ECHMIADZIN UNDER ATTACK

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The Armenian Mirror-Spectator

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In the year 1045, when the Bagratuni dynasty was in decline, one of the Armenian princes, named Vest Sarkis, handed the keys of the capital city of Ani to the Byzantine rulers, thus ending the history of another Armenian dynasty.
In more recent times, by the end of World War I, General Antranik was holding the fortress of Erzerum, with the help of ammunitions and supplies left over by the retreating Russian Army. Most of the Eastern Armenian soldiers defected, announcing that the area was not their homeland. Thus we lost valuable pieces of historic Armenian territory, perhaps unfortunately, for good.

These days that self-destructive gene has been bugging some people in the Armenian media and in positions of power, to undermine, or to destroy the foundations of the Holy See of Echmiadzin, under the most appealing slogans of "democracy" or "free speech" or defense of "human rights." without pausing to ponder the long-term damage they can cause.

Echmiadzin has been under Soviet rule for 70 years and is still recovering from the damage of that oppressive regime. Many Armenians, mindful of the historic role of the Mother See, have been

supporting and helping the supreme spiritual center to overcome its challenges. Others, however, within and without Armenia, have unleashed an unholy war, based on manufactured gossip and self-serving causes.

This ugly campaign began with some trial balloons in the ARF media, proposing to create a diaspora structure, with Catholicos Aram I of Cllicia as its titular head.

Then the disease spread through the opposition papers in Armenia, namely *Haykakan Jamanak* and *Chorrord Ishkahanutioun*, with marching orders coming from the former President Levon Ter-Peirosian, who insulted the Catholicos for not joining the political street rallies, which he organized to "dismantle" the "kleptocracy".

Another tabloid named *Hraparak*, which seems to be willing to publish any article containing character assassination, for a fee, joined the chorus. Recently, a more Influential paper, *Aravot* has taken up the campaign, using an illegally-taped conversation between His Holiness Karekin II and the Georgian Patriarch lllya II, showing the Armenian Pontiff in an unfavorable light. That doctored tape was placed on Facebook by Geogians to embarrass the Calholcos. *Aravot*'s editor, Aram Abrahamian, portrayed the Catholl cos in his lead article as "ignorant" and a "mafia figure." lt turns out that Mr, Abrahamian's TV program was recently removed from "Shoghakat" television chanel, sponsored by Echmiadzin. So much for morality in media in Armenia.

These attacks have not been spontaneous; some quarters must be orchestrating them. We cannot blame all of these attacks on the Catholicosate of Cilicia, however, as much as it may serve the cause of that see.

When you have ill will, you can turn upside down any positive Initiative or project and criticize, If that is your main purpose. Thus, the Catholcos develops a program to meet the perennial problem of clergy shortage in the Armenian Church and generates the resources to send 30-40 young aspiring clergymen to the centers of higher learning or major seminaries overseas, some accuse His Holiness of trying to "take over" the diaspora or planning to place his "people" in positions of power. The Catholic Church is strong and unified because the Pope assigns cardinals in different dioceses and no one attempts to play the "democracy" charade. For a long time, in the absence of educated clergy, Armenians have been used to having the services of many pedestrian spiritual leaders, who would be displeased to be replaced by younger and more educated clerics.

Another point of criticism is that a certain monastery has not been renovated. Recently, the Issue was around Sanahin (which by the way is being renovated by the Ministry of Culture), ignoring the fact that a dozen other monasteries or churches have been renovated by Echmiadzin.

Armenians have been lackadaisical in their comfortable positions of local feudal lords and they get upset as the church strives to get organized as a unified — and unifying — entity. The cases In point are in Europe, especially in Switzerland and Nice, France, where troublemakers are trying to challenge the church hierarchy, always with the lofty slogans of “democracy" and "free will" of the

people.

Following the Genocide and the deportations, Armenians settled in many European countries. Surviving the initial cultural shock, they settled into a more or less harmonious community life. Almost all the churches were local parishes without the framework of a diocese to make them a unified entity.

The new influx of immigrants has changed the scene entirely. Massive migrations from Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria and Armenia have created an explosive situation, because each group was coming up with a different set of social and political baggage of values. This situation called for local leadership with foresight that could put to best use these differences. Unfortunately, polarization developed in Southern France between Armenians from Turkey and Armenia, and somewhat from Lebanon, reaching a critical situation, especially in Nice.

A crisis developed also in the Swiss-Armenian community, for entirely different reasons. The origins and the development of the Swiss crisis have been amply explained for anyone who has taken an interest to listen, but it has been exploited by some for their own selfish agendas.

The Geneva parish priest, Abel Oghloukian (Manoukian), otherwise an erudite clergy, with a rebellious nature, fomented trouble. Being an articulate person, he was able to enlist to his cause a few local leaders. Oghloukian, rather than using his education and religious training for constructive causes, created problems wherever he was assigned, first Vienna and then Geneva.

He broke his vow of celibacy and got married, contrary to church canons, and Echmiadzin was lenient considering his religious knowledge.

In 1992, His Holiness Vasken I had began to form a diocese for the growing Swiss-Armenian community. After his demise, Catholicos Karekin I continued the project, with little success.

And now the situation exploded in the face of Catholicos Karekin II who simply tried to continue the task initiated by his predecessors. It looks like Oghloukian and his ilk rather prefer to keep the Swiss-Armenian community in small parishes, than in unifying into a diocese, where the rebellious priest would remain under the Jurisdiction of a Primate.

He challenged Echmiadzin's plans and was defrocked.

In all these local conflicts, certainly no party is blameless. The onus is on the local leadership and particularly outside armchair pundits who run to the rescue of a rebellious clergy in the name of "democracy", "right to criticize authority"' and so on.

Any freedom, not balanced with constructive responsibility, is reckless anarchy. Yet we find people with a great zeal to criticize without any constructive contribution.

The most vocal opposition to Echmiadzin, and for that matter to Armenia, comes from an online publication called Keghart, co-edited by Dr. Dikran Abrahamian. Each issue has an orgy of anti-

Armenia diatribes, putting to shame the Turkish and Azeri media.

Keghart ran a petition against Echmiadzin "deploring patriarchal order" and in support of the rebellious clergy, rather than criticizing the indignant behavior of the defrocked priest.

Along with a number of insulting articles, we also find an editorial with a headline: "Hands off the Diaspora", with a further comment that "the scandalous Incidents in Nice and Switzerland are not isolated events. They seem to be part-and-parcel of a plan to subjugate diaspora communities to the will of disgraceful rulers In Yerevan."
We have heard this same mantra for 70 years in the ARF press. It looks like the anti-Armenia crusade has changed hands and is being taken over by a more virulent group.
Any Armenian, with minimal sanity, would think what's wrong if Armenia and the diaspora work hand in hand, even under "the rulers in Yerevan?" Why espouse the cause of our enemies, pitting the diaspora against Armenia? Don't we have enough divisions imposed on us by our enemies and unfortunate turns of history?

Keghart seems to be the gathering place of former Communists, fellow travelers and anarchists willing to inject any amount of poison to further alienate the diaspora from Armenia.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Armenia's independence with tremendous problems inherited from the past: a sagging economy, brain drain, many colorful religious sects infiltrating the society fabric and enemies in Ankara, Baku and Tbilisi bent on Armenia's destruction.

Armenia's leadership has been marked by many failures; Echmiadzin is reeling from its 70-year slumber; Armenia's population is abandoning the historic homeland in droves, after dreaming of independence for six centuries.

Where is the cure?

Spewing poison or trying to place one stone over the other so that the much-dreamed of homeland will survive for posterity?