

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

Archbishop Mesrob Mutafyan Elected 84th Patriarch of Turkey

By HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

After months of state interference, the Governor of Istanbul—having received the required approval of Turkey's Council of Ministers—permitted the 80,000-strong Armenian community of Turkey to proceed with the election of a successor to Patriarch Karekin II who had passed away six months ago, in March.

On October 14, the General Assembly of the Armenian Church Community—made up of 10 clergymen and 79 lay delegates representing 15,811 church members from Istanbul, Kayseri, Diyarbakir, Iskenderun, Kirikhan and Vakifkoy—elected Archbishop Mesrob Mutafyan, 42, as the 84th Patriarch of Istanbul and All of Turkey. The other candidate, Archbishop Shahan Sivajian, 72, whose candidacy was supported by Turkish authorities, received 15 votes.

The center of the largest Christian community in Turkey, the Patriarchate of Istanbul is one of the four Hierarchical Sees of the Armenian Apostolic Church (the other three are the Catholicosates of Ejmiatsin and Cilicia, and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem). The Istanbul Patriarchate was established in 1461 by Sultan Mehmet II, the Conqueror of Constantinople. While historically known as the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople—and still so-called in Armenian—the reference to the ancient capital of Byzantium is a taboo in Turkey. In early May, Turkish television accused Archbishop Mutafyan of committing "a crime" by placing at the funeral of the late Patriarch a wreath with the Armenian inscription, Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Despite such occasional media attacks, Archbishop Mutafyan enjoys the support of the local diplomatic corps and high-ranking religious and foreign leaders. Among the first dignitaries who paid courtesy visits to Patriarch Mutafyan were Bartholomew II, Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church; David Asseo, the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Community in Turkey; Ivo Hlavacek, the Dean of the Consular Corps and Consul General of Slovakia in Istanbul; Mark Parris, US Ambassador in Ankara, and Carolyn Huggins, US Consul General in Istanbul. The Patriarch also received congratulatory messages from the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and other religious leaders.

Born in Istanbul in 1956, Archbishop



Mesrob Mutafyan, upon completing his elementary education at the local Yessayan Armenian school, attended the Stuttgart American High School in Germany. He received his undergraduate degree from the University of Memphis, Tennessee, in Sociology. He continued his graduate work in Old Testament Studies and Archeology at the Hebrew University and the American Biblical Institute in Jerusalem.

In addition to his pastoral and administrative responsibilities, Mutafyan is also the editor of the Patriarchate's academically-oriented journal *Shoghagat*.

Among the challenges facing the new Patriarch are the lack of adequately trained teachers for the two dozen Armenian schools, and a sufficient number of priests to staff Istanbul's 33 churches. "Our top priority will be to train priests and nuns," said Mutafyan.

Mutafyan's election opens a new era in the life of the Armenian community. His youth, charisma, administrative and pastoral leadership are assets that the community needs at this juncture in its centuries-old history.

Mutafyan has already been criticized by the media in Armenia and the Diaspora for some statements and activities. His first Patriarchal directive was a communiqué to the Armenian community on the occasion of the

75th anniversary of the Turkish Republic, stating, "The Armenian community of Turkey, being one of the indivisible parts of this fatherland, greets the auspicious milestone of the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the Turkish Republic with joy." Special prayer services were conducted in the churches and at the Patriarchal Cathedral, and cultural programs were staged throughout the community.

Most recently, in another political gesture, Mutafyan called upon Pope John Paul II to intervene in the bitter conflict between Turkey and Italy over the extradition of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan. "It is my hope," said Mutafyan in his letter, "that Your Holiness will contribute to the traditional, stable and peaceful relations that exist between the peoples of Turkey and Italy during the present impasse." Meanwhile, the Vatican insisted Italy should not be left alone to deal with the Kurdish question. "Europe and the international community must help resolve this, essentially European, problem," said Vatican official Cardinal Achille Silvestrini.

Earlier this year, Mutafyan had made headlines in June for commenting on the French National Assembly's affirmation of the Armenian Genocide. "The Armenian community in Turkey finds itself between two fires," Mutafyan told Reuters. "The state of Armenia, the Armenian Diaspora and the Turkish government, all three have different views and opinions... When these three shoot at each other, we are right in the middle," he said.

No one envies Mutafyan's position. The Armenian community and leadership in Turkey have to constantly juggle their national and state loyalties. "Every Armenian in Turkey grows up with three elements in his personality: being a Turkish citizen, his heritage as an Armenian, and his faith as a Christian in a country which is overwhelmingly—99 percent—Moslem." Mutafyan had said in the same interview.

Leading an extremely vulnerable community (see next story) requires understanding, diplomacy, patience and wise judgment. Surely, Mutafyan does not satisfy everyone—Armenia, Diaspora or Turkey—but he has said clearly that his responsibility is to place the interests of his flock and community above all other considerations. ■