TURKEY HAS NO RIGHT TO INTERFERE IN ARMENIAN PATRIARCH'S ELECTION

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By Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier, 22 July 2010

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The latest example of such blatant interference was the selection of Archbishop Aram Ateshyan, as Deputy Patriarch, after doctors had diagnosed the current Patriarch of Turkey, Mesrob Mutafian, as suffering from incurable dementia.
Six months ago, after a two-year delay during which the Patriarchal seat was practically vacant due to Patriarch Mesrob's incapacity, the Patriarchate's Religious Council wrote to the Turkish government seeking permission to elect a coadjutor (co-Patriarch). The Council then set up an Election Committee in order to organize such an election once Ankara gave its permission.

To complicate matters, the Election Committee, exceeding its authority, sent its own letter to Turkish officials, asking for permission to elect a new Patriarch rather than a co-Patriarch.

Both initiatives made the serious error of inviting the interference of the Turkish government into the Armenian community's internal religious affairs. Furthermore, both requests contradicted the Patriarchate's almost 600-year tradition and practice of not having a co-Patriarch, unlike the Holy See of Etchmiadzin, the Catholicosate of Cilicia, and the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The request to elect a new Patriarch was also improper, since a new Patriarch can not be elected, while the existing Patriarch is still alive, as Patriarchs are elected for life.

Taking advantage of the dissension within the Armenian community, the Turkish government finally responded on June 29, allowing the election of a Deputy Patriarch, but not a co-Patriarch or a new Patriarch. By so doing, Turkish officials violated the Armenian community's religious rights, ironically, at the community's own request!

In authorizing a Deputy Patriarch to represent the Patriarchate, the Turkish government has in effect

weakened the status of that historic institution. Since Patriarch Mesrob is mentally but not physically incapacitated, he may live for many years, while the Patriarchate is led by a mere Deputy Patriarch. Such an eventuality would serve Turkey's interests which has always sought to assimilate the Armenians by bureaucratic obstructions, and depriving it of a freely elected and capable religious leader.

Within 48 hours of the government's edict, Archbishop Ateshyan, who de facto ran the Patriarchate as Chairman of the 26-member Religious Council, convened a meeting which unanimously elected him Deputy Patriarch. No other clergymen were given a chance to submit their candidacies for that post.

While Armenians worldwide remained silent, with the exception of Primate of Germany, Archbishop Karekin Bekciyan, a few courageous Armenians in Istanbul dared to raise their voices in protest. The Election Committee, which the Turkish government disbanded, filed a lawsuit against Ankara's decision, demanding the election of a new Patriarch, not just a Deputy.

Where do we go from here? Armenian religious and lay leaders outside Turkey should protest the undue interference of the Turkish authorities in the internal affairs of the Armenian Church in violation of the Lausanne Treaty.

More importantly, Armenians in Turkey should come together and declare that the office of the Deputy Patriarch is a temporary arrangement, not a long-term solution. Without asking for Ankara's permission, the Armenian community should organize a new election to elect a co-Patriarch, who would then become Patriarch after the demise of the presently incapacitated Patriarch Mutafian.

Whether the Armenian community decides to elect a new Patriarch or a co-Patriarch is its own business, and not that of Turkish officials. It is important that the Istanbul Armenian community coalesces around a common position and avoids further dissension. If the local Armenian community becomes united and enjoys the backing of Armenians and others around the world, the Turkish government, which prides itself as a secular and democratic regime, would be more reluctant to politically interfere in the Armenian minority's religious affairs.