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CHURCH-GOVERNMENT TENSION IN ARMENIA AND THE STANCE OF THE ARMENIAN PATRIARCHATE OF ISTANBUL

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As we previously discussed on several occasions, the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul (officially the Patriarch of Turkish Armenians) Sahak II Mashalian has in recent times been acting differently in comparison to the times when he first came into office. When he first came into office, Sahak II had dedicated himself to finding solutions to problems faced by the Turkish Armenian community in unison with Turkish authorities. Nowadays, however, he has begun to act in a blatantly political manner and has been making statements that disregard Türkiyes South Caucasus policy and its normalization process with Armenia. The following examples can be given in this regard:

- He has referred to Turkish Armenians as diaspora in contradiction to historical and societal facts,[1]
- He has requested legal personality for the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul in contradiction to the Treaty of Lausanne, the founding document of the Republic of Türkiye, and the secular constitutional order of the Republic,
- Citing church solidarity, he has sided with Catholicos Karekin II in the dispute between the Nikol Pashinyan government and the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, which is an internal matter of the Republic of Armenia.

In light of this stance, Sahak II appears to have adopted a political position contrary to his role as the religious leader of the Turkish Armenians. Recent developments between the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin and the Pashinyan government[2] have once again turned Sahak II into an intervening party in Armenias ongoing religious and political divide.

In Armenia, a bishop who had criticized Catholicos of Etchmiadzin Karekin II was dismissed by the church administration. The said bishop appealed the Churchs decision to the courts, and following the appeal, an investigation was launched that resulted in the trial of Karekin II and five members of the Catholicosate's Supreme Spiritual Council. On 10 August, the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, under the leadership of Sahak II, issued the

following statement criticizing this situation;[3]

"It is a known fact that the negative attitude adopted toward the Armenian Apostolic Church in recent times has been a source of deep sorrow for our people living in Armenia and in the diaspora. The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin has for centuries been a force of attraction for our people in terms of faith and a cornerstone of our national and religious unity. [...]

In this context, the judicial proceedings conducted against the Catholicos of All Armenians and the churchs high-ranking bishops, and the fact that they are being called to account before secular authorities in connection with the accusations against them, hurt the dignity of the Armenian Church. [...]

The Armenian Church also plays an important role in the religious, national, and social life of our people in the diaspora. Therefore, any step that would weaken the sovereignty of the Mother See or undermine its inviolability will also weaken the bonds that have become deeply intertwined between the church and society over the centuries. [☀ Therefore, regarding matters concerning the Church, we find it meaningless and hurtful to seek criminal elements in the statements of the Catholicos of All Armenians and the institutions subordinate to him. [...]

As the Armenian Patriarchate of Turkey, we declare our solidarity with the Catholicos of All Armenians and his high-ranking bishops. We warn all those responsible not to bring the decisions of the Armenian Church and its clergy before civil judicial authorities. [...]

There are several important points that require attention here:

The Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin and the Patriarchate of Istanbul are two of the four main administrative centers of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Although the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin is considered the first in terms of seniority, the administrative centers operate independently and are not accountable to the other centers. Furthermore, the Patriarchate of Istanbul, due to the Ottoman States dominant political, military, economic, and cultural power over a vast geographical area that lasted for centuries, had surpassed the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin in terms of prestige and become a force of attraction in the Armenian world. The 10 August statement by the Patriarchate of Istanbul excessively highlighted the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin and damaged the Patriarchate's historical prestige.

The Patriarchate of Istanbul is a public institution operating in Türkiye, and its authority is limited to meeting the religious and spiritual needs of Turkish citizens of Orthodox Armenian origin. However, the 10 August statement consistently emphasized the Armenian people at a global scale and drew attention to the Armenian Diaspora. Türkiyes citizens of Armenian origin (in other words, Turkish Armenians) carry out the overwhelming majority of their social lives with the rest of Türkiyes citizens; in other words, their fate is effectively intertwined with Turks, not with Armenians living in Armenia or the Diaspora. The Patriarchate of Istanbul, disregarding its status as a Turkish public institution, has emphasized pan-Armenian nationalism. It should not be forgotten that pan-Armenian nationalism has been instrumentalized throughout history to foster

hostility against both the Ottoman State and the Republic of Türkiye on various occasions.

A normalization process based on delicate balances is currently underway between Türkiye and its neighbor Armenia. Establishing a healthy and sustainable relationship with Armenia is among Türkiyes foreign policy priorities in the South Caucasus and beyond. The trial of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin administration is an internal matter of Armenia involving complex political and social elements. The involvement of the Patriarchate of Istanbul, a Turkish public institution, in Armenia's internal affairs (even in the name of church solidarity) conflicts with Türkiyes foreign policy interests and undoubtedly causes unease within Armenias government. Furthermore, Karekin II has been known for his anti-Türkiye and Turkish sentiments for years, and he acts as a political opposition leader among circles who oppose the Türkiye-Armenia normalization process. The Patriarchate of Istanbuls support for such a controversial figure is unbecoming of its historically prestigious position and incompatible with its public identity.

**Picture: Sahak II Mashalian (left), Karekin II (right) - Source: News.am/Agos*

[1] Selenay Erva Yalçın, Türkiye Ermenileri Patriği Sahak IInin Son Açıklamaları Ve Görevinin Sınırları, *Avrasya İncelemeleri Merkezi (AVİM)*, Yorum No: 2026/23, 3 Mart 2026, https://avim.org.tr/tr/Yorum/TURKIYE-ERMENILERI-PATRIGI-SAHAK-II-NIN-SON-ACIKLAMALARI-VE-GOREVININ-SINIRLARI

[2] Selenay Erva Yalçın, Ermenistanda Kilise Yönetimi Ve Hükümet Arasındaki Laiklik Gerilimi, *Avrasya İncelemeleri Merkezi (AVİM)*, Yorum No: 2026/79, 5 Ağustos 2026, https://avim.org.tr/tr/Yorum/ERMENISTAN-DA-KILISE-YONETIMI-VE-HUKUMET-ARASINDAKI-LAIKLIK-GERILIMI

[3] Armenian Patriarchate of Turkey criticized the legal proceedings, *Agos*, August 12, 2026, https://www.agos.com.tr/tr/haber/armenian-patriarchate-of-turkey-criticized-the-legal-proceedings-41488

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