

# PATRIARCHAL ELECTION PROCESS OF TURKEY'S ARMENIAN COMMUNITY

## BRIEF

### *Historical Background*

The existence of Armenian religious institutions in Istanbul dates back 565 years. Subsequent to the addition of Istanbul to the Ottoman Empire (1453) during the reign of Mehmed II, the Armenian community began establishing its first churches in Istanbul. In 1461, Archbishop Hovagim of the Armenian community in Bursa was invited to Istanbul by the Sultan, who would recognize him as the Armenian Patriarch and spiritual leader of the Ottoman Empire's Eastern Orthodox subjects.<sup>1</sup>

The structure and operations of the Armenian community was codified in 1863 with the approval and ratification of the Armenian National Constitution, which defined the duties of institutions such as the Office of the Patriarch, the Clerical (Ruhani) Assembly and the Material (Cismani) Assembly. These institutions would address the spiritual and secular needs of the Armenian community, first throughout the Ottoman Empire and later in the Turkish Republic. The Armenian community elects its own patriarch according to both the articles of the Armenian National Constitution and the Treaty of Lausanne.

As the patriarch is both the highest ranked member of the community and also elected by it, he is essentially the leader of Turkey's Armenian community. It is also the highest office recognized by the government. The office of the Patriarch is currently occupied by Mesrob II Mutafyan, the 84th Patriarch.

### *Current Situation*

Patriarch Mesrob II Mutafyan of the Armenian community has been unable to work for 11 years due to dementia. Definitively diagnosed in 2007, a disability report was prepared for Patriarch Mesrob II as he would no longer be able to make decisions following damage to the part of the brain responsible for reasoning and cognition. Standard procedure in case of the death of a patriarch is for the Spiritual Assembly to elect a *Değabah* [locum tenens] and prepare the community for elections. While the same process was expected for a patriarch with a disability report, a trustee was appointed to the office of the patriarch instead.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.turkiyeermenileripatrikligi.org/site/tarihce-patriklik-makami/>

With a ruling by the Turkish Cabinet, Archbishop Aram Ateşyan assumed the seat as a “temporary solution” in 2010 under the title “General Vicar of the Patriarch.” Yet, he has continued to occupy the office for 8 years as an unelected official.

Particularly with the outcry from religious figures, the Armenian community was galvanized, and the ensuing demand necessitated the hastening of the election process.

As elected *Değabah* Archbishop Karekin Bekçiyān explains in his statement,<sup>2</sup> events proceeded as follows:

“Based on medical reports, Turkish courts ruled that His Eminence Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan was unfit for duty, which in turn led to the October 25, 2016 ruling by the Clerical Assembly that “the office of the Patriarch was vacant,” once again bringing up the topic of Turkey’s Armenians electing their 85th Patriarch.

I arrived in Istanbul to participate in the *Değabah* (locum tenens) election upon invitation of the General Vicar of the Patriarch Archbishop Aram Ateşyan. On March 15, 2017, I was elected *Değabah* with the favor of the Clerical Assembly in a 23-11 vote, conducted in accordance with our codes and customs and where Archbishop Ateşyan was also a candidate.”

### *A trustee was appointed to the Armenian community*

Electing the Patriarch is the Armenian community’s inalienable right. In democratic systems, crises are solved by democratic elections, by the ballot box. As the Armenian community, we have the right to vote in order to resolve this spiritual and material chaos. Unfortunately this process was impeded and the Armenian community presently has an appointed trustee.

Yet, in order to initiate the election process, the clerics of Turkey’s Armenian Patriarchate elected Archbishop Karekin Bekçiyān’ı *Değabah* [locum tenens] on March 15, 2017. However the Istanbul Governor’s office attempted to interfere with the election, the community spoke up against this interference, and the intervention was ultimately unsuccessful.

The Patriarch election process essentially began after the election of the *Değabah*. Appeal after appeal was sent by the office of the Patriarch to the Interior Ministry by way of the governor’s office. On July 9, 2017, a memorandum regarding the election signed by *Değabah* Archbishop Karekin Bekçiyān was sent to the Istanbul

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/20198/bekciyan-dan-veda-mesaji-ibretlik-entrikalar-cevrildi>

Governor's office by the Enterprising (Müteşebbis) Committee. However none of these statements elicited timely responses from the relevant authorities. Whereas the dates suggested for the planned two-stage patriarch elections were December 10 and 13, 2017.

### *The will of the community was disregarded*

The awaited response, signed by Istanbul Deputy Governor İsmail Gültekin, arrived at Turkey's Armenian Patriarchate on February 5, 2018. In it the deputy governor stated that Archbishop Ateşyan was recognized as General Vicar of the Patriarch but not Archbishop Bekçiyān as *Değabah*. The letter also contended that the conditions for a patriarch election had not been met. In addition to personally insulting *Değabah* Archbishop Bekçiyān by referring to him with the clause "supposed," it said that all of his decisions were considered invalid and thus disregarded the will of the community.

Stating that elections would not be held until the death of current Patriarch Mutafyan, the letter implies that the Armenian community would be lead for many years not by an elected official but by someone appointed by the state. This is a clear blow against the Armenian community!

In the wake of the letter, the chairs of Armenian foundations were invited to a meeting with the Interior Minister where the decisions in the letter were reiterated. Subsequently, the Clerical Assembly met and ruled to continue with General Vicar of the Patriarch Aram Ateşyan. In fact, it would not be wrong to suggest this ruling was imposed on the Clerical Assembly by the government.

As a result of this ruling, Archbishop Karekin Bekçiyān was forced to step down as *Değabah* and return to Germany. In his farewell statement, Bekçiyān notes that scheming was taking place:

"It is unfortunate that this outcome, seemingly targeting myself, is actually about sabotaging the election of the 85th patriarch and is the product of a protracted and well-planned campaign. This campaign began the very day I was elected *Değabah*. Several upsetting, hurtful and cautionary schemes took place. These underhanded campaigns became very ugly. I fear that this attitude will wear our community down and even corrupt it."

A segment of the Armenian community refuses to accept this state of affairs and continues to insist on an election. The latest such demand came on February 21st,

when a group of 72 Armenian writers, journalists and artists released a statement<sup>3</sup> saying, “The desired social harmony will only emerge when the rightful and legal patriarch election is once again held fairly. The silence brought on by resignation is not peace, but an imposition.” Meanwhile, a group following the state of affairs from Armenia has begun a petition campaign for the office of the Catholicos in Armenia to relieve Aram Ateşyan of his titles.

### *The solution is at the ballot box*

As the Armenian community awaits the Patriarch election, a certain will within the state and its reflection within the Armenian community has stonewalled the election process and prevented the election. Aram Ateşyan, aiming to serve his own interests instead of the Armenian community, has formed a crooked partnership with a segment within the state wishing to appoint a trustee at the head of the community. He has both ignored the best interests of the community and also ravaged church traditions.

However the solution that can preclude all disagreement is at the ballot box! Presently, following the Turkish President relaying to the Armenian community his desires regarding the patriarch election, is of critical importance.

### *We should not give up hope and acquiesce to these impositions*

In his statement,<sup>4</sup> Değabah Archbishop Karekin Bekçiyen says the Armenian community has been worn down. The chaotic situation Turkey finds itself in obviously reflects on the Armenian community as well. While the Armenian community is already anxious about its future, intrusions such as these further erode our institutions.

Let us not forget that a strong Armenian community governed both spiritually and materially well will also benefit Turkey. All those responsible should put aside their own interests, take into consideration the values and needs of the community, and back the right to an election. As the Armenian community of Turkey we should not give up hope and acquiesce to these impositions.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/20247/ermeni-aydin-ve-sanatcilardan-patrik-secimi-icin-cagri>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/20198/bekciyan-dan-veda-mesaji-ibretlik-entrikalar-cevrildi>