IN SOLIDARITY WITH TIBETANS

Posted on December 28, 2008 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By Dikran Abrahamian BA, MD, Ontario 28 March 2008
It is incumbent on civil society to hold authorities accountable wherever they are, because Human Rights and Liberties are almost always relegated to the back burner by states despite lofty pronouncements.

By Dikran Abrahamian BA, MD, Ontario 28 March 2008
It is incumbent on civil society to hold authorities accountable wherever they are, because Human Rights and Liberties are almost always relegated to the back burner by states despite lofty pronouncements.

If my recollection serves me right it must have been in mid 1969 - around the time when man set foot on the moon. I have lost my old passport, can't determine the exact dates, and I have been "negligent" in keeping notes. I can't be more accurate than that. With Armenak from Beirut, Jean from Paris, Mateos from St-Etienne - an authentic hippie who had visited Kathmandu a few months back - I headed north from New Delhi to Dehradun. The purpose was to visit the Tibetan refugee community nearby, south of the Himalayas. Sookiass, the owner and principal of *Haikashen* school in the same city, was our guide.

We had heard a lot about the Tibetans and their plight. Getting to know them in person and exchanging views was something that we looked forward to. Undoubtedly we were excited about the planned encounter in addition to enjoying the beauty of nature in north India.

Cleanliness all around the refugee camp struck us first. People, young and old, were engaged in their mundane activities; children were cheerfully running around, and a few monks in their red robes were silently walking in the narrow lanes - almost marching. There was calmness surrounding us, no traces of panic and disorder.

There weren't that many with whom we shared a common language to converse, but once a few showed up we were impressed by their friendliness. Although reserved in their expressions, and extremely cordial in their manners to the extent of imparting a false perception of artificiality, we felt warmth and acceptance. It did not take long to get invited to the temple and partake in the religious ceremony. Unique was the experience of thanksgiving without vocalizing by merely rotating the prayer wheels.

That first exposure to the Tibetans served to be an internalized matrix for a narrative which was weaved with stories heard from my maternal grandmother and uncles. Those "tales" were about another refugee camp located in Port Sa'id in Egypt predating the Tibetan by about one half century. Ever since that trip I would gradually understand better what it meant to be a refugee and why.

Over years I could not avoid realizing the many similarities between the people in Port Sa'id, the Tibetans and the inhabitants of other refugee camps scattered in the Middle East. Like Armenians in the Ottoman Empire the Tibetans endured and continue to face a hostile socio-economic and political environment along with disdain towards minority entitlements. The central authorities deny basic human rights, impose a policy of marginalization and eventual assimilation. Culture, history, religion and land were all and are still at stake. Is it any wonder that desperate protesters claimed the streets in Lhasa like their Armenian counterparts in Istanbul over a century ago? They were both met with violence.

If the Armenians who were subjected to Genocide during the First World War have demonstrated anything to the world community it is the plain fact that it does not take long for a paranoid authority to commit the unthinkable. Sovereignty of the

larger entity, threats of outside conspirators, traitors from within, revolt etc were all invoked in the past and will continue to be cited to preserve superiority and an empire. Demands for a reasonable autonomy in both cases, Armenian and Tibetan, were considered to be acts of treason.

Solidarity with the Tibetans and a robust denunciation of the brutal attempts to silence a whole people is a priority. It is particularly so for those who carry the never healing scars of oppression and threat of annihilation. World powers, big and small, will exhibit a whole array of utterances that suit respective vested "national" interests. It is incumbent on civil society to hold authorities accountable wherever they are, because Human Rights and Liberties are almost always relegated to the back burner by states despite lofty pronouncements.