

PASHINYAN ON KAREKIN II, AMULSAR AND OTHER ISSUES

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About Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians

Q: What are your thoughts around the issues surrounding the Armenian Apostolic Church and Karekin II and what actions are you ready to take? Also, why do sects, particularly the Jehovah Witnesses, receive such great allowances, for example, not serving in the army.

PASHINYAN: The issues around the Armenian Apostolic Church have created an unpleasant situation. I have directed the police to look into the recent issue in Vayots Dzor regarding the issue and government's involvement. If anything wrong or illegal has taken place, if steps have been taken

to prevent the Catholicos from his work, then this must be addressed. It is my belief that government has no place in the church's internal issues. Why am I calling this an internal church affair? Because my impression is that there are Armenian Apostolic clergy, and people connected to the clergy, among the protestors. When I see some of these statements by the protesting clergy, that confirms my understanding that these are internal church affairs. But some of the statements made by some members of the clergy, who appear to be protecting the Catholicos, are actually throwing fuel onto the fire. Still, this remains within the church and has not yet spilled over into the public domain for the government to take a position. But, of course, when it comes to defending the law, the government must do what it must do. And specifically, the police, which answer to the prime minister, must do their job. We will not allow this environment of love and understanding to be disturbed by people connected to the Armenian Apostolic Church. You know that the police intervened to free the area around the Mother See. And if needed, they will do so again.

But I urge the church leaders to come together, discuss and resolve their internal problems and not put the rest of us in this situation. In many instances, there are internal structural questions. At this point I don't see a reason for the government to get involved but the government will make sure that order is maintained. And government will. When I was reviewing the videos surrounding the situation in Vayots Dzor, I was not very happy with that investigation. I once again call on the church and its representatives to resolve their internal issues; if I am mistaken, I urge them to correct me, I'm not an expert in church matters, but I think there are issues there, it's not acceptable that hidden processes are taken to aggravate the situation and place us before an undesirable situation. If not, if these issues come before the government, we will have to take a thorough look and offer very concrete responses. But that's not the situation yet.

Regarding the religious permissions allowed, these emanate from the international obligations undertaken by Armenia. Honestly, when I was in the correctional facility in Kosh, there were Jehovah's Witnesses who had refused to serve in the military based on their religious beliefs and were convicted. There were people there with the deep conviction that they could not serve, whether you agree with them or not, that was their conviction. But my impression is that there were also people who wanted to benefit from such mechanisms, but today our legislation says that they will perform alternative service. These laws emanate from our international obligations. An important attribute of democracy is religious freedom but we are not going to allow anyone to use the umbrella of religious freedom to seek special allowances, or take on illegal acts. We will protect freedom of conscience but won't allow its abuse, within or outside the government. Those issues will be addressed but for that I have to be aware of such instances.

I am very glad that many of our citizens are following government work with a magnifying glass and alerting us about it. I can assure you that we are not going to ignore any serious alert and leave it without a response. We will not close our eyes to any such infractions, regardless of who they are. If I implement this with my own family members, you can be assured that we will do this with

everyone. I said the other day that if we have made mistakes, we also have the opportunity to correct that mistake. We are not taking money, we are not taking shares in someone's business. We can correct our mistakes. If the criticism is constructive or not constructive, it doesn't matter; we will elicit what is valuable in such criticism, and won't ignore any of them.

About Amulsar gold mine

Q: Mr. Pashinyan, if you were still a member of the opposition, you would doubtless be opposed to the Amulsar project. I know that you love Armenia and would not want to see a mine instead of a mountain. Here is my question, what can we do for you to be an oppositioner again for a day and shut down the Amulsar problem once and for all?

PASHINYAN: I very clearly announced that had the Amulsar process had begun during my tenure as prime minister, I would have opposed it and would not have allowed it to go forward. I have said this. And not because I think that there should not be any sort of mining industry in Armenia, but because I think it is absurd to develop a mining operation in one of Armenia's main recreational and health centers. Secondly, we, as the government, cannot carry out any action if there is no clear legal, de jure justification for it. A lot of people now tell us to just go and shut down the mine, but we cannot just go and, without basis, close down the mine. That is the beginning of unruliness. I am sure that none of you would want me to allow that kind of indulgence again and push the government to act upon my whims, however noble the issue may be. And it would just be first one, then two, then five moves like this. Today, we shut down a mine because the Prime Minister wishes that. The next day we close another factory. A third day we shut down a member of the media because of the Prime Minister's whim. Then we lock up people. I hope this is not what you want. We need to know how decisions are made. According to the Constitution, government officials and state bodies are only allowed to carry out actions that are backed by law. I hope that you would not want that we return to that kind of indulgence in the Republic of Armenia. As you know now, the Commission for Environmental Protection has started a review and we are studying this matter. During my trip to Jermuk I was hoping that representatives of Lydian Armenia would also take a step forward to trying to explore this and understand how we might resolve this issue. We have inherited this situation from the previous government where an internationally traded mining company which is the only mining company represented in the stock market, has carried out \$400 million investment in this project. We have this situation and it cannot be resolved with a simple move. The Prime Minister cannot just get up in the morning and order the mine shut. I hope this is not what you expect of the government. We have inherited it and have to deal with. I've said this, and in the past as well, when we complain about the authorities, we say they are illegal, corrupt, that is not just a product of people's character. There must also be institutional limitations.

Recently when we were talking with world-famous economist Daron Aćemoglu, he said that the efficiency of any government depends on a crucial factor, the willingness to limit itself, its freedoms. For example, currently according to Armenia's constitution, Prime Minister has major powers and if

limits are not placed then people will be faced with a major problem. No one wants the government to authorize lawlessness. I am very concerned about Amulsar, first of all environmentally. It is not clear to me how the previous government allowed this.

Lydian Armenia says that your government gave us clearance and we came in and invested. We have to resolve this issue in accordance with the letter and spirit of the law because if we mishandle this then it will lead us on a wrongful path and Armenia will be faced with a difficult problem.

When I visited Jermuk, in speaking with the protesters, I asked the people, dear brothers and sisters, this project has been around for a decade why didn't you raise the issue back then when it could have been prevented so that neither the investors nor the government would have been faced with such a situation? They said that back then they couldn't protest because they feared repercussions. I

I should also note that I was stunned to find out that some people after me got up and said that they would resolve the issue with arms. They'd take up guns and shoot. I want to strongly say to them that no issue in Armenia will be resolved with arms. I want to strongly condemn anyone who thinks that in this atmosphere of peace and understanding any question is going to be settled with an armed action. In that case what was the purpose of the revolution? No one will solve a problem with violence, with arms. I say this as prime minister. Let's forget about these kinds of interactions and relations. Any such statement will face a strong response from law enforcement. They will not be ignored.

Regarding Amulsar, I want to say that this issue is being carefully studied, I am worried, we will find a solution, but unfortunately Lydian Armenia did not demonstrate a constructive approach to discuss this issue during my visit.

About continuing corruption cases

Q: When are the big corruption cases involving Sashik Sargsyan, Mikayel Minasyan, Gagik Khachatryan, Robert Kocharyan, Hovik Abrahamyan, etc. going to be uncovered?

PASHINYAN: I don't like the phrasing of the question - that we have to find guilty people. But rather, we have to go after every stolen dime. The fight against corruption is a priority for us.

In my opinion, not all law enforcement agencies have been effective in the fight against corruption. This needs to change. Sometimes there is the impression that some law enforcement circles are sabotaging the corruption investigations. I continue to say that the fight against corruption needs to actively continue in Armenia, but that needs to happen within the bounds of law, defense of human rights, etc. As a former political prisoner, it would be a personal disgrace for me if there are political prisoners in Armenia during my tenure. But it would be equally disgraceful if the battle against corruption is not very effective.

I have said to law enforcement agencies that if they do not demonstrate their effective efforts to counter corruption, then there will be new appointments. I have said this openly. If there is the

thinking that, well, we'll wait a few months, and these guys will forget, and we'll go back to working as we used to work... that's not going to happen. They will be disappointed, those who think this way. I want to assure them that it will never be the case and that the careers of those with that mindset will be very short in the government. They will not just be relieved of their positions, but also be faced with legal proceedings. I expect effective battle against corruption, and within the limits of the law.

Oh, also -- People think that I get up in the morning and send the law enforcement to chase this or that person. That is not how it works; the law enforcement works based on complaints and clear evidence.

I will say again, the fight against corruption will continue effectively in Armenia. We are grateful to those law enforcement officials who are contributing effectively. And we will act against those officials who are not sabotaging the process. Corruption was not carried out by a handful of people, there were hundreds and thousands involved, we are going to be diligent to go after them. Our law enforcement is trying.

