News

Armenia's National Security officers arrest Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan of the Armenian Ap

Armenia's National Security officers arrest Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Yerevan, Armenia, June 25. Galstanyan is charged with attempting to overthrow the government and destabilizing the state. (OSV News/Reuters/Melik Baghdasaryan)

Gina Christian

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A struggle between church and government continues to deepen in Armenia, with one bishop in custody and crowds preventing a second bishop sought by authorities from being detained.

On June 25, Armenia's security forces arrested Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the dominant faith community of the Caucasus nation and part of the ancient Eastern Orthodox family of churches.

The country's investigative committee accused the archbishop and 13 others of plotting to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan through attacks on power supplies and transportation, charges the archbishop's legal counsel, Sergei Harutyunyan, has denied.

Galstanyan leads the Sacred Struggle opposition movement, which has seen tens of thousands protest territorial concessions by Pashinyan to Azerbaijan, among other issues.

On June 27, crowds blocked authorities from entering the official residence of the Armenian Catholicos, or church head, in Echmiadzin, where Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan — who leads the Diocese of Gyumri and Shirak — was located.

Ajapahyan was accused of calling for the government's ouster in February 2024, according to the cleric's attorney, Ara Zohrabyan.

The archbishop was quoted by The Associated Press as saying, "I have never hidden and I am not going to hide now. I say that what is happening now is lawlessness. I have never been and am not a threat to this country, the main threat is in the government."

Authorities withdrew, while calling on the crowds not to escalate the situation and urging Ajapahyan to surrender.

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On June 8, Pashinyan — who came to power in 2018 — also demanded the resignation of Catholicos Karekin II, accusing him of violating his vow of celibacy by fathering a child. In a subsequent statement, the Armenian Apostolic Church said Pashinyan was eroding the nation's "spiritual unity," although the church did not comment on the prime minister's accusation against the Catholicos.

Russian-Armenian billionaire Samvel Karapetyan was detained June 18, following his release of a social media video in which he said the church was under attack by the government. Pashinyan has moved to nationalize Karapetyan's energy company.

Armenia was the first nation to officially adopt Christianity, doing so in 301, having been evangelized by the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew between 40 and 60 A.D.

Both Christian Armenians and Turkic Azeris lived for centuries in the Nagorno-Karabakh region — an ethnic Armenian exclave known in Armenian as Artsakh — which became part of the Russian empire during the 19th century. After World War I,

the region became an autonomous part of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan.

Both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union, with the exclave quickly becoming the focus of several struggles between Armenia and Azerbaijan for control of the region.

In 2023, Bishop Mikael Mouradian of the California-based Armenian Catholic Eparchy of Our Lady of Nareg told OSV News that Azerbaijan's aid blockade to Nagorno-Karabakh revived the specter of the 1915-1916 Armenian genocide, when up to 1.2 million Armenians were slaughtered and starved under the Ottoman Empire. The atrocities were the basis for lawyer Raphael Lemkin's development of the term "genocide."