DIASPORA POLITICS INEVITABLE IN NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

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By Haroon Siddiqui, The Toronto Star, 29 April 2010

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In the past, some immigrants did keep a tactical silence. But even they nurtured and passed along their heritage to their children.

Witness the attachment of third- and fourth-generation Ukrainian Canadians to Ukraine. Or the campaign by Armenian Canadians to have the Turkish killing of Armenians 100 years ago acknowledged as genocide. Greek Canadians objected to independence for Macedonia. Sikh Canadians voiced anger about goings-on in India. Tamil Canadians complained about the Sinhalese war on the Tamils in Sri Lanka.
Less noisily, Bangladeshi Canadians have been protesting the presence in Canada of one of the alleged murderers of the founding father of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and his family. They were assassinated in 1975 in Dhaka in a military coup. After a much-delayed trial, five former soldiers were hanged in January. Six others convicted are at large. One, Nur Chowdhury, lives in Toronto, his refugee claim rejected.

Bangladesh wants him extradited. A few dozen Bangladeshi Canadians marched on Parliament Hill last month demanding that he be deported. But Canadian policy prohibits sending anyone to a country where he may face capital punishment. Adding poignancy to the diplomatic request is that it comes from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, daughter of the slain leader. She survived the slaughter because she happened to be out of the country at the time.

Diaspora politics is not confined to immigrants. Witness the Jewish community's advocacy for Israel — trying to ban books, plays and conferences critical of Israel, as well as pressuring governments, universities and media to muzzle criticism.

It's the most active lobbying in Canada on behalf of a foreign country or people. Nothing illegal about it, as a group of Canadians exercises its rights peacefully, even if at times to justify Israeli wars. The effort is also the most successful, given the Harper government's almost unquestioning support for Israel, in contrast with the Obama administration, which has decided that some Israeli actions run counter to American interests.

Canada being a microcosm of the world, it's only natural that foreign issues have become domestic issues. Sometimes, they transcend ethnic communities.

The war on Iraq, initially opposed by Arab Canadians, was vehemently opposed by a majority of Canadians. The Afghan war is obviously not just an Afghan Canadian issue. Iranian Canadian protests about the stolen election in Iran have had resonance among Canadians.

How to distinguish between what's acceptable diaspora politics and what is not? The primary dividing line has been between the peaceful and the violent, the lawful and the unlawful. Another has been the Canadian national interest, which should not be held hostage to any group.

Public opinion plays a role. Some foreign causes are seen as more legitimate than others. That's why groups try to make their cause sound worthy of support. Some are better at media manipulation and political organizing, while the less sophisticated and the less powerful take to the streets. The latter are mostly the newer minorities.

It is these groups that are routinely admonished to "respect our customs," "conform to our way of life," and "adopt Canadian values." What those might be beyond the rule of law is rarely defined.

What do we mean when we hector someone to "be Canadian"? Play hockey? At least watch it, preferably on a couch with a beer in hand? Or, in Quebec, eat poutine and listen to Céline Dion? What else? If one can't catalogue it all, how can we implement it?

Values are forever evolving and are best absorbed voluntarily. So we have to be conscious that the admonition "Be Canadian" is not a club that we can use on those we don't like.