

Mesrob II: Diaspora deaf to Turkish Armenians (1)

Monday 24 September 2007, by [Yonca Poyraz Dogan](#)

“The ‘Armenian genocide resolution’ pending in the US Congress disrupts both the relations between Turkish people and Armenians in Turkey and between Turkey and Armenia,” said Patriarch Mesrob II (Mutafyan), the spiritual leader of Turkey’s Armenian Orthodox community.

“We had big problems in the past. I especially find the approach of the İttihat Terakki’s (the Committee of Union and Progress) collective punishment of Armenians quite wrong. It wasn’t the whole Armenian community who took up arms against the government, but I believe the Turkish Republic should not be accused of what happened then. The diaspora would say that it should be accused as long as there is a denial of what happened,” Mesrob II said.

Armenians claim up to 1.5 million of their kinsmen died in a genocide campaign by Ottoman Turks around the time of World War I, but Ankara rejects the charge, saying both Armenians and Turks died in civil strife when the Armenians took up arms for independence in eastern Anatolia, siding with Russian troops that were invading the crumbling Ottoman Empire.

There is currently a non-binding “Armenian genocide resolution” pending at the US Congress. “We are the ones here living with our Turkish friends everyday. The resolution’s passage would have a cooling effect on our relations,” Mesrob II said, adding that the diaspora doesn’t care about Turkish Armenians’ sensitivities and that “it’s a political issue for them.”

Turkish Armenians are the biggest Christian community in Turkey with approximately 70,000 people living in Anatolia. Mesrob II said that since they lack schools of theology, the number of clerics is only 26 and bringing religious services to the community is tough.

For Monday Talk, **Mesrob II** told Today’s Zaman that the Armenian community hasn’t been represented in the Turkish Parliament, even though some of them have been interested in politics. The community’s attitude toward the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) is generally positive, and the main reason behind this is the “aggressive attitude” of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), especially regarding the law of foundations.

As the Turkish-Armenian religious leader, Mesrob II has a different stance from that of some Turkish circles regarding the secularism debates. “I don’t think that secularism is under threat in Turkey. Secularism has been so entrenched in the society since the time of Atatürk that I don’t think anybody will be able to remove it,” he stated.

We’ve been trying to interview Mesrob II since Today’s Zaman was founded on Jan. 16, but due to some unfortunate events — such as the Jan. 19 assassination of Hrant Dink, editor of the Turkish-Armenian weekly newspaper Agos, we were unable to until now. The Patriarchate closed its doors to the media then after receiving many threats. Nevertheless, the patriarch started to open up recently and discuss the Turkish-Armenian community’s problems more.

For Monday Talk, we had a sincere interview with the patriarch, ranging from politics to his personal life, beliefs and hobbies.

Could you talk about your childhood, your neighborhood, your education?

I was born in İstanbul in Tarlabası on Yoğurtçu Faik Street. We had Muslims, Jews, Greeks and Armenians in the neighborhood. Everybody knew everybody else's important religious celebrations. We had wonderful days having many celebrations together, especially on holidays. I grew up in the Taksim neighborhood around Talimhane, where Taksim square is. I went to the Esayan Armenian school in Taksim. I continued my education at the İstanbul English High School for Boys. Later I went to the Stuttgart American College in Germany. In the United States, I went to the Memphis State University to study sociology. Then to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, then to Angelicum University in Rome, Italy and finally got my doctorate at St. Mary's University in Washington.

How did you benefit from studying sociology?

I was able to understand people better.

Did you decided to study theology then?

No. I decided to study theology later after I had an accident in the United States. I was supposed to die but I survived. I lost my best friend in that accident. After that, I felt like I re-started life and dedicated myself to religion.

Why do you fast during Ramadan?

Otherwise I'd feel guilty at the time of the iftar (the evening fast-breaking meal).

Why would you feel guilty?

If I participate in the iftar with others who fasted all day, not having fasted myself, I feel guilty.

Do you fast throughout the month of Ramadan or just when you are invited for iftar?

Fasting is also a Christian practice, so I do not have any problem fasting throughout the month of Ramadan. It also helps to bring my Turkish friends and me closer together.

Do you have fond memories of Ramadan?

I was in a village called Kıyıköy in Kırklareli in 1974 at the time of Ramadan. Together with the villagers, I would get up for sahur (a small meal eaten before dawn; the final meal before the day's fast begins). This is a fond memory for me.

What is a typical day for you?

Among the patriarch's duties is inspection of the churches and attending liturgies at churches. I attend to my appointments.

Do you have hobbies?

I like traveling.

Where do you like to go most?

Jerusalem. I try to go there once a year. In Turkey I like to go along the Bosphorus. One of the places I like most is Kıyıköy. I also like Mersin.

Do you watch television?

I usually watch news on TV.

Don't you watch any of the hundreds of television series?

I watch “Yeşeren Düşler” (Revived Dreams).”

Why do you like that series?

It is about real life in a small village where one family tries to domineer over the others. It is a real life situation.

How many patriarchates are there in the world?

In the world there are 23 patriarchs. In the Armenian church, there are four patriarchates, the first one is in Armenia and the others are in Lebanon, Jerusalem and İstanbul.

Are there different levels or are you all equal?

The Catholicosate in Armenia comes first. All others are autonomous. We don't meddle in each others' affairs much.

A Muslim leader, Mehmed the Conqueror, founded the Patriarchate in İstanbul in 1461. What is the significance of this?

The founding of the Armenian Patriarchate in İstanbul is unique. It marks the first time in history that a Muslim sultan established a Christian center. It's quite positive for inter-religious dialogue.

What are the Turkish-Armenian community's feelings toward the new government?

The community's attitude toward the AK Party is generally positive. One of the main reasons behind this is CHP's aggressive attitude, especially regarding the law on foundations. Because of this our community tends to support the AK Party.

Are there Armenians interested in politics, interested in being candidates perhaps?

Yes, there have been a few people.

Would they be interested in becoming independent candidates or be under the umbrella of a party?

Most of them tend to support the AK Party.

If the AK Party had approached them, would they have entered politics?

They might have.

Have there been any Armenian members of Parliament in the history of the republic?

I know one who was a school principal, indeed my principal, at the Esayan school that I went to. Her name was Hermine Kalustyan.

Do you remember what year and from which political party?

I think from the CHP. The year escapes my memory.

What could have changed if there was an Armenian member of Parliament?

First of all we would have been represented. No members of any minority groups — be it Jews, Armenians or Greeks — have been represented in Parliament, even though it is our Parliament too.

To be continued...

[PROFILE]

Who is Mesrob II?

Mesrob II became the 84th patriarch of Turkey's Armenian Orthodox community in 1998 after Patriarch Karekin II passed away. Mesrob II studied theology in 1979-1982 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel. He held several positions in Turkey's churches including bishop, chairman of the Religious Council, patriarchal vicar for Ecumenical Affairs, overseer of the Theological Auditorium, vice-president of the Patriarchal Advisory Council and archbishop. He is the editor-in-chief of the Shoghagat Theological Review. He has academically worked on the "Vanakan Vartabed's Commentary of Davoush on the Book of Job." He is bilingual in Turkish and English and uses classical Armenian, Hebrew, French and Italian in his academic studies.

Sources

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