THE CONSPICUOUS SILENCE OF THE ARMENIAN ACADEMIC IN ARMENIA AND IN THE DIASPORA, APATHY OR FEAR?

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Category: Opinions

Excerpts from notes of Prof. Sima Aprahamian for the presentation at the Roundtable Discussion:Policy Directions in Post Election Armenia, Montréal, 20 June 2008

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The quotations below are excerpts from the notes of Prof. Sima Aprahamian for the presentation dealing with the subject of ***the Conspicuous Silence of the Armenian Academic in Armenia and in the Diaspora, Apathy or Fear?***

I was asked to bring the issue of the silence of the Armenian academics about the recent events in Armenia.

Although the post-Perestroika & Glasnost years leading to Armenia's re-independence were marked by an active presence and participation of Armenian intellectuals, the same cannot be said of the post 1991period.

There have been radically different interpretations of the election result and debates have emerged inside and outside Armenia – but what we come to label as "intellectuals" may not have been actively present in these debates.

As you know, since 1991 Armenia has held five presidential elections (1991, 1996, 1998, 2003, and 2008). Of these only the 1991 election is considered to have been free and fair.

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Unlike the previous instances, many officials, civil servants and diplomats have resigned or lost their positions; likewise some army generals backed Ter-Petrossian; What really may have been different in this case is perhaps due to the existence of new forms of media. Moreover, as was pointed out by the Open Democracy observation, this "election itself and especially the demonstrations in their aftermath have witnessed the emergence of a generation of young Armenians as an active political constituency. The festive atmosphere in Liberty Square has attracted increasing numbers of young people, despite threats of expulsion or suspension against them (allegedly) made by the deans and rectors of some universities. This, again, is a contrast with previous elections, particularly in 1998 and 2003, when protest rallies were composed mainly of older people whose nostalgia for the good old Soviet days led them to support former Armenian Communist Party leader Karen Demirchian (1998) and his son Stepan Demirchian (2003)".

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As already mentioned, Armenians conceive of themselves as an oppressed nation, and for them failure to provide a solution to the "Armenian Question", along with the 1894-95 Armenian massacres by the Ottomans culminating with the 1915 genocide, its denial by Turkey, and the forced deportations of Armenians from their historic homeland in Turkey that led to the dispersal of the Armenian populations throughout the world, have led to the perpetuation of this identity.

Even the rhetoric of Soviet Armenia reinforced such conceptualisations, as the following passage from an article by H. Hagopian indicates (1987: 5):"The Great October Revolution extended its rescuing hand to the Armenian people at

a time when one and a half million Western Armenians were being put to the sword by the Young Turks, and when the escapees had abandoned their centuries old homeland as the Kemalists brandished their yataghan before the Eastern Armenians …."

Nationalist aspirations were repressed under Soviet rule. However, since the early days of Sovietisation through the post-Stalinian period, Armenians have expressed their sentiments with mass uprisings, as with the February 1921 uprising or with individual protests, and beginning with the 1960s the movement has at first been centred around the issue of the demands for official recognition of the 1915 Armenian genocide and the rights of peoples for self-determination.

The national movement in Armenia did not re-surface until 1956, when a Union of nationalists appeared in the University of Erevan (mouradian 1990: 253). The 1960s witnessed a growing national movement, as an engineer, Svedlana (born in 1938) recalls in the summer of 1992: "In the 1960s there was a brief Spring in Soviet Armenia. We were young and initiated a movement for (1) the official recognition of the Armenian genocide; (2) and for the demands of our lands from Turkey. It was also during this period that we initiated a petition for the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia". All the post-*perestroika* leaders of the Armenian national movement had their inspirations from the events in the 1960s."

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In an article entitled *New Government – Old Guidelines* by David Petrosyan April 28, 2008 the following observations were made.-

The formation of the government and the administration of the country's new President on the whole finished in Armenia. Even one and rather a perfunctory glance at the formed team is enough to understand that the "new team" in its staff hardly differs from the previous one. No doubt, only new Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandian is a relatively new figure in it. The former career Soviet diplomat, in difference to many of his former Armenian colleagues, in the early 90s decided to continue his career in the Third Republic and did not miscalculate. Now the zealous supporter of a strict protocol having resided in Paris in the past 10 years is to "show himself to good effect" on the spot, in Armenia. It will be not so easy. No doubt, local observers will compare E. Nalbandian with his predecessor, V. Oskanian, who was very harshly and on business criticized by print media not controlled by the authorities. However, many opponents appreciated V. Oskanian for his flexibility, intellect, and openness to press. The new minister will have to build a new image under conditions of much time trouble and pressure by not only the OSCE Minsk Group, main foreign players in the region, strengthened positions of Baku, but also under conditions of an extremely low level of the internal and external legitimacy of the "party in power" in Armenia…….

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http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-caucasus/armenia_3075.jsp

The most recent nationwide polls in 2003 "fell short of international standards for democratic elections in a number of key respects, in particular the counting and tabulation of votes …showed serious irregularities, including widespread ballot stuffing." Armenia urgently needs to improve its election system before the next parliamentary

contest in 2007; the referendum was an opportunity for the country to show that it is ready to take a step forward towards becoming a democracy based on the rule of law. All the evidence so far is that Armenia has failed to take that step.

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A disputed election followed by mass protest has created a political crisis in another post-Soviet state. But the arrival of new technologies and a younger generation signal a new chapter rather than a rerun, says Armine Ishkanian.

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