FRAGMENTED, FRACTIOUS, SUICIDAL ISLETS

Posted on November 11, 2013 by Keghart

keghart.com

Category: Opinions

Editorial, 12 November 2013

Think of the Armenian Diaspora as an archipelago of 25 or so islets strewn over a vast ocean. Thanks to the internet, these islets are in better contact now than they've ever been, but the e-revival will not guarantee their survival because they are dysfunctional entities mired by pointless rivalry, if not hostility.

Typically, in each community there are at least three or four churches, three political parties (four if one includes the Ramgavar split), and a variety of cultural-social-athletic groups in addition to "patriotic" associations representing cities in Cilicia and Western Armenia. Then there are the groupings such as "BolsaHyes", "YekipdaHyes", "BarsgaHyes" and "LipananaHyes", as well as the solitude between "Hayasdantsi" Armenians and those from other parts of the world. The community might have 5,000 to 10,000 members, but it somehow manages to accommodate these rampant divisions. Thus the Diaspora is not only a collection of islets but those islets themselves are carved into thinner slices of real estate.

Editorial, 12 November 2013

Think of the Armenian Diaspora as an archipelago of 25 or so islets strewn over a vast ocean. Thanks to the internet, these islets are in better contact now than they've ever been, but the e-revival will not guarantee their survival because they are dysfunctional entities mired by pointless rivalry, if not hostility.

Typically, in each community there are at least three or four churches, three political parties (four if one includes the Ramgavar split), and a variety of cultural-social-athletic groups in addition to "patriotic" associations representing cities in Cilicia and Western Armenia. Then there are the groupings such as "BolsaHyes", "YekipdaHyes", "BarsgaHyes" and "LipananaHyes", as well as the solitude between "Hayasdantsi" Armenians and those from other parts of the world. The community might have 5,000 to 10,000 members, but it somehow manages to accommodate these rampant divisions. Thus the Diaspora is not only a collection of islets but those islets themselves are carved into thinner slices of real estate.

When the cultural association of one group organizes an event, members of "rival" groups studiously avoid it as a matter of principle and loyalty. As a result, these affairs inevitably have embarrassing attendance. Indicative of the dismal state of affairs is that it's often the small group of people who attend literary events or the showing of painting, as opposed to the huge crowds which cram 200-decibel, hollering shindigs where an execrable mishmash of chifte-telli-rabiz-shish kebab music is the "Armenian" fare.

One of many corrosive aspects of the divisiveness is that it discriminates against artists, writers, performers, and public figures. Once an entertainer performs at a community centre or his show is

sponsored by a certain group, he becomes the "property" of that group. Other Armenian organizations label him "Tashnag" or "Echmiadznagan" entertainer and not invite him to their future functions. This, of course, chokes creativity and artistic talent, and narrows our public discourse.

The situation for the "independent" writers, artists, teachers, journalists is even worse. Nobody deems it worthwhile to sponsor the exhibition of a painter if he or she happens to be "independent" and not allied to this or that party. "If you're not one of us then you deserve to be left out in the cold," seems the cruel and self-destructive policy. Same goes for writers, singers, teachers, journalists whose works are rejected by the party organ, if they are "independent". Not infrequently they have to make "donations" to be promoted or hired.

At a time when Western Armenian fiction has died without a whimper and Armenian book buyers are scarcer than palm trees in Alaska, authors of non-fiction Armenian books are penalized due to the same blacklisting policies. A book of potential interest to all Armenians can be sponsored or promoted only by one faction. The blackballing is often continent-wide: Since these organizations or anachronistic political parties have chapters and branches in more than one country, if a book is launched, say, in Los Angeles, by the Ramgavars, Hamazkayin will probably not sponsor the book launch when the author tries to promote his book in Boston or in Toronto.

The division also erects social barriers for the young and marriageable members of the community. In certain pockets of Armenian communities it continues to be a taboo for a young Echmiadznagan to date someone whose family is Tashnag and vice-versa. While the community's insidious behavior limits the pool of spousal choices for its young, it's absurdly shocked and appalled when its young marry odars.

The inane cleavage also weakens the political clout of the community. Due to the divisions, Diaspora Armenians, with rare exceptions, do not have the critical mass to make a difference in the political arena, let alone field an Armenian candidate. Thus throughout the Americas, the number of politicians of Armenian origin can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Yet when our Turkbeijan antagonists complain about the "powerful Armenian lobby", we pat our back and gleefully accept the lie as the truth.

Once a year, but not in every community, Armenian groups commemorate the Genocide together as one people. But on April 25 they are back to their entrenched bad ways, nursing century-year-old wounds.

Some 5 million Armenians live among the 7 billion people of the world. That's 0.05% of the total world population. Outside of the Russian Federation, the biggest Diaspora communities are in France and in the United States. Some 400,000 French-Armenians represent 0.6% of France's population; The 100,000 Armenians in Argentina represent 0.2% of the 41 million population. Armenians in the U.S. represent 0.3%; in Canada, 0.24%. Despite our insignificant numbers, we continue our inexplicable in-fighting, although the average Armenian doesn't know the difference

among the traditional political parties or the churches.

One doesn't have to be a prophet or a crackerjack actuary to predict that the Diaspora is doomed unless it gets its act together—and fast. If we continue our self-sabotage, if we don't make an agonizing reappraisal of where we are going, and we continue our antediluvian patterns of behavior in a few decades our churches, community centres and schools will be empty, our newspapers will fold, there will be no one to encourage Armenian talent, there will be no "Olympic games" for our young, and the framed pictures of Ararat, which we proudly hang in our living rooms, will end up in the dustbin as so much junk. It's high time we came to our senses and asked ourselves whether we truly care about the future of the Diaspora. Our antagonists have no say in this: if we die as a community, it will be of our doing.

In Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" the hero landed on a wisp of an island called Lilliput, where the inhabitants were six-inches tall. Lilliputian society was ravaged by dissension between high-heel and low-heel wearers. To make matters worse, they also couldn't agree whether eggs should be broken at the big end or the small end.