

### Church as Civil Society? Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Armenia

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the broader public debate. A deeper analysis of religious civic participation might be an opportunity for investi-

gations that are neither secularly biased nor apologetic in favor of the Church.

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## Church as Civil Society? Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Armenia

Tigran Matosyan, Yerevan

### **Abstract:**

The Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) has experienced a revival in Armenia after the country's independence from the Soviet Union. In contrast, Armenia's post-Soviet civil society has remained weak. By definition, the church itself is part of civil society: it can represent the interests of people and promote civic participation. This article reflects whether the AAC has utilized her potential in civil society to assist Armenia's democratization. In particular, the article indicates how the AAC's strong ties with the state have so far prevented her from becoming a full-fledged member of civil society. It also identifies those spheres of activity where the AAC has nonetheless contributed to the formation of civil society in Armenia.

### **Church as Civil Society**

A religious institution like a church can contribute to civil society in a number of ways. For one thing, a church can represent. It can make an effort to defend the rights of people in the face of the government and to counterbalance the latter's authority. A church can engage local communities and church-related organizations in various participatory activities, such as volunteering or charity. Church-related communities and organizations can become potential venues for their members to practice democracy. Finally, a church is capable of contributing to civil society through its ideology. It can theologize the concept of civil society and propagate values

such as mutual trust, participation, self-sacrifice, and volunteering, as desirable aspects of religious identity.

A brief review of the social activity and political role of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) during Armenia's move toward independence will show how the AAC has used her potential to contribute to civil society.

### **Revival of the AAC in Armenia**

The AAC was among those institutions in Armenia who undeniably benefited from the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Armenian Church experienced colossal hardships during Communist rule. Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, the properties of the Mother Sea

of Holy Etchmiadzin (the administrative headquarters of the AAC and the Pontifical Residence of the Armenian Catholicos) were confiscated and nationalized, hundreds of churches were closed and turned into storehouses, and numerous clergymen were arrested, exiled, or murdered. The most outrageous act of violence against the Church took place in 1938, when Soviet State Security agents strangled Catholicos Khoren I for his disobedient stance. Assistance of the Armenian Church to the Soviet war effort from 1941–1945, brought about some positive shifts in the attitudes of the Soviet state toward the Church. The latter was allowed to elect Catholicos in 1945. Several churches were returned to Holy Etchmiadzin as well. After the death of Stalin in 1953 and the elevation of Catholicos Vazgen I in 1955, the freedoms of the Armenian Church were expanded; however, in an atmosphere of total anti-religious propaganda and numerous restrictions imposed by the state, the activities of the Armenian Church were mostly incapacitated and her influence became minimal. Therefore, Armenia's independence in 1991 became a watershed for the Church between the decades of communist suppression and the period of a post-Communist revival.

In the years since independence, the AAC has experienced significant institutional development under the leadership of the past Catholicos Vazgen I (1955–1994) and Garegin I (1995–1999), as well as the current Catholicos Garegin II (since 1999). In particular, the state returned the religious buildings appropriated by the Soviet authorities to the Armenian Church. Dozens of monasteries and churches have been built and repaired in Armenia through joint efforts of the AAC, the state, and benefactors. Holy Etchmiadzin also embarked upon raising new religious leaders. Educational institutions of the AAC, including the Gevorgyan Theological Seminary, became engaged in the pursuit of this goal. As a result, the number of clergy has increased by the hundreds over the course of two decades. In 1995, the AAC also co-founded the Faculty of Theology at Yerevan State University with the aim of preparing laity specialists.

The AAC has become an integral part of Armenia's modern identity. In 2013, as many as 94 percent of surveyed population in Armenia claimed fidelity to the AAC. Although levels of religious practice (e.g., church attendance or frequency of praying) are low in Armenia (Charles 2010), Armenians turn to the AAC to sanctify their major life events. For example, wedding ceremonies almost always include a religious ritual at the church. As a relatively recent tendency, churches have become venues for holding public funerals, or priests administer rites for the deceased outside of the church. Baptism of young children in the church has become a widespread practice in Armenia as well.

The AAC also enjoys the highest levels of institutional trust in Armenia. In 2013, as many as 76 percent of surveyed Armenians fully or somewhat trusted the religious institution to which they belonged<sup>1</sup>. The confidence of Armenians in the AAC is comparable only to their confidence in the army (62 percent). Other institutions in Armenia enjoy levels of trust much lower than the AAC. For example, confidence in the Police is almost half; in the President and the NGOs—it is three times lower; in the courts—four times lower; and in Parliament—almost six times lower.

### From Revival to a Concordat?

However, at some point over the course of the AAC's revival, the state and the church started to merge. The first signs of a symbiosis became evident during the presidency of Levon Ter-Petrosyan (1991–1998). For instance, a symbolic tradition—when the Catholicos gives his blessings at the inauguration ceremony of the president, and the latter, swears the oath on both the Constitution and the Holy Bible—was introduced during the first years of the Republic. Another example is that in 1997 the AAC and the Armenian government agreed to involve priests in the army service as spiritual counselors. However, state politics during Levon Ter-Petrosyan's presidency was predominantly secular.

The principle of separation between the state and the church started to blur during the presidencies of Robert Kocharyan (1998–2008) and Serge Sargsyan (since 2008), and since the elevation of Garegin II. As a result of constitutional reforms in 2005, the Armenian Constitution incorporated ambiguous messages about the relations between the state and the church. Along with reinstating the principle of separation of the two, the amended Constitution acknowledged the important role that the AAC has played in the history of Armenians (Article 8.1). Meanwhile, the last paragraph of the same article stated that the relations between the Republic and the Armenian Church “*may be regulated by law*”. This stipulation left a door open for further integration between the two entities.

Two years later, in 2007, Robert Kocharyan signed the “Law on the Relations between the Republic of Armenia and Armenia's Apostolic Holy Church”. The law recognized the AAC as “a national church” (Article 2) and gave it a number of privileges. For example, the AAC became exempt from paying taxes (Article 11). Her branches abroad came under the official protection of the Republic of Armenia (Article 13). The state also

<sup>1</sup> <<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/>>; Armenia is a predominantly monoethnic country where Armenians constitute 98 percent of the population.

granted the Armenian Church widespread opportunities for promoting spiritual knowledge through both public and church institutions of education (Article 8).

The AAC's involvement in the public education of Armenia constitutes perhaps the most conspicuous example of how the symbiosis between the state and the Church has occurred. Currently, the presence of the Armenian Church in public school is evident right from school entrance, where the portrait of the Catholicos hangs on the wall next to that of the President. "The History of the Armenian Church" is a mandatory subject in public schools, with the AAC enjoying the right to partake in the development of the curriculum and textbooks.<sup>2</sup> The Church can also nominate candidates for teaching this subject. At some schools, the Lord's prayer is recited by pupils during the lessons of the Church history, regardless of whether non-believers or representatives of other religions are in attendance. Moreover, Holy Etchmiadzin seems to have exercised influence vis-à-vis the contents of another school subject. In particular, a number of education specialists and historians in Armenia believe that the AAC has succeeded in revising certain events and phenomena in the textbooks of the Armenian history to support her own narrative.

The AAC responded to the granted privileges by lending support to the state authorities in political affairs. Backing the candidate of the country's ruling party during the 2008 presidential election constituted one such unprecedented example. In November 2007, after less than a year of signing the mentioned law on state-church relations, Archbishop Navasard Kchoyan, the Vicar of the Ararat Patriarchal Diocese, attended the Eleventh Congress of Armenia's ruling Republican Party. The Archbishop blessed the Congress and delivered an obviously side-taking political text. Specifically, he alluded to the main opposition candidate and first president of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan by stating that, "The past remains in the past; and there is no returning to it"<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, the high-standing religious leader expressed his—and presumably, the hierarchy's—support for the candidate of the ruling party, Serge Sargsyan, by declaring that a vote of confidence for the Republican Party should have its logical continuation.

The AAC also demonstrated a pro-government position during the run-up to and after the contested February 19 election. In one example, two weeks prior to election day, the Armenian Church took part in turning a religious event—the cross march devoted to the Day

of Remembrance of the Holy Martyrs of Vardanants<sup>4</sup>—into a political campaign of Serge Sargsyan. Specifically, the latter himself took part in the cross march and was praised at the end of the event in a public speech by Navasard Kchoyan. In a video dated at the beginning of March 2008, in which time nine people had died and dozens had been wounded following clashes between law-enforcement and the opposition, challenging the validity of the election results, Garegin II expressed his condolences to the families of the deceased and called for unity and mutual tolerance. However, the Catholicos' abstract interpretation of the reasons leading to the clashes allows for an assumption that he was reproducing the official version of the events; that is, the opposition was preaching hatred and intolerance toward the authorities; people lost their sound judgment and caused disorder, which resulted in regrettable casualties. As could be expected, the Catholicos also congratulated and praised Serge Sargsyan during the ceremony of the presidential inauguration on April 9, 2008.

The AAC hierarchy has also stood by the state authorities by demonstrating indifference to civic activism directed against government policies. Since 2008, an unprecedented number of protest movements have taken place in Armenia. Thematically, the protests have addressed a wide range of issues, such as human rights, social justice, ecology, and preservation of architectural monuments. The forms of the protests have been diverse as well: rallies, marches, sit-in strikes, "occupy" style gatherings, flash mobs, collective petitions, and boycotts. The protest initiative called "Let's save Teghut forest", protests to preserve the Mashtots Park in the center of Yerevan, as well as the fight against the rise in the public transit fare, and against the cumulative pension system, received perhaps the widest public resonance. Notably, the AAC preferred to stay neutral with respect to the issues raised by the protesters. However, the official voice of Holy Etchmiadzin could be of significant assistance to the protesters; her silence has obviously played into the hands of state authorities.

### Still Civil Society

Despite her choice not to join those who have been challenging the government and its policies, the AAC has still acted as civil society in a narrower sense. In particular, Church-related organizations, both formal and informal, have periodically engaged in civic activism over the course of the past two decades. These organi-

2 See Mkrtchyan, Satenik (2014): Where did we come from? Creationism versus Evolution in Armenian Public schools. In A. Agadjanian (ed.), *Armenian Christianity Today. Identity Politics and Popular Practice*. Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate, 57–70.

3 <<http://www.a1plus.am/21230.html>>

4 The Armenian nobility who died as martyrs defending their Christian faith during the battle of Avarayr in 451 against Sassanid Persia.

zations have provided opportunities for people to volunteer, to provide charity, and to network.

The NGO “Youth Unions of the Armenian Church” exemplifies such faith-based civic activism. Apart from being platforms for altruistic self-expression, the Youth Unions help young people make contacts and exchange information with each other. Taking pilgrimages, celebrating holidays, attending lectures, and holding sports events and art exhibitions, are some of the activities that allow the youth to network with each other and to generate social capital. Members of the AAC-related youth organizations also have considerable opportunities to experience horizontal relationships among one another and to engage in bottom-up decision-making processes. By providing platforms for self-expression, these organizations become rare venues for young people to practice democracy in Armenia.

The “Armenia Round Table” is another faith-based program operating since 1996 on the initiative of the AAC and the World Council of Churches. In partnership with the Armenian Catholic and Armenian Evangelical Churches, as well as local NGOs, the program has implemented numerous charitable, educational, cultural, and community development projects in Armenia.

Finally, using her mechanisms of religious propaganda, the AAC has constantly preached Christian val-

ues of self-sacrifice, charity, mutual trust, etc. to a wider public. By doing so, the Armenian Church has presumably contributed to the formation of an atmosphere conducive to civic activism in Armenia.

## Conclusion

In sum, post-Soviet Armenia has undergone partial de-secularization. Once the dominance of Communist ideology ended, Armenian society made a big leap back to its Christian roots. Armenians started to largely identify themselves with the AAC. The role of the Church in the lives of Armenians has increased significantly. Meanwhile, the Church has experienced considerable institutional growth and earned the trust of the majority of Armenians.

Over the course of the AAC’s revival, the Armenian state assumed patronage over her. The latter reciprocated with a loyalty toward the state. Consequently, the alliance between the two tightened to a degree in which the AAC could not act in a capacity as defender of public interests or challenger of questionable state policies. In this sense, the AAC has not fulfilled her potential as a member of civil society. Nevertheless, the Armenian Church is one of the rare institutions in Armenia that has provided opportunities for people to engage in civic activities such as volunteering and charity.

## About the Author

Tigran Matosyan is an independent researcher in Yerevan, affiliated with the Russian State University of the Humanities, EU-FP7 Project ISSICEU. He has focused his research on value transformations, identity issues, and public policy-making in the South Caucasus.

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