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## RELIGION AND POLITICS

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## Editorial: Religion and Politics in the South Caucasus

Ansgar Jödicke, Fribourg

The following three contributions in this issue of Caucasus Analytical Digest address recent developments in the field of religion and politics in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. Despite the different religious traditions in the three countries, there are several strikingly common features among the relationship between religion and politics.

These three countries in the South Caucasus experienced a period of social instability and fundamental political re-orientation after gaining independence in 1991. With a background embedded in the Soviet Union's past, a majority of the population has begun to support a western political orientation. In terms of policies towards religions, this western orientation includes two elements. First, and in contrast to the anti-religious politics of the Soviet Union, all three states guarantee freedom of religion. Second, and in the tradition of the fierce Soviet modernization paradigm, they all have legislation supporting the separation of politics and religion (Armenia was the last to include a paragraph about the separation of church and state in the reformed constitution of 2005).

The dominant religious institutions in the three countries have arranged themselves according to a new reality. Presenting themselves as guardians of national heritage and social stability, they have tried to secure as much legal and informal power as possible to gain influence in politics and society. The question of national identity has been extremely pertinent during the first two decades of these young republics. Therefore, the contribution of religion to national identity, and partly to nationalism, has been a striking similarity in the formation phase of the new political order; this was even more pronounced in Georgia and Armenia than in Azerbaijan. In the early days of the young republics, politics was not a strong and sovereign force that "used" religion for this purpose. Quite the contrary, the political system was weak, sometimes corrupt and fragmented. Religions used their symbolic status to secure benefits.

Especially in Armenia, the church hierarchy has established a well-organized institution aligned with political powers, whereas Azerbaijan has exhibited the lowest level of influence from religious institutions on politics.

Obviously, the legal and social situations in these three countries are very different. However, all three countries established a stable legal framework for religious institutions. This did not happen without struggle. As Georgian democrats engaged in a vivid debate about the dangers of a strong Georgian Orthodox Church on the democratic development of the country, Azerbaijan's government insisted on the danger of certain Islamist movements to the secular character of the country's political culture. However, the formal and juridical questions in all three countries seem to be solved, at least temporarily. The legal status of the Armenian and Georgian churches has been fixed, and official announcements ascertaining the domestic religious tradition do not cause substantial political excitement, either positive or negative. Azerbaijan's government has brought the religious field largely under control. In this situation, both new problems and new opportunities emerge.

Remarkably, all three country reports in this issue conclude that the most pertinent question now is the development of religious contributions to civil society. This highlights that religious traditions not only operate as institutions; religious activism beyond the religious hierarchy can be both a chance for non-governmental contributions to society and can serve as the seeds of political opposition. Therefore, it is true that new challenges in the relationship between politics and religion in the South Caucasus occur in a clear legal and political framework. Moreover, the legal status of religious institutions and their relationship to political institutions are just one dimension that must be analyzed to grasp the role of religion in society. It is civil society that is now pertinent to the development of the three countries. Consequently, 'civil society' turns out to be a greater focus of recent academic research in the region.

### *About the Author*

Ansgar Jödicke is Senior Lecturer at the University of Fribourg/Switzerland in the Department of Social Sciences. His research area is religion and politics. Together with Alexander Agadjanian and Evert van der Zweerde, he recently edited the volume *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (Routledge 2015).

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## Islamic Activism as a Social Movement. Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Azerbaijan

Fuad Aliyev, Baku

### Abstract:

Post-Soviet Azerbaijan has been moving through a process of Islamic revival for more than two decades. This revival in itself has not been a homogenous process, having its ups and downs, changing dynamics and multi-dimensional characteristics. Radicalization, sectarianism and state–civil society–religious relations are the issues at stake. A recent trend of more control over faith-based activism with ongoing marginalization along sectarian lines is a problem that must be addressed.

In Azerbaijan, a post-Soviet secular republic sandwiched between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia's unstable North Caucasus region, more people have followed the natural trend of turning to religion and Islamic revival after the fall of the Soviet Union. It is not surprising that Islamic activism in the form of religious communities, informal networks and faith-based organizations has been concurrently rising and has become an integral part of civil society, although it is not accepted by the latter. This rising activism has led to suspicion among the authorities and the general public, who fear the increasing influence of Islamism and the possibility that religious groups may act as non-progressive barriers to the country's secularism.

### Islam in Soviet Azerbaijan

After the fall of the independent Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan in 1920 when the Bolsheviks came to power, weak Soviet authorities did not suppress, and even cultivated relations with Muslim clergy as well as local intelligentsia in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis were given recognition of national identity, which included Islam as one of its components (Swietechowski 2002). In the meantime, the Soviet regime was attempting to weaken this component, promoting Azerbaijani national consciousness as a substitute for identification with Islam.

The Soviets initiated "modernization," which included the expropriation of *waqfs* (charitable foundations), shutting down Islamic civil courts and schools, banning public religious ceremonies, closing down some mosques, and the obligatory unveiling of women (Swietechowski 2002). However, the real fight against Islam, along with other religions, was launched in the late 1920s. This fight featured a change in alphabet from Arabic to Latin and then to Cyrillic to eliminate the influence of clerics and Muslim intellectuals, as well as dampening the influence from religious literature on the masses; new laws banned and established severe punishments for many public religious practices and traditions; massive mosque closings; arrests, deportation and executions of clerics (*ibid.*).

This pressure lessened during World War II, when the Soviet government tried to mobilize all possible forces to unite its people in the face of foreign intervention and war. As a result, despite the ideology of militant atheism, official "independent" Muslim religious administrations were allowed: the Muslim Religious Board for the European USSR and Siberia (centered in Ufa, Bashkir ASSR); the Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Tashkent, Uzbekistan); the Muslim Religious Board for the North Caucasus (in Buinaksk; later in Makhachkala, Dagestan); and the Muslim Religious Board for Transcaucasia (Baku, Azerbaijan). These Boards did not oppose Soviet rule and even tried to find similarities between Communist ideology and Islamic values, such as equality, freedom of religion, security of honorable work, ownership of land by those who till it and others that were put in practice after the October Revolution.

The Transcaucasus clerical elite was operationally different from other Soviet Muslim elite. Its jurisdiction was mostly over Azerbaijani Muslims in Armenia and Georgia and it was staffed by Azerbaijanis and served Azerbaijanis. Thus, it served as a type of national institution.

Before independence, there were 54 registered "religious cults", including 11 Shia and 2 Sunni mosques as well as 2 mosques shared by both branches. The number of educated clerics was very low and those educated were graduates of the Islamic University in Tashkent or the Mir Arab College in Bukhara (Swietechowski, 2002). In fact, there were no highly educated Islamic scholars who studied in recognized Islamic educational centers abroad.

### Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

The collapse of the Soviet Union accelerated the Islamic revival in Azerbaijan, with identification with Islam by larger sectors of the population compared to the end of the Soviet period. However, in Azerbaijan, Islam was still mainly perceived as an element of national iden-

tity, whereas Islamic values and customs were an integral component of national culture, with overlapping religion and customs (Motika 2001).

During the first decade of transition, according to Motika, 4% to 6% of the population of Azerbaijan could be called "active" believers, which indicated that they obeyed various Islamic norms; 87% to 92% considered themselves Muslims but complied with only (often quite small) part of the religious rules. Only approximately 3% called themselves atheists (Motika 2001, Faradov 2002). Later studies have not revealed significant changes indicating stabilization of religious dynamics and an end to Islamic revival (Yunus 2012, Balci&Goyushev 2012).

Another important factor was that the Religious Board in Baku was heir to a religious administration established during the Tsarist period and thus may have had some historical legitimacy for the population even during Soviet times. Probably even more important, however, is that Azerbaijan's Muslim community is predominantly Shia. In contrast to Sunni Islam, a formal religious hierarchy is not foreign to the historical development of Shia Islam.

Azerbaijan includes various elements of "Islamic Revival" characteristics of other Post-Soviet republics. There have been radical Salafi/Wahhabi movements that came later and could not achieve the progress they had made in Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus. Supported by Iran, other groups were also trying to challenge the existing status quo. However, in contrast to some central Asian states, the vast majority in Azerbaijan supported the idea of a secular state.

As far as the relationship between the government and Islam is concerned, despite adopting some symbols of the religion and defending Islam as a part of national identity, it has not reached a state of Islamic revival and is not ready to welcome any Islam related independent activity. In fact, any type of religious social activism that is not subordinate to, or approved by, the Board is considered "hostile" and "suspicious" by the authorities (Aliyev 2015).

Rising Islamic activism has led to suspicion among government leaders and the general public, who fear the increasing influence of religious leaders and organizations, because there is the possibility that religious groups may act as non-progressive barriers to the country's secular democratic development. Consequently, the potential for religious actors to provide real benefit to civil society is hindered by public misconceptions regarding the motivations of religious activism. Therefore, there is a huge gap between secular and faith-based organizations, secularized and religious people who lack mutual collaboration within the limited opportunities for social activism (Aliyev 2015).

Islamism in Azerbaijan exhibits some geographic differences. Baku and the surrounding regions are more pro-Shia, though Salafis are gaining support in Baku and Sumgait. Salafis are more prevalent in the northern parts of Azerbaijan, where different Sunni Daghestani minorities closely reside. Regions bordering Iran are influenced by the ideas and support of the Iranian model of Islam.

The most serious concern is the spread of religious extremism from abroad, from Dagestan and Iran, but strict police control over the potentially affected areas is supposed to prevent this. On some occasions, this police control has been a concern of human right activists (ICG 2008, p. 20).

The country's legislation emphasizes the secular nature of the state and thus forbids organizations from seeking to promote racial, political, or religious discord. It also goes without saying that national legislation imposes strict government control on foreign religious organizations. Such a strict approach is rooted in the Constitution's Article 18. Given the rising perceived threat of Islamic activism, a new Religion Law was quickly adopted in June 2009, while both the Criminal Code and Administrative Code were amended to introduce new offenses and punishments as well as to require already registered religious organizations to re-register.

Azerbaijan faces immediate threats (whether real or perceived) from various agents that could potentially use Islam as a tool to gain public influence in Azerbaijan (Aliyev 2015). Azerbaijan is geographically close to both Iran and Turkey and has cultural affinity with each, thus making it more "vulnerable" to their cultural and ideological influence and in both, religion is highly significant. This makes Azerbaijan very cautious about Islamic activism and its possible implications.

### **Islamic Activism as a Social Movement**

In this context, Islamic activism as well as religion–state–civil society interactions could be aptly viewed through the lenses of the social movement theory by structuring it into three major dimensions: ideology and contention, resource mobilization, and framing.

These dimensions respectively reflect matters of grievance (issue), resources and frame. Grievance is about "wrongness" perception—something to be addressed, but remaining unaddressed. This is the ideology of social activists and their "repertoire of contention" (Tilly 2002). Resources are about tools of power such as people, organizations, funding, leadership and social capital. Framing represents the way and forms of public communication with the target groups, state and civil society in general.

In terms of ideology and contentions, Islamic activism is quite diverse, ranging from pure post-Islamist

movements such as Gulen to radical Wahhabi jihadists. However, there is a “post-Islamization” trend in the rhetoric and agendas of Islamic activists who want to gain the public acceptance and remain in the mainstream of Islamic activism. A good example is Haji Shahin Hasanli and his “Menevi Dunya” (The World of Morality) organization. Radicals of both Sunni and Shia camps are marginalized more than ever in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The end of Islamic revival, strict government policies, social stereotypes and limited resources resulted in narrowing opportunities for Islamic activism that is too Islamist.

Any social-political activism that is independent from state approval (not to mention Islamist approval) is currently restricted to limited opportunity conditions that complicate resource mobilization and require extra flexibility in terms of operations and fundraising as well as more informal (sometimes even undercover) networks. It is natural that in such conditions many funding of Islamists comes informally from abroad. This makes Islamist movements and their leaders more vulnerable because it is easier for authorities to accuse them of being the agents of foreign interests, illegal activity, fraudulent activities; it also makes it easier for authorities to persecute, if necessary, under relevant criminal charges. This was the case of the Gulenist network in Azerbaijan, which has gone significantly “undercover” since 2014 when a restrictive campaign against it was launched by authorities accompanied by the media (Sultanova 2014).

Even more evident is framing of the “post-Islamization” trend in Azerbaijan. Now, more and more movements, regardless of their sectarian backgrounds, attempt to frame their messages in more societal forms rather than purely Islamist forms, avoiding and not stressing confrontation with the political status quo

and secularism. We can observe such a trend in almost all of the mainstream movements, such as Haji Ilgar Ibrhaimoglu’s ‘Juma Mosque’ Community.

All others (Wahhabis, radical Shia political activists and Nurcu activists) have been fiercely persecuted and neutralized. There have been arrests of the leaders and activists of the pro-Iranian Islamic Party of Azerbaijan since 2011, anti-government religious leaders, such as Taleh Bagirzade, Abgul Suleymanov, or Wahhabi leaders, such as Zokhrab Shikhaliyev, Mubariz Qarayev in 2014–2015, and so on.

### Conclusion

Islamic activism has been on the rise in post-Soviet Azerbaijan as a result of Islamic Revival and social-political developments across the region. This rising activism has been seen as a potential threat by the authorities and secular public alike. There are fears of increasing influence from Islamism and the consequent undermining of secularism. As a result, the government of Azerbaijan tightened legislation and regulation through formal supervisory institutions such as the Committee for Work with Religious Organizations and the Muslim Board of the Caucasus. Independent and / or externally funded faith-based activism has been subject to persecution.

This has significantly narrowed opportunities for Islamic activism in Azerbaijan and has conditioned its development in terms of ideology, resources, mobilization and framing. The existing status quo, unchallenged by any actor other than certain marginalized small groups or terrorists, has shaped ‘post-Islamization’ of the religion–state–civil society discourse as well as the institutional development of Islamic activism in the country.

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Dr. Fuad Aliyev is Adjunct Faculty at ADA University and Khazar University in Azerbaijan. He received his PhD in Economics from Azerbaijan State Economic University in 2011. Dr. Aliyev was a Hubert Humphrey fellow in Public Policy in 2005/2005 at the University of North Carolina / Chapel Hill as well as a Fulbright Scholar at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in 2011/2012.

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## A New Public Role of Religion? Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Georgia

Ketevan Rcheulishvili, Tbilisi

### Abstract:

This essay discusses the discourse on the public role of religion in Georgia after the collapse of the communist regime. Particularly, it examines the Georgian Orthodox Church’s contribution to national identity and new social values and norms. Thus, this essay assesses the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in public opinion building despite the fact that democratic and liberal values to some extent conflict with traditional or/and religious values promoted by the Georgian Orthodox Church.

### Orthodox Christianity in the Context of Social Sciences’ Research

The interdisciplinary study of Orthodox Christianity recently became the subject of systematic research; of particular concern is the public and political role of Orthodox Churches. In this respect, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC)—representing the majority religion in Georgia—is an interesting case. The GOC has traditionally had a significant presence in the public sphere. Thus, since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the GOC has become a major focus of social science research about political developments in Georgia.

To adequately understand both religious change and the complex development of the church–state relationship in Georgia, we should take into account several methodological aspects and conceptual ambiguities already noted in various sociological studies.

First, although most authors have agreed that there is no single European model of church–state relations, some authors insist on a coherent European dimension of modernity, emphasizing the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. However, this dichotomy speaks

little about the details and actual position of a specific religious tradition in any particular country. Post-communist countries should not be seen as a homogenous case that contradicts Europe because there are many aspects presented in both Western and Eastern European church–state dynamics that should be analyzed through a comparative perspective of church–state relations in Europe.

Second, religion is no longer seen as a dependent variable that is negatively affected by modernization but is perceived as an active factor in social development. Pluralism and individualization do not automatically weaken the social position of religion. These changes in the theoretical perspectives of sociological approaches may affect any historical narrative and methodological approach in this field of study.

Third, the trend of revitalization, which was widely acknowledged and discussed in the latest studies of post-communist countries (and beyond them), does not appear to be unidimensional evidence. A distinction should be made between “the revitalization visible in the public appearance and role of religion [...] and

the revitalization, visible in the rise of individual religiosity according to different indicators (like belonging, church participation, belief in God and particularly behavioural consequences of religious believing).” (Zrinščak 2011, 162) The newly acquired public role of religion has not always developed in parallel with the rise of individual religiosity.

To summarize, the most crucial and perhaps trickiest issue in dealing with our issue is how to adequately analyze the changes in church–state relations over the course of socio-political transition, remaining aware of the changing ‘conceptual narratives’ of modernization.

### The Georgian Orthodox Church during the Communist Regime

As Stephen F. Jones remarked in his essay on ‘Soviet Religious Policy and the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church’ (1989), the Georgian religion has always been part of the Soviet Union’s ‘national problem’. The Soviet government has treated religion not only as an ‘erroneous ideology’ but as a political institution with an independent social base. In Georgia, the Church was seen as supporting ethnic separation and thereby serving as a barrier to the integration of the Georgian population into the Soviet Union.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet administration strongly restricted organizational activity of the GOC. A combination of atheist propaganda and terror led to the virtual elimination of practicing believers. Soviet laws economically and judicially weakened the church. However, during the Second World War there was some relaxation of the government’s anti-religious measures. To strengthen morale against the advancing German “Wehrmacht” during the Second World War, Stalin allowed religious communities in Georgia to practice their faith. The GOC, together with other Soviet religious organizations, adopted a patriotic attitude and was rewarded with state recognition of its canonical status. In 1943, its autocephaly was recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church, probably on Stalin’s personal instructions.

Under Khrushchev, there was increasing state interference in church affairs. To avoid growth in church influence after World War II, Khrushchev started an anti-religious campaign reminiscent of the atheistic propaganda of the 1920s and ‘30s. At the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Georgian Communist Party in 1960, the party leader’s First Secretary V. P. Mzhavanadze called for a more intense struggle against ‘survivors of the past’.

In the 1960s and ‘70s, believers began to establish links with nationalist and civil rights movements. Many religious activists became prominent in the growing dissident movement. In Georgia, the link between

civil rights and the rights of Orthodox believers was strong. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Merab Kostava, Viktor Rtskhiladze and other believers provided the core of the Georgian dissident movement in the 1970s. ‘Official’ churches, despite remaining within the narrow framework of religious activity, were not affected by the clampdown on dissent.

Georgian nationalists, whose influence has grown substantially since the demonstrations of November 1988, and particularly since the massacre on April 9, 1989, regarded the church as playing a vital role in the struggle for national self-expression under the communist dictatorship. Official surveys in the 1980s showed that young people, in particular, sympathized with a close association between the GOC, national and ethnic identity.

This episode marked not only a new era of church–state relations but also a turning point in the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the Georgian public.

### Religion and National Identity in the Post-Communist era

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgian Orthodoxy has experienced a massive revival in a politically independent Georgia. However, the first years of the post-communist period brought religious freedom that was extended equally to traditional (national) and minority religions and thereby created a space for new religions to enter the previously closed religious field. “However, traditional churches and conservative parties found it unjustified to grant the same privileges to traditional churches (that had suffered during Communism) and to newly arrived religions, [...] some of which possessed ‘suspicious’ features” (Zrinščak 2011, p. 161). The tendency of the selective collaboration of states with traditional religious institutions, eliding the rights of minority religions seems to note the compatibility of religious values of traditional churches with the (nationalistic) politics of new democracies in Eastern Europe. Thus, the public trust and loyalty towards traditional churches that prevailed in these countries can be explained through common acknowledgement of the importance of traditional religious institutions in surviving national identity and their role in national mobilization of societies.

Liberated by new political freedom, the GOC in independent Georgia successfully incorporated a nationalist ideology in its agenda and became a catalyst in the process of nation-building (Sulkhanishvili 2012). In contrast to the inconsistent post-soviet policy of the young state, the Church provided an alternative and nationalistic ideology. Georgian people perceived the GOC as a single neutral territory, where the real national narratives could be established.

The GOC under Patriarch Ilia II has always taken a patriotic position on most issues. In his sermons, Ilia II has always stressed the church's role as a defender of the Georgian nation and its culture. In his 1980 Christmas Epistle, he declared that 'where the language declines, so the nation falls' and in 1986, the church published a booklet entitled *Glory to the Georgian Language* to celebrate Georgian Language Day (April 14). In 1987, during the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the great Georgian national poet and public figure, Ilia Chavchavadze, the church canonized him and devoted itself to the religious interpretations of his patriotic writings. Georgian sociologists assess this event as a logical continuation of 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism, which re-emerged in the last years of the Soviet Union.

In contrast to Georgian nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was liberal or civic nationalism in the context of a nation building processes, a considerable part of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century moved toward an ethnic nationalism with an anti-western ideology that rejected globalization and liberalism. They expressed their fear of losing traditional ties, which were presumed to be very important for the country.

### Current Developments

Some recent studies continue to analyze the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in both politics and identity formation. Interviews with politicians have revealed that a large portion of the Georgian political elite acknowledge the special role of the Orthodox Church in society and support the reinforcement of its status. Therefore, this tendency inadvertently leads to a stronger role of the Church in the public domain (Sulkhanishvili 2012). In this respect, the public role of the Church is still ambivalent due to the European-style democratic system of the country, which contradicts this type of religious identity and power.

However, other researchers have formulated new fields of research and tried to evaluate the Church's contribution to civil society (CIPDD 2010). This development may be associated with the more general tendency of imbalance between the formal and informal dimensions of democratic consolidation becoming increasingly noticeable within Georgia. Since 1989, Georgia has seen much effort aimed at reforming and refining the formal and institutional side of democracy, such as establishing institutional structures, amending legislation, reforming bureaucracies, and privatizing and developing economies towards free-market systems. Compared with the considerable progress made in these respects, the informal side of democracy, such as the emergence of a proper political culture as well as the generation of legitimacy, establishing civic and community initia-

tives, etc. have received much less attention and appear to remain vulnerable.

An assessment of Georgian civil society indicates that the highest level of citizen engagement is in the frame of the Orthodox Church. Thus, the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the most influential institutions in the country also regarding civil society. It is noteworthy that this form of religious engagement has increased sharply over recent years, from 1.3% to 5.6%. Particularly, it is much higher than civic participation in other spheres, e.g., consumer protection unions, where it stands at 0.1% (WVS 2009; CIPDD 2010, 24).

After independence, the public space and public life were very different from Communist traditions. The Georgian Orthodox Church, having a weak institutional background and capacities and a lack of institutional experience due to the 70 years of religious persecution under the Soviet regime, had difficulties finding its new position within the complex normative discourse in Georgia. Therefore, forms of religious relations, religious conventions, religious practice and other features had to be adjusted to the new established public space. Relations and forms of communication between believers and the Georgian Orthodox clergy were rather informal, flexible and less institutionalized. It is noteworthy that informal relations and informal norms of reciprocity have had more influence in Georgia than the formal rule of law. While the official structures have always been treated with a fair dose of mistrust in Georgia, personal relationships and family often carry more importance than loyalty to the central state.

Nevertheless, the new civic values of participation and active civil society provide an environment where the GOC can operate successfully despite propagating anti-modern norms and values. Giving attention to these processes, public debates and research may overcome the dichotomy between a highly critical view of the GOC and a euphemistic, idealized view.

### Conclusion

Public discussions on the public role of religion still exhibit strong polarization between representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church and most of the intellectuals in the country. The Church's image among these intellectuals is that of an anti-modern institution set against the forces of modernization and Europeanization. Consequently, they strongly criticize the role of the Orthodox Church in public opinion building and claim that religion should be excluded from civil society. The result is polarization of the discourse between anti-church polemics and pro-church dithyrambs.

In light of this, there is a clearly defined necessity for a balanced treatment of these issues in both research and

the broader public debate. A deeper analysis of religious civic participation might be an opportunity for investi-

gations that are neither secularly biased nor apologetic in favor of the Church.

#### *About the Author*

Ketevan Rcheulishvili is currently a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Kassel (Germany) and affiliated with the Russian State University of the Humanities, EU-FP7 Project ISSICEU. Her research interests are the sociology of religion, concepts of social capital, methods of qualitative research and interpretative approaches.

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## Church as Civil Society? Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Armenia

Tigran Matosyan, Yerevan

### **Abstract:**

The Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) has experienced a revival in Armenia after the country's independence from the Soviet Union. In contrast, Armenia's post-Soviet civil society has remained weak. By definition, the church itself is part of civil society: it can represent the interests of people and promote civic participation. This article reflects whether the AAC has utilized her potential in civil society to assist Armenia's democratization. In particular, the article indicates how the AAC's strong ties with the state have so far prevented her from becoming a full-fledged member of civil society. It also identifies those spheres of activity where the AAC has nonetheless contributed to the formation of civil society in Armenia.

### **Church as Civil Society**

A religious institution like a church can contribute to civil society in a number of ways. For one thing, a church can represent. It can make an effort to defend the rights of people in the face of the government and to counterbalance the latter's authority. A church can engage local communities and church-related organizations in various participatory activities, such as volunteering or charity. Church-related communities and organizations can become potential venues for their members to practice democracy. Finally, a church is capable of contributing to civil society through its ideology. It can theologize the concept of civil society and propagate values

such as mutual trust, participation, self-sacrifice, and volunteering, as desirable aspects of religious identity.

A brief review of the social activity and political role of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) during Armenia's move toward independence will show how the AAC has used her potential to contribute to civil society.

### **Revival of the AAC in Armenia**

The AAC was among those institutions in Armenia who undeniably benefited from the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Armenian Church experienced colossal hardships during Communist rule. Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, the properties of the Mother Sea

of Holy Etchmiadzin (the administrative headquarters of the AAC and the Pontifical Residence of the Armenian Catholicos) were confiscated and nationalized, hundreds of churches were closed and turned into storehouses, and numerous clergymen were arrested, exiled, or murdered. The most outrageous act of violence against the Church took place in 1938, when Soviet State Security agents strangled Catholicos Khoren I for his disobedient stance. Assistance of the Armenian Church to the Soviet war effort from 1941–1945, brought about some positive shifts in the attitudes of the Soviet state toward the Church. The latter was allowed to elect Catholicos in 1945. Several churches were returned to Holy Etchmiadzin as well. After the death of Stalin in 1953 and the elevation of Catholicos Vazgen I in 1955, the freedoms of the Armenian Church were expanded; however, in an atmosphere of total anti-religious propaganda and numerous restrictions imposed by the state, the activities of the Armenian Church were mostly incapacitated and her influence became minimal. Therefore, Armenia's independence in 1991 became a watershed for the Church between the decades of communist suppression and the period of a post-Communist revival.

In the years since independence, the AAC has experienced significant institutional development under the leadership of the past Catholicos Vazgen I (1955–1994) and Garegin I (1995–1999), as well as the current Catholicos Garegin II (since 1999). In particular, the state returned the religious buildings appropriated by the Soviet authorities to the Armenian Church. Dozens of monasteries and churches have been built and repaired in Armenia through joint efforts of the AAC, the state, and benefactors. Holy Etchmiadzin also embarked upon raising new religious leaders. Educational institutions of the AAC, including the Gevorgyan Theological Seminary, became engaged in the pursuit of this goal. As a result, the number of clergy has increased by the hundreds over the course of two decades. In 1995, the AAC also co-founded the Faculty of Theology at Yerevan State University with the aim of preparing laity specialists.

The AAC has become an integral part of Armenia's modern identity. In 2013, as many as 94 percent of surveyed population in Armenia claimed fidelity to the AAC. Although levels of religious practice (e.g., church attendance or frequency of praying) are low in Armenia (Charles 2010), Armenians turn to the AAC to sanctify their major life events. For example, wedding ceremonies almost always include a religious ritual at the church. As a relatively recent tendency, churches have become venues for holding public funerals, or priests administer rites for the deceased outside of the church. Baptism of young children in the church has become a widespread practice in Armenia as well.

The AAC also enjoys the highest levels of institutional trust in Armenia. In 2013, as many as 76 percent of surveyed Armenians fully or somewhat trusted the religious institution to which they belonged<sup>1</sup>. The confidence of Armenians in the AAC is comparable only to their confidence in the army (62 percent). Other institutions in Armenia enjoy levels of trust much lower than the AAC. For example, confidence in the Police is almost half; in the President and the NGOs—it is three times lower; in the courts—four times lower; and in Parliament—almost six times lower.

### From Revival to a Concordat?

However, at some point over the course of the AAC's revival, the state and the church started to merge. The first signs of a symbiosis became evident during the presidency of Levon Ter-Petrosyan (1991–1998). For instance, a symbolic tradition—when the Catholicos gives his blessings at the inauguration ceremony of the president, and the latter, swears the oath on both the Constitution and the Holy Bible—was introduced during the first years of the Republic. Another example is that in 1997 the AAC and the Armenian government agreed to involve priests in the army service as spiritual counselors. However, state politics during Levon Ter-Petrosyan's presidency was predominantly secular.

The principle of separation between the state and the church started to blur during the presidencies of Robert Kocharyan (1998–2008) and Serge Sargsyan (since 2008), and since the elevation of Garegin II. As a result of constitutional reforms in 2005, the Armenian Constitution incorporated ambiguous messages about the relations between the state and the church. Along with reinstating the principle of separation of the two, the amended Constitution acknowledged the important role that the AAC has played in the history of Armenians (Article 8.1). Meanwhile, the last paragraph of the same article stated that the relations between the Republic and the Armenian Church “*may be regulated by law*”. This stipulation left a door open for further integration between the two entities.

Two years later, in 2007, Robert Kocharyan signed the “Law on the Relations between the Republic of Armenia and Armenia's Apostolic Holy Church”. The law recognized the AAC as “a national church” (Article 2) and gave it a number of privileges. For example, the AAC became exempt from paying taxes (Article 11). Her branches abroad came under the official protection of the Republic of Armenia (Article 13). The state also

<sup>1</sup> <<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/>>; Armenia is a predominantly monoethnic country where Armenians constitute 98 percent of the population.

granted the Armenian Church widespread opportunities for promoting spiritual knowledge through both public and church institutions of education (Article 8).

The AAC's involvement in the public education of Armenia constitutes perhaps the most conspicuous example of how the symbiosis between the state and the Church has occurred. Currently, the presence of the Armenian Church in public school is evident right from school entrance, where the portrait of the Catholicos hangs on the wall next to that of the President. "The History of the Armenian Church" is a mandatory subject in public schools, with the AAC enjoying the right to partake in the development of the curriculum and textbooks.<sup>2</sup> The Church can also nominate candidates for teaching this subject. At some schools, the Lord's prayer is recited by pupils during the lessons of the Church history, regardless of whether non-believers or representatives of other religions are in attendance. Moreover, Holy Etchmiadzin seems to have exercised influence vis-à-vis the contents of another school subject. In particular, a number of education specialists and historians in Armenia believe that the AAC has succeeded in revising certain events and phenomena in the textbooks of the Armenian history to support her own narrative.

The AAC responded to the granted privileges by lending support to the state authorities in political affairs. Backing the candidate of the country's ruling party during the 2008 presidential election constituted one such unprecedented example. In November 2007, after less than a year of signing the mentioned law on state-church relations, Archbishop Navasard Kchoyan, the Vicar of the Ararat Patriarchal Diocese, attended the Eleventh Congress of Armenia's ruling Republican Party. The Archbishop blessed the Congress and delivered an obviously side-taking political text. Specifically, he alluded to the main opposition candidate and first president of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrosyan by stating that, "The past remains in the past; and there is no returning to it"<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, the high-standing religious leader expressed his—and presumably, the hierarchy's—support for the candidate of the ruling party, Serge Sargsyan, by declaring that a vote of confidence for the Republican Party should have its logical continuation.

The AAC also demonstrated a pro-government position during the run-up to and after the contested February 19 election. In one example, two weeks prior to election day, the Armenian Church took part in turning a religious event—the cross march devoted to the Day

of Remembrance of the Holy Martyrs of Vardanants<sup>4</sup>—into a political campaign of Serge Sargsyan. Specifically, the latter himself took part in the cross march and was praised at the end of the event in a public speech by Navasard Kchoyan. In a video dated at the beginning of March 2008, in which time nine people had died and dozens had been wounded following clashes between law-enforcement and the opposition, challenging the validity of the election results, Garegin II expressed his condolences to the families of the deceased and called for unity and mutual tolerance. However, the Catholicos' abstract interpretation of the reasons leading to the clashes allows for an assumption that he was reproducing the official version of the events; that is, the opposition was preaching hatred and intolerance toward the authorities; people lost their sound judgment and caused disorder, which resulted in regrettable casualties. As could be expected, the Catholicos also congratulated and praised Serge Sargsyan during the ceremony of the presidential inauguration on April 9, 2008.

The AAC hierarchy has also stood by the state authorities by demonstrating indifference to civic activism directed against government policies. Since 2008, an unprecedented number of protest movements have taken place in Armenia. Thematically, the protests have addressed a wide range of issues, such as human rights, social justice, ecology, and preservation of architectural monuments. The forms of the protests have been diverse as well: rallies, marches, sit-in strikes, "occupy" style gatherings, flash mobs, collective petitions, and boycotts. The protest initiative called "Let's save Teghut forest", protests to preserve the Mashtots Park in the center of Yerevan, as well as the fight against the rise in the public transit fare, and against the cumulative pension system, received perhaps the widest public resonance. Notably, the AAC preferred to stay neutral with respect to the issues raised by the protesters. However, the official voice of Holy Etchmiadzin could be of significant assistance to the protesters; her silence has obviously played into the hands of state authorities.

### Still Civil Society

Despite her choice not to join those who have been challenging the government and its policies, the AAC has still acted as civil society in a narrower sense. In particular, Church-related organizations, both formal and informal, have periodically engaged in civic activism over the course of the past two decades. These organi-

2 See Mkrtchyan, Satenik (2014): Where did we come from? Creationism versus Evolution in Armenian Public schools. In A. Agadjanian (ed.), *Armenian Christianity Today. Identity Politics and Popular Practice*. Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate, 57–70.  
3 <<http://www.a1plus.am/21230.html>>

4 The Armenian nobility who died as martyrs defending their Christian faith during the battle of Avarayr in 451 against Sassanid Persia.

zations have provided opportunities for people to volunteer, to provide charity, and to network.

The NGO “Youth Unions of the Armenian Church” exemplifies such faith-based civic activism. Apart from being platforms for altruistic self-expression, the Youth Unions help young people make contacts and exchange information with each other. Taking pilgrimages, celebrating holidays, attending lectures, and holding sports events and art exhibitions, are some of the activities that allow the youth to network with each other and to generate social capital. Members of the AAC-related youth organizations also have considerable opportunities to experience horizontal relationships among one another and to engage in bottom-up decision-making processes. By providing platforms for self-expression, these organizations become rare venues for young people to practice democracy in Armenia.

The “Armenia Round Table” is another faith-based program operating since 1996 on the initiative of the AAC and the World Council of Churches. In partnership with the Armenian Catholic and Armenian Evangelical Churches, as well as local NGOs, the program has implemented numerous charitable, educational, cultural, and community development projects in Armenia.

Finally, using her mechanisms of religious propaganda, the AAC has constantly preached Christian val-

ues of self-sacrifice, charity, mutual trust, etc. to a wider public. By doing so, the Armenian Church has presumably contributed to the formation of an atmosphere conducive to civic activism in Armenia.

### Conclusion

In sum, post-Soviet Armenia has undergone partial de-secularization. Once the dominance of Communist ideology ended, Armenian society made a big leap back to its Christian roots. Armenians started to largely identify themselves with the AAC. The role of the Church in the lives of Armenians has increased significantly. Meanwhile, the Church has experienced considerable institutional growth and earned the trust of the majority of Armenians.

Over the course of the AAC’s revival, the Armenian state assumed patronage over her. The latter reciprocated with a loyalty toward the state. Consequently, the alliance between the two tightened to a degree in which the AAC could not act in a capacity as defender of public interests or challenger of questionable state policies. In this sense, the AAC has not fulfilled her potential as a member of civil society. Nevertheless, the Armenian Church is one of the rare institutions in Armenia that has provided opportunities for people to engage in civic activities such as volunteering and charity.

### *About the Author*

Tigran Matosyan is an independent researcher in Yerevan, affiliated with the Russian State University of the Humanities, EU-FP7 Project ISSICEU. He has focused his research on value transformations, identity issues, and public policy-making in the South Caucasus.

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## CHRONICLE

**31 March – 28 April 2015**

31 March 2015	Georgian government officials snub the state of the nation address delivered by Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili in Parliament
31 March 2015	Azerbaijan expels a Human Rights Watch researcher and bars him from entering the country to attend the trial of two activists
1 April 2015	The Ukrainian Prosecutor-General's Office rejects Georgia's request to extradite former President Mikheil Saakashvili, now serving as adviser in Ukraine, saying the request is politically motivated
2 April 2015	The defense ministers of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey meet in Tbilisi to discuss military cooperation and regional peace and security
6 April 2015	A Council of Elders in Pankisi Gorge in north-east Georgia appeals to the authorities to take measures to prevent the recruitment of youngsters from the region for the fight with the Islamic State in Syria
8 April 2015	Georgian Defense Minister Mindia Janelidze appears at a hearing before lawmakers and says that the military threat from Russia remains high
9 April 2015	In reaction to an ex-convict being suspected of fatally shooting two policemen, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili says that the state will be "merciless" with convicts released from jail who turn criminal again.
10 April 2015	The Vatican says that Pope Francis has met with Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili for discussions on the development of bilateral relations
12 April 2015	Pope Francis calls the massacres of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey during World War I "genocide" during a Sunday mass
14 April 2015	Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan criticizes Pope Francis for calling the mass killings of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey "genocide"
14 April 2015	The foreign ministers of Denmark, Poland and Sweden pledge support to Georgia's European integration process on a joint visit to Tbilisi, less than six weeks before the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga
15 April 2015	The European Parliament passes a resolution using the word "genocide" to refer to the massacres of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey with the Turkish Foreign Ministry saying that the resolution is an attempt to rewrite history
15 April 2015	The Georgian Economy Ministry states that Georgian and Russian civil aviation authorities have agreed to expand direct regular flights between the two countries
16 April 2015	Data released by the Georgian Central Bank show that remittances to the country declined by 22.8% in the first quarter of 2015, including a large fall in money transfers from Russia
17 April 2015	The Georgian Parliament discusses legislative amendments aimed at criminalizing participation in illegal armed groups abroad, including "calls for violent actions"
20 April 2015	Georgian parliament speaker Davit Usupashvili meets with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Groysman to discuss ways to enhance parliamentary cooperation between the two countries
22 April 2015	Turkey recalls its ambassador to Austria after political parties represented in the Austrian parliament issued a joint declaration calling the massacre of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey a "genocide"
23 April 2015	During an official visit to Tbilisi Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko states that Belarus supports Georgia's territorial integrity
24 April 2015	Armenia marks the 100 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War I massacres of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey with French President Francois Hollande and Russian President Vladimir Putin attending the commemoration in Yerevan
24 April 2015	Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Aleksandr Lukashevich says that Russia has a negative view of the Eastern Partnership Summit to be held in Riga in May 2015
25 April 2015	French President Francois Hollande meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Baku to discuss rights abuses in Azerbaijan and the conflict with Armenia over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh
27 April 2015	Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) says that an Iranian soldier, who claimed that he had faced religious discrimination, has defected to Armenia
28 April 2015	The Georgian Minister of Environment and Natural Resources Protection resigns, citing family reasons. A week earlier the Minister for Regional Development and Infrastructure had also resigned

## ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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