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THE DISPUTE OVER THE ELECTION OF THE ARMENIAN PATRIARCH OF ISTANBUL HAS YET AGAIN INTENSIFIED

Mehmet Oğuzhan TULUN

Analyst

The Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul Mesrob II Mutafyan assumed his position as the Patriarch in 1998, but after he was stricken with Alzheimers disease in 2008, he slowly began to withdraw from public and became unable to serve his duty. Due his deteriorating health condition, in March, Mesrob IIs mother was appointed by a court order as his legal guardian.

When Mesrob II became so ill as to become unable to serve his duty, a dispute emerged amongst the Armenian community in Turkey about the election of a new patriarch or a co-patriarch. In the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, which has history running back centuries, a Patriarch had either passed away while on duty or had abdicated, and because the present situation had never been encountered before,[1] the Armenian community could not definitively decide how to proceed exactly. In this process of deciding how to proceed, Archbishop Aram Ateshian was appointed in 2010 as the General Vicar (Acting Patriarch) as a sort of midway solution.

In time, a group of Armenians began to request the election of a new patriarch instead of the appointment of a General Vicar. This, combined with the opposition some Armenians have against Aram Ateshian has brought the dispute about the patriarch election to the forefront today. Ateshians writing of a letter addressed to the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in which he objected to the resolution passed by the German Federal Assembly characterizing the 1915 events as genocide, especially caused him to be subjected to a smear campaign spearheaded in Turkey by the Agos newspaper.[2] Furthermore, some sections of the Armenian community in Turkey and abroad accused him of being a traitor. Those carrying out the smear campaign against Ateshian went so far that, they had him barred from attending the ceremony that was conducted during Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Churchs visit (which carried great importance for Armenians) to Armenia in June 2016.[3]

In a statement, Ateshian replied to the criticisms directed against him as follows:

> ☀ *In my letter* [addressed to President Erdoğan]*, I did not say genocide happened or genocide did not happen. What I said was that third countries use us* [Armenians] *as leverage, that they bring up the Armenian issue for their own interests, and that they forget us when they have good relations with Turkey.*[4]

Concerning those who called him a traitor, Ateshian gave the following response:

> ☀ *Courage is not about shouting and making a lot of noise, but about preserving the rights that you have. As such, what I say is that those who allege that I am a traitor are in fact the traitors. If a set of rights were attained, if so much real estate was handed back, it was all achieved during my term* [as the General Vicar]*. ...*[5]

As a result of these kinds of disputes, in November, the Clerical General Assembly of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul gathered to hold a meeting, retired Patriarch Mesrob II from his duty by giving him the title Retired Patriarch, and announced that an election will be held for a new patriarch. However, this move brought along with it new disputes and raised question marks. For example, can a patriarch, who is still alive but unable to perform his duties, actually be retired? Bishop Sahak Mashalyan, head of the Clerical Council of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul and who presided over the Clerical General Assembly meeting, put forth the following argument concerning this question:

> ☀ *We did not retire His-Highness the Patriarch, His-Highness was already legally retired eight years ago. We also did not declare the office* [of the Patriarch] *as being empty; for it was already empty since our Patriarch was not able to fill it for eight years. We did what was necessary in the face of these facts and decided for the holding of an election for a new patriarch.*[6]

A matter of dispute that emerged after the announcement of the Clerical General Assembly was whether it is necessary or not to ask the state of Turkey for permission to hold a new patriarch election. For example, according to Ateshian, permission must first be gained from the State in order hold an election, and until such a permission is obtained, the Patriarchate will continue its functions under the helm of the General Vicar.[7] According to Mashalyan however, there is no need to obtain permission from the State, and that the only thing that needs to be done is to notify the State and obtain a date for the election.[8]

After the Clerical General Assemblys decision regarding the holding of a patriarch election, four peoples names have come up for candidacy for the election:[9] General Vicar Archbishop Aram Ateshian, Bishop Sahak Mashalyan, Archbishop Karekin Bekchian (the spiritual leader of the Armenian community in Germany), and Archbishop Sebouh Chouljian (spiritual leader of the Gugark region of Armenia). All four of these candidates have Turkish citizenship, which is a prerequisite for being eligible to become the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul.

When one takes notice of the smear campaign that had been carried out against Aram Ateshian, who had objected to the abuse of Turkish Armenians for the sake foreign states machinations regarding the 1915 events, it becomes difficult to evaluate the moves made towards the holding of a new patriarch election as being an unprejudiced endeavor. In our view, this possible election is not only about choosing a new patriarch, but also about eliminating Ateshian who is not liked by certain sections (who prefer dragging the dispute about the 1915 events into political machinations) due to his opinions that run counter to their opinions. How patriarch candidates are determined and how a patriarch is elected is

naturally a subject the Patriarchate and the Armenian community decides upon. What is important is that, if a patriarch is to be elected, it would be best if the new patriarch is someone who stands clear of political machinations that seek to abuse the Armenian community and hurt Turkey, and someone who attaches importance to the improvement of Turkish-Armenian relations.

* Photo: Agos

[1] Bu son müracat olacak, on kez başvuru yapacak değilim, *Agos*, 4 Kasım 2016, p. 10.

[2] Gülsüm Gizem Özyol, İstanbul Patrikhanesi Ermeni Sorununda Doğru Tespitlerde Bulunmuştur, *AVİM*, http://avim.org.tr/tr/Yorum/ISTANBUL-PATRIKHANESI-ERMENI-SORUNUNDA-DOGRU-TESPITLERDE-BULUNMUSTUR

[3] Özyol, İstanbul Patrikhanesi Ermeni Sorununda Doğru Tespitlerde Bulunmuştur.

[4] Almanya bildirisi gerginliği, *Agos*, 4 Kasım 2016, p. 10.

[5] Almanya bildirisi gerginliği.

[6] Miran Manukyan, Yapmamız gerekeni yaptık, *Agos*, http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/16952/yapmamiz-gerekeni-yaptik

[7] Bu son müracat olacak, on kez başvuru yapacak değilim

[8] Manukyan, Yapmamız gerekeni yaptık

[9] Candidates for Istanbul Armenian Patriarch Named, *Asbarez*, http://asbarez.com/156622/candidates-for-istanbul-armenian-patriarch-named/

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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