ARMENIA'S OLIGARCHY'S CORRUPTING INFLUENCE ON THE DIASPORA

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Dr. Berge A. Minassian, Armenian Renaissance, Toronto, 16 September 2015

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A classic example of an aborted attempt at creative destruction that Acemoglu recounts is presentation by a modest Englishman to Queen Elizabeth I, of a machine that would automate weaving. Despite her many otherwise enlightened decisions (her reign established England's Renaissance), in this case she refused to give the inventor a patent, because such a machine would be too revolutionary and would destroy the English nobility's hold on power. Here I explore whether the leadership of the Armenian Diaspora is 'inclusive' and whether processes such as 'creative destruction' are possible in the Diaspora.

If not impossible, it is extremely difficult to imagine a democratization of the Diaspora because of the

ever-presence of the 'opt-out' option. Unlike a Diaspora a country can be likened to a group of friends in a sailing boat in the middle of the sea. One way or another they have to agree on which way to direct the boat. They have to go together and do not have the option of each going his own way. If they decide to do it democratically, the majority's direction will be adopted, for better or worse, but at least the boat will move. In the Diaspora, each person or group has historically gone its own way, because they can. It is unlikely that this behavior will change, because the opt-out option will always be there. The space of this essay does not allow a full elaboration of the many other reasons why a democratic Diaspora is extremely difficult to achieve, not the least of which is the definition of who is Armenian. Let us take today's Diaspora in Canada as a snapshot of the history of the Diaspora. Who are the leaders of the Diaspora?

1) **The Church**. It derives its power from God and is certainly not 'inclusive', i.e. its decisions are not based on a majority of the people's will. The church is a classic example of how 'creative destruction' fails in a non-democratic structure. In the two arms of the Armenian Apostolic Church there is not a single disagreement on doctrine or dogma, yet the church is unable to unify, even though this is the wish of the great majority of Armenians. Unification would be 'creative destruction' of the powers of the clerical leaders (the ruling catholicoi and bishops) who would have to relinquish power. They thus resist, and because they have the opt-out option, remain divided. The situation is compounded by the direct participation of the leadership of the Armenia based church in the extractive oligarchy ruling Armenia. That oligarchy, like all nobility, fights to perpetuate itself. With the church leadership in its fold, the oligarchy directs the church to behave in such a way as to confer to it 'divine' support. Like all nobility, the oligarchy abhors creative destruction, including reunification of the mother church of the Armenians. Incidentally, the Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia recently called Mr. Gagik Tsarukyan, the Armenian oligarch par excellence the 'sun', because the latter donated $ 500,000 to the See and to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). How can the catholicos not know where this money comes from, and how can he in future call the 'sun' a lost sheep?

2) **The Armenian General Benevolent Union** (AGBU). The organization is not inclusive in its decision-making. Usually, one has to belong to the financial elite to join its leadership. Being non-inclusive, AGBU chapters derive, ostensibly, legitimacy from the oligarchy in Armenia, including the church. They revel in medals from the extractive regime, and thus have their official mouths sealed from criticizing the regime. This does not mean that the AGBU, or any of the four groups in this list, does not do good. I am simply pointing out the non-democratic nature of the leadership of the Diaspora and the resultant unholy and unhealthy alliances that organically rise in non-inclusive structures.

3) **The All-Armenian Fund**. The head of this organization is the president of the country and the head of the ruling oligarchy. The other board members include church leaders (non-inclusive), AGBU (non-inclusive), political parties (non-inclusive) and famous personalities. There need not be any

further discussion of inclusiveness in this arm of the leadership of the Diaspora, since it is in fact headed by the non-inclusive extractive regime ruling the country itself.

4) **The ARF** – While the ARF has internal democratic modes of election, it also has democracy-quashing powers in its echelons all the way to the top. Local leaders can evict from the party anyone they wish. As a result, the Toronto ARF, for example, has been led by the same family, relatives and friends for decades. Likewise, the ARF bureau voids any local election or decisions it does not like. As such, the bureau, based in Yerevan, has absolute power on the ARF in the Diaspora. The bureau is near-totally in line with the ruling regime in Armenia on all important issues, except the erstwhile protocols signed with Turkey. The ARF was a regime partner until recently, and when they left that coalition still accepted important ambassadorial posts, and today are the chief supporters of the constitutional changes devised by the regime to perpetuate its rule. The ARF, which has a massive influence in the Diaspora, is generally silent on the misrule in Armenia. It stood by the regime during the March 1, 2008 massacre and obtained a number of ministerial rewards, and more recently openly called for imprisonment of civic activists. Finally, major ARF figures in Armenia are part and parcel of the oligarchy. Space does not allow further elaboration, but any serious retrospective of the last decade clearly shows that the ARF essentially toes the regime line.

Returning to the main topic of Diasporan governance, a very recent case highlights the damaging consequences of non-inclusionary, non-accountable leadership. One of the authors of policy and platform initiatives for the Liberal party of Canada, Mr. Viken Attarian, presented himself for investiture in his riding, the first step towards participating in the present federal elections. Mr. Attarian is well known in the community as one of its greatest thinkers, and a person of unimpeachable integrity and abilities. The ARF worked tirelessly to ensure the defeat of Attarian. The story is long ('Montreal Armenian Disunity the Big Winner', August 23, 2015) but the downstream effects were also the loss of two other Armenians' strong chances of occupying seats potentially in the governing party of Canada. While one cannot know directly why the ARF was so worried about Attarian in parliament, four facts are clear. He would have been a leader of the trio of Armenian parliamentarians. He had in the past criticized the ARF for actions he did not consider right (as he had other parties). He would most certainly have worked to do what could be done from Canada to bend rule in Armenia towards inclusive governance. Finally, he would have quite possibly reached the highest places of power in Canadian government, including even foreign ministerial position. The ARF's relentless attack to prevent a uniquely qualified Armenian from reaching Canadian government position is another typical example of the age-old dread that non-inclusive leaderships have of creative destruction.

I wish those who would like to democratize the Diaspora well, of course, but I consider that task of Sisyphean difficulty, in particular because of the inextricability of the opt-out option from the nature of Diaspora. On the other hand, it is eminently possible to transform the governance of Armenia. Acemoglu's sweeping historical review in 'Why Nations Fail' shows example after example of how

this happened elsewhere and how countries move from stagnation and failure to success and thriving, or vice versa. I suggest that saving the motherland is priority, is doable, and will be supremely consequential on the future of the Diaspora. Imagine a day when the hands from Armenia meddling in the Diaspora are not wily ones of those wishing -at all cost- to preserve and expand personal power and wealth, but the honest, firm and gentle hands of the genuine Armenian people shaping the only future there is for the Armenian nation.