ILHAM ALIYEV'S GIFT

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Editorial, 18 June 2016

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The Armenian Trojan horse is the country's widespread corruption—a proclivity which takes many guises. Since independence corruption has penetrated every nook and cranny of the government and society: cronyism; government-approved monopolies; "mafia" gangs; nepotism; fraudulent elections; lack of transparency and accountability; harassment of political rivals; looting of Diaspora donations; heavy-handed patronage; cowboy mentality; influence peddling; bribery; tax evasion; pillaging the treasury; dubious auditing ; under-the-table sweetheart deals; non-transparent application of tax, customs and regulatory rules; weak enforcement of court decisions; close ties between high-ranking government officials and business barons; excessive privilege for the select few; untendered government contracts; venal bureaucracy; ministers owning businesses in blatant conflict of interest… a mayor who is part owner of his city's bus line; university professors who boost a student's grades if the student greases the professor's palm with silver; corrupt judiciary, executive and legislative branches; a culture of impunity for the elite, plus the misdeeds of fellow oligarch-Catholicos Karekin II.

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The above has forced a million Armenians to leave their homeland while 30% of the population who have stayed live in poverty. Meanwhile, oligarchs ride their high-end cars are shadowed by flotillas of Humvees on Yerevan's Northern Avenue protected by preposterous, 300-lbs hoods in bullet-proof vests, black leather jackets, oversized Rolexes and ferocious aftershave as if looking for walk-on parts in "The Sopranos".

On top of this rank heap sits President Serzh Sargsyan--the man who two years ago spent $186,000 for a one-week stem-cell rejuvenation treatment in South Korea. How can he afford the treatment considering his modest salary? Easy. Together with his gangster brother, the president has stashed millions of dollars overseas. His predecessor—Robert Kocharian aka Great White Hunter—similarly wallows in ill-gained lucre. Sargsyan and Kocharian are the heads of the two major oligarch pyramids dominating Armenia's economy… pretty good for the two impecunious veterans of the Artsakh War.

Many Diaspora Armenians, who knew about the corruption-gnawed Armenia, kept their counsel. "Sargsyan might be corrupt, but his tough regime is making Baku think twice about threatening our homeland" was the *idée fixe* of these Diasporans who believed silence is golden when the subject is Armenia corruption.

And then surprise: the impious Azeris attacked. How dare the ineffectual foe challenge the jingo pronouncements of the fat-cat Armenian political leaders? Suddenly, senior military officers' boast that they would "have tea in Baku" if the Azeris were unwise enough to attack proved to be banal. Did these generals believe snappy military uniforms and salad on their chest equaled military superiority?

During the brief war some Armenian tanks became sitting ducks because they had fuel for no more than a few kilometers. There were reports that senior officers had sold the fuel. Soldiers had fought with empty stomachs and no water. Others had few bullets and were fighting with '80s weapons against a high-tech Azeri arsenal. Some soldiers had no sleeping bags. There was shortage of radio communication devices. The soldiers discovered the Azeri army wasn't the army their fathers had fought in the first Armenian-Azeri War. In addition to the unsustainable casualties, the Armenian side lost 800 hectares of land which Baku says gives Azeris strategic advantage in several locations. Despite all, the heroism of the junior officers—many in their early twenties—had saved the day.

Midway the mini-war it became obvious that corruption had spread to Armenia's vaunted army. People asked how $10 billion could leave the country in the past decade. Azeri President Aliyev

gave a credible report that it was the Armenian side which had asked for ceasefire.

In response to the public outcry for the inexplicable battle losses, Sargsyan and PM Hovik Abrahamian launched an anti-corruption drive. Faster than you could say Vasag Seuni, the pair donned the reformist garb and fired or imprisoned a dozen or so senior military and defense ministry officials. They promised to streamline government expenditure, investigate state procurement processes, improve the domestic business environment, curtail featherbedding, and downsize government agencies. The Republic of Kleptocracy was to be stopped on its tracks. The government would lend an ear to the Anti-Corruption Centre which in 2015 reported the government had awarded 70% of its procurement contracts without competitive tenders. Abrahamian promised to target conflict of interest among senior government officials, improve transparency and oversight. Sargsyan and Abrahamian promised a crackdown.

Were they blind or in denial all these years? Hadn't the UN Development Programme, among other international agencies, condemned corruption in Armenia concluding it was a "serious challenge to its development"? Didn't the men who rule Armenia know that Armenia's corruption index is at par with Mali, Mexico, Gambia, and the Philippines? The miraculous awakening of the pair to the corruption around them reminds one of sly Capt. Renault of "Casablanca" who famously said to Major Strasser: "I'm shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on here," as he pocketed the money the croupier handed to him.

When Sargsyan and Abrahamian are among the beneficiaries of the rotten edifice how could they claim innocence with a straight face? But they did.

Is Sargsyan serious about reform? Doesn't he know the problem is not one of individual corruption but of the system?

Nothing less than re-inventing the state will stave off collapse. For more than a decade citizens had tried to deliver the message to their government only to be met by indifference and repression.

Is it too late to make meaningful and fundamental change? How can one overhaul the chronic, widespread and systemic corruption within a few months, especially when the "reforming" twins have been at the core of the rotten system for so long?

Before the Azeri attack the Armenian government, business, intellectual, and media circles lived in a fool's paradise believing that although the country was mired in corruption it was robust enough to withstand Azeri aggression.

And then came the Aliyev surprise… or more accurately the Aliyev Gift.

The Azeri attack was a wake-up call for Armenians. Even the dense and complacent government leaders and oligarchs (often interchangeable) realized it's impossible to have a strong army when the state is riddled by corruption and the population is demoralized by the crimes of the country's elite.

Aliyev's Gift awakened Armenians that the country can be lost if drastic and swift measures are not taken to overhaul every aspect of its corrupt *modus operandi*.

Will Armenia's leadership understand that it's almost 11 p.m. and not much time is left before the midnight knell?

The Armenian leaders who have assumed the stewardship of the country should ask themselves: "Is this the state our people had been praying for since 1375 when the last Armenian kingdom collapsed? Is this why our 1915 martyrs refused to be turkified? Is this what our pitch-fork carrying farmers fought for at Sardarabad?"