CONCERNS OVER THE PATRIARCH ELECTION

AVİM

The election process of the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul and the related disputes started in 2008 when Patriarch Mesrob II Mutafyan became unable to carry out his duty due to his illness. To this day, this issue has still not been resolved. In the most recent article published by AVİM, we had indicated that the patriarch election process approaching to its conclusion.[1] Since the publication of this aforementioned article, however, another controversial development has come up in the election process.

The General Vicar (Acting Patriarch) Archbishop Aram Ateshian, tasked with carrying out the duties of the Patriarch due to Mesrob IIs illness, had stated on May 24 that had had resigned from his position as the General Vicar in order for the patriarch election to proceed and that from then onwards he would only carry out the routine activities of the Patriarchate. In the proceeding days, however, Ateshian, indicating that he had not yet received official documents from the State of Turkey, did not officially put into effect the statement of resignation he had made on May 24. Meanwhile, Archbishop Karekin Bekchian, the spiritual leader of the Armenian community in Germany (he handed over this position this past June) and the Trustee (Ar. Değabah) tasked with carrying out the patriarch election process, argued that Ateshian should resign from this position as the General Vicar with the election of Bekchian as the trustee. He added that Ateshian might get removed from his position by the Clerical General Assembly of the Patriarchate should he not resign. Indeed, the Spiritual General Assembly convened on June 28 under the chairmanship of Trustee Bekchian and took the decision to terminate Ateshians position as the General Vicar with a majority of the cast votes. Prior to the voting, Bekchian alleged that Ateshian was obliged to resign from his position in order for the patriarch election to proceed in a healthy manner and to prevent misunderstandings that might come up during this process.[2] However, Ateshian stated that he would not resign, but that he would respect a decision by the Clerical General Assembly to terminate his position.

However, the aforementioned decision by the Clerical General Assembly contains an aspect that is bound to raise question marks.

The below statement was made following the decision:

> As per the ancient customs of our Church, due to the Trustee election having been carried out, Trustee Archbishop Karekin Bekchian is the only official in charge of

> the administration and representation of the Office of the Patriarch until the election of the new Patriarch…[3]

In sum, this decision has not just terminated Ateshians position as the General Vicar, it has also granted Bekchian the powers vested in the Office of General Vicar. However, the Office of the Trustee is created not for the fulfillment of the duties of the General Vicar, but for the carrying out of the patriarch election. Consequently, with the decision of the Clerical General Assembly, Bekchian has virtually engaged in a power grab, meaning that he has attempted to arm himself with powers that go beyond what was intended by his election as the Trustee.

At this point, the following questions must be asked:

During the process preceding the election a new patriarch, if Aram Ateshians continued occupation of the position of General Vicar will be a cause for misunderstandings, would the power grab started with the decision of the Clerical General Assembly also not be a cause for misunderstandings?

Given recent developments, is it possible to distinguish between Bekchian and Ateshian, whom Bekchian accuses of abusing his position as the General Vicar?

Bekchian, who has been granted extraordinary powers, is trusted with preparing the ground for the election a new patriarch while also being a candidate for the position. Can this be accepted as fair and impartial (Bekçiyans name has been circulated as a candidate for some time and he has issued no statement regarding this)?

How can the silence and even the approval expressed by Agos newspaper on this current situation, who has until now consistently criticized Ateshian and praised Bekchian, be explained?

Finally, will official approval be granted for the election of a new patriarch under such suspicious circumstances?

AVİM will continue to follow developments with this critical perspective.

**Photo: Agos*

[1] 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, date of access July 7, 2017, http://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/THE-ELECTION-PROCESS-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-PATRIARCH-OF-ISTANBUL-HAS-GAINED-MOMENTUM

[2] Miran Manukyan, Ateşyanın görevine son verildi, *Agos*, Sayı 1100, Haziran 30, 2017, p.

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[3] Manukyan, Ateşyanın görevine son verildi.

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