A POST-PROTOCOL REACTION: WHAT DEFINES THE DIASPORA?

Posted on October 30, 2009 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

The **Armenian** Weekly

By Lalai Manjikian, PhD Candidate, Montréal, The Armenian Weekly, 28 October 2009

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Armenians need to break free from genocide, but how? On Oct. 10, the inevitable happened. News broke and images surfaced of the Armenian and Turkish foreign ministers signing the controversial protocol agreement in Zurich, as Western and European powers encircled them like triumphant vultures. Many thoughts flooded my mind as I began to actively contain wounds—with the hope of them ever healing dwindling rapidly away.
At that moment, I thought of the fate of every nation, woman, man, and child who has ever felt helpless in the face of colonial rule or any form of political oppression. Another image I had was that of my grandfather on his frigid death bed, 90 years after surviving the wretched earth of Der Zor. After all, history does not rest alone in archives and books. Bodies and faces are also bearers of traumatic history, for future generations to either assume or reject. From Anatolia to Quebec, my grandfather's life had come full circle, but the perpetrators of his unfathomable loss had not. Following the most recent developments related to the protocol process, the likelihood of the perpetrators' descendents ever rightfully acknowledging their history has become even slimmer.

I despise feeling powerless (not to be conflated with surrender). I was overcome with that feeling as news of the signature began to sink in. What can one do when confronted with a done deal, especially of this magnitude? The impassioned claims did nonetheless echo from Paris to Los Angeles, from Beirut to New York. It was heartening to see the waves of dissent surrounding the

protocols, as well as the organized and spontaneous protests throughout the diaspora and in Armenia. They were a testament to a national consciousness at work, the expression of a collective memory still pulsating, regardless of political affiliations or beliefs. Once uprooted and dispersed by genocide, today's de-territorialized diaspora vocally challenged their homeland's decision-making powers on a matter that continues to define the diaspora today, like it or not.

This contention inflicting the Armenian world over the past few months has left me pondering, once again, what it means to belong to the diaspora today, particularly in light of the newly approved protocols. With the stakes as high as they are now, what do we consider as the pivotal definers and pillars of our identity as Diasporan Armenians? We are certainly identified by our connection to present-day Armenia, but also defined as a people rejecting victimhood, yet forever condemned to remain the descendants of an unrecognized genocide. We likely embody both these characteristics in varying degrees. Today, however, more than ever, we face a struggle negotiating the two. Many assert that with time, future generations will cease to carry the remnants of a traumatic past, along with the urgency to speak up about it. Whether defeatism or realism propel this claim is debatable. Nonetheless, the diaspora remains in large part defined by its traumatic past, which has, in some twisted way, guaranteed its survival and
development until now. In many ways, it is up to us to either secure our existence or help others who push us to oblivion.

I was taken aback by how many were ready to dismiss any anti-protocol position as being ultra-nationalist or extremist—stating that those who are staunchly against the signature are desperately trying to cling on to their identity, as the protocols are destroying what they have stood for all these years. What else are we to do as descendents of genocide survivors? Also, as diasporans don't live in Armenia—though I would argue that in many instances, they live with and for Armenia—it was easier for some to condemn these so called "hardliners" reacting on emotion, rather than pragmatism—a much needed entity, given the political and economical instability in the region.

Emotion was surely in the equation, but the underlying guiding force was, in many instances, the principle and moral obligation. Again, some may even easily dismiss principle, but I saw it as a strong weapon deployed organically and nonviolently throughout the disapora over the past weeks. Principle can retaliate against aggressive denial, against induced collective amnesia rampant in Turkey (minus the brave exceptions), and against the desire to overwrite confirmed history. This organic force, as it grows parallel to scholarly research, lobbying, and politics, is in our reach. It is a movement that circumvents the possibility of complete erasure, so desperately sought out by some. Labeling individuals as being extremists is easy; embodying the moral pulse, amid cracks in national consciousness, is being responsible.

The protocol process unleashed a jolt in many of us, reawakening the semi-dormant rhetoric of the genocide throughout the Armenian masses. I am left wondering how to negotiate a deep compassion and commitment to support a free and independent Armenia, with the moral and

humanistic obligation of pursuing genocide recognition.

I suppose scattered beads are used to confounded allegiances by now…

**Note: The opening quote is from Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth (1963).*