



# *Late harvest*

***Armenia's new church leader, Karekin I, must heal the rifts within the Armenian Church before he can plan for the future, writes Hratch Tchilingirian***

*The National Ecclesiastical Assembly of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Echmiadzin*  
 Inset: His Holiness Karekin I who was elected Catholicos of All Armenians at the Assembly

In April 1995, the new Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church was elected in Echmiadzin, Armenia. Almost 9 million Armenians in the republic, the 'near abroad', and the diaspora were represented at the ceremony by 400 delegates from over 32 countries.

The event represented many historical firsts. The National Ecclesiastical Assembly (the highest legislative body of the Armenian Church, composed of 26 per cent clergy and 74 per cent lay people) was convening for the first time for 40 years. The election was taking place for the first time in a free and independent Republic of Armenia. For the first time in history, the Catholicos of the Great House of Cilicia, in Lebanon, was elected Catholicos of All Armenia. The President of the Republic of Armenia addressed the NEA for the first time and witnessed the enthronement of the new Catholicos.

Karekin I was elected the 131st Catholicos of All Armenia by the NEA. And yet the entire process of his nomination and eventual election was eclipsed by the issue of unity within the Armenian Apostolic Church. Most people thought that with the election of Karekin as Catholicos, the

Armenian Church would find unity. Events have not been so straightforward.

Since the 1950s there has been a feud between the two sees in the Armenian Church: Echmiadzin and Cilicia. During the Cold War, the schism took on a political slant, and the Catholics in Echmiadzin became known as 'pro-Soviet' and the one in Cilicia 'anti-Soviet'.

Contrary to popular perception, church unity in the Armenian Church is not likely to involve merging the two sees of Echmiadzin and Cilicia. In essence, church unity means going back to the pre-1956 relationship between the two sees. This would mean that the Cilician see would return to its 'historical area of jurisdiction' which includes Lebanon, Syria and Cyprus.

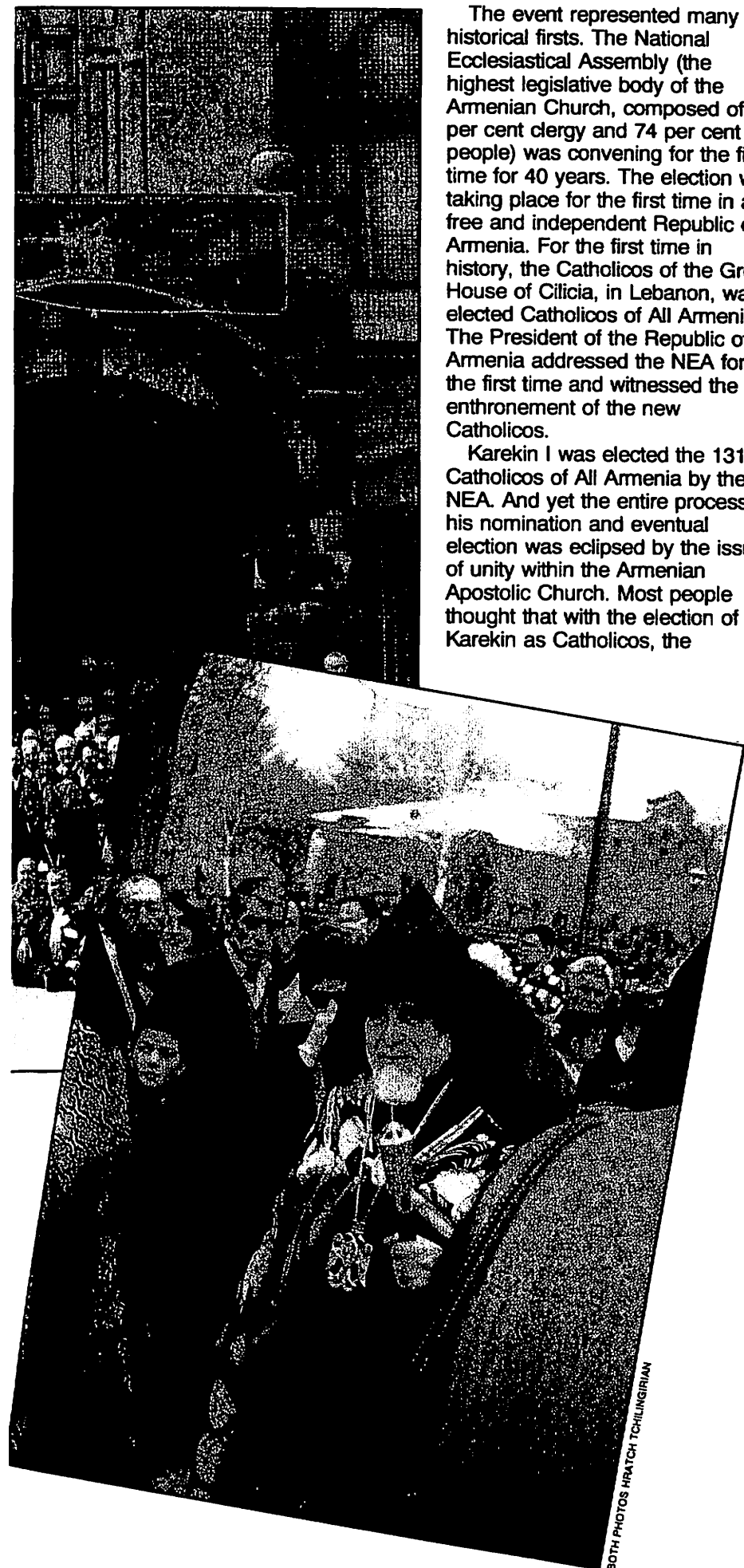
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During the late 1950s, the Cilician see stepped out of its defined area of influence when it established dioceses in the United States, Iran and Greece, so putting the 'division' in the Church on diocesan and jurisdictional levels. Until 1956, Cilicia and Echmiadzin had very good relations and complemented each other's work by sharing their resources and personnel. One NEA delegate was hopeful after Karekin I's election. 'There should now be a very harmonious relationship between the sees. That is the harvest that we will reap from these historic events.'

On his election, Karekin I outlined his plans to delegates. He listed four priorities: celebrations for the 1,700th anniversary of Christianity as the state religion of Armenia; training of clergy and lay workers for the religious revival of the Armenian nation; the reinterpretation of Armenia's national and religious identity; and ensuring the financial stability of



BOTH PHOTOS HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

the Echmiadzin see.

Finally, he stressed the urgent need for 'reform' within the Armenian Church. 'The reformation of the Armenian Church should be our goal, our target, our point of departure.' That reform should 'preserve an order that is alive, not an order which is just a structure. We need to reform the Church in such a way that she will become an active and positive presence for the benefit of our nation.'

Karekin I has set himself a daunting task. Not least of his difficulties is the lack of personnel in Echmiadzin to help him carry out

stage, and understandably a trial period is needed to establish social and political boundaries.

The Armenian Church needs to use this time to redefine her role and mission from that of a surrogate state for the Armenian nation to an active and positive institution for the benefit of the nation.

These considerations will affect the position of other religious groups in Armenia. As in other parts of the former Soviet Union, the appearance of foreign missionaries and new religious movements have become the subject of constant debate and concern. Since the independence of Armenia in 1991, there have been reports of incidents of 'persecution' of evangelical groups and new religious movements. The Armenian Church's failure to speak out about these incidents has been all too evident.

In a homogeneous society such as Armenia, the presence and activities of non-indigenous organisations can all too easily be seen as a threat to national unity, and even to national security. How the Church is going to position itself in an emerging democratic society, where pluralism and freedom of conscience are guaranteed by the constitution, remains to be seen. The move from a parochial to a more ecumenical world view is a challenge that the Armenian Church will have to address as the new millennium approaches.

The celebration of the 1,700th anniversary of Armenia's acceptance of Christianity will take place in 2001. Plans are under way to organise events on both local and international levels. With his experience, energy, and charismatic leadership, Catholicos Karekin I is expected to navigate the Armenian Church into the 21st century, forging a new vision for the Armenian nation.

He has called the 1,700th anniversary celebration a 'new Pentecost' for the Armenian nation. During the next five years, the leadership of the Armenian Church has a unique opportunity to define the meaning, depth and significance of this 'new Pentecost' for the Armenian nation and for the rest of the world. ●

*Hratch Tchilingirian is a researcher in sociology at the London School of Economics.*

*'Let us all admit that the current situation that exists in our Church – that is, its division – is a national disgrace. I do not accept any justification, any argumentation, from all those who have contributed to that division. They do not have any justification. I do not accept the false passions that caused the division. I do not accept the view that the Church in Echmiadzin, which was regarded as subservient to the Kremlin or the KGB, has served our people worse than the Cilician see. Simply, the Armenian nation, as in the past, in this era as well had turned into a pawn of the Cold War. Today, we have the opportunity – without the demands of foreign forces – for the first time, to solve our problems ourselves. To solve the greatest problem that our Church faces.'*

*Levon Ter Petrossian, President of Armenia, speaking to the NEA in April 1995.*

his new agenda. The administrative infrastructure is dilapidated – a legacy of Soviet rule. Some of the most basic administrative tools, such as telephones, faxes and computers, urgently need replacing with more modern equipment. Karekin I's first task is to recruit a team of able staff and modernise the offices in Echmiadzin.

Other important long-term challenges face the new Catholicos, such as church-state relations and religious tolerance in Armenia.

As a national church, the Armenian Apostolic Church enjoys the full support of the new Armenian Republic. Constitutionally, church and state are separated, but the lines of demarcation are not yet clear. The Church could well be tempted to seek state patronage to advance her own interests, but the move would probably have a lasting impact on both church and state.

Armenia, like other former Soviet republics, is at a transitional