

AN ENERGIZED DIASPORA IS ENTITLED TO A DEMOCRATIC FORUM

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By Dikran Abrahamian BA, MD, Ontario, Canada, 15 November 2009

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While the evening's topic--"Expectations of the Diaspora Following the Protocols"-- and the organizational skills and vision of the coordinators rightly helped make the gathering an unequivocal success, there was a third and as important a reason for the organizers to congratulate themselves: The Altadena gathering was a unique expression of **participatory** democracy, with almost one-third of the attendees expressing their opinions and posing questions to the panelists. This third fact made the evening exemplary in our Diaspora reality.

As participant, the event offers me an opportunity to reflect on **form**, digressing from the traditional approach to report on **substance**.

Was it a coincidence that the two panelists-- Kevork Haleblian, a member of the executive of ARCA and Dr. Minas Kojayan, editor of **Nor Or** weekly--as well as Dr. Raffi Balian (MC-facilitator) and myself, were graduates of academic institutions in Soviet Armenia? I recall the graduation ceremonies of those many years ago. I clearly remember that prior to bestowing the degrees to the graduates from Diaspora, the dean would remind them "you are the ambassadors of Armenia". He would then advise each one to participate in "Spyurk" community activities, after leaving the motherland.

The Altadena gathering was probably a vivid expression of what the educators in Armenia had in mind. It was also reminiscent of the healthy mindset that prevailed among the majority of my Diaspora colleagues studying in Armenia. It was not uncommon in those days to engage in heated discussions about Diaspora's future, to talk about "Spyurk" and the latter's relations to Armenia. Ramgavars, Hunchaks, Marxists, "Tchezoks" and occasionally Tashnag-oriented youth, if not in formal settings but informally interacted with each other and mused about Diaspora's future.

Typically for young people, we made outlandish prescriptions at times. Invariably, we would deplore the the lack of unity in Diaspora. We also pondered about ways to overcome Diaspora's multiple challenges. Perhaps we were idealists, but our diagnosis was not too far off the mark. Was it their goals that split Armenian organizations? What would it take to achieve amity, if not some form of unity or consensus? Were vested interests in high positions obstacles to national unity? Why were the majority of Diaspora Armenians apathetic to the threats our far-flung communities faced?

Or perhaps the Diaspora public was indifferent because it was denied the prospect to participate in a meaningful way in community affairs.

As if mindful of the above questions, the coordinators of the Altadena gathering went to great lengths to open the channels of communication between the attendees and the panelists. At such meetings we are traditionally used to hearing the "voice from the above", from the podium...A dead end one-way communication. That night in Altadena the opinions, criticisms and suggestions of the public were clearly of paramount importance to the organizers. It's no wonder that the attendees responded with such satisfaction to the **democratic** manner.

The Diaspora is an amorphous, multicentric entity. Gatherings, such as the above, which encourage the participation of all voices and not just that of the **vocal** apparent majority, constitute a welcome phenomenon. The organizers deserve our plaudits for making it happen and for setting a welcome precedent in our community lives.

The evening was an exceptional brainstorming session, fitting for the uncertain times our nation is experiencing. Our public is tired of sloganeering. Our public is eager to participate in the decision-making process. A public energized by the Protocols controversy, is hungry for a forum. Our community leaders and our organizations have a golden opportunity to involve as many individuals as possible in our vital national discourse.

Congratulations to the executive of the Armenian Rights' Council of America for its bold and democratic approach.

