HOLD THAT THOUGHT: SKI-JUMPING, CREDIT UNIONS AND WHAT THEY COULD TEACH THE DIASPORA(S)

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By Viken L. Attarian MSc MBA, Mount Royal, Quebec, 7 April 2010

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Hold that thought, for now.
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The athlete essentially skis down a steep slope, and then just hurls himself into a precipice, while gliding as he takes off from the ledge, with the hope of landing safely at the bottom and having literally jumped the longest possible distance. This is truly a tremendous demonstration of bravery, elegance, understanding of the forces of nature, understanding of the laws of physics, faith in one's own abilities and, I would venture to say, it is an almost unparalleled expression of the overcoming of one of the most basic of all natural instinctive fears, the fear of the force of gravity and falling down into the depths to one's own doom.
At the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, the longest ski jump that achieved gold medal status was 138 meters, a scary thought for anyone. Especially if one has seen the vertical video shot from the top of the jump hill all the way down to the landing area.

But, it turns out that that jump does not even come close to the world record of 239 meters of Mr. Bjørn Einar Romøren of Norway. Granted, this was not a standard ski jump, but was part of what is known as ski-flying competitions and was set back in 2005. There are apparently only a handful of ski-flying hills in the world that can allow for such a long takeoff, but this is something truly amazing to see. The jumping-off height is the equivalent of jumping off the Empire State Building (without a

parachute!!!). Here is that jump for the record
World's Longest Ski Jump

The question that pops to one's mind though is how does one get there? How does one train to achieve such spectacular results? Do the athletes simply jump off cliffs and break their bones to smithereens, with those who survive and being foolish enough to try again eventually succeeding? Are these simply a suicidal lot who just happen to be selected by a process of self-elimination to amaze us?

Well, we know the answer. Ski jumping is like any other sport. It takes a long time to practice to achieve perfection, and like everything else, one has to start with very small steps. Children start training at a very early age, even as young as 3-4 years' old and they start practicing jumping off literally little bumps no higher than a few centimeters. Eventually, if they practice long enough and try hard enough and overcome all their fears and challenges they can achieve the 100 meter jumps and beyond.

Of course, you don't have to take my word for it. Here it is explained by a former US Olympic ski jumper Kurt Stein (11th in Lillehammer in 1994).

Now hold that thought again.

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What would your reaction be if a complete stranger called you and said?

"We would like to create a financial institution based on the proven concept of credit unions that would take care of all your financial needs, your children's and grandchildren's education, your financial goals, your home ownership plans, your business financing needs, your retirement planning, your insurance planning, your tax planning, your estate planning and everything else that has to do with your family's finances, and by the way, you will have a say in how this organization is run."

Your first reaction might be like that of most people, to ask them not to bother you again and then simply hang up. Or, depending on your mood of the moment, you might skip the first part and just hang up.

A few slightly interested folks (or those who are likely more polite) might first ask the most obvious question:

"Who are you?" by that they would mean "Please identify yourself and let me judge if you are worthy of a little bit more of my time".

Then they would apologize and hang up.

Even a fewer number of people might engage in the conversation saying something like:

"And what are your (your group's, your team's, your company's) qualifications and certifications to

allow you to engage in such broad-based financial activities?"

Even fewer might ask

"And who are your investors? Where does your money come from and how do you guarantee my deposits with your institutions".

And even fewer might further ask

"And what kind of track record do you have of prudently managing other people's money and investments and meeting their financial needs? Can you provide independent references that I can verify? What kind of checks and balances are in place to protect your clients etc. etc.?"

Now even fewer if any of these last very few, who would admittedly be interested, would say

"OK, things seem to check out, here is **ALL** of our family's financial wealth, we shall be using your services **EXCLUSIVELY** and where do we sign on the dotted line?" They would be the biggest of fools if they did so, simply because, from a financial perspective that would be the equivalent of being anti-diversified and putting all of one's eggs in the proverbial single basket. How many people you know would actually do that?

Of course, if the caller answered the question "Who are you?" with "My name is Bernie Madoff / Earl Jones / Charles Ponzi and have I got a deal for you" and you still continued the conversation, then you wouldn't deserve anyone's sympathy.

Now, once again, hold that thought. This will be the last time, I promise.

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If I were to ask a simple question of anyone with a semblance of knowledge of the Armenian Diaspora(s) and that simple question being this:
"Can you point out a successful historical experiment in democracy in any of the multitude of Armenian Diaspora(s)?"
What would be the answer?

It is of course a rhetorical question, but nevertheless, if anyone is tempted to answer YES, I would suggest that any answer should consider the following facts:

• The concept of democracy is to be understood as illustrated by the practical context of the societies of Western liberal democracies.
• It includes basic ideas such as representation and a legitimacy granted through some formal electoral process.
• It is bounded by the concept of an entity which encompasses a multitude of individuals, who do share a common aspect (religion, nationality, organizational affiliation etc.).
• It includes the actions of the representative body as being relevant for those individuals. For example, by acting for the social benefit and the improvement of the lives of the people that they

are elected to represent.
• It encompasses some temporal boundaries, which limit the representing group in time and enforce repeated electoral processes after the expiry of that temporal limit.
• It encompasses varying degrees of checks and balances within the representational process itself and during the lifetime of the representational body.
• It also presupposes some kind of executive sub-body that emerges from the majority of the representative body, which in turn implements the agenda items and priorities that are deemed relevant for the larger electing group.
• It includes the implementation of an appropriate opposition to the majority representational group that works for similar objectives but with differing approaches and priorities.
• Said opposition being tasked with ensuring that the checks and balances in place are not circumvented and that accountability is maintained towards the individuals who have elected their representatives.

So, in summary, **we are looking for representation through fair elections, an opposition serving the same principles, accountability to those who elect, legitimacy, and controls. All these being foundations of functioning democratic institutions as they are to be understood.**

Given these criteria, one should perhaps look at the actual Armenian experience in the Diasporan context(s). Institutions of Armenian communities anywhere around the world are in fact, to this day, full of fake "democratic" practices. Even when one argues that there are relatively "fair" elections, the usurpation of any such "elected" position is a regular practice; changing the bylaws and regulations of the organization is a norm to allow the said usurpation; decisions without any consultation, let alone heeding any dissenting and opposing voices is an oft repeated storyline that can be told by many in any community; conflict of interest and nepotism are not even discussed anymore as they are daily practices across the board and so on. When was the last time that anyone attended an annual general meeting in an Armenian organization where those who reported to the members officially and unequivocally declared that there was no case of any conflict of interest in the year reported on and that that statement was recorded in the minutes and is part of the official proceedings? The issue is not even a relevant agenda item, and would barely be understood if brought up.

My first point therefore is related to the issue of trust. Given this reality and given that we have a serious institutional democratic deficit, and we actually do not know how to collectively behave democratically, why would we conclude that any new effort we come up with will succeed? Why would anyone in their sound mind give away their representational right to anyone who comes forward? Especially if those who are coming forward have any Diasporan institutional track record? Why would any of the readers of this essay for instance say to Mr. or Mrs. *Spyourkahay Nergayatsoutsitch* "I believe in you, here, take my vote and you have carte blanche. Represent me on any or all issues that our proposed Global Diasporan Representative Body decides on. Whether it be

issues of policy, in country political positions, representations at the table of international organizations, negotiating rights and positions as it relates to our historical lands and crimes committed against our nation, or even cooperating with or perhaps actively undermining the government of Armenia". Even assuming through some miracle of a sudden *Hokin Sourp* ("Holy Spirit") descending upon all our existing "leadership" with their existing baggage and institutional inertia of undemocratic behavior being washed away, why would anyone believe that once this body is actually created that they could keep this suddenly discovered goodwill and sacrifice their priorities for the common good on all issues and for a long and sustained period of time?

To be fair, there is an existing track record of a cooperative structure, in the form of the All Armenia Fund. Yet, it certainly does not satisfy the conditions of a democratically elected body as outlined above. It is one of a narrow focus, which I would argue is the rightly focused approach to creating a Diasporan global governance model.

My second point is one related to universal legitimacy. Once again, given the current context, and even assuming that the issue of trust in all those who would come forward is resolved, the question is, why would anyone want to give away a universal representation on all issues to such a group? What happens if members of the Diasporas disagree with the positions taken by this organization? That would be a very likely possibility, yet this institution would have far-reaching representational legitimacy, it would have negotiating powers, policy agendas, and positions on serious topics of the day (many being extremely divisive).

Furthermore this organization would run the risk of being compromised by international security agencies etc. Giving it broad legitimacy on all issues to represent the aspirations and positions of the Diasporas would be a serious mistake, knowing also full well that the concern of usurpation of power and leadership is a valid concern in all Diasporan institutions.

My third point is one of practicality and experience. Again, assuming that the previous two issues are resolved, where is the historical experience that would enable us to run such an organization across the whole world? How is the process of elections to be managed for example? What are the sources of financing and how transparent are they? How is the voice of the "silent majority" (non-affiliated with any organization) to be heard? How are the international jurisdictional issues tackled? Are there other international governance models that can be emulated and learnt from? And so on.

I would suggest that spending efforts and resources creating such a body, even when sincerely proposed, are at best misguided.

Why?

Because it would be the equivalent of skiing down the jumping hill and then dropping straight down into the void, not taking off into the skies.

Because it would be the equivalent of giving all our money to a bunch of people who have no

experience building a credit union and yet they want to handle all of the financial affairs of their clientele.

Because, in a worst case scenario, it would be the equivalent of giving all your retirement money to Mr. Ponzi.

In an overstretched metaphor, it would be the equivalent of expecting cavemen to design a supersonic aircraft. Not impossible, but highly improbable.

Since it is no longer advised to hold our thoughts, especially in our politically charged times, I would also suggest that **a global governance needs to be experimented with by focusing on specific projects around which all the Diasporas and multitudes of our identities would agree.** The All Armenia Fund is one such project; the Armenia Tree Project is another one. The pursuit of justice and retribution for the crimes committed against our people could be another one. And so on. Granting legitimacy through representation on specific issues is viable and acceptable. At some point, if one disagrees with the direction it is taking, one can always withhold support. Even if the institution itself continues to officially represent us on its issue, at least it could not claim representation on all issues and forever. If the Diaspora(s) were not particularly thrilled when President Sarkissian signed the "Protocols", why would they want to create the opportunity for more of such acts?

Any other approach would not be worth the effort.

I think.

And so should you.

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