

The Armenian Apostolic Church and the Challenges of Democratic Development in Armenia

Mkrtchyan, Narek

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Mkrtchyan, N. (2017). The Armenian Apostolic Church and the Challenges of Democratic Development in Armenia. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 97, 10-14. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-87739-7>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

The Armenian Apostolic Church and the Challenges of Democratic Development in Armenia

By Narek Mkrtchyan (Yerevan State University / American University of Armenia, Yerevan)

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in democratization processes in the Republic of Armenia. The narrative of the first Christian nation and the Armenian Apostolic Church has historically played an important role in shaping the identities (e.g., national, political and cultural) of the Armenian nation throughout history. Taking this fact into consideration, the contribution proposes that the Armenian Apostolic Church, as one of the most trusted institutions in Armenia, has real potential to impact the country's political decision-making processes. To this end, it is quite important to focus on the relationships among civil society, political elites and the Church. This approach will shed light on the limitations of the Armenian Apostolic Church in supporting the democratization of Armenia. Regarding the relationships between political society and the Church, one can conceptualize such relationships as hegemonic. The Apostolic Church plays an important role in establishing and supporting the hegemony and legitimacy of the ruling regime, which makes them loyal to each other's policies and ideologies. Next, the contribution will attempt to understand the attitude of the Apostolic Church toward civic activism or civic actions against the ruling regime and vice versa.

Introduction

The Armenian Apostolic Church has historically been an inseparable part of Armenian society and the national narrative, and it is the only institution in the Armenian reality that has preserved its continuity since the 4th century A.D. The collapse of the Soviet Union opened new channels for the re-engagement of the Armenian Apostolic Church in different spheres of society. The privileged status of the Church is justified by its historical role in the maintenance of an Armenian national identity during critical periods of history. However, the engagement of the Armenian Apostolic Church could hardly be possible without official approval from or cooperation with the ruling authorities. This paper aims to shed light on the opportunities and challenges for the Armenian Apostolic Church in the democratization process of the Republic of Armenia. However, it is even more important to understand whether the Church even wants to support democratization. One of the most important aspects of the country's democratization concerns the development of civil society and civic activism. This contribution particularly tries to examine the role of the Church in the democratization of the Republic of Armenia through the prism of civil society studies. In this context, it is interesting to consider the nature of the relationships among the Church, civil society and political players during the investigation.

The political puzzle of explaining the role of the Church in democratization processes necessarily leads to questions concerning international and domestic legal frameworks. In the context of a religio-political puzzle, it is important to understand what types of legal oppor-

tunities religious institutions can provide in supporting different political processes. Nevertheless, much of the current debate centers on only the Armenian Apostolic Church. Next, a legal status examination lends support to the claim that only the Armenian Apostolic Church has the opportunity to play a role in the different political processes.

The State and the Apostolic Church: Mutual Institutions

After proclaiming its independence, the Republic of Armenia signed different international documents protecting the religious freedoms and activities of religious organizations, e.g., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. Consequently, the constitution of the newly established Republic was created in accordance with universal standards. Accordingly, Article 8.1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia guarantees "*Freedom of activities for all religious organizations*",¹ which in turn enabled the registration of dozens of religious institutions and churches in Armenia. On the other hand, the Armenian Apostolic Church is the only religious institution whose relationship with the state is regulated by the 2007 law "*On the Relations between the State of Armenia and The Holy Apostolic Church of Armenia*". Indeed, this law is based on the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, according to which "*The Republic of Armenia*

1 National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia (1991), The Law of the Republic of Armenia on the Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Organizations. <<http://www.parliament.am/legislation.php?sel=show&ID=2041&lang=arm>>

recognizes the exclusive historical mission of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church as a national church, in the spiritual life, development of the national culture and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia". Thus, the exceptional role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in maintaining the national identity and culture of Armenians² is officially recognized. This Church, which has the most followers in Armenia, can play the role of either supporting the hegemony of the existing ruling classes or establishing a new hegemony.³ The idea of hegemony should be understood through the prism of Antonio Gramsci's theoretical concepts. The cooperation of the Armenian Apostolic Church with the state is a type of cooperation with political society, while the engagement of the Church in democratization processes can materialize, at a minimum, through strict cooperation with civil society. To prove this point, it could be argued that the consequences of cooperation with political society, e.g., the exclusive representation of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the spheres of media, education, culture, security and correctional institutions, prohibits the Church from publicly criticizing corruption, unfair procedures of justice or government policies restricting civic activism in Armenia.

The Apostolic Church as Legitim�er of Political Processes

Before examining the Church's opportunities to support the democratization process of the Republic of Armenia, I would first like to discuss the obstacles and challenges that democratization faces when seeking the support of the Church. Again, the most serious obstacles concerning the official cooperation between the ruling regime and the Armenian Apostolic Church can be conceptualized as hegemonic, which seriously limits the Church's engagement in democratization processes.

One of the key components of democracy is the functioning of a representative political system through free and fair elections. Elections should be an inseparable part of any contemporary process of democratization. In this regard, it is extremely interesting to examine the position of the Armenian Apostolic Church in these processes. It is obvious that among the obstacles to democratization in the post-Soviet space are unfair presidential, parliamentary and municipal elections. Here,

the question arises whether the leading church, which has millions of followers, can condemn such unfair elections in favor of democratization. To provide a more or less comprehensive response to this question, one can examine the historical experiences of other countries. For example, the Catholic Church in communist Poland played a crucial role in not only forming contrasystems and civil society in support of democracy but also in striving for the establishment of its own hegemony.⁴ Thus, we can argue that the Polish Church was part of civil society.

The picture is different in the case of Armenia. Since Armenia's independence, the Apostolic Church has been engaged, directly or indirectly, in political processes. To put it more precisely, the power of the Church functions in the sphere of the legitimization of certain political processes or in the rule of certain leaders and regimes. This practice derives from the Armenian royal tradition, when the Catholicos of all Armenians recognized the power of kings and took part in a king's coronation ceremony. Similarly, after a presidential or a parliamentary election, be it fair or not, the leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church must present the official statement of the Holy See. The role of the Church is arguably not restricted to ritualistic and symbolic activities because the blessing of the president of the Catholicos plays a crucial role in providing internal legitimacy for parliamentary and presidential elections.⁵

Although the Constitution states that "*The Church shall be separate from the state in the Republic of Armenia*", some high representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church still try to influence certain political processes. The most recent case concerns municipal elections held in Vanadzor—the third largest city in Armenia—on October 2, 2016, when three opposition parties won 18 council seats in the 31-member Council of Elders, leaving the leading Republican Party with only 13 council seats.⁶ However, despite the party's insufficient number of votes, the ruling Republican candidate for mayor surprisingly won the most votes in secret voting. In response, the three opposition parties decided to boycott the sessions of Vanadzor's municipal council with the aim of preventing the Council from adopting a different agenda. To resolve this complicated situation, the ruling party "*petitioned the Church for help*". The response from the

2 A similar pattern emerged for the Georgian Orthodox Church when the state by Constitutional Agreement simultaneously recognized the special role of the Orthodox Church in Georgia and freedom of belief and religion.

3 See Narek Mkrtychyan (2015), Gramsci in Armenia: State–Church Relations in the Post-Soviet Armenia, *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, (2015) 32(3), p. 166.

4 Eugeniusz Górski (2007), *Civil Society, Pluralism and Universalism*, Polish Philosophical Studies, VIII. Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, p. 25.

5 Narek Mkrtychyan (2015), op. cit., 167.

6 "Bright Armenia" party to initiate dissolution of Vanadzor Council of Elders, Panorama.am, <<http://www.panorama.am/en/news/2016/12/13/Bright-Armenia-party-to-initiate-dissolution-of-Vanadzor-Council-of-Elders/1693713>>

Church came swiftly. During the Christmas Mass, the leader of the Diocese of Gugark, Archbishop Seboug Chouldjian, publicly called on the opposition Vanadzor city council members to cooperate with the Republican Mayor.⁷ The announcement by the archbishop was highly criticized by the opposition parties, which tried to remind the clergy about the separation between the Church and state.

The Church and Regime-Backed Oligarchs

Another challenge to the Church's engagement in democratization processes concerns cooperation between regime-backed oligarchs and Church leaders. According to the literary and cultural critic Vardan Jaloyan, the Church has cooperated with oligarchs and some criminal networks to ensure its own continuity because church building in Armenia is in many cases the business of oligarchs engaged in illegal/criminal activities.⁸ Church-building activities seem to increase the reputations of certain oligarchs during election campaigns. For example, during the re-branding of his discredited reputation in the wake of the 2017 parliamentary election campaign, the ruling regime-backed oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan created a film dedicated to his life in an attempt to win voters to the "Tsarukyan alliance". The film begins with the scene of a church he built, after which the viewer encounters high praise for the religiosity and glorification of Gagik Tsarukyan's church-building mission by different high representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church.⁹

Another noteworthy example concerns the most scandalous corruption incident of 2013 involving former Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan (Chairman of the Board of the Eurasian Economic Commission) and the archbishop of the Ararat diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Navasard Kchoyan, who with the help of the businessman Asot Sukiasyan (currently imprisoned) had registered an offshore company in Cyprus worth approximately 10 million dollars.¹⁰ The case was considered to represent the most scandalous corruption allegations of the year and one of the key challenges to Armenia's

economic development and democratization in Freedom House's Nation in Transition 2014 annual report.¹¹

Church vs. Civic Activism

The jointly shaped policies of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the state can hardly allow the Church to publicly criticize the government for corruption, monopoly and injustice. Taking into consideration the institutional and cultural legacy and the legal status of the Church, the indifferent stance of the Armenian Apostolic Church is problematic for the country's democratic development. It would be wrong to say that the Armenian Apostolic Church is fully isolated from civil society. Somewhat surprisingly, during many civic protests—especially before or after police attacks on activists—the Church sends its clergy to the location of the protest. One example is the "Electric Yerevan" civic protest in 2015, when priests formed a line with intellectuals to create a human wall between the two conflicting sides. Such an action is similar to a "working visit" that aims to ease the tension between the regime and civil society, or in Gramscian terminology, to form a "historic bloc" between the "oppressors and oppressed". Thus, the Church's involvement in civic protests is restricted to its symbolic meaning because there is no single precedent when the Church seized the opportunity to stand up for the interests and rights of civil society. Moreover, this fact is well perceived by Armenia's citizens. In addition, it was not accidental that during the "Khorenatsi" civil rally in support of "Sasna Tsrer", who had stormed and held one of the headquarters of the Yerevan Police garrison from 17th to 23rd of July, the public refused the directions of the priests and mediation by the Church. According to Human Watch Report, on 29th of July, 2016, the Armenian police used excessive force against peaceful protesters on Khorenatsi Street,¹² during which one could hardly find any clergy in the lines of ordinary citizens. Moreover, when Armen Melkonyan—a priest in the Church's diocese in Maastricht, Holland—participated in a protest in support of Sasna Tsrer in front of the Republic of Armenia Embassy to the Netherlands, the leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church relieved him of his pastoral responsibilities.¹³

After the death of Artur Sargsyan, or "the bread bearer" (Hac Berogh), who had been charged for break-

7 Nare Stepanyan, "The spiritual leaders should not intervene political processes" Azatutyun, <<http://www.azatutyun.am/a/28218918.html>> last view 10 March. (In Armenian).

8 Vardan Jaloyan, "The Church and Mafia," <<http://religions.am/article/էկեղեցին-և-մաֆիան/>> last viewed 1 April, 2017. (In Armenian).

9 "Մարդ, որը կառուցում է". Գագիկ Ծարուկյանի Մաս 1-ին [The man who constructs: Gagik Tsarukyan, Part 1] <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8ii19eopyE>>

10 Ararat Davtyan, Edik Baghdasaryan, and Kristine Aghalyan, "Cyprus Troika: Who 'Stripped' Businessman Paylak Hayrapetyan of His Assets?" Hetq, 29 May 2013, <<http://hetq.am/eng/news/26891/ovqer-en-paylak-hayrapetyani-unezrkman-hexinaknery-ofshorayin-eryaky.html>> last view 8 April, 2017.

11 Nation in Transition 2014, Armenia, <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2014/armenia>>

12 "Armenia: Excessive Police Force at Protest" Human Rights Watch <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/01/armenia-excessive-police-force-protest>>, accessed on April 9th 2017.

13 Armine Sahakyan, "Priest's Complaint About Armenian Government Strikes a Chord With the Faithful" Huffington Post, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/armine-sahakyan/a-priests-complaint-about_b_11810286.html>, last view 9 April 2017.

ing the police cordon to take food to the members of Sasna Tsrer, dozens of citizens asked the Bishop of Yeghvard to perform a requiem mass in his honor. The “bread bearer” Artur Sargsyan died on March 16th, 2017, during the most active period of the parliamentary election campaign, as a consequence of a hunger strike against the ruling regime. However, the Bishop of Yeghvard refused to perform the ceremony in memory of a civic activist who struggled against the ruling regime. Ironically, the action of this representative of the Church appears to be “reasonable” after learning that Sasun Mikayelyan—the leader of one of the leading opposition parties of Armenia, Civil Contract—was among the organizer-citizens. This case does not represent an exception, as Armenian civil society has previously witnessed the unwillingness of the Church to support civic initiatives. For example, since 2008, the “Save Teghut Civic Initiative”—the longest civic initiative in Armenia to date—has been pressuring the government, i.e., the Ministry of Nature Protection and the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, to nullify the approval for the exploitation of the Teghut Mine, which would become the second largest copper-molybdenum mine in Armenia, in order to protect the rich flora and fauna of the forest in Lori marz.¹⁴ While the public strictly criticized the government’s grant of a 25-year exploitation license to Armenian Copper Program (81% of ACP shares belong to the Liechtenstein-registered Vallex Group), the leader of the Diocese of Gugark, Archbishop Seboug Chouldjian, during a public debate openly supported the Vallex Group’s right to exploit the Teghut.¹⁵

All of the above-mentioned cases seem like a piece of a wood floating on the surface of water because they have much more profound roots. To prepare the grounds for the reproduction of its apparatus, a regime will usually use the most trusted institutions in the society. In other words, the creation of hegemony requires the formation of consent in a society. Hence, to create a sense of commonality among civil society, the government uses the potential of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The process of hegemony formation in Armenia involves

several key social and state institutions, e.g., schools, the army and prisons. Starting in 2003, a new subject called History of the Armenian Church was taught in all Armenian public schools, and content analyses of the textbook argue that it propagates both the Christian doctrine of the Apostolic Church and the general principles of the state ideology.¹⁶ Moreover, the Apostolic Church of Armenia not only participates in society’s primary socialization processes but also supports national security. The securitization mission of the Church was established in a 2000 charter signed by the Apostolic Church and the government, according to which priests are allowed to regularly hold meetings with soldiers in order to provide Christian-patriotic education. In addition, the Armenian Apostolic Church is the only religious institution the country that has the right to hold regular meetings with prisoners in correctional institutions. This is another important process that supports the hegemony of the regime through the formation of a historic bloc between the oppressors and the oppressed. As a pay-off for the services of the Church, in 2011, the Parliament of the Republic of Armenia approved legal amendments that exempted the Church—one of the largest landowners in the country—from property and land taxes. Thus, there is ample reason to understand the Church’s supportive attitude toward political society.

Conclusion

To sum up, the Armenian Apostolic Church has real potential to mobilize society toward certain political processes. In practice, the Church can play huge role in democratization or the democratic decision-making process in the Republic of Armenia only after overcoming the abovementioned challenges. However, the mutually beneficial high-level cooperation with political society prevents the Church from being an active supporter of democratization, at least on the civil society level. The Church can support the democratization of the Republic of Armenia first of all by its willingness to do so. Next, the ruling regime must stop perceiving the Church as a voter mobilizer, policy legitimizer and hegemony supporter.

About the Author

Narek Mkrtychyan is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of World History at Yerevan State University. Currently, he is a visiting lecturer at American University of Armenia. His research interests focus on Armenian and world history as well as nation and state building in the post-Soviet space.

See overleaf for further reading.

14 For more details, see Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan, Valentina Gevorgyan, *Civic Activism as a Novel Component of Armenian Civil Society*, Yerevan 2016.

15 Գուգարաց թեմի առաջնորդի խոսքը, [The speech of the leader of the Diocese of Gugark] January 17th 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly9vxJHxb64>>.

16 See Narek Mkrtychyan (2015), op. cit., 169.

Further Reading

- Yulia Antonyan (2014) *Political power and church construction in Armenia*. In Agadjanian A, Jödicke A, van der Zweerde E (eds) *Religion, nation and democracy in the south Caucasus*. New York: Routledge, 81–95.
- Jose Casanova (1994), *Public religions in the modern world*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Narek Mkrtchyan (2015), Gramsci in Armenia: State–Church Relations in the Post-Soviet Armenia, *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, (2015) 32(3), 163–176.
- Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan, Valentina Gevorgyan, *Civic Activism as a Novel Component of Armenian Civil Society*, Yerevan 2016.