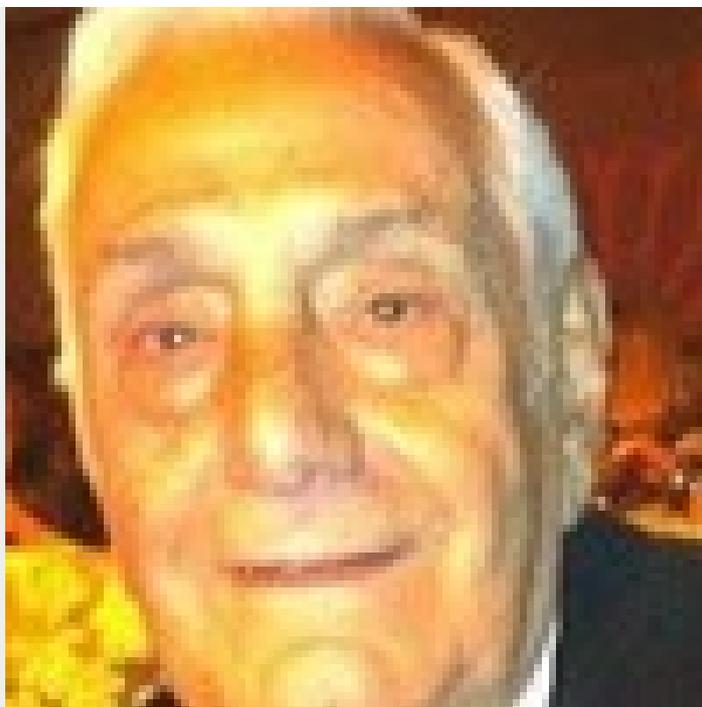


IS THIS HOW FREE & INDEPENDENT ARMENIA SHOULD BE?

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By Michael Mensoian, [The Armenian Weekly](#), 2 November 2013

Michael Mensoian, J.D./Ph.D, is professor emeritus in Middle East and political geography at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and a retired major in the U.S. army. He writes regularly for the Armenian Weekly. 

Let's begin by saying that we are proud to have a free and independent Armenia. That our country has been able to survive a brutal baptism, overcoming the devastating Spitak earthquake in 1988 during the waning days of the Soviet Union and the catastrophic collapse of its economy when the Bolshevik's socioeconomic experiment in state building self-destructed. It was an experiment that ignored accepted economic principles and the inextinguishable desire and determination of captive ethnic people to maintain their unique cultures. In addition to these significant obstacles, from its very inception Armenia was caught between its dependence on Moscow and its interest in strengthening its relationship with the West.

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During these 22 tumultuous years, the three administrations that have governed Armenia have been challenged to balance the country's independence with the demands of Russian interests in the South Caucasus; the genocidal proclivity of Turkish-Azeri leaders; and the realization that its future is best oriented toward Western Europe. During these years the country has had all of the trappings that characterize a going political entity. Progress has been made and if we were to compare the Armenia of today with the Armenia of some 20 years ago, the progress has been palpable.

However, having noted the success in maintaining this precarious balance and the progress that has been made, it would be unfair to gloss over the adverse impact that these same administrations

have had on Armenia and its people. Some blame for what currently plagues Armenia lies with the opposition parties and their respective leadership. How the blame is apportioned is unimportant. The fact that there is blame to *share* is important.

A recent conference organized by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and the UN Office in Armenia was held in Yerevan to explore the demographic challenges facing the country. For the administration to have its Labor and Social Affairs Ministry hold or even participate in such a conference is the height of cynicism: It is the unholy alliance between the ruling Republican Party and the oligarchs that has prolonged and intensified the economic malaise that plagues Armenia, and that is responsible for the demographic challenges the conference was to consider.

Yet, Deputy Minister Ara Petrosyan carried out his ministerial duties by citing the "Spitak earthquake...the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Karabagh War, and the transport blockade imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey" as reasons Armenia has such a high level of poverty and unemployment.

Another factor for the serious decline in the annual population count is the below replacement-level fertility rate. The low birth rate in Armenia is not necessarily the same reason for the low birth rate that the conferees cited for developed countries, where opportunity costs are a significant factor in delaying marriages as well as encouraging lower birth rates. A study introduced by one of the participants "revealed that emigration of young... is determined by the lack of opportunities for professional growth and development, as well as the wish to live in a society with better protection of human rights, democracy, and governance." An endless number of studies on countries experiencing similar problems already cite these same reasons.

Another survey introduced during the conference indicated that emigration was encouraged by "systemic issues such as centralization of business and monopolies and issues in education and the judicial sector." In addition, "the business sector is handled by a group of people who are also directly involved in public administration, supervising specific areas or sectors of the economy. This makes smaller competitors vulnerable, causing unemployment and unequal distribution of income throughout society." Should any of these conclusions really come as a revelation to members of parliament and representatives of relevant government agencies who were in attendance, or to the opposition political leaders who sat on the sidelines while the very reasons cited were taking root.

The same tired excuse that the closed border with Turkey and Azerbaijan has been a contributing factor to Armenia's problems was mentioned again. This excuse will never die. Armenia did not close the border and if Turkey had allowed it to remain open, Armenia would have been overwhelmed by a Turkish economy that can out-produce at a lower per unit cost practically anything that Armenia produces or is likely to produce. Consider that Turkey's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is over 45 times greater than Armenia's GDP. The argument in support of an open border is that it would reduce the cost of goods that Armenians purchase. True, but how does Armenia pay for these

goods? Since when is having an unfavorable balance of payment situation sound economics? Do proponents of an open border suggest that Turkey exploit workers in Armenia to produce the goods Armenians need? Who benefits? The Turkish businessman, or our connected politicians and oligarchs, or both. An open border without proper safeguards (which are most likely to be determined by the same unholy alliance of politicians and oligarchs that rule Armenia) would not benefit the Armenian worker and his family. In all likelihood, the Turkish lira would replace the Armenian dram as the currency of choice. Like Russia, Turkey would serve as a second magnet attracting our young people in search of employment and other opportunities.



Unfortunately, one can easily be misled by the veneer of vitality observed in Yerevan, which successfully masks the problems that engulf our country. The level of economic development in the country is inflated by the development that is taking place in our *mayrakaghak* (capital city)—development, by the way, that follows no comprehensive master plan other than to meet the profit motive of entrenched politicians and oligarchs. This development does very little to reduce the high level of poverty or unemployment; or to increase the limited educational and professional opportunities for our young people; or to stem the flow of individuals and families forced to leave Armenia in search of a better life.

Some opposition political parties have announced that they are prepared to address the demographic challenges that Armenia faces. Although the intent is sincere, it is based on an unrealistic assessment of the situation. The demographic challenges—stemming emigration and the below replacement-level fertility rate—are inextricably tied to a culture of governance where corruption and favoritism permeate all aspects of the economic, political, and judicial systems.

Sad to say, the political parties are in no position to lead a movement for change. Let's consider the various groups required for any effort to succeed. First and most important are the opposition leaders. Who among them has the charisma and the influence to create a working coalition of the required constituencies? Consider that there is no significant working relationship between any major opposition party and the various groups of activists. This should be the first step in broadening the base of any political party that is genuinely concerned with seeking change. Gaining the support of the electorate would seem to be a priority of the first order. If the people who are affected by existing conditions cannot be mobilized, what chance is there for change to occur? As it is, a significant number of voters most likely have no appetite for confrontation or have legitimate reasons to stay above the fray. Consider that some one million voters did not participate in the 2013 presidential election.

The third group essential to creating change lives is the diaspora. A firm relationship between opposition leaders and diasporan leaders is, at best, a work in progress. Two subsets of leaders can be identified: There are the wealthy philanthropists who work independently with government and religious leaders in Armenia to underwrite their personal projects. And there is a second group of

leaders who head the various organizations that solicit funds and channel humanitarian, technological, and financial aid to Armenia and its people. The projects that are being funded and the aid that is being provided are important. However, in large part it is a band-aid approach because it responds primarily to the *immediate* needs of the people, such as medical services, meals for the elderly, making potable water available, environmental rehabilitation, housing, etc. These are among the many needs that the administration has failed to address. Underwriting projects and providing aid without any attempt to address the policies, corruption, and the oligarchic and oligopolistic systems that are directly responsible for the poverty, unemployment, and demographic situation that so desperately requires this aid does little to empower the people so that they can build a better Armenia and improve their quality of life.

Diasporan leaders have a duty to weigh-in and lend their support to a legitimate opposition movement. Many of these diasporan leaders have the ear of the president and the Catholicos, meeting regularly when occasions demand or when receiving a medal in recognition of their service. Each of us has a moral responsibility to help our country. There can be no excuse, when we have the opportunity, to turn a blind eye to what we know is the cause for the debilitating conditions affecting our people.

The final group that is a key to real change includes the president and the oligarchs who are the beneficiaries of the economic malaise they have created. Unfortunately it is not likely that they will acknowledge their avarice as being responsible for the existing conditions in Armenia and voluntarily change course.

We are a people with a brilliant history that extends over millennia who have overcome adversity so many times in our past. But today, we seem to be willing to sit idly by as our country withers slowly and possibly irretrievably into oblivion. This is neither an over dramatization or an exaggeration of existing conditions in *mer mayreni yergir*. Our problem is that the opposition leaders (group 1) talk a good game, but the results never live up to their rhetoric. The electorate (group 2), except for energetic groups of activists, for the most part has no sustained appetite for confrontation or believes there is no credible opposition to lead them. Based on past experiences, they have reason to believe it would be a futile effort. The diasporan leaders (group 3) are hesitant, or worse, do not believe that they should be involved in the internal politics of Armenia. They are doing their duty by underwriting their personal projects or funneling aid to our brothers and sisters in need. The only committed, determined entity in all of this is the ruling party and the oligarchs (group 4) who form the power structure that is the root-cause of the problems. They will not voluntarily participate in any effort to change a system they oversee that would jeopardize the wealth and influence they enjoy.

Until an effective movement can be formed where there is trust and understanding between the opposition political leaders, representative sectors of the electorate, and key diasporan leaders, our people will continue to experience these unacceptable and demoralizing conditions. Is this what our

free and independent Armenia should be?

