

THE ELECTION PROCESS OF THE ARMENIAN PATRIARCH OF ISTANBUL HAS GAINED MOMENTUM

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Archbishop Aram Ateshian, the General Vicar (Acting Patriarch) of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, announced his resignation 24 May 2017.[1] In order to make sense of Ateshians resignation, it is necessary to explain process concerning the election of the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul.

The election of a new Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul has for many years now been issue that has preoccupied the Armenian community of Turkey and has caused serious disputes within this community.[2] The issue began in the year 2008 when Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul Mesrob II Mutafyan became unable to perform his duties due to his illness. Church traditions has prevented the election of a new patriarch since the Patriach Mesrob II is still alive (despite being unable to physically fulfill duties). For this reason, Archbishop Aram Ateshian was appointed as the General Vicar in 2010 as a temporary solution. However, in 2016, the Clerical General Assembly of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul retired Mesrob II and announced that a patriarch election would held. In March 2017, an election was held for the position of the *değabah* (En. trustee), the official tasked with the carrying out of the patriarch election. Archbishop Karekin Bekchian, the spiritual leader of the Armenian community in Germany, was elected as the trustee. However, the Office of the Governor of Istanbul indicated that the patriarch election in its current state was causing disturbances within the Armenian community and expressed, in essence, that the State [of Turkey] does not recognize the trustee election and that Vicar General Ateshian [was] officially still in office.[3]

As a result of the statement made by the Office of the Governor, Vicar General Ateshian announced that he would continue serving in his post, and, in essence, postponed the patriarch election to a later date citing that the circumstances were not yet appropriate for holding an election. However, as was the case during his term as the Vicar General, Ateshian was subject to a heavy propaganda and virtually to an exclusion (the reasons were explained in one of my previous articles[4]) by the Armenian diaspora (known for its

anti-Turkey stance) and a group of people spearheaded in Turkey by the Agos newspaper. While Ateshian was constantly scorned during this campaign, Karekin Bekchian was constantly praised as a patriarch candidate. It should be noted that Bekchian is known for his support for [the] anti-Turkey activities organized by Germany (which embrace Armenian allegations) and backed by the German Protestant church.[5]

Despite all the pressures exerted on him for his resignation, the Vicar General Ateshian continued serve in his post until May 24. Ateshian announced that he was resigning out of what he viewed was a necessity and to clear the way for the patriarch election process, and indicated that he was always ready to do his part for the soundness of the election process.[6] Ateshian also indicated, however, that he would continue to oversee the routine functions of the Patriarchate until the election of a new patriarch. After his resignation, Ateshian sent a letter to Trustee Bekchian concerning the carrying out of the patriarch election process and invited Bekchian to Turkey. In his letter, Ateshian expressed that the circumstances concerning the patriarch election had matured and that positive signals had been received from state institutions concerning this issue. Ateshian explained in his letter to Bekchian why he had, until now, not resigned from his post:[7]

> We continued our Vicar Generalship by bearing in mind two points. Firstly, the Patriarchate could not become unattended and headless in front of the state. Secondly, it was virtually impossible to hold the patriarch election without proceeding in harmony with the state. Considering these two essential requirements, we made countless sacrifices in the name of the continuation of the Patriarchate and confronted malicious protests intended to wear us down. We did all of these by looking after the Patriarchates interests.

Besides Bekchian, Ateshian also sent a letter to the spiritual leader of the Armenian Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin (situated in Armenia) Karekin II and provided explanations regarding his resignation and the election process.[8] It should be noted here that Karekin II, known for his unconstructive stance against Turkey, had in the past attempted to interfere in the election process of the Istanbul Patriarch despite being unauthorized to do so and on another occasion had publicly ostracized Ateshian.[9] The Catholicos of Etchmiadzin, according to church traditions, is considered the first amongst equals in context of the highest ranking officials of the Armenian Apostolic Church (These officials are: Catholicos of Etchmiadzin, Catholicos of Cilicia, Patriarch of Istanbul, and Patriarch of Jerusalem). However, due to the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul having administrative independence concerning internal affairs, as the head of the Patriarchate, Ateshian is not required to provide any explanation concerning the patriarch election process to any authority or office outside of Turkey. Accordingly, the fact that Ateshian felt compelled to provide any explanation to Karekin II goes to show just how much pressure was exerted on Ateshian from outside of Turkey.

The resignation of Ateshian and the invitation made to Bekchian has resulted in the patriarch election process gaining a oticeable momentum. Ateshian has clearly expressed that the conditions have become favorable for the patriarch election and Bekchian has announced that he will come to Turkey within ten days. Shortly before these developments, Bekchian had gone to Etchmiadzin to pay a visit to Karekin II,[10] after

which he attended a religious meeting in Moscow presided by Karekin II that expressed support for the trusteeship of Bekchian.[11] Mostly recently, Bekchian announced that, prior to returning to Turkey, he has certain appointments to attend to in Germany, but did not provide an explanation as to what these appointments in Germany are.[12] Upon returning to Turkey, as the trustee, Bekchian will be tasked with brining the election process to a successful end without further delay.

Four names had come up as patriarch candidates during the disputes regarding the patriarch election: Aram Ateshian, Karekin Bekchian, Head of the Clerical Council of the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul Bishop Sahak Mashalyan, and the spiritual leader of the Gugark region of Armenia Archbishop Sebouh Chouljian (it is possible to mention the spiritual leader of the Armenians of the eastern states of the US Khajag Barsamian as a fifth candidate, although his name is not being brought forth at this stage as a patriarch candidate). All of these candidates have Turkish citizenship, which is a prerequisite for being eligible to become the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul. However, only Ateshian and Bekchians candidacies look certain at this stage. It is difficult to make predictions about how successful each of the candidates are going to be in the election. However, judging by his stance exhibited while in Germany, Bekchians candidacy is sure to raise questions about what kind of contributions it will make to the Armenian community of Turkey and the relationship between this community and the State of Turkey.

Photo: Agos

[1] The statement regarding Ateshians resignation has been posted on the Patriarchates website only in Armenian for now: ՅԱՅՏԱՐԱՐՈՒԹԻՒՆ, *Türkiye Ermenileri Patrikliği*, Mayıs 24, 2017, erişim tarihi Mayıs 26, 2017, http://www.turkiyeermenileripatrikligi.org/site/hy/%D5%B5%D5%A1%D5%B5%D5%BF%D5%A1%D6%
. However, the contents of the statement have been shared in English-language news pieces: Miran Manukyan and Uygar Gültekin, Ateşyan finally steps down, *Agos*, May 25, 2017, accessed May 29, 2017, http://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/18588/atesyan-finally-steps-down

[2] For the details of this issue, please see: 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, accessed May 29, 2017, http://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/THE-DISPUTE-OVER-THE-ELECTION-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-PATRIARCH-OF-ISTANBUL-HAS-YET-AGAIN-INTENSIFIED ; 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 27, 2017, accessed May 29, 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, accessed May 29, 2017, http://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/OUTSIDE-INTERVENTION-TO-THE-ELECTION-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-PATRIARCH-OF-ISTANBUL

[3] Mehmet Oğuzhan Tulun, Outside Intervention to the Election of the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul Continues, *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)*, Commentary No.2017 / 23, March 17, 2017, accessed May 29, 2017, http://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/OUTSIDE-INTERVENTION-TO-THE-ELECTION-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-PATRIARCH-OF-ISTANBUL-CONTINUES

[4] Tulun, The Dispute Over the Election of the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul Has Yet Again Intensified ; Tulun, The Dispute Over the Election of the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul Continues.

[5] Tulun, Outside Intervention to the Election of the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul Continues.

[6] Manukyan and Gültekin, Ateşyan finally steps down.

[7] Ateşyandan Bekçiyana davet: Şartlar olgunlaştı, *Agos*, Mayıs 25, 2017, erişim Mayıs 26, 2017, http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/18589/atesyandan-bekciyana-davet-sartlar-olgunlasti

[8] Ateşyandan Karekin IIye: Yönetimi Bekçiyana bırakıyoruz, *Agos*, Mayıs 25, 2017, erişim tarihi Mayıs 26, 2017, http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/18590/atesyandan-karekin-iiye-yonetimi-bekciyana-birakiyoruz

[9] Tulun, The Dispute Over the Election of the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul Has Yet Again Intensified ; Tulun, Outside Intervention to the Election of the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul.

[10] Election process on Supreme Spiritual Council's agenda, *Agos*, May 11, 2017, accessed May 29, 2017, http://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/18478/election-process-on-supreme-spiritual-council-s-agenda

[11] Supreme Religious Council expresses support to Bekçiyan, *Agos*, May 19, 2017, accessed May 29, 2017, http://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/18559/supreme-religious-council-expresses-support-to-bekciyan

[12]Manukyan and Gültekin, Ateşyan finally steps down.

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