

# Istanbul's Patriarch Kazanjian's Death Reawakens Old Issues of Church Rights



**T**he spiritual leader of the estimated 60 thousand Armenians in Turkey, Patriarch Karekin Kazanjian, died on March 10; a final vote on his successor is expected in late May. Kazanjian was the 83rd leader of the Armenian Patriarchate established by Sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror of Constantinople in 1461.

Born in Istanbul in 1927, Kazanjian was elected Patriarch of Turkey in September 1990. In the early 1940s, he studied at the Armenian Seminary in Jerusalem, where he was ordained a celibate priest in 1950. In 1951, he was appointed Dean of the Holy Cross Seminary of the Istanbul Patriarchate.

In 1953, he was invited to serve in the United States by the Diocese of the Armenian Church and was appointed pastor of St. Mary's Armenian Church in Washington, D.C.

In 1966, he was consecrated a bishop by Catholicos Vazken I of All Armenians and was appointed Patriarchal Legate to the Far East. Later, he was elected Primate of the Armenian Diocese of Australia. In 1980, he returned to Jerusalem and served as the Grand Sacristan until his election as Patriarch of Turkey.

Kazanjian is credited for administering the affairs of the Patriarchate in Istanbul under the very difficult circumstances created by the Turkish state and Islamic fundamentalism.

As Patriarch, he had the difficult task of negotiating with the Turkish authorities over the church's rights while at the same time having to seek protection from them against attacks on the church by Islamic extremists. The government maintains strict

restrictions on the church's activities, as it does on all Christian churches. It closed the Holy Cross Armenian Seminary in 1971 and continues to refuse permission for the rebuilding of church structures.

In 1995, Turkey forbade lay delegates from participating in elections for a new Catholicos in Armenia. Last December, the government ordered the Patriarchate to disband its council of lay advisors.

Meanwhile, Islamic extremists have attacked the Patriarchate and a number of churches in the past few years, making the church dependent on the government for protection. Such a predicament called for firmness and diplomacy.

A source in Istanbul said, "He was able to develop working relations with the Turkish government and defend, as much as possible, the rights of the Armenian community in Turkey. He was well liked and respected by the community."

The Chancellery of the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul said the process of electing a successor is to conclude with a final vote on May 20th, pending the approval of the Office of the Governor of Istanbul.

Turkish law mandates Kazanjian's successor be a Turkish citizen, preferably one who has completed Turkish military service; this limits the list of eligible candidates to only three. The most-favored candidate is the energetic, Western-educated Archbishop Mesrob Mutafyan.

By Hratch Tchilingirian