

Clarifying Church-State Relations in Armenia

A Rebuttal to the Narrative of Religious Persecution under Prime
Minister Nikol Pashinyan

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Table of Contents

1. Background: A Complex History of Church-State Relations
2. Nature of Recent Events: Political, Not Religious
3. Debunking the “War on Christianity” Narrative
4. Disinformation and Ethno-Religious Fearmongering
5. Governance, Reform, and Democratic Integrity
6. Conclusion

Executive Summary

Recent public statements and political briefings circulated by opposition-aligned entities have alleged that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has launched an aggressive campaign against the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC). These claims include accusations of religious persecution, political repression, and even a deliberate effort to “Islamize” Armenia by bringing in 300,000 Muslim Azeris.

This white paper seeks to address and contextualize these claims, providing a balanced analysis grounded in democratic principles, legal frameworks, and current geopolitical dynamics. While the recent confrontations between the Armenian government and segments of the Church leadership reflect genuine tensions, they should not be mischaracterized as an attack on Christianity or national heritage. The use of incendiary language and misinformation undermines democratic discourse and distracts from Armenia’s urgent security and governance challenges.

1. Background: A Complex History of Church-State Relations

The Armenian Apostolic Church is one of the world's oldest Christian institutions, with its roots dating back to 301 A.D. In Armenia, it enjoys a privileged legal status and deep cultural legitimacy. For centuries, during extended periods when the Armenian nation lacked statehood, the Church served as the representative of the people before foreign sovereigns and in various international forums. However, the Church has also historically engaged in partisan politics, often aligning with previous administrations and taking public positions on secular governance.

Since taking office in 2018, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government has promoted a policy agenda that emphasizes civilian supremacy over clerical institutions, in line with constitutional principles of secular governance. This has inevitably led to friction with Church leaders who perceive these reforms as a threat to their influence.

However, this friction also carries a geopolitical dimension, as the current leadership of the Armenian Church is closely aligned with Russia and with Moscow-backed opposition forces inside Armenia. While the Prime Minister advocates a more balanced foreign policy between Russia, neighboring states, and the West, the Church leadership favors a subordinate alignment with Moscow, resembling the asymmetrical, dependency-based relationship between Russia and Belarus. For example:

- While Prime Minister Pashinyan has adopted a policy barring Armenian officials from visiting Belarus—due to Minsk's unequivocal support for Azerbaijan's aggression during and after the 2020 war—the Armenian Catholicos has continued to make such visits.
- The Catholicos's brother serves as head of the Armenian Church Diocese in Russia and maintains exceptionally close relations with the Russian leadership.
- The Catholicos himself enjoys equally warm relations with Moscow, in sharp contrast to his strained relationship with the Armenian Prime Minister. A notable example was President Vladimir Putin's decision to award him a state medal (<https://www.azatutyun.am/a/32219303.html>).
- Russian oligarchs of Armenian descent, who are at odds with the Armenian government, closely coordinate their activities with the senior leadership of the Armenian Church.

To fully appreciate this last point, it is worth recalling that throughout the post-Soviet era Russian-Armenian oligarchs have often served as instruments of influence, shaping Armenia's domestic politics and, by extension, its geopolitical orientation. Against this backdrop, the arrest of Samvel Karapetyan—the wealthiest Russian-Armenian oligarch with direct ties to the Kremlin—should be seen as part of the broader effort to curb foreign interference in Armenia's internal affairs. Within the same framework, the Armenian Church, given the strongly pro-Russian disposition of its top leadership, emerges as a key channel of such influence. The unfortunate consequence is that the Church is being drawn ever more deeply into political and geopolitical power struggles.

2. Nature of Recent Events: Political, Not Religious

Arrests of Clergy

The arrests of Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan and Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan were linked only to their alleged involvement in calls for, and organization of, the government's overthrow through a military coup d'état or acts of terrorism.

Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan has, in effect, emerged as the de facto political leader of the opposition, spearheading protests in 2024 and 2025 that explicitly demanded Prime Minister Pashinyan's resignation. In a widely publicized episode in 2024, the Archbishop organized a mass rally in Republic Square, where he issued an ultimatum to the Prime Minister – one hour to step down. It is noteworthy that throughout these demonstrations, as well as during the subsequent year-long wave of political agitation and street protests, law enforcement authorities neither arrested nor harassed the Archbishop. He was granted full freedom to conduct political activities within the boundaries guaranteed by the Armenian Constitution.

The Catholicos himself has publicly called for the Prime Minister's resignation. Yet, no law enforcement measures have been taken in response to these statements.

The law enforcement intervened only after obtaining information indicating potential plans of violence and terrorism. In particular, audio recordings capture Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan speaking openly about planning assassinations and violent actions intended to instill public fear, destabilize the state, and pave the way for the government's removal. Notably, the opposition DID NOT DISPUTE the authenticity of these recordings, but instead argued that the statements had been taken OUT OF CONTEXT.

In light of the recent revelations regarding Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan and his supporters' involvement in plotting violence and the overthrow of the government, Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan's renewed calls for a military coup d'état have been met with greater seriousness than before. The YouTube link below contains footage in which Archbishop Ajapahyan himself acknowledges (in Armenian) that he has repeatedly called for such a military coup (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3lKtB4EpNc>).

Beginning at 2:50, Archbishop Ajapahyan states that during the 2020 war he called for a military coup d'état, a demand he acknowledges repeating several times in the following years. He laments that the generals did not heed his appeals. In the same interview, he further argues that a mere "piece of paper" — the Constitution — cannot outweigh the security of the country, thereby once again seeking to justify his call for an unconstitutional coup d'état.

No other member of the clergy, from any denomination, has been arrested or imprisoned. To repeat, the Armenian government has cited national security and anti-coup legislation as grounds for these actions. No law or government directive has targeted religious belief or

practice. In fact, priests, pastors and the faithful of all denominations continue to worship freely.

A brief remark is warranted regarding allegations of “politically motivated expropriations” targeting supporters of the Church. These claims center on the Armenian government’s takeover of the Armenian Electricity Networks—an action carried out fully in accordance with Armenian law and legal procedures. The utility, owned by Samvel Karapetyan, the wealthiest Russian-Armenian oligarch, had been plagued by persistent and widespread power outages, fueling significant public discontent. The repeated failures to meet service-level agreements provided the legal and practical justification for the takeover.

While a full review of the background and political context of this decision would require separate analysis, it is sufficient to note that such measures are neither extraordinary nor unprecedented in democratic systems. A notable comparison can be drawn to Puerto Rico (a U.S. territory), where authorities are currently moving to replace the private grid operator, LUMA Energy, due to similar issues of outages and mismanagement (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-07-22/puerto-rico-takes-step-toward-ousting-grid-manager-luma-energy>).

Conclusion: These arrests are tied to calls and organization of violent overthrow of government, not political actions, and certainly not religious identity or ecclesiastical activity.

3. Debunking the “War on Christianity” Narrative

Statements from opposition-aligned voices describe the situation as a “calculated attempt to undermine Armenia’s Christian foundation” and liken it to “Soviet-era repression.” Such comparisons are deeply misleading and historically inaccurate. The facts demonstrate otherwise:

- Freedom of worship remains fully intact in Armenia.
- The Armenian Apostolic Church continues to function without restriction, and no legal measures have been taken to limit its religious activities.
- Criticism of Church leaders by the Prime Minister, while sometimes undiplomatic and provocative, does not amount to a systematic campaign of religious persecution. In fact, his criticism has been directed solely at the Catholicos and a small inner circle of senior clergy.
- Only one consistent personal allegation has been raised against the Catholicos: violation of the vow of celibacy, which is a serious offense in the Armenian Church. He is alleged to have a child whose name has circulated in the media—an allegation neither the Church nor the opposition has denied.

- Nikol Pashinyan is the first Armenian leader who, in a clear departure from his predecessors, openly speaks of his devout faith, his daily reading of the Bible, and his frequent use of scripture and psalms in public remarks. At one gathering, he even admitted that his first personal “revolution” in life began when he picked up the Holy Bible. By contrast, former President Robert Kocharyan (1998–2008), now a leading opposition figure, has often been mocked for his perceived lack of faith.
- The current state of religious freedom in Armenia is best illustrated by the following comparison: in 2017, under the previous administration, Reverend Franklin Graham was not allowed to visit Armenia. By contrast, Prime Minister Pashinyan is offering full government support for the inaugural Republic of Armenia Prayer Breakfast in 2025, to which Reverend Graham has been invited.

Conclusion: This is not a cultural revolution against faith; it is a political dispute involving powerful institutions vying for influence.

4. Disinformation and Ethno-Religious Fearmongering

The claim that Pashinyan seeks to bring 300,000 Azeri Muslims into Armenia is not supported by any verifiable policy document, migration plan, or diplomatic agreement. Armenia’s population stands under 3 million. Such claims are mathematically and logistically implausible and appear designed to provoke panic. These claims are all the more ludicrous given that Azerbaijan is struggling to resettle its own citizens even in territories under its full control—Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions. Despite allocating \$10–12 billion for reconstruction, it has managed to resettle only about 14,000 permanent residents, along with 30,000–40,000 temporary construction workers, far short of its stated goal of 140,000 settlers.

Such false narratives (“fake news”) form part of Russia’s ongoing campaign of information warfare targeting the Armenian public. The themes of this campaign include:

- The claim that the August 8, 2025 declaration signed in Washington, D.C., and the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity, effectively hand over Armenia’s Syunik region to Azerbaijan and Turkey.
- Assertions that the massive apartment construction boom in Yerevan is financed by Turkish capital, allegedly to enable ethnic Turks to resettle in Yerevan. An earlier version of this narrative (before the 2023 ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh) claimed the apartments were intended to depopulate the region of its Armenian inhabitants.
- The accusation that the 2018 revolution was orchestrated by the West in order to pave the way for Nagorno-Karabakh to be surrendered to Azerbaijan.

- The conspiracy theory that those in the Armenian leadership are secret agents of Turkey/Azerbaijan/United Kingdom, tasked with dismembering Armenia and transforming it into a Turkish province.

These preposterous narratives evolve and expand each year, adapting to new political developments. Their ultimate purpose is to foment discontent toward the Armenian government and to sow mistrust between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, thereby creating conditions that facilitate Russian meddling and manipulation in both countries.

Conclusion: Disinformation of this kind undermines trust in democratic institutions and distracts from Armenia's real security concerns along its borders.

5. Governance, Reform, and Democratic Integrity

The “Veharan is Great” movement, reportedly initiated by Pashinyan supporters online, does not represent official government policy and has no legislative standing. Pashinyan's calls for reform within the Church—though poorly framed on social media—reflect broader public demands for transparency, accountability, and modernization of Armenia's elite institutions.

Crucially, a distinction must be drawn between the Armenian Church as an institution and its leadership. Public trust in the Church as a spiritual institution remains relatively high—around 60 percent—whereas confidence in its top leadership drops sharply, reflecting the broader mistrust toward Armenian elites across all institutions. This gap also helps explain why no significant public backlash, including street protests, took place following the arrests of the aforementioned archbishops and other police actions directed at the Church's senior leadership.

The Prime Minister's administration continues to pursue democratic reforms, including:

- Judicial modernization
- Anti-corruption campaigns
- Cross-party dialogue on border demarcation
- Engagement with Western partners to uphold religious freedom and minority rights

6. Conclusion

While the current tensions between the Armenian government and elements of the Armenian Apostolic Church are serious and require careful handling, they do not constitute a war on Christianity or a betrayal of Armenian heritage. Rather, they are symptomatic of a young democracy grappling with the balance of power between its institutions.

Religious freedom remains protected. Armenia's sovereignty and Christian identity are not under threat from within. What is under threat, however, is the integrity of public discourse—eroded by fear-based narratives and politically motivated disinformation.