OLIGARCH'S OR PEOPLE'S ARMENIA?

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Category: Opinions

Zareh Ouzounian, Toronto, 3 Febraury 2015

The recent developments in Artsakh--see the below attached links--deserve close attention and strong condemnation. They shed light on the underlying causes and reasons for unacceptable violence against peaceful protesters.

On January 31 a convoy of 40 cars headed to Artsakh. This auto rally was one of many and had been preceded by four similar rallies in the different regions of Republic of Armenia during recent months. These auto rallies are organized by the *Nakhakhorhrtaran* (pre-parliament), now the *Himnatir Khorhrtaran* (Founding Parliament) and the stated purpose is to inform and engage the general public in the political discourse, promoting systemic and regime change in Armenia, with the stated intention of starting widespread civil disobedience on April 24, which coincides with the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide.

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These auto rallies are and have been totally peaceful and purely informative. The Artsakh authorities had previously discouraged the organizers from such an action and had used all their propaganda machine to depict the organizers as “trouble makers”. The *Himnatir Khorhrtaran* nevertheless decided to go ahead with the rally. Before reaching the “border” between Armenia and Artsakh, they were met by police and civilians (some of them with masks) who told the organizers that their auto rally is not welcome in Artsakh and that they should return to Armenia. The organizers of the auto rally understood the situation and complied.

As soon as they started getting back into their cars to return to Armenia, they were brutally attacked and received extensive physical, material and psychological damage. None of the auto rally participants fought back. It is worthwhile mentioning that they had brought along with them their spouses and children and were totally unarmed as they had absolutely no intention of engaging in

any kind of conflict.

There were three journalists among the protesters, and the attackers confiscated their video recorders to prevent the recording and any publicity of the attacks. Nevertheless, most of the brutal event was successfully recorded with the help of cellular phones.

The attackers had total disregard to the presence of women and children and smashed those same cars while the women and the children were inside. They also brutally attacked Jirair Sefilian, a distinguished decorated war hero, Alec Yenikomshian, a legendary ASALA hero, Igor Mouradian, a member of the original Karabagh Committeee, Varoujan Avedissian, a remarkable past commander in the army, lawyer, defender of rule of law and democracy, and many others.

Understandably, the opinions vary regarding the policies, strategies and road map of the *Himnatir Khorhrtaran,* however regarding the unjustified violent attacks on peaceful protesters, there is widespread condemnation. The only people not condemning are hard core supporters of the present regimes in Armenia, Artsakh, and the Diaspora.

One of the most frequently debated questions is: Why Artsakh? Why did Sefilian and the *Himnatir Khorhrtaran* want to organize an informative rally in Artsakh? What were they hoping to achieve? Isn't Artsakh a *de facto* republic, independent in itself and independent from Armenia? This is a fundamental issue and reveals a wide divergence in opinions.

For the *Himnatir Khorhrtaran*, Artsakh is an integral part of Armenia. The so-called border is only a technicality that needs to be corrected. The *Artsakhtsi* (inhabitant of Artsakh) carries an Armenian passport. The *Artsakhtsi* can occupy the highest positions in Armenia. All university degrees are mutually recognized. During the liberation war, the Armenian army and the Diaspora freedom fighters fought alongside the *Artsakhtsi* and achieved success with that joint effort. Many of the political parties, including the Diaspora parties have an active presence in Artsakh. Our fundraising institutions like the *Himnatram* direct their assistance both to Armenia **and** Artsakh. The AGBU, the Medical Associations, the Trade Associations and innumerable humanitarian NGOs do not differentiate between Republic of Armenia and Artsakh.

Following this logic, all activities, including civic and political, should be allowed to be carried freely in both Artsakh and Armenia. This includes of course freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful dissent.

The ruling elite in Artsakh would have been much better advised not only to allow the free expression of a dissenting opinion, but should have actually welcomed it and shown the world they are a tolerant and open-minded society. This would have gone a long way *vis-à-vis* our Diaspora and the international community.

The argument that Artsakh is presently in a dire security situation under constant attacks from the Azeri side, and hence such rallies should have not taken place does not stand ground. Artsakh has

been under attack for the past 21 years and will remain threatened in the foreseeable future. But so is the province of Tavoush in Armenia proper. Being under security threat does not and should not exclude political and civic activism and the search for better governance and real independence.

Artsakh and Armenia should be one state as they are inhabited by the sons and daughters of the same nation. Anything else is not sustainable in the long run. Can you imagine if in the future *Nakhitchevan* is liberated, or *Javakhk*, or Western Armenia without a strong central government. Such a unity is imperative, failing which there will be small republics that will certainly be more vulnerable to foreign influences and interventions

Another subject of controversy is the date of April 24, coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. The detractors argue that April 24 is an untouchable date of national mourning whereas the *Himnatir Khorhrtaran* argues that in addition of the remembrance of 1,5 million victims of the genocide, that date should also become the symbol for the re-birth of our State. A political action should be started on that day when large numbers of compatriots both citizens of Republic of Armenia and from the Diaspora will already be mobilized for the traditional march towards the Dzidzernagapert. It would be rather difficult for the regime to use violence against the activists starting a widespread and **non-violent civil disobedience** as it will be subject to scrutiny by Armenians and the international community alike. Thus, April 24 will become a date for rebirth of the nation in addition to the genocide remembrance.

This alternative approach of non-violent civil disobedience is based on the indisputable fact that the elections have time and time again proven to be fraudulent. Alternative means are necessary to bring about systemic change in the country.

Among the guiding principles of the *Himnatir Khorhrtaran*:

- Establish a New Armenia, with proper governance,
- Struggle against the economic and political dominance of Armenia by oligarchs and foreigners through establishment of a truly independent State,
- Achieve the unity of Republic of Armenia and Artsakh,
- Bring about systemic change by peaceful, non-violent means.

Consequently, the peaceful protests presently occurring in Armenia have an EXISTENTIAL purpose with multiple dimensions.

Yes, the people of Armenia want better governance.

Yes, they wish to get rid of the present oligarchic system bleeding the country and its citizens.

Yes, they wish for an independent judiciary system.

Yes, they want to fight the decaying corruption affecting all aspects of their everyday life.

But above all, the people of Armenia want THEIR Armenia back.

The present administration has a different perspective. The recent geo-political developments have consistently proven that the ruling elite is in agreement with the *status quo* and sacrifices all the above-mentioned principles in the name of *Realpolitik*.

While freedom of speech is supposedly tolerated in Armenia and Artsakh, it seems to be allowed as long as it is just words. As soon as the spoken word is accompanied by action, dissent gets organized, receives shape, form and substance, starts receiving an attentive ear from a growing segment of the population and the media, that same freedom of speech begins posing a threat to the *status quo*. At that stage Freedom of speech and expression becomes unacceptable to all groups and individuals belonging to and benefiting from that *status quo*.

This is why no effort will be spared to silence the true opposition. By subduing the voices calling for liberation, by describing the protestors as marginal, by responding to peaceful protests with disproportionate and unacceptable violence, by using every means to intimidate the dissenting voices, the present administration will try to silence the people's voice and crush any effort capable of bringing CHANGE.

At stake is our very existence as a Nation, a state with independent policies in the interest of its citizens.

We cannot be simple bystanders.

A peaceful non-violent transition is necessary. All Armenians must be vigilant that it is so.

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Սա բանդիտական հարձակում էր, հարվածներ են հասցրել նաև Ժիրայրի կնոջը և երկու երեխաներին

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«Շարժում 88» կուսակցությունը ներողություն է խնդրում կատարվածի համար

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