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# FACT SHEET

# Pashinyan Targets the Armenian Church

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# Pashinyan Targets the Armenian Church

**Updated: 18 December 2025**


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## I. Update

"Armenia's domestic political life continues to be dominated by the ruling party's confrontation with the Church leadership.[1] In his attempt to dethrone Catholicos Karekin II, Prime Minister Pashinyan has adopted a two-fold approach in recent months. On the one hand, he has sought to create cleavages within the Church by finding loyalists willing either to speak out publicly against the Catholicos or to defy his authority by serving liturgies attended by the prime minister. The second element of this approach is the instrumentalization of law-

[1] Tigran Grigoryan, *State Interference and the Erosion of Religious Freedom and Autonomy in Armenia,* 9 December 2025, in *Democracy Watch*, a joint initiative of CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security, https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/991016/state-interference-and-the-erosion-of-religious-freedom-and-autonomy-in-armenia/

enforcement bodies against Church figures who publicly oppose the prime minister's policies, as well as the direct intervention of security agencies in the internal procedures and functioning of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

"This double-edged strategy was fully on display in the past week. For Pashinyan, one way of undermining the Catholicos's authority has been his attendance at Sunday liturgies in various monasteries and churches, accompanied by officials and loyalists from across the country. During these liturgies, priests are required not to mention Karekin II's name, despite this being mandated by Church canon. The latest such liturgy took place in Gyumri, and ahead of the Prime Minister's visit, special services were reportedly involved. Father Ruben Gasparyan told RFE/RL's Armenian Service that he had been asked to participate in the liturgy attended by Pashinyan and that various actors, including the National Security Service (NSS), urged him not to mention the Catholicos's name–an instruction he refused to follow.[2]

"Pashinyan later confirmed the NSS's involvement, noting that he only attends liturgies where the Catholicos's name is not mentioned."[3]

Pashinyan added a new dimension to his demand that the Catholicos resign. "I do not need a Catholicos who obeys me," he said. "I need a Catholicos who does not obey a senior lieutenant of a foreign intelligence service and who does not report daily to the lieutenants of a foreign intelligence service. I have no such ambitions." He made the remarks in Parliament in response to an opposition MP.

"Ktrich Nersisyan"—the Catholicos's secular name—"must step aside. There is no alternative," Pashinyan continued. "Neither senior nor junior lieutenants, captains, majors, nor even generals of foreign intelligence services will save him."

These developments coincide with public opinion polls indicating a continued erosion of Pashinyan's popularity—estimated at below 20 percent in all surveys—alongside growing public trust in the Church, now estimated at around 70 percent.

On 9 December 2025, eleven civic organizations accused the Armenian authorities of violating religious freedom and illegally persecuting senior clerics in response to Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's efforts to depose Catholicos Karekin II.

In a joint statement, the mostly Western-funded[4] groups declared:

"Today we are witnessing a gross violation of Armenia's constitution, the principle of the rule

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[2] ibid
[3] ibid
[4] Azatutyun (RFE/RL Armenian Service), https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33618509.html

of law, fundamental human rights and freedoms, the independence of the judicial system, as well as the autonomy of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church protected by the constitution and international conventions."

The civic groups—among them the Yerevan Press Club and four human rights watchdogs—strongly condemned NSS pressure on clergy, describing it as an abuse of power. They also characterized as illegal "government attempts to interfere in the formation of the Church's governing bodies and its internal decision-making."

## II. Background: From Reform to Authoritarian Drift

What began as a reformist "Velvet Revolution" in **2018** has evolved into a power-consolidating regime under **Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan**.

Through:

- the **manipulation of the judiciary and legal system**,
- the **misuse of law enforcement and security agencies**, and
- the **systematic targeting** of the Armenian Apostolic Church, independent media, civic voices, and opposition groups,

Pashinyan has steadily eroded institutional independence and pluralism in Armenia.

These actions have collectively weakened the foundations of Armenian democracy, revealing a clear pattern of **democratic backsliding toward authoritarian governance** designed to prolong the ruling *Civil Contract* party's **seven-year dominance**.

The upcoming **parliamentary elections** (no date set but expected no later than **7 June 2026**) will be of decisive importance for Armenia's democratic future and sovereignty.

## III. Legal and Constitutional Violations

Over recent months, the Pashinyan government has escalated its persecution of the Armenian Church and its supporters, including:

- the **detention of three Archbishops** (one already convicted),
- the **arrest of a Bishop and a dozen priests**, and
- the **detention of Armenian billionaire Samvel Karapetyan** for his support of the Church.

These actions violate international principles of **non-interference in religious affairs** and **freedom of religion or belief**.

They also breach **Armenian national law**, specifically:

- **Article 17** of the *Law on the Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Organizations*, which upholds the separation of Church and state and prohibits government interference in the "internal life of the Church and religious organizations."
- **Article 18** of the same law, which states:

"The state does not finance either the activities of religious organizations or the promotion of atheism; at the same time, it grants members and ministers of religious organizations the right to participate in public and political life on an equal basis with other citizens."

## IV. Interference in Church Leadership

Defying Church law and canonical procedure, Pashinyan publicly announced plans to **replace the Catholicos (head) of the Armenian Apostolic Church** "as a follower of the Armenian Church."

He:

- **established his own rules** for the process,
- **appointed himself** to select the first ten members of a "coordination group" to execute it, and
- previously declared that the Armenian state "must have" a decisive say in the election of the head of the Church.

Following these statements:

- **Parliamentary Speaker Alen Simonyan** did not rule out **constitutional amendments** affecting the Church, and
- **Justice Minister Srbuhi Galyan** claimed that the Prime Minister's plans were "consistent with the law."

### Arrests and Escalating Pressure on the Church

In an apparent effort to increase pressure on the head of the Church, a nephew of the Catholicos and his brother, layman Gevorg Nersisyan, were arrested in early November on charges of obstructing a pro-government party's local election campaign in their village. Both men rejected the accusations as politically motivated and were placed in pre-trial detention.

### Disputed Claims About the Church's Origins

In an effort to justify his interference in the affairs of the Church, Nikol Pashinyan stated in early December—incorrectly—that "in the year 301, the Armenian Apostolic Church was established by the state, by decision of the state." This assertion was subsequently echoed by the Minister of Justice. Historical facts, however, attest otherwise.

## Apostolic Foundations of the Armenian Church

The origins of the Armenian Church date back to the Apostolic era. According to ancient tradition, well supported by historical evidence, Christianity was preached in Armenia as early as the second half of the first century by two disciples of Jesus Christ: St. Thaddeus (John 14:22–24) and St. Bartholomew (John 1:43–51).

For the first three centuries, Christianity in Armenia existed as a clandestine faith and endured severe persecution.

In 301 AD, Christianity was officially adopted by the Armenian people as the state religion through the efforts of St. Gregory the Illuminator, the patron saint of the Armenian Church, and King Tiridates III, the reigning monarch of the time.

Shortly thereafter, between 301 and 303, the spiritual and administrative center of the Armenian Church—the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin—was founded in Vagharshapat. Today, the Armenian Apostolic Church stands as an independent Oriental Orthodox Christian Church.

## Alleged Clerical Revolt and Political Pressure

In late November 2025, Prime Minister Pashinyan reportedly coerced or incentivized ten bishops and archbishops to issue a joint statement accusing Catholicos Karekin II of covering up an alleged sex scandal involving another archbishop—an ally of the Catholicos and a vocal critic of Pashinyan. The statement also called on other bishops and laypeople to join them in "cleansing the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin from the sacrilegious clergyman and those who share his sin."

## Allegations of Blackmail and Legal Irregularities

Allegations that the authorities may have blackmailed members of this clerical "revolt" with compromising material stem from press reports concerning several signatories.

One of them, Archbishop Navasard Kchoyan, vicar of the Church's largest Araratian Pontifical Diocese, has long courted controversy due to his extravagant lifestyle and reportedly close ties to Armenia's former ruling elite. In August 2023, he was charged with fraud and money laundering but was not detained; in December—after participating in the revolt—the Anti-

Corruption Court dropped the charges.

Another signatory, Bishop Arakel Karamyan, is widely believed to be the biological father of Argishti Kyaramyan, a close ally of Pashinyan who headed the Investigative Committee until the previous December. A third, Archbishop Vazgen Mirzakhanyan, currently Primate of the Diocese of the Baltic States, has been accused in the media of fathering a son in Tbilisi, where he served as Primate until a decade ago.

## Government Endorsement and Proposed Reforms

Pashinyan publicly "thanked" the clerics for their "principled position," remarking that their declaration demonstrated the existence of clergy within the Church who are "deeply committed to its spiritual mission."

With the emergence of this group of high-ranking clerics openly aligning themselves with the Prime Minister, Pashinyan appeared to recalibrate his approach. In early December, he unveiled what he described as a "roadmap for reforming" the Armenian Apostolic Church, emphasizing the adoption of a new Canon Law as a cornerstone of his proposed reforms.

Referring once again to Catholicos Karekin II by his secular name, Ktrij Nersisyan, Pashinyan stated: "Therefore, it is very important that the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church, immediately after the removal of Ktrij Nersisyan and the election of a locum tenens, proceed with the drafting and adoption of a new Canon Law, in which clear and transparent rules will operate—rules that will be visible not only to the clergy but also to the public. This will clarify the values the Church upholds and the mechanisms for both public and internal oversight," ultimately paving the way for the election of a new Catholicos.

## Call for Protest

On 17 December 2025, the "rebel" group issued a public statement calling for a protest at Holy Etchmiadzin the following day, 18 December, to formally demand the resignation of Catholicos Karekin II. This call aligns with the prime minister's July announcement advocating a "Great Spiritual Gathering" in Etchmiadzin, pledging to personally lead the movement, intended to exert pressure on the Catholicos of All Armenians, Karekin II, to step down from his spiritual leadership.

## Scores Rally for Embattled Head of Armenian Church

Heeding appeals from opposition and public figures, scores of believers rallied in and outside the main cathedral of the Armenian Apostolic Church on Thursday to show support for Catholicos Karekin II, facing growing government pressure to resign.

Rows of riot police separated them from a smaller number of government supporters who also

gathered outside the Echmiadzin cathedral in response to calls from renegade clerics involved in Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's efforts to depose the supreme head of the church. No serious violent incidents were reported during the standoff that lasted for hours.

Journalists at the scene reported that individuals not wearing police uniforms were aggressively attempting to "coordinate" the situation. When asked who those people were, the Chief of Police declined to clarify, saying only that they were not serving in uniform.

More than half an hour after the gathering began, the ten bishops who had convened the event appeared before thousands of faithful assembled near the Mother See. They announced that they had submitted a letter to the secretariat demanding the Catholicos's resignation.

"Our mission at this moment is complete. Next time, we will be here together with you to pray in the Mother Cathedral for the strengthening and enlightenment of our people, our nation, and the clergy," said Archbishop Vazgen Mirzakhanyan, Primate of the Diocese of the Baltic States. His remarks were met with whistling from many in the crowd, while others shouted "Judas."

In his address, Karekin II said that the existing issues must be resolved in accordance with canonical order and urged the clergy involved to return to the canonical framework.

"We are living through alarming days," the Catholicos said. "Instead of strengthening the spirit of reconciliation, tolerance, and unity in society, attacks against our Church continue. Another encroachment against Holy Etchmiadzin took place today, regrettably involving some of our own clergy." He added that the turmoil surrounding the Church would not undermine its mission or its efforts to serve the country and uphold the Church's spiritual mission.

Karekin II received a hero's welcome from supporters as he emerged from his adjacent residence and made his way to the ancient church, which was filled with worshippers. They chanted his name and title throughout the service, countering calls for his resignation from pro-government protesters, many of them ruling party members and supporters.

During the sermon, the Catholicos again denounced what he described as continuing attacks on the Church and did not indicate that he would yield to pressure. He also criticized the dissenting bishops, once more urging them to "return to the canonical field."

As he spoke, several of those bishops briefly appeared outside the church, surrounded by police and plainclothes security officers. After repeating their demands through a megaphone, they quickly left the area.

## V. Desecration and State-Supported Usurpation of Church Property

The Prime Minister is **actively involved** in sacrilegious performances by a **defrocked priest** at **Hovhannavank Monastery** in the Diocese of Aragatsotn, presented falsely as a Holy Liturgy.

The monastery has been **seized** with **direct law enforcement involvement** and **participation of groups in civilian clothes**, while **Public Television** broadcasts the events live.

In response, the **Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin** declared:

"The actions being carried out in Hovhannavank under the pretense of religious ceremonies, with the sponsorship of the authorities, are acts of desecration — devoid of any spiritual value and canonically invalid. Consequently, the church of Hovhannavank must undergo re-consecration. The Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin will pursue all legal means to restore its rights over Hovhannavank, to eliminate the consequences of violations against freedom of conscience, to protect the spiritual and canonical life of the faithful, and to ensure the proper continuation of clerical service."

## VI. Politicizing Religion: The "Prayer Breakfast" Initiative

In **November 2025**, Armenia will host the **inaugural Republic of Armenia Prayer Breakfast** — "initiated and organized by Armenian civil society, with the support and participation of the Hon. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan."

According to the event's website:

"This unique gathering will bring together leaders from politics, diplomacy, business, media, public life and faith, both in Armenia and abroad, [...] The event takes on added significance following the August 8, 2025, historic peace declaration between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Washington, D.C. – a milestone opening new possibilities for stability, cooperation, and regional renewal."

Rather than addressing "the moral and spiritual challenges facing our nation and the world," this event appears to serve as a **political campaign platform** for a self-proclaimed "milestone."

Pashinyan's campaign against the Church—and against any opposition to his **concessions to Azerbaijan and Turkey**—is fundamentally political, often **echoing or being echoed by** Azerbaijani narratives.

However, not everything turned out as planned. On 15 November, Catholicos Karekin II gave an audience to a group of foreign guests at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, who had arrived in Armenia for the Prayer Breakfast initiative. The Catholicos responded to questions from the guests regarding the existing tensions in the relations between the Church and the authorities, as well as anti-church actions, including the unlawful detention of clergymen and unfounded accusations against the faithful of the Church.

## VII. Repression of Opponents and Church Supporters

Pashinyan's actions against critics often "**coincide**" with major diplomatic engagements or concessions to Azerbaijan and Turkey.

### The Arrest of Samvel Karapetyan

- **17 June 2025**: Announcement of Pashinyan's "historic visit" to Turkey on **20 June 2025**, part of "meaningful steps" toward reducing conflict with Azerbaijan.
- Within hours, security services **arrested billionaire Samvel Karapetyan**, who had just condemned[5] Pashinyan's campaign against the Church.

Over **40 people** were detained before Karapetyan's early-morning arrest on **18 June**.
He was charged with **inciting the violent overthrow** of the government and has since been held in **pre-trial detention**.

Karapetyan denied wrongdoing, with his lawyers dismissing the charges:

"Anyone can watch that video and assess whether it constitutes a crime or not."

Opposition groups widely condemned the crackdown as politically motivated and intended to **appease Azerbaijan** while **silencing domestic dissent**.

### Purge within the National Security Service

On the same day, **Armen Abazyan**, Director of the **National Security Service (NSS)**, was dismissed after failing to promptly execute the Prime Minister's order to arrest Karapetyan. Abazyan became the **fifth NSS head** dismissed during Pashinyan's seven-year rule.

## VIII. Crackdown on Opposition During Turkey Visit

On **20 June 2025**, as Pashinyan departed for Turkey, police **detained dozens of opposition activists**—mainly members of the **Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun** and the **"Srbazan Paykar" ("Sacred Struggle")** movement led by **Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan**.

The **Interior Ministry** confirmed the detentions, citing only "operational information about the preparation of actions aimed at disrupting public order."

A ministry spokesman added:

"The police are carrying out enhanced service, within the framework of which preventive and explanatory work is being undertaken. We call for the maintenance of public order. Any illegal

[5] "A small group, forgetting the Armenian history, the thousands of years of history of the Armenian Church, has attacked the Armenian [Apostolic] Church, the Armenian people. I have always stood with the Armenian [Apostolic] Church and the Armenian people. If the politicians do not succeed, then we will intervene in the campaign against the [Armenian Apostolic] Church in our own way."

manifestation will be met with a tough response."

Opposition leaders claimed that by "unleashing repressions," Pashinyan sought to "please Erdogan even more and fulfill his demands," while **neutralizing domestic opposition** to further concessions to Turkey and Azerbaijan.

## IX. "Large and Sinister Plan by the 'Criminal-Oligarchic Clergy'"

Two weeks before Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met **with Ilham Aliyev** on **10 July 2025** in **Abu Dhabi**, Armenian authorities launched a new phase of arrests and public accusations against the Church and its supporters.

These developments unfold amid deepening tensions between **Pashinyan and the Armenian Apostolic Church**, tensions that trace back to:

- Armenia's **military setbacks in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war**,
- subsequent **territorial and political concessions to Azerbaijan**, and
- the Prime Minister's **increasingly hostile rhetoric** toward Church leadership.

## X. Arrest of Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan and the "Coup Plot" Allegations

- On **25 June 2025**, **Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan** was arrested. Authorities allege he **orchestrated a coup plot** aimed at forcibly overthrowing Prime Minister **Nikol Pashinyan's government**.
- The **Investigative Committee** accuses Galstanyan and **14 others** of preparing "terrorist attacks, organizing mass unrest, and seizing power" — allegedly using fireworks, blocking roads, disrupting electricity and internet, and mobilizing **over 1,000 ex-soldiers and police officers**.
- **Armenian courts** placed Galstanyan, **ARF-Dashnaktsutyun Supreme Council member Igor Sargsyan**, **Artsakh Republic interim president Davit Galstyan**, and more than a dozen activists in **two months of pre-trial detention**, following **searches in over 90 locations**.
- On **7 July 2025**, the **Prosecutor General** asked the **National Assembly** for authorization to indict opposition lawmaker **Artur Sargsyan**[6] as a collaborator in the

[6] "Hayastan/Armenia" faction member of the National Assembly, whose immunity was lifted by the parliamentary majority on 8 July following a request by the Prosecutor General.

alleged conspiracy.

## Government's Allegations

According to official statements and the Investigative Committee's report, the alleged plan included:

- **Plotting acts of terrorism:** procuring weapons and explosives; planning bombings and arson.
- **Mobilizing mass unrest:** recruiting former security service members to blockade roads, disable infrastructure, and incite violence.
- **Attempting a coup:** "securing means and tools" to overthrow the government through force.

## Defense Response: "Fabricated and Politically Motivated"

**Archbishop Galstanyan** and his legal team reject all accusations, describing them as **fabricated**, **politically motivated**, and part of a broader **crackdown on dissent** timed ahead of the 2026 parliamentary elections.

They argue the case aims to:

- **Stifle internal dissent**,
- **Neutralize the Church's influence**, and
- **Weaken opposition** to further **Armenian concessions to Turkey and Azerbaijan**.

Defense lawyers have publicly called the allegations "fiction," emphasizing that:

- **No illegal weapons** were found — only **licensed arms** unrelated to any alleged plot.
- The entire case constitutes "**political persecution**" designed to **paralyze the opposition** and **curb the Church's role in public life**.

## Evidence Tampering and Concealment Allegations

On **7 July 2025**, attorney **Hovhannes Khudoyan** issued a detailed public statement accusing authorities of **falsifying and manipulating evidence** in the investigation.

He wrote:

"Here's what the anti-Armenian[7] is doing while planning his vile attack on Etchmiadzin:
It has already been proven that the Investigative Committee falsified the recordings:
a. The idea of executing/shooting the criminals has been taken out of context.
b. The chaos is being orchestrated by law enforcement (see the Prosecutor General's petition).
c. Numerous unpublished materials contradict the edited recordings.
d. Some materials disprove not only the intent but also the possibility of committing criminal acts. However, these were concealed by the Prosecutor General and not included in the motion against Artur Sargsyan."

Khudoyan further alleged:

"To facilitate the falsifications by law enforcement, the accusations are being inflated by propagandists in various sectors. For example, statements are being made in Parliament or on air about buses being set on fire or people being killed — yet such claims are not found in the fake charges nor mentioned by any law enforcement body.
By inflating their imagined terrorist scenario, they try to direct blame toward all opponents: 'If you don't accept our falsification, then you must be a terrorist too.'
The primary target, however, is the Armenian Apostolic Church. Today, the anti-Armenian made that clear as well[8]. I urge law enforcement not to try to defend themselves with these lies — they are far too obvious. Every face involved in the attack on the Catholicosate will be documented and shown to the public."

He concluded:

"P.S. Together with Bishop Bagrat, we have decided to file lawsuits against all slanderers and defamers at all levels. The first ten lawsuits will be submitted to the court in the coming days.
Hovhannes Khudoyan
Lawyer."

## XI. Another Outspoken Archbishop Arrested, Charged, and Convicted

On **27 June 2025**, **Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan**, Primate of the **Shirak Diocese**, **surrendered to the Investigative Committee in Yerevan** after the **National Security Service**

[7] Reference to Nikol Pashinyan
[8] A couple of hours earlier, Nikol Pashinyan had posted this on his Facebook page, referring to Catholicos Karekin II, Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, and Mikayel Ajapahyan in their civilian names: "If Ktrich Nersisyan considers the arrest of Vazgen Galstanyan and Gevorg Ajapahyan to be illegal, then he shares the ideology and plans of those individuals — to stage a military coup, execute people against walls, and create chaos in the country. All the more in this situation, no part of the enlarged Vagharshapat community can be off-limits to law enforcement activity — especially considering that, thanks to Ktrich and several others, those same areas are not off-limits when it comes to acts of debauchery."

**(NSS)** and **Police of the Republic of Armenia** failed to apprehend him at Etchmiadzin. The attempted arrest led to **clashes between police and supporters of the Armenian Church**.

Ajapahyan was accused of making **"public calls for the seizure of power and violent overthrow of the constitutional order."** The charges stem from an **interview given in February 2024** to a local media outlet. In that interview, the Archbishop stated that *what Armenia needs is a coup*, but did not call on anyone to carry it out. At the time, **prosecutors found no criminal wrongdoing** in his remarks.

In **June 2025**, prosecutors suddenly revived the issue, arguing that Ajapahyan had repeated the same statement, thereby justifying the reopening of the case.

Critics contend that the **16-month delay** before launching prosecution further proves the case's **political motivation**, pointing to its timing within **Pashinyan's broader campaign against top clergy**. As one legal commentator noted:

"From a legal standpoint, the same act can't be considered non-criminal in one case and criminal in another. A person cannot now be sentenced to imprisonment for an action that was previously not regarded as a crime."

Following a **swift trial**, on **24 September 2025**, the court **found Archbishop Ajapahyan guilty** of publicly calling for the seizure of power and the overthrow of Armenia's constitutional order. On **3 October 2025**, he was **sentenced to two years' imprisonment**.

In a statement to reporters, **Archbishop Ajapahyan's attorney, Ara Zohrabyan**, denounced the verdict as **"an evident political directive."**

"The accusations against him represent merely an expression of his opinion and cannot be classified as a call to action," he said.

## XII. Armenian Priests Rounded Up in New 'Political Probe'

On **15 October 2025**, **an Armenian bishop and at least 12 priests** were detained in a new criminal investigation that the **Armenian Apostolic Church** described as part of **Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's ongoing campaign** against senior clergy.

### Mass Detentions and Raids

Investigators **raided the headquarters** of **Bishop Mkrtich Proshyan**—a nephew of Catholicos **Karekin II** and primate of the **Aragatsotn Diocese**—along with the **homes of subordinate priests** early that morning before making the arrests.
Opposition leaders **condemned the raids**, citing them as further evidence of state persecution of the Church.

## Criminal Charges and Allegations

On **16 October 2025**, law enforcement authorities **filed charges** against **two of at least 13 detained priests**.
The case allegedly stems from the claims of a **defrocked priest**, who in **September 2025** accused unnamed senior clergymen of **corruption and indecent behavior**, and claimed he had been **forced to attend opposition rallies in 2021**.

These statements—**widely interpreted as supportive of Pashinyan's efforts** to **depose Catholicos Karekin II**—were cited as the basis for the new investigation.

The **Investigative Committee** alleges that **Bishop Proshyan**:

- **Forced subordinates** to attend opposition rallies before the **2021 parliamentary elections**, and
- **Interfered with their "electoral rights."**

Bishop Proshyan **denies all accusations**.
His attorney, **Ara Zohrabyan**, said investigators **failed to present any credible evidence** of coercion, dismissing their claims as legally baseless:

"Even if such a thing was said, it's called [pre-election] campaigning, it's not a crime," Zohrabyan told reporters.

## Additional Indictments

The second arrested cleric, **Father Karekin Arsenyan**, was **charged with "assisting"** Proshyan in the alleged crimes. He **denies any wrongdoing**.

Also indicted was a **layman employed as a diocesan accountant**, accused of **embezzlement**, though **details of the charge were not disclosed**.

## Yet Another Archbishop Arrested

On 4 December 2025, another archbishop of the Armenian Apostolic Church was arrested and indicted amid Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's ongoing efforts to force Catholicos Karekin II to resign. Armenia's Investigative Committee announced that Archbishop Arshak Khachatryan, head of the Mother See Chancellery in Echmiadzin, had been taken into custody and charged with allegedly ordering one of his aides to plant drugs in the backpack of a protester in 2018. The protester had demanded Karekin II's resignation. Khachatryan was remanded to two months of pre-trial detention.

The arrest followed weeks of mounting pressure on the archbishop. In late October, a sexually explicit video purportedly featuring Khachatryan circulated on social media. He dismissed the

footage as fabricated. Speaking at a news conference days before his arrest, Khachatryan claimed that “various officials” from Armenia’s National Security Service (NSS) had attempted to intimidate and blackmail him into taking unspecified “certain actions” in connection with the scandal. He was arrested by the NSS while leaving the Investigative Committee building, where he had been summoned for questioning about the leaked video.

According to Khachatryan’s defense, the arrest was preceded by a series of procedural violations. One of the so-called “rebel” clergymen—whose identity remains unknown—had requested that the Investigative Committee analyze the video. The Committee allegedly produced a “half-page expert report” and provided it directly to the requester, in violation of the law. Khachatryan, who maintains that the video is fake and therefore did not constitute a violation of his right to privacy, never asked the Committee to conduct such an analysis. Neither he nor his lawyer was informed that an expert examination was underway, nor were they given an opportunity to submit questions to the expert. The expert report concluded that the individual in the video was Khachatryan, based solely on perceived similarities in physical features, but offered no opinion on whether the video was authentic or AI-generated.

Having failed to exert pressure on Khachatryan through the video scandal, the authorities, according to his defense, moved to “plan B”: reviving an allegation dating back to 2018 and placing the archbishop in pre-trial detention.

Khachatryan’s lawyer, Arsen Babayan, argued that the questioning regarding the video served merely as a pretext for the arrest. He said there was no legitimate reason for another round of interrogation and described the questions posed as “absurd and meaningless.”

The Investigative Committee stated that the criminal case concerns the illegal sale of narcotics by a group acting in prior agreement in a public place. “We have never heard anything more absurd,” Babayan said during a Facebook Live broadcast. He pointed to a fundamental contradiction between the charges and the alleged conduct. While Khachatryan is accused of arranging for drugs to be planted in a protester’s backpack to discredit the individual, the formal charge refers to the “sale” of narcotics, not to an attempt to frame or defame a demonstrator.

Babayan accused the authorities of pursuing the case for political reasons, arguing that the charges are intended to discredit Khachatryan. He also highlighted the timeline of events. The alleged incident occurred in 2018, when he said, “some people” involved in the investigation raised suspicions that the drugs found in the backpack might have been planted at Khachatryan’s behest. According to Babayan, the most recent investigative action before December took place in July 2025. Then, on 4 December, an investigative group was abruptly formed, criminal proceedings were launched against Khachatryan, and he was immediately arrested.

“This chronology itself is evidence of when the political order was given,” Babayan said. “When the political authorities decided to initiate political persecution against Archbishop Arshak because of his views and his statements.” He situated Khachatryan’s detention within what he described as a broader campaign by the government against the Armenian Apostolic Church.

### Bishop Synod postponed

The Armenian Apostolic Church postponed a publicized Bishop Synod (Episcopal Assembly), originally scheduled for December 10–12, due to the current situation in Armenia, particularly the government’s actions against clergy.

According to a statement from the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, “Considering the current situation in Armenia, especially the ongoing repressions against members of the clergy, including arrests, and responding to the request of bishops, the Catholicos of All Armenians has decided to temporarily postpone the Bishop Synod.”

Earlier, the Church had announced that the Synod would address recent developments surrounding the Armenian Apostolic Church and internal church matters.

According to anonymous sources cited by local media, the Episcopal Assembly was postponed due to pressure from the National Security Service (NSS). Those reports claim that Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II was warned that if the assembly proceeded and decisions were taken regarding the ten “rebel” bishops, this would be followed by developments unfavorable to them; the names of clergy allegedly slated for arrest were even mentioned. The NSS is also said to have threatened to block the entry of clergy arriving from abroad or to prevent them from returning to their dioceses.

According to the same media outlets, the “rebel” bishops were aware of these developments when they circulated a false statement asserting that they regretted the postponement because they had something to say to the assembly and were preparing to “express” their viewpoint—even though they had the same opportunity to do so at the Supreme Spiritual Council meeting, which they chose to boycott.

## XIII. Broader Implications

This latest episode, which began in mid-2025—framed by the government as an anti-terror operation and by Church representatives as a **politically engineered crackdown**—marks a significant escalation mark an unprecedented escalation in the **Pashinyan government’s** confrontation with the **Armenian Apostolic Church**.

These repressions and prosecutions—based on **delayed, disputed, or recycled accusations**—timed to coincide with diplomatic **overtures to Azerbaijan and Turkey**, fit a

broader pattern of **judicial harassment and political intimidation** targeting religious leaders who criticize the government's policies toward **Azerbaijan** and **Turkey**.

The rapid succession of **clerical indictments**, **police raids**, and **media attacks** underscores a growing effort to:

- **Criminalize dissenting clergy** and **targeting of religious institutions** as part of broader authoritarian consolidation,
- **Weaken the Church's institutional independence**, and
- **Suppress alternative moral or political authority** in Armenian society.

The Pashinyan government's actions—spanning from interference in Church affairs to political repression—represent a **systematic assault on Armenia's democratic and spiritual foundations**, weaponizing the security services, eroding the rule of law, and politicizing justice.

These developments mark a pivotal moment for **Armenia's sovereignty**, its **constitutional order**, and the **freedom of religion and conscience** guaranteed under both **domestic and international law**.

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For more info, see: *Armenia’s Authoritarian Turn: Nikol Pashinyan and the Persecution of Samvel Karapetyan and the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church*, authored by Robert Amsterdam, founder and managing partner of Amsterdam & Partners LLP.

For a legal analysis, see: *When the State Hunts a Church: Armenia’s Steady Break with the Rule of Law*, by Dr. Kevork Hagopjian, Esq.

See also: *Armenia: Democracy Watch*, A joint initiative by CivilNet and the Regional Center for Democracy and Security

See also: *INJUSTICE IN ARMENIA — Mass political persecutions of 2025: PART A (May–September), prepared by the Armenian Center for Political Rights*

See also: *Pashinyan’s Assault on the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF-Dashnaktsutyun)*, 26 October 2026