Bekchian at every opportunity while ignoring his flaws and has claimed that there is no need to consult with government officials regarding the patriarch election.[14] On the other side of the argument are a prudent group people, alongside Armenian media outlets such as Jamanak, Nor Marmara and Luys, who advocate acting in unison with the Turkish government with regards to the patriarch election.

Another issue that should be mentioned is who will run in the election for the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul. When the patriarchate election process first gained momentum, four names were mentioned of becoming candidates: General Vicar Archbishop Aram Ateshian, Head of the Clerical Council of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul Bishop Sahak Mashalyan, Archbishop Karekin Bekchian, and the spiritual leader of Armenias Gugark region Archbishop Sebouh Chouljian.

However, Archbishop Bekchian has left Turkey for Germany, and after what has happened, he will probably not run as a candidate. Archbishop Ateshians reputation has taken damage in the eyes of the community as a result of accusations and the defamation

campaign that has been conducted against him for years. Bishop Mashalyan may have difficulties in gaining sufficient votes due to his relatively young age and lower rank and the disapproval caused by his emotional outburst in February 2017. The candidate that is most unlikely to be elected is Archbishop Chouljian, as he is not known in Turkey like the other candidates. Moreover, due to the long-standing tension in Turkey-Armenia relations, it is not likely for many voters to want to bring Chouljian to the top of a deeply-rooted institution of Turkey such as the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul.

Ultimately, it is not known when the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul election will take place and it does not seem at the moment that any of the potential candidates will gain wide support from the Armenian community of Turkey. Our wish as AVİM is that this election will be conducted in unison with the Turkish government (as it has been in previous elections) and that a name who will be able to gain the wide support of Turkeys Armenian-origin citizens be elected as the patriarch.

It should not be forgotten that the Armenian Patriarchs of Istanbul, who are one of the four highest ranking officials of the Armenian Apostolic Church, were never solely spiritual leaders throughout the Ottoman Empire era; they were among the prominent opinion leaders of the Armenian community. In this framework, through their opinion leadership, the Armenian Patriarchs of Istanbul also gained political power beyond their religious authority (this fact is also acknowledged by Armenian writers). In line with this tradition, but within today's secular republican principles, the person to be elected as the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul should, on the hand, be able to serve the religious needs of the Armenian community and provide spiritual leadership. On the other hand, the Patriarch should be a prudent person with a constructive approach who can carry out his duties in unison with government officials.

**Photo: The building of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul (www.turkiyeermenileripatrikligi.org)*

***Translated by: Ahmet Can Öktem*

[1] Toplumumuza Çağrı, *Türkiye Ermenileri Patrikliği*, 28 Mart 2018, http://www.turkiyeermenileripatrikligi.org/site/toplumumuza-cagri/

[2] See for example, the intervention of Karekin II, the Catholicos of Etchmiadzin: Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, The Dispute Over The Election Of The Armenian Patriarch Of Istanbul Continues, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Analysis No : 2017/12, February 2, 2017, http://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/THE-DISPUTE-OVER-THE-ELECTION-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-PATRIARCH-OF-ISTANBUL-CONTINUES ; Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, Outside Intervention To The Election Of The Armenian Patriarch Of Istanbul, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Analysis No: 2017/14, March 15, 2017, http://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/OUTSIDE-INTERVENTION-TO-THE-ELECTION-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-PATRIARCH-OF-ISTANBUL

[3] Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, "The Dispute Over The Election Of The Armenian Patriarch Of Istanbul Has Yet Again Intensified," *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Commentary No: 2016/59, November 15, 2016, http://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/THE-DISPUTE-OVER-THE-ELECTION-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-PATRIARCH-OF-ISTANBUL-HAS-YET-AGAIN-INTENSIFIED

[4] Tulun, The Dispute Over The Election Of The Armenian Patriarch Of Istanbul Continues.

[5] AVİM, Outside Intervention To The Election Of The Armenian Patriarch Of Istanbul Continues, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Commentary No: 2017/23, March 17, 2017, http://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/OUTSIDE-INTERVENTION-TO-THE-ELECTION-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-PATRIARCH-OF-ISTANBUL-CONTINUES ; Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, The Election Process Of The Armenian Patriarch Of Istanbul Has Gained Momentum, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Analysis No: 2017/19, May 29, 2017, http://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/THE-ELECTION-PROCESS-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-PATRIARCH-OF-ISTANBUL-HAS-GAINED-MOMENTUM

[6] AVİM, Concerns Over The Patriarch Election, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Commentary No: 2017/53, July 7, 2017, http://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/CONCERNS-OVER-THE-PATRIARCH-ELECTION

[7] See for example: Başepiskopos Aram Ateşyan - Patrikhanenin Spekülatif Açıklamasının Işığında Zorunlu Saptamalar, *Avrasya İncelemeleri Merkezi (AVİM)*, AVİM Bülten – 9 Ocak 2018, http://avim.org.tr/tr/Bulten/BASEPISKOPOS-ARAM-ATESYAN-PATRIKHANENIN-SPEKULATIF-ACIKLAMASININ-ISIGINDA-ZORUNLU-SAPTAMALAR

[8] AVİM, Concerns Over The Patriarch Election – III, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Commentary No: 2017/61, August 27, 2017, http://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/CONCERNS-OVER-THE-PATRIARCH-ELECTION-III

[9] Valilik'ten Patrikhane'ye mektup: Bekçiyan'ı tanımıyoruz, *Agos*, 6 February 2018, http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/20164/valilik-ten-patrikhane-ye-mektup-bekciyan-i-tanimiyoruz

[10] Bildiri, *Türkiye Ermenileri Patrikliği*, 9 Şubat 2018, http://www.turkiyeermenileripatrikligi.org/site/bildiri-2/

[11] Bildiri, *Türkiye Ermenileri Patrikliği*, 23 Mart 2018, http://www.turkiyeermenileripatrikligi.org/site/bildiri-5/ ; Şahnur Kazancı, Kime Danışalım?, *Luys*, Yıl: 6, Sayı: 115, 1 Nisan 2018, p. 7.

[12] Bekçiyan: Amaç Seçimi Sabote Etmekti, *Agos*, Sayı: 1132, 16 Şubat 2018, p. 4.

[13] Message Sent By President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan To The Religious Ceremony Held In The Armenian Patriarchate Of Istanbul On 24 April 2018, Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, April 24, 2018, https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/92270/message-sent-by-president-erdogan-to-the-religious-ceremony-held-in-the-armenian-patriarchate-of-istanbul-on-24-april-2018.html

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About the Author :

Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun is an AVİM Analyst. His research focuses on Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Asia, Turkish-Armenian and Turkey-Armenia relations, international crimes and history, and the interplay between religion and politics.

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Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Mail: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

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