

Armenia's state is now the greatest threat to its own official Christian church

by David A. Grigorian, opinion contributor - 01/12/26 1:30 PM ET



Grigor Yepremyan/PAN Photo via AP
Armenian Apostolic Church leader Catholicos Karekin II in 2021.

This Christmas, the world's oldest Christian church was under attack. The church in Armenia — a small country in the Caucasus and the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion in A.D. 301 — has been the object of a brutal campaign unleashed by the country's authoritarian ruler, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

Recently, a striking headline — “In God's name, what is going on in Armenia?” — dominated page nine of the Financial Times as part of a full-page advertisement accusing the country's government of Christian persecution. It is an extraordinary accusation in a country where more than 90 percent are followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The country's constitution gives the church a formal role in the preservation of its national identity, although the official separation of state and religion allows it to function independently.

In short, the country's oldest and most respected institution, which has sustained the identity of this small country for centuries while it has fallen under the rule of Romans, Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols, Turks and Russians now finds itself on a collision course with its country's own government.

Pashinyan — a college dropout turned yellow journalist, whose sudden ascent to power in 2018 is widely attributed to Russia — makes no secret of the fact that he wants to overthrow the church's spiritual leader, the Catholicos Karekin II. His elaborate campaign of pushing out the church leadership has involved the arrest of three archbishops, a bishop, several clergy and supporters. The aim is to divert attention of the country away from its existential problems.

People from across Armenia are deeply dissatisfied with Pashinyan's leadership and believe that the nation is drifting in the wrong direction. Nearly three-quarters of citizens now struggle

with poverty and Pashinyan's approval rating was measured in the single digits last summer — one of the lowest ratings of any head of government in the world.

A significant factor in dissatisfaction with his governance is the sense that Pashinyan has been unwilling or unable to safeguard Armenia's national security and sovereignty during a period of exceptional geopolitical vulnerability. Armenia now confronts the coordinated pressure of Russia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan — three powers whose cooperation threatens the country's existence.

Armenia's loss of Nagorno-Karabakh (or Artsakh in Armenian), its main strategic defense buffer, in 2020 and the subsequent exodus of its 120,000 Armenian population in 2023 remains a national trauma. Pashinyan has attempted simultaneously to deny responsibility and deflect blame, while many view the church's firm stance on this tragedy as a principal catalyst for his feud with the clergy. The church has vigorously defended the rights of the refugees and highlighted Pashinyan's culpability for this national humiliation.

Despite his highly unpopular attack on the Armenian Apostolic Church and his low approval rating, Pashinyan is laying the groundwork for an attempt to stay in power for another five years. Citing widespread abuse of administrative resources and government crackdowns on its critics, Transparency International's Anti-Corruption Center stated in a recent report that these problems are calling into question the freedom and fairness of this year's Armenian parliamentary elections.

In a recent interview, one of Armenia's most prominent human rights advocates warned of escalating repression by the regime ahead of the June 2026 elections. As a measure of control over the judiciary by Pashinyan, she mentioned the publication, one day prior to the court's decision, of a court verdict extending the pre-trial detention of church benefactor and leading businessman Samvel Karapetyan, on a website owned by the Pashinyan family.

Ironically, with their blind and unconditional support of Pashinyan's anti-Christian and defeatist policies on Artsakh and his corruption record, EU member states are pushing the people of Armenia closer to Russia. By crushing dissent inside the country and cozying up to Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping, Pashinyan has shown time and time again that he is not a reliable partner for the West.

His visit to China, with which he recently signed a strategic partnership agreement, is a testament to that, coming only days after the historic Aug. 8 peace deal he had pre-signed in the White House. The Trump administration should not fall for Pashinyan's continuous flip-flopping.

This would be a good time for the Trump administration to extend a helping hand to Armenia and Armenian Americans, most of whom remain faithful followers of Christian values and the Armenian church. A strong U.S. statement denouncing Pashinyan's actions against the Armenian Apostolic Church would go a long way in helping the people of Armenia remove him from power and force new elections.

Conversely, allowing Pashinyan to keep attacking the church and dividing his country risks jeopardizing the deal that the Trump administration worked so hard to seal. It might even backfire during midterm elections in November 2026.

Dr. David A. Grigorian is a research fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, a non-resident fellow at the Center for Global Development, and a 22-year veteran of the International Monetary Fund.

1

¹ This material is distributed by Sovereign Global Solutions on behalf of National Democratic Alliance of Armenia. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

"Of course, we welcome the confiscation of illegally acquired property of former officials, but there must also be a similar attitude towards current officials," he said.

Pashinian also vowed to separate business from politics when he swept to power during the 2018 "velvet revolution." He has failed to honor that pledge, according to the ACC.

The Western-funded watchdog warned that the "intertwining of business and politics," coupled with "widespread and unpunished abuses of administrative resources" and "selective enforcement of the law against political opponents," is putting at risk "the legality of the elections" due in June 2026.¹

¹ This material is distributed by Sovereign Global Solutions on behalf of National Democratic Alliance of Armenia. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.