VIRTUAL STATE RUN BY OLIGARCHY

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In a democracy, the government is a team elected by the people and civil servants hired by that government to pass and administer laws that optimize the well-being and prospects of the people. In the wake of the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia was naturally unready to set up such a system. As a result power fell into the hands of persons who soon realized that money is power.

Where was this money to come from? Naturally from the sources intended for the people. Soon, a coalition of clans formed and the oligarchic system of governance was established. Within this syndicate, struggles for leadership led protagonists to forever try to enhance their strengths, i.e. grab more and more of the people's resources. The oligarchy then became increasingly more sophisticated. Thus the members of the major opposition party in parliament are also members of the syndicate.

Now a system of rotating chairmanship of the hierarchy is in place masquerading as political discourse. It's not known to what extent the individuals in power have national 'feelings' or aspirations, but assuming they do, they find themselves stuck in an all-or-nothing rut, the price of extrication from which too high for them and their families. So the self-serving oligarchic government perpetuates itself, with the consequence that Armenia does not have a government. In other words, citizens do not have a collectively selected team to realize their collective goals.

The collectivity (the nation) is headless, rudderless, glue-less. As such, it is temporarily no longer a collectivity (a nation). Worse, the 'head', to maintain itself, has to steal from the 'body' (how else to satisfy its source of power?). The sum total of this situation is that Armenian parents lie sleepless in bed late at night and worrying about their children's future, do not see themselves as part of a group that together can build a good place for all the children of the group. The longer the current situation persists, the more entrenched in the minds of individuals the notion that nation is a myth.

Here is an example from my area of work, health care and medical education. All of society is similarly organized. There is no accreditation of hospitals and no proper licensing of doctors. This year, Armenia will graduate half as many medical students (over 500) as the Canadian province of Ontario (less than 1,000), even though Armenia's population is at best one-seventh that of Ontario. Armenia has as many medical schools as Ontario. One, is (was) a reasonably good medical school (Heratsi State Medical School). The others have sprouted as private properties of this or that oligarch. Their quality is dismal, their 'graduates' are youths with money who join the residency programs next to those with a semblance of proper education from Heratsi.

In any normal country, medical residents are paid a salary during their residency. In Armenia, the residents pay the hospitals to do their residency. Graduation from a residency program is tied to the number of years spent in the program, and pretty much only that. For example, one can spend three years in a surgical specialty, and during these years can operate on zero patients, but then can graduate anyway.

Some years ago, when the Soviet era dean of the main medical school (Heratsi) retired, a fantastic new dean was appointed. Her husband was a minor oligarch. She, however, seemed to have something special in her heart. She established a superb vice-dean of medical education office to revamp the whole system. This naturally did not go well with the oligarchy. The incredible efforts and inroads towards revamping curricula, introducing accreditation and licensing, etc. led by this office were abruptly stopped. The dean was replaced, and since then Heratsi and its teaching hospital are in severe decline.

Incidentally, the Church also owns a hospital. Very recently, the position of medical director opened at this hospital, and a seemingly normal competitive process was initiated. People sent resumes, interviews were held, and excellent candidates were short-listed… and at the last moment, the Catholicos intervened and said, no, there is this other guy I know…. he will become the director, and so he was.

I know many people in Armenia, but I do not know anyone who does not know the above. How do they react to these realities? Most, understandably, leave. Few are substrata of the oligarchy, and are able to lead some kind of existence. Few others are the true embodiments of our nation. They somehow manage to rise above their fears. They channel the thousands of years of our culture and refuse to accept defeat. Against all odds they hope and they stay. They join civic society movements, such as the Pre-Parliament movement, and they do what they can, alone, or in their small groups, with no power or money, to try and save this nation.

I know many people in the Diaspora, and I do know some who still do not know much of the above, though their numbers are dwindling. The Diaspora leadership certainly knows the above. But why do Diaspora leaders embrace (literally) the oligarchy?

How are we doing as a nation? Not well. We are losing 100,000 of our people from the homeland every year. Can we invent riches to keep our people on the land? No. Can we govern ourselves better? Yes, but first we need to actually have a government. We should stop pretending we have a government. We should stop lying. There are too few left who could be lied to, and Diasporan leaders are increasingly turning into ludicrous jesters. And what are we, regular Diasporans, who accept this?

The major media, in the homeland and in the Diaspora, are controlled by the government or the Diasporan leadership respectively. They spew lies. What is uglier is us. Standing in church and community halls… applauding. Empty words; ridiculous, soundless, heartless, applause. A wailing

silence all around, stabs, impalement, again and again, into the core of who we are, into the heart of the journey that brought us here.

Oh, what our fedayeen faced in the mountains of Agdagh and throughout Anatolia, to save what few they could from the caravans of death. Oh, what deprivation, rape, and abuse survived the helpless young girls, who, somehow, against all odds, carried us, delivered us, here, before they dropped, annihilated, but hopeful, hopeful, thinking that they did their part, that we would do ours, that evil will not win, that the nation will survive…

It is time we opened our eyes. It is time we became honest. It is time we got serious. It is time we stopped being scared.

I conclude with an extract from Grigoris Balakian's book, *Armenian Golgotha*. Srpazan Balakian, on his way to be killed (which he miraculously escaped), with a small group of destitute co-deportees came across a sight not to be beholden by human eyes. He wrote (translation by Peter Balakian with Aris Sevag):

"For a moment or two, on seeing this misery, we lost hope. And we asked ourselves: Why are we living and for whom are we living?... But then, suddenly, the flaming fire of life strengthened our weary steps. No! No! On the contrary, it was necessary to live at all costs… All that mattered was to stay alive and see the resurrection of the Armenian people."