

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ELECTIONS

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 Prof. Alan Whitehorn, Toronto, 14 May 2011

Political Participation and Elections in Canada & Armenia

The following lecture was presented to the annual convention of the Armen Karo Student Association. Comments are welcome.

Introduction

As Armenian Canadians, our identities are rooted in two distinct lands. Many of our youngest were born in Canada; still others grew up elsewhere in the Diaspora. Irrespective of where we first took our first steps as a child, we have special feelings towards Armenia. Hayastan is our ancestral homeland. It is precious to our collective identity. It is even more so, given the trauma of the 1915 genocide that killed so many of our kin. Almost a century later, that terrible period still defines much of our shared identity about who we are and hope to be. So much of our fears and hopes are still linked to the events caused by the Young Turk genocidal regime of the Ottoman Empire. The revolutionary authoritarian state denied the Armenian people's collective right to participate as full citizens within a multi-ethnic polity and tried to destroy us as a people. Turkey still denies that it planned and committed those terrible deeds.

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As we commence the second decade of the 21st century, it is important that we look back and continue to learn our history. However, it is equally important that we look forward and reflect on our

future path. Scholars have documented that lack of democracy is a key contributing factor to genocide. Therefore, it can be suggested that an articulate and principled commitment to democracy is one of the best ways for Armenians to repudiate the past genocidal misdeeds of others.

Some Questions

What do Armenians know about democratic practices around the world? What do Armenian-Canadians know about their own history of political participation and democratic challenges, both in Canada and in Armenia? What analytical insight do we possess about democratic theory and organization? What are our experiences with contemporary parties and elections?

Analytical Outline

Political participation can come in many forms and on a variety of levels. There are two categories, each involving a pyramid-like pattern. With more people involved at lower levels and fewer at higher strata. The first and larger pyramid is that of conventional forms of participation. This can take the form of listening to politicians and then voting. It may involve volunteering time or funds, joining a party, serving in some organizational role or becoming a candidate. It may even include being elected or serving in some leadership role. Not all of us have the time, background or the inclination to become fully engaged in non-stop politics. But it is important that we remain informed and participate. Too many do not do so, particularly amongst the young generation. Their non-voting rates are historically high and sadly growing. I would suggest that voting is a moral obligation that we owe to those who never had such a democratic choice and who suffered a horrific fate under a brutal authoritarian regime. We must never forget what a lack of democracy can mean. The second pyramid of participation can emerge when at times the avenues of peaceful democratic forms of participation are closed by arbitrary government. Or such a conventional route of participation seems inadequate or too slow. When human rights and citizenship are denied, it is legitimate for individuals and groups to petition or protest. If those requests for reform are repudiated by the regime and those making the requests are harassed or punished, then one has the right to escalate in both methods and demands. A subject population has the right to collective self-rule. They ought to be able to live in peace, security and dignity. They have the right to resist tyranny and crimes against humanity. Above all, a subjugated people have the right to defend themselves against state-directed genocide.

Major Issues

Most of politics is not usually about revolution and genocide. It does, however, involve value choices, competition for resources, and forming a government often through elections, but not only so. Despite significant differences in geography, history, culture and economics, countries often face similar or comparable issues. The magnitude of the challenges may, of course, differ. The solutions also can vary. Amongst those issues that seem most relevant in Canada and Armenia are the

following:

Executive power:

How much executive power is appropriate? What are the constitutional limits upon government? What is the relationship between the executive and the legislature? How are citizens protected from an arbitrary government or leader?

Parties:

How many parties are best to reflect the diversity of public opinion? How do parties differ? Are parties built around different leaders, ideologies, policies or demographics? How partisan should politics be? Should some parties be banned? Are some parties, in practice, significantly underrepresented in the legislature? Are parties equal in access to the voters? Are some parties with more resources than others? Does the party in power take unfair advantage of state resources to stay in office? Do some parties unnecessarily drive a wedge between social groups? How democratic are parties in their internal organization?

Conventional participation

What are the best ways to participate in democratic politics? Which parties offer the best policies and programmes? Should support for parties be based primarily on the issue how much they recognize the 1915 genocide? How important is it for Armenians as a group to support one particular party? Is national unity of Armenians key in political participation?

Unconventional participation:

If normal avenues of participation are blocked, are unconventional forms inevitable? What is the attitude of the regime to public protest? How large are the protests? How violent are the protesters? How does the state respond? How successful can are protests?

Inequality:

Do all groups participate equally in politics? Are women underrepresented? Are young people under-represented? Is there a growing cultural gulf between rural and urban? Is there a social/economic divide between the capital city and the regions? Is the gender gap of increasing importance? Is there a widening generational gap? How great is the gulf between the rich and the poor? Is the poverty amidst wealth reaching excessive levels? Is the country divided between right and left, between rich vs poor, between the 'haves and have nots'? How much should the state spend on social programmes? Should the government lower taxes?

Health Care and Welfare

How well do we nurture our children? Do we need more and better public day care? Do we need to greatly expand our funding for post-secondary education? How do we treat our elderly, who endured so much in history? Are state pensions sufficient? What are the demographic changes affecting the viability of our social programmes?

Job Creation

In the midst of a global recession, is the number one priority jobs? Being a relatively small portion of the global GNP, do we really control our economic future?

Environment

Is the quest for jobs and economic growth endangering our country's land, and water? Is the young generation more committed to green values?

Human Rights

Is the continuing growth of state executive power an increasing threat to our democratic freedoms? What are the public constraints on those with coercive power? How are ethnic and religious minorities treated both by the state and the public at large

Sovereignty

Will our country survive in the coming decades? What are the internal and external threats? Is another referendum on independence in the future?

Foreign Policy and Defence

What direction in the political compass should we look? What is our past? What is our future? Should we do more in UN peacekeeping? As a people who have suffered immeasurably from genocide, do we have an historic obligation to those who perished in 1915? Should we do far more to stop genocide and crimes against humanity? Are our efforts best suited to provide aid and soft power in a conflict-prone world or combat missions and hard power?

Our Country's Place in the World:

Existing near an imperial/super power, what is our role as a smaller state? How can we maintain our independence? Is a small nation-state economy viable in today's world? Does our country need to be part of a large regional or continental trade block? If so, which one?

Relations Between the Diaspora/Republic of Armenia

What is the relationship between the affluent Diaspora and impoverished Armenia? Does each part of the Armenian nation have quite different experiences and expectations? Is one still searching for the existential basic quantity of life features (e.g. physical security and jobs), while the other quality of life aspects (e.g. environment)? What are the top priorities of Diaspora Armenians vs Armenians in the Republic? How aware are Diaspora Armenians of the public priorities in Armenia? How well do Armenians in the land-locked Republic understand the Diaspora? Are we one undivided nation or two fragmented solitudes searching in the dark for each other? Where is the guiding light for Armenians in this new century?

Conclusion

This long list of questions can be posed equally in Canada and Armenia. We would benefit from greater understanding of the interrelatedness of these questions and what are possible and plausible responses. May wisdom and the quest for justice be our guides.

Appendix A

Participation, levels, styles, forms:

styles: conventional vs. unconventional

conventional: (often peaceful)

levels: hierarchic pyramid, more resource demanding fewer people participate
starting with the lowest

1) non-voter, parochial/subject

2) spectator who watch debates, read pamphlets & ads, talk to friend, wear button, vote)

3) transitional who attend meetings, contribute, become a member

4) gladiators who volunteer, solicit funds & support, become a member, or candidate, or elected
representative - highest level

unconventional: (often violent)

petition

protest, demonstration

boycott

refusing to pay homage or stand for anthem

refusing to pay taxes or serve in army

unlawful assembly

riot

general strike

violence against property

violence against persons

kidnapping, assassination, hijacking (i.e. few)

coup

rebellion, civil war

guerrilla war, revolution

Appendix B

Recent Parliamentary Election Results: Canada and Armenia

Armenian Parliamentary Election Results, 2007

(parties vote, 5% or over)

Republican Party of Armenia/ Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaktsutyun	33.9%
Prosperous Armenia/ Bargavach Hayastani Kusaktsutyun	15.1%
Armenian Revolutionary Federation/ Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaktsutyun	13.1%
Rule of Law/ Orinants Yerkir	7.1%
Heritage/Zharangatyun	6.0%
Other (8 parties)	20.3%

Canadian Parliamentary Election Results, 2011

(preliminary results)

Conservative	39.6%
New Democratic Party (NDP)	30.7%
Liberal	18.9%
Bloc Quebecois	6.1%
Green	3.9%
Other (none with more than 1%)	

Appendix C**Survey of Public Opinion Priorities: Canada and Armenia**

Most important issues facing Armenia

Armenian Sociological Association survey, 2007

Rank order

- 1) unemployment
- 2) social & economic situation
- 3) Nagorno-Karabagh
- 4) stagnation
- 5) corruption
- 6) slow economic development
- 7) migration
- 8) genocide recognition

Most important issues in Canada, 2011

Nanos Research, February 14, 2011

Rank and percent

Health care	22.9%
Jobs/economy	20.2%
Environment	10.3%
Debt/Deficit	5.2%
Education	5.3%

