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Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan attends a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Senate Palace of the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia, Sept. 26. (Ramil Sitdikov/Pool photo via AP)

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A prominent cleric in Armenia was sentenced to two years in prison Oct. 3 after being found guilty of calling for an overthrow of the government.

Archbishop Mikael Ajapahyan was arrested in June and accused of being part of an alleged coup plot against the government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

The cleric was found guilty on Sept. 24 of calling for the government to be overthrown. His lawyer, Ara Zohrabyan, condemned the verdict as being politically motivated.

Ajapahyan was prosecuted for merely expressing an opinion, said Zohrabyan, who vowed to appeal the verdict.

The Armenian Apostolic Church, the dominant faith community of the Caucasus nation and part of the ancient Eastern Orthodox family of churches, also condemned the verdict as politically motivated, describing it as "one of the clear manifestations of the authorities' anti-church campaign."

The [authorities had tried to detain Ajapahyan in June](#), which led to security forces facing off with crowds at the headquarters of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Videos circulated online showed clergy jostling with police.

After Armenia's National Security Service urged Ajapahyan to appear before authorities, local media showed him entering the building of Armenia's Investigative Committee. The following day, a court in Yerevan ordered to place Ajapahyan in pretrial detention.



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

Ajapahyan's arrest followed that of Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, who led the Sacred Struggle opposition movement. He was accused of plotting a sabotage campaign to overthrow Pashinyan, charges that his lawyer rejected as "fiction."

In April 2024, tens of thousands of demonstrators called for Pashinyan's ouster after Armenia agreed to hand over control of several border villages to Azerbaijan and to normalize relations between the neighbors.

Sacred Struggle has bitterly opposed the handover of the border villages. Although the territorial concession was the movement's core issue, it has expanded to a wide array of complaints about Pashinyan, who came to power in 2018.

Russian-Armenian billionaire Samvel Karapetyan, who is another vocal critic of Pashinyan, was also arrested in June on charges of calling for the government's overthrow, which he denied.

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Armenia and Azerbaijan have been locked in territorial disputes since the early 1990s, as various parts of the Soviet Union pressed for independence from Moscow. After the USSR collapsed in 1991, ethnic Armenian separatist forces backed by the Armenian military won control of Azerbaijan's region of Karabakh and nearby territories.

In 2020, Azerbaijan recaptured broad swaths of territory in and around Karabakh. A lightning military campaign in September 2023 saw Azerbaijan fully reclaim control of the region, and Armenia later handed over the border villages.

In August, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan shook hands at a White House summit before signing a deal aimed at ending decades of conflict. A formal peace treaty was initiated by the two countries' foreign ministers at that meeting, but it is yet to be signed by the leaders and ratified by the countries' parliament.