THE CASE FOR VARTAN OSKANIAN: AN OPEN LETTER

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Vartan Karaoghlanian, Burbank, CA USA, 8 October 2012

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On a personal level, one feels pain for a dear friend targeted by a political apparatus intolerant of any form of dissent, let alone criticism expressed by a former administration member. In a larger sense, one feels pain for Armenia itself, in view of the Armenian government's seeming inability to prove itself worthy of its own principles of democracy, justice, and fairness.

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I have known Vartan Oskanian since 1973. We met that year as students at the Yerevan Polytechnic Institute. The friendship that almost instantly developed between us was more akin to the bond of brotherhood, particularly given our commonalities.

Both Vartan and I were sons of the Diaspora, raised with an impassioned vision of service to community and homeland. More than a matter of mere idealism, that vision was rooted in a certain existential credo. The values we were instilled with propelled us to get a good education, work hard, but also, ultimately, help contribute to the vitality of Armenian culture, engage in processes which would lead to a better future for the Armenian nation.

Despite the fact that he came from a well-to-do family, which meant he had the option of studying in Europe or elsewhere, Vartan sought to obtain his university education in Yerevan. That's because he wanted to experience the full complement of the Armenian heritage up-close, at the cultural heart of the worldwide Armenian community, where Armenian was spoken everywhere you turned, and theaters and concert halls were filled to the rafters week after week. Above all, Vartan, like so many of us, yearned to dedicate himself to community activism.

His first opportunity in this regard came in the late 1980s, when, after having moved to Los Angeles

with his family, Vartan and a group of like-minded friends, including myself, founded the Armenian International Magazine (AIM). Envisioned as the Time Magazine of the Armenian media, AIM soon became a household name, offering in-depth reporting and analyses of current affairs, with a special focus on two historic developments: Artsakh's war of liberation, and the independence of Armenia.

By 1992, when AIM already was regarded as one of the world's most respected Armenian news publications, Vartan both served as its editor-in-chief and continued his studies, at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, from which he earned a graduate degree.

It was at this juncture that Vartan resolved to put his abilities directly at the service of our fledgling independent republic. His life in Los Angeles, and his job at AIM, had all the makings of a comfortable, prosperous future, while the idea of public service in an Armenia gripped by severe economic hardship and political uncertainty could scarcely be considered appealing. Yet, to Vartan, the challenge was precisely the point, as the one thing which mattered to him was that he knew he could — and must — be of help to the homeland, in whatever capacity.

After moving to Yerevan with his family, Vartan began to work for the foreign ministry, and within a short few years was entrusted with the ministry's top position. As foreign minister, Vartan Oskanian carried out a progressive mandate which comprised Armenia's accelerated political and economic integration into the world community, better relations with neighboring states and international powers, and the pursuit of an equitable peace process.

Vartan's public service following his tenure as foreign minister has been and continues to be as significant and far-reaching. The Civilitas Foundation, which he established in 2008, is much more than a conventional think tank. It offers innovative yet common-sense programs designed to foster democracy, development, and regional peace, with an overarching emphasis on helping Armenia become a dynamic, prosperous, and genuinely pluralistic republic. As importantly, the Civilitas Foundation has become a source of inspiration and hope for thousands upon thousands of Armenian citizens, youths in particular, who take their cues from the foundation to advocate civic discourse, wide-ranging democratic reforms, and grassroots economic empowerment.

So why is Vartan Oskanian, one of Armenia's most forward-thinking, and certainly most reform-minded public figures, now being made the target of a veritable crusade by the country's oligarchic powers-that-be? The answer, of course, is provided by the question.

I believe that today every voice of dissent in Armenia, every single action which promotes free speech, better democratic institutions, and economic empowerment of the masses, is as precious and irreplaceable as the most priceless national resource imaginable. There is no future for Armenia without these voices — unless we all resign ourselves to an Armenia forging ahead as a pluralistic state in name only.

By writing this open letter, my hope is that people everywhere will join me in protesting against the false accusations leveled against Vartan Oskanian. With our united stance, we must remind the

government of Armenia that the victim here is not just Vartan Oskanian per se, but democracy itself, and that the world is watching.