

**Demarches of N. Pashinyan and A. Pashazade
against the Armenian Apostolic Church
Expert's comment, June 22, 2025¹**

Eduard.B. Atanesyan

The sequence of events indicates that the campaign unleashed by the political authorities of Armenia against Holy Etchmiadzin may not be associated with the reasons declared by Nikol Pashinyan, who purportedly initiated the campaign to “purify” the Church from unholy ministers and “*return it to its people*”.

It is difficult not to notice the chronological connection between the initiative of the Prime Minister of Armenia and the attempts of the Armenian Apostolic Church to take upon itself, to the extent possible, the functions of protecting the rights of the Artsakh Armenians, preserving the Armenian historical and civilizational heritage of Artsakh and preventing Baku’s ambitious plans for the so-called “*Western Azerbaijan*”. Apparently, N. Pashinyan saw in such activation of the Church a threat to his own power and the strategic trajectory aimed at normalizing relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey. The Church, in the opinion of the ruling team, thereby went beyond the bounds of apoliticality, and since the RA is a secular state according to its Constitution and structure, the authorities intended to carry out a counter-move in retaliation for the taboo “foreign policy” activation of Holy Etchmiadzin, initiating a de facto lustration of spiritual hierarchs and a reorganization of the canons of the election of the Supreme Patriarch of the Armenian Church.

Listing the reasons that prompted him to take this step, N. Pashinyan does not reveal to the public the whole picture of his true motives and, mainly, resorts to arguments of a spiritual, ethical and moral nature. Most of all, he avoids admitting that Holy Etchmiadzin, with its actions, is damaging the “*peace process*” with Azerbaijan, keeping the “Artsakh issue” agenda open at the international level and requiring political assessments and further legal decisions. Meanwhile, the chronological sequence of a number of events sheds light on the political causes of the crisis in relations between the government and the Church in Armenia.

At the end of May 2025, an international conference of the World Council of Churches (WCC) was launched in Bern, Switzerland, on the initiative of Holy Etchmiadzin, under the title “*Freedom of Religion: Preservation of Armenian Religious, Cultural, and Historical Heritage in Artsakh/ Nagorno Karabakh*”. In his inaugural address, His Holiness Garegin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians sharply criticized Azerbaijan for unleashing, with the support of Turkey, the war and ethnic cleansing in Artsakh, the illegal trials of the leaders of the second Armenian state held hostage, and for the destruction and appropriation of the Armenian spiritual and cultural-historical heritage of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Catholicos’s messages were unambiguous: the Artsakh issue cannot be canceled, and the international community is obliged to develop a fair approach and mechanisms to ensure the rights and a dignified life in their homeland for the Artsakh Armenians who were forcibly expelled from it.

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 16.06.2025.

The Bern Conference emerged as a significant event not only within the context of the activities of Christian churches, but also had a political resonance, which, in fact, was what the AAC was counting on. Of course, Azerbaijan could not help but know about the preparations for its holding and the range of issues to be discussed by the participants of this event. Therefore, it is safe to assume that a meeting of the Council of Kazis of the Caucasus Muslims Administration (CMA) was deliberately organized in Baku exactly a week before the opening of the event of Christian churches in Switzerland in order to cast a shadow on the successful work of Holy Etchmiadzin to consolidate the Karabakh issue on the international agenda. Let us recall that at the aforementioned meeting, held on May 22, 2025, the head of the CMA, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, declared the Armenian Church to be a structure that poses a threat to the entire region, inciting hatred, extremism and revanchism among its flock. Also during the Council of Kazis meeting, it was announced about the resumption of the activities by “*Irevan Kazi*” and someone named Bakhtiyar Najafov was elected as its head.

Meanwhile, two days prior to the commencement of the conference in Bern, Prime Minister N. Pashinyan, in turn, launched a campaign against the AAC, making a resonant statement about “*cluttering of churches*”. It is noteworthy that he did not react in any way to the essentially extremist statements of A. Pashazade, especially since the Sheikh-ul-Islam’s statements did not refer to the supreme hierarchs of the AAC, but to the Armenian religious institution as a whole, to the Armenian Church as such, of which the Armenian Prime Minister considers himself an adherent, and for the preservation of the sanctity of which he allegedly intends to wage his struggle.

Following this, on June 6, 2025, the head of the CMA made another statement to the media, noting that he expressed his unwillingness to engage in a meeting with the head of the Armenian Church due to the fact that Garegin II “*went into politics*” allegedly unbecoming of the status and true obligations of a spiritual pastor. These words sounded in unison with the already widespread campaign in the pro-government Armenian media, accusing Holy Etchmiadzin of politicization and interference in state affairs.

Another notable event that coincided with the crisis in relations between the authorities and the AAC in Armenia and the intensification of anti-Armenian rhetoric by the CMA was the publication of a document by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) on the situation with religious freedoms in Azerbaijan. Based on the fact-finding process that began in February of this year, the Commission stated that Azerbaijan had committed war crimes and religious persecution against the Armenians of Artsakh and is currently attempting to “*erase the historical presence of Armenia in Karabakh*”. USCIRF called on the U.S. government to impose sanctions against Azerbaijani government entities involved in serious violations of religious freedom. According to the Commission Chairperson Vicki Hartzler, the U.S. government must use its sanctions mechanism until Azerbaijan implements the necessary reforms and holds accountable those who arrest and torture people for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of religion. It is indicative that for the first time, the Commission members called on the U.S. government to focus primarily on Armenians, despite the fact that the rights of Muslims in Azerbaijan are also violated. Commission member Muhammad Elsanusi put forward a proposal to

develop mechanisms to ensure that Armenians expelled from Nagorno-Karabakh can make pilgrimages to their shrines and cemeteries in their homeland.

Consequently, the USCIRF conclusion and its recommendations to the U.S. government directly resonate with the agenda of the church conference in Switzerland and the theses of the Catholicos of All Armenians, voiced by him in his inaugural address. They also correspond exactly to numerous reports of international human rights organizations, and, in particular “*Freedom House*”, in whose most recent report dated November 11, 2024, Azerbaijan is accused of violating the conventional rights and freedom of religion of the Armenian population of Artsakh.

Naturally, this state of affairs does not suit Baku, which sees in the aforementioned events a connection and a tendency to keep the Karabakh issue open on the international agenda. The “Karabakh case” is not closed, and this reality, as they think in Azerbaijan, could not have taken place without strong impulses transmitted from Armenia itself. The RA government and N. Pashinyan are definitely not transmitters of such initiatives, and the political opposition, despite the motivation, does not have the necessary resources to initiate such processes. The only institution that has the ability to influence the international and, in particular, Western conjuncture in the context of the Karabakh issue is the Church, which has largely taken on the coordination of the work of the Armenian diaspora structures and lobbying organizations to actualize the problems of the Artsakh Armenians and their rights in the international arena.

The West, for its part, may have its own motives for supporting the Karabakh agenda, in addition to the actual voiced intentions of establishing justice for 150,000 Armenians who were forcibly expelled from their land and deprived of their spiritual and historical shrines. Among other things, the “Karabakh card” may be valuable for Western centers of power in the context of demonstrating leverage over the Aliyev regime if it begins to show signs of moving away from the corresponding geopolitical vector. If the Armenian Church steps aside from the role of the main institutional stakeholder in keeping the Karabakh issue open, then the West itself will not be able to use the Karabakh card more effectively in its geopolitical game with I. Aliyev. Baku understands this well, and with a high degree of probability, in the context of signing the so-called “*peace treaty*”, they set a condition for N. Pashinyan, along with the refusal to continue the activities of the OSCE Minsk Group, to also take measures to neutralize the initiatives of the AAC on the Karabakh agenda on the international arena. In a broad sense, the Aliyev regime sees in Holy Etchmiadzin and Antelias as a potential to lead Armenia away from the “*peace vector*” oriented toward fulfilling Baku’s maximalist demands.

From this point of view, we can talk about the coincidence of interests of I. Aliyev and N. Pashinyan, since the concluded “*peace*” will solve the problem of satisfying all its ambitions with respect to Armenia for Baku, and for N. Pashinyan it will become the main resource for maintaining his power and legitimacy. In this regard, the presence of the AAC’s own position on the terms of the proposed “*peace*”, diametrically opposed to the point of view of official Yerevan, will make the signing of the agreement difficult to implement. Azerbaijan will only be prepared for this “*peace*” under the condition of consensus between the Armenian political authorities and the Church, or under the condition of removing

“*incapable*” hierarchs from the church system and establishing actual control of the ruling political force in Armenia over the Mother See of Etchmiadzin. Apparently, N. Pashinyan opted for the latter option, since, as the years of his rule have demonstrated, he has not managed to come to a consensus with the AAC on any of the fundamental issues and, moreover, is unlikely to do so on the issue of the fate of the Artsakh Diocese.

The facts suggest that Azerbaijan is not capable of independently, and even in cooperation with Turkey and the Jewish lobby, successfully fighting the AAC on the international arena. In the Islamic world, historically familiar with the Armenian presence, especially in places where the AAC and the communities living under its shadow have had a centuries-old presence, Baku’s anti-Armenian rhetoric and actions cause misunderstanding and often condemnation. Moreover, the attempts of the CMA headed by A. Pashazade to take on the predominant role in undermining the positions of the Armenian Church in Muslim nations by distorting the interpretation of the reasons for the emergence of the Karabakh conflict (the CMA promoted the alleged “*the anti-Islamic essence of the Karabakh movement*”) were not taken seriously and ultimately proved unsuccessful. For their part, the state institutions of Azerbaijan are also unable to neutralize the traditional influence of the Armenian Church in the Christian West even with the help of widely practiced methods of “*financial incentives*”. In the matter of the “*dispute*” over the spiritual and civilizational heritage of the Artsakh Diocese, Baku is even more unable to oppose it with anything other than weak and untenable initiatives from an ideological and scientific point of view, such as the revival of the so-called “*Albanian-Udi Church*”. As another illustrative example, we can note the pseudo-scientific conference in the Vatican on the topic of “*belonging*” of the Artsakh religious shrines to the heritage of Caucasian Albania, the negative resonance of which, thanks to the AAC, outweighed the political dividends from the original plan for Baku. The Armenian Church is an authoritative and long-established institution, and the success of the Azerbaijani method of action against it is highly questionable.

On the other hand, N. Pashinyan’s low political resource also does not allow him to hope for an independent resolution to the conflict in his favor that would overcome the Church factor on the way to concluding the “*peace*” pushed by Baku. And, nevertheless, the actions of the political authorities of the Republic of Armenia, synchronized with the discrediting campaign launched by the CMA with the support of official Baku, increase the pressure on the AAC and expand the fronts of its forced defense. Moreover, so far we are seeing the visible part of the “*united*” anti-church campaign, and it is possible that at a certain stage new signs of “*coincidence*” of the strategies of the political authorities in Yerevan and Baku will appear.

I would like to believe that N. Pashinyan’s accentuated *demarche* is at least an autonomous phenomenon, not directly connected to the actions and statements of the Azerbaijani clergy’s similar emphasis and timing. However, in practice, this is no longer of significant importance, since the interests of these parties are conceptually close, and therefore the presence of mutual interest is difficult to exclude.