REFLECTIONS ON THE RECENT TRAGEDY IN YEREVAN

Posted on August 28, 2019 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Dikran Abrahamian BA, MD March 9, 2008

> ***If history has any advice to us it is resisting outside infiltration as best as we can.***

Much has been said and yet not said about the recent presidential election in Armenia.

Protagonists of both sides try to point fingers towards their respective opponents for the tragedy that occurred on March 1, 2008 in the streets of Yerevan resulting in 8 people dead and many wounded. The authorities are in no retreat at all, but in damage control by misinforming the public; at least one leader of the opposition is widening the scope of demands calling for an "international" investigation of what transpired.

Individuals, organizations and church leaders are all in unison in trying to call for sobriety, and underlining the potential of further deterioration that could compromise the security and unity of Armenia itself. Diasporan Armenians are engaged in this process at least by voicing their opinions.

Probably we as a nation (the term loosely used) should not be surprised of what was to come. It was written on the wall and unfortunately we did not have the guts to intervene before it was too late. Hindsight is right it is said, but foresight is much in need specially now.

Blaming this or that faction diverts us from the path that will lead us out of the impasse. The present primary leader of the opposition and the oligarchs ruling the country were in many ways cut from the same cloth. The elections of 1995 were a foretaste of what to come and the present authorities had their first lessons of how to exercise fraudulent and rigged elections then; subsequent occasions served to refine the practice in violation of human rights and deepening the roots of authoritarianism in a fragile country that can survive only and only through the participation of the majority of its people in the process of governance. Unfortunately that was not meant to be and people felt disenfranchised and disempowered

Compared to countries of similar size and emerging from a system of state capitalism on a grand scale, Armenia to its credit registered favorable economic growth. However, the beneficiary was the small elite of oligarchs and kleptocrats. Time and again in subtle and not so subtle ways authorities were cautioned of potential dangers, but they chose to ignore well intentioned advice. Instead they continued their insatiable appetite for more by amassing new fortunes and leaving the vast majority of people to its own skills in poverty. The disparity that ensued bloated the ranks of frustrated people who would express themselves in whatever way whenever an opportunity arose.

Well intentioned Diasporan organizations and individuals since the earthquake and subsequently lent a helping hand in many ways. Caught in fervor of romantic patriotism people prayed, hoped and wished that a new democratic Armenia would evolve - a country that respects human rights and is respected in the international arena. Over the years many intricately laced relations developed. In the course anomalies were noticed. At times some were very

critical of how Armenia as a society was shaping. Yet despite that effort overall Diaspora was timid in drawing the line in the sand, forcefully making clear where it stands and what its expectations were. In a sense by being a reluctant bystander it de facto sanctioned ongoing violations of human rights and looting of the bounty.

It's deplorable to notice that people who were minor partners in the present regime are now talking about introducing changes that would ameliorate the situation in future. They knew very well what was wrong prior to this recent tragedy. They were enjoying having ministers. Where were they prior to this tragedy? Why did they not introduce legislation to prevent what was to come? Now they accept the status quo and extend an olive branch to the authorities. That is pure and simple jockeying to secure positions in a future government.

Equally deplorable are statements by a person in the government who had earned the respect of many in Armenia and Diaspora. Prior to the elections he made allegations that a particular opposition leader would do anything to get to power. What about the present regime? Isn't it using all its might, including firing on its own people to remain in power? Why is he remaining silent? Is it a service to secure a position in the next government? Does he buy the Chief Prosecutor's spokesperson's denying any shots had been fired by the police?

Over years much has been said about outside interferences and influences in the internal affairs of Armenia. Now, that factor is being twisted in so many ways in order to silence opponents, dissidents and confound the understanding of what's going on. All what's left is to declare that so and so has committed treason and is a traitor. It's an advantage of any authoritarian regime to pull out this or that document from the past and present to the public out of context to prove its point. The regime already had discredited itself in so many ways and its integrity was tarnished prior to the elections that now such measures will fall on deaf ears of many.

Speaking of outside interference, it's a touchy subject and hard to document. All what can be done by an outside amateur observer is to glean from certain facts and make an educated guess at best. Why a country as small as Armenia boasts of having the largest USA embassy in the CIS countries? Why Armenia needs such a vast land ceded to a foreign jurisdiction, when it processes only a handful of visa applications and other matters in a day? Wasn't it during this regime that the embassy was built? What's its purpose? (*)

If history has any advice to us it is resisting outside infiltrations as best as we can. The call for an investigation by international bodies is at best an ill advised measure. It will further intensify and probably even confound the present tense atmosphere and the security of Armenia.

After all said and done it is the responsibility of any country's government to restore normalcy and it's an inescapable part of that obligation to take responsibility for whatever crisis. Blaming the opposition is not the route and will lead nowhere. Earnest cooperation is the only venue as long as it is not understood as co-optation.

(*) Following this posting in a private correspondence his Excellency Ambassador John Evans has provided some clarification about the "myth" of the perceived exaggerated size of the edifice. I share

with you the email with the kind permission of the Ambassador.

Dear Mr. Abrahamian,
I take the liberty of responding to you about the question of the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan. I was the U.S. Ambassador there 2004-06, when I was recalled for having used the word "genocide" to describe the events of 1915-16. You may be familiar with that story.

In any case, let me put your concerns about the new U.S. Embassy building to rest. The story has been circulating for some time that the new chancery is "the biggest" in the CIS or, as some accounts have it, "in the world." This is not actually the case. Although the building (five buildings in all, counting the Marine quarters for five Marine Security Guards, the USAID building and two entrance structures) looks massive when viewed from Avenue Isakov, it actually is "right-sized" for the staff of aproximately 320 Armenian locally hired professionals and about 70 American employees. It is a comfortable, but efficient platform for carrying out the activities, many of them programs of assistance, that the staff is charged with administering.

I asked my predecessor, John Ordway, how the story about the alleged "largest Embassy" got started. He explained that, at the time the land for the chancery was acquired, those 23 acres did set something of a record for construction of a new US embassy in modern times. Somehow the large tract of land morphed into the "largest embassy." Occasionally the "23 acres" was improperly rendered by the media as "23 hectares," which is of course much larger. US Embassy Yerevan is middle sized, about the same size as its sister embassies in Tbilisi and Baku. Much bigger are, of course, the US missions in such places as London, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Moscow, Beijing, New Delhi, Cairo, etc. The media also at one point claimed that there were 400 Marines at the Embassy (there are a total of six). There was also a claim that there were missiles in the structure, and someone even once claimed we had a submarine in nearby Lake Yerevanian! My experience of the new embassy, which I had the honor to open, in May 2005, was that it was more like a university campus than a fortress (which unfortunately is what some other new US embassies resemble).

.....
With best regards,

John Evans
(in Washington)