

OFF THE CUFF AND FROM THE HEART

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By Prof. Davit Zargarian, Ottawa, 30 May 2009

The following is a portion of a discussion that was held on-line in 24 April Forum (Canada) on the eve of the mayoral election in Yerevan. It is published with the permission of the author.

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Perhaps my reading of LTP's speech is not nuanced enough, but I hear in his words, the unfortunate attitude of blaming the Diaspora for nearly all the major problems of Armenia. It's an ideology that says if everyone in the Diaspora doesn't go out marching in the streets and doesn't shout out strong voices of political protest to Serge Sarkissian, then Diaspora is directly responsible for the poor state of democracy in Armenia.

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Ironically, LTP states that the most important goal for us all should be the welfare of Armenia's citizens, yet he seems to forget that the Diaspora at large has contributed and continues to contribute to the welfare of its compatriots through economic and cultural help.

There is no room in the approach adopted by LTP for the following considerations:

- that perhaps some Diasporans don't believe they have the right to be too forceful in their criticism of the Armenian state;
- that maybe some in the Diaspora believe that it's not just the state authority in Armenia that is not ready for a mature democracy but also many of the citizens of Armenia haven't fully embraced democratic principles;
- that the serious doubt LTP, himself, would create a significantly stronger democratic regime.
- that maybe some in the Diaspora don't believe that corruption is easy to eliminate without major

cultural shifts among the masses.

None of the above "maybe"s seems to have been considered; the only explanation offered for Diaspora's relative silence is that "they don't care about us; they just care about Genocide recognition". The mirror image of this attitude, which is equally simplistic and unjustified, is the belief or fear among some in the Diaspora that if they were to rely on Armenia's government for advancing Genocide recognition, it would be a lost cause.

Some, on one side of the divide seem to think that the other side cares only about Genocide and doesn't care about the advancement of democracy and improving the lives of people; others, at the opposite side believe that if it were up to Armenia's elite, they would be only too glad to put historical grievances aside and get on with the business of trading soap and shampoo with Turkey and oil with Azerbaijan.

Let us talk frankly about what LTP seems to consider fundamentally important for Armenia, the welfare of its citizens, their human rights, justice, etc. How committed is LTP to all this? I am willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and consider the possibility that looking back over his own presidential terms in the 1990's he is now determined to become a true people's leader, to respond to national aspirations of his constituents, to entrench democracy and human rights in Armenia. But, what are the indications that this is indeed the case?

I'm not reassured that he's serious about carrying out the true duties of the Mayor of Yerevan; rather, it sounds like he's simply using the Mayoral race to position himself and his supporters for the real prize, which is presidency. Is this fair to the citizens of Yerevan? If we believe that people's welfare is of utmost importance, I would say that the mayor should invest himself/herself 100% in improving the functioning of the city and deal effectively with its mundane but real problems. In this context, I fear that LTP is not campaigning to improve garbage collection or expand green spaces or improve quality of drinking water, etc. but will simply use this position to attack his political enemies and to prepare himself for the big race.

Of course, I am not against his ambitions for the presidency. I have no reason to believe he would be worse than Kocharian or Sargsyan; but someone who aspires to become the leader of the country should also be wise enough not to paint all of Diaspora with the same broad brush and to realize that Diaspora is its ally, not its enemy.

A true leader should open communication channels with the Diaspora, not limit himself to the elite organizations. How many times has LTP come to talk to us, to understand our concerns and outlooks, not just about Genocide recognition but also our dreams of what we would like to see happen in Armenia? It is not hard to make speeches from Armenia to condemn the Diaspora for not

being vocal and active enough in the fight for democracy in Armenia, but much harder to build bridges and to engage us in this struggle. In addition, what guarantees is he willing to offer that his presidency will truly change things around?

In the fight against corruption and anti-democratic tendencies, all who are opposed to the present situation had better learn to unite and find common ground. Making dismissive speeches and issuing blanket condemnations of a significant portion of one's potential supporters is not conducive to victory.

