THERE IS NO ROLE FOR THE DIASPORA IN YEREVAN; IS THERE?

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(Reactions to Prof. Onnig Beylerian's Views) July 7-9, 2008
by Avedis Kevorkian, Philadelphia, PA & Viken L Attarian P. Eng MBA, Mount Royal and excerpts from "24April Forum" discussion by Dr. Vahe Manook, Toronto; Alidz Bostanian, Montréal & Davit Zargarian PhD, Ottawa

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"Not only is the idea of Diaspora involvement in Yerevan asinine and idiotic but also it smacks of arrogance."

If it was the intention of Prof. Onnig Beylerian to start a discussion on the subject of the role of the Armenian Diaspora vis-à-vis Yerevan, permit me to take off my jacket, roll up my sleeves, and enter the fray. (If it wasn't, I will anyway!)

But first, permit me to apologize in advance to the good professor for the language and tone of this essay.

Whether or not the idea of involving the Diaspora in Yerevan's affairs is his, it is an asinine and idiotic idea. If it is not his idea but he is passing on someone else's idea, then I humbly suggest that he take up another cause--perhaps, the right of consenting sado-masochists to abuse each other in the privacy of their homes, for instance.

Not only is the idea of Diaspora involvement in Yerevan asinine and idiotic but also it smacks of arrogance. It suggests that a divided and divisive Diaspora--whose elements actually compete with each other--can, somehow, make things in Yerevan better. It suggests that matters are so well organized in the Diaspora that it sets an excellent example for Yerevan (or, for that matter, any other government) to emulate.

Before I go on, I must say that I would like to hear Prof. Beylerian's explanation (and defense?) of the divided Armenian Diaspora and its *diprosopus tetrotus* monster called the Armenian Church. And, when he finishes, I would like to hear Prof. Beylerian's explanation (and defense?) of two (count'em, two) "independence" days. Is it his view that by having two of everything, the Armenians are twice as good and worthy as any other group? Or, is it a confession that the Armenians are only half as good?

But, to continue.

The following diatribe is based on some of the professor's talking points in his presentation at the June 20 conference in Montreal.

A diaspora, by definition, is a diaspora because it chooses not to live in the "mother" country. Therefore, a diaspora has no business interfering in the affairs (certainly has no right of participation in the executive or legislative branches) of the "mother" country. If it has any role vis-à-vis the "mother" country, it is to support it and its aspiration and hopes--from a distance. But, if it disagrees with

what the "mother" country is doing, it should refrain from any action.

However--and it is pretty obvious who they are--those who advocate involvement want to do it from the comfort of their air-conditioned homes, with their huge, flat-screen television sets, and three cars out front. If the advocates are sincere in their concern about matters "over there," let them no longer be part of the Diaspora and let them move to Armenia and assume a hands-on role.

Those who make these suggestions, those who want to interfere in the affairs in Yerevan, those who know best what Yerevan should do are no more representative of the vast (estimated four-million) Armenian Diaspora, than is Yerevan in the affairs of East Fignewton Falls, Idaho. Those who want Diasporan involvement in Yerevan are the same minority voices that comprise the so-called "political" parties who never did the Armenians any good in the 19th century, in the pre-Genocide 20th century, in the post-Genocide 20th century, and, now, in the 21st century.

They are the people who "own Armenia and the Armenians" and cannot abide that anyone else has the right to an opinion without their approval and consent. However vocal, they represent no one except themselves and are a very small minority.

No doubt, the first thing that their Diaspora will do is build a Cathedral across the road from Etchmiadzin and then build a string of associated churches next door to the existing Etchmiadzin churches.

But, let us discuss some of the professor's talking points--starting with which Diaspora should get involved in Yerevan.

He appears to lament the fact that Yerevan treats the Diaspora as "a foreign entity." For once, Yerevan has something right. The Diaspora IS a foreign entity; it is an entity in a foreign country--dozens of foreign countries, in fact.

He appears to lament the fact that the Diaspora is not represented in the Armenian Government, but does not answer the question: "Why should foreign entities be represented in the Armenian government?" Will the professor's Diaspora in Government be representative of the host country/ies? Will the American diaspora be represented in Yerevan?; will the Canadian?; will the Argentine?; will the Brazilian?; will the French?; will the Russian?; will the Lebanese?; will the South African?; will the. . .why go on?

Or, will the four-million world-wide Armenian Diaspora select representatives? Will it cast world-wide ballots? Who will select the candidates on the world-wide ballots? Indeed, who will be authorized to select the candidates on the world-wide ballots? Will those elected then move to Yerevan to sit in the Parliament building, or will they participate from the comfort of their host countries by way of their cell phones and laptop computers?

Why not impose the four-million Armenians in the Diaspora as members of the National Assembly, and be done with it?

(Is it relevant to ask if the Irish Diaspora is represented in Dublin, the Greek Diaspora in Athens, the Jewish Diaspora in Jerusalem, the Polish Diaspora in Warsaw, the Chinese Diaspora in Beijing? No? All right, I won't ask.)

He laments that there are no common institutions between the Diaspora and Yerevan. The reason is that there are no common institutions among the Armenians in the Diaspora. Look around you, Professor: "This is the church I go to, and that one over there is the church I don't go to; this is the charity I support, and that one over there is the charity I don't support; this is the youth organization I support, and that one over there is the youth organization I don't support; this is the cultural group I support, and that one over there is the cultural group I don't support." Which/whose institutions does the professor suggest be shared with Yerevan?

A point that the professor does not discuss is whether or not the crooks and thieves and thugs who run Armenia want the influence of the Diaspora. Surely, all they want from the Diaspora is its money. The crooks and thieves and thugs in Yerevan don't need any outside help in deciding which model BMW or Mercedes to buy when the ashtrays get full in their present autos.

No, Professor, the crooks and thieves and thugs in Yerevan don't need any help in ruining Armenia. The Diaspora should stay away.

However, just to show that I am not completely negative, permit me to make a suggestion. Why doesn't the Armenia Diaspora set up another Armenia somewhere else? After all, TWO Armenias is the one thing that we lack.

Avedis Kevorkian
Philadelphia, PA, 7/7/08

The Following are excerpts from a discussion in "24April" Forum:

After reading Onnig Beylerian's analysis of the Diaspora's participation in Armenia's political economic process, some questions remain in my mind which I hope someone more versed in these issues can provide answers to.

The first paragraph reads, "Despite frequent statements by Armenian politicians that Armenia seeks to "tap" the Diaspora's vast potential and resources, little is done to provide the Diaspora the opportunity to effectively contribute to Armenia's political and economic development."

Question:

Does it mean that the Diaspora should be involved and be part of political-economic decision making process of Armenia's government? Or does it mean that Diaspora's views be looked at and considered as consultation without any direct participation in decision making process?

Obviously to be part of the decision making process is the effective way since consultation only will not put any obligation on the government to implement any views, suggestions or proposals by the Diaspora. However, I do not know any government of any country that will allow citizens of another country to be part of and influence its decision making process unless they possess dual citizenship and have the voting right.

In another section Beylerian explains the reasons why Diaspora has not been successful in having input in major events in Armenia.

To my understanding the reason is that the Diaspora is not a unified and cohesive entity. Armenians are all over the world and in each country they have different political, cultural and other organizations. We have a number of political parties with different views, opinions, agendas etc. and unfortunately look at each other as rivals and even enemies. This is true not only at the party level but also at individual level, leaders who add personal ambitions and agendas to the mix. We have divided churches each one pursuing its own interest etc.

Question:

In the unlikely scenario of the willingness of Armenia's government to bring Diaspora into the decision making process, whom should they invite to participate, which party or parties? Which organizations?

If these parties, organizations and individuals can not work together here in the Diaspora what are they going to do for Armenia's political, social and economic issues other than create chaos and more problems. How long will it take for the Diaspora to overcome these shortcomings, to create a higher level of organization as suggested by Beylerian, and more importantly who is going to do it?

I hope someone can clarify these issues for me.

Dr. Vahe Manook, Toronto 7/8/08

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I agree with your column. The Diaspora is divided - it was, it is, and there is no hope in the horizon. If all those years they did not unite, and the division grew deeper and deeper as we know, even after independence, then we know for now this is the status quo. And if it happens one day that it is given a role to play in the Armenian government, it will no doubt pursue its political agendas, or may serve some other powers or create instability in the country; it might also complicate things between native Armenians and the Diasporan ones. All of which is not beneficial for Armenia and the Armenian people.

Let us not forget that Diasporan Armenians are not in agreement with each other at this point; the leaders are not on talking terms, so how can they be with Armenians in Armenia? The political parties in the Diaspora have not yet attained that level of maturity. The people themselves would unite when the leaders do. Actually the people themselves do not have a problem; it is the leadership who has divided the people.
I'm curious to know if Jews outside Israel have any powers in their government or as a matter of fact Italians or Greeks living outside their homelands have any such powers in their governments. And why should they? And why should we?

Native Armenians know very well and say it too that we in the Diaspora always have problems. A few years ago, I interviewed the no.1 singer in Armenia Shoushan Petrosian, for an Armenian radio program, when she was invited here to perform. She was

boycotted - by the other divided half - let's say. She was furious. In the interview she made sure to say her mind, and she said: " You here in the Diaspora always have problems".

And she was right. She found it very petty that we do not overcome our differences even when someone like her is in town to appreciate and hear Armenia; after all she is Armenia's voice and represents Armenia and has come all the way from there, not to sing only for one group. I who am a Diasporan, was not proud at that moment, that we were rebuked, but who is to blame? For this reason, there are a lot of our people who get disillusioned and keep away from Armenian life.

And now we want to meddle in Armenia's affairs? I don't think so.

Alidz Bostanian, Montreal, 7/9/08

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Dear Vahe:

Your questions and reflections are interesting and touch on important challenges facing Diasporan communities. You touched on the very important question of who can speak for the Diaspora. This is a very tough issue and I don't have a good solution, but I hope we can explore this point in this forum. In the mean time, I would like to touch on the issue of WHY/HOW Armenian governments should engage with the Diaspora and take advantage of its assets in solving some of the problems facing us as a people.

You raised the question of what it means for Diaspora to participate in an effective way in Armenian politics, and gave some hints about your answer(s). My own answers are fairly similar to yours in the sense that I strongly object, in principle, to individuals or organizations based in Canada, the US, or Europe dictating policies to the legitimate government of Armenia, or bringing undue influence in the process of decision making, particularly when the issues in question require local input and experience, and when outside interference risks thwarting a general and made-in-Armenia consensus arrived at in a democratic way. So, we agree that being an "effective partner" should not mean that Diasporans have access to the proverbial red-phone which they can pick up and tell the president of Armenia which lever to pull.

On the other hand, I also believe that a visionary Armenian government committed to nation building would recognize the dangers of dismissing the concerns and advice of Diasporans, and would be very attentive, in a genuine way, to listening to Diasporan voices and incorporating Diasporan experiences and perspectives into the process of policy development. So, the Diaspora would be considered an effective partner in building the future of Armenia if Hayastantsis and their legitimate governments adopted a sincere attentiveness to Diasporan ideas, perspectives, advice, and reactions, and if they created direct communication channels for dialogue and consultation.

I assume there's no need among us to delve too deeply into why the Diaspora deserves to be consulted on most issues and why it

should be trusted to come up with sensitive and helpful advice. We consider ourselves passionate about Armenia's future and, to a large extent, are willing to put our money where our mouths are; we think of ourselves as stakeholders in how Armenia fares in the world because most of us maintain both emotional and physical ties to the land and its people; and our experience of living in so many different places gives us a perspective that can complement a government's own views and intelligence.

Reiterating Beylerian's question, have the last 2-3 governments engaged the Diaspora as an effective partner along the above lines? If not, is this failure a consequence of not knowing "how" to engage the Diaspora, or simply because they didn't want to? I don't know the right answer, but it might be useful for us to discuss a few concrete initiatives that could be used by a government sincerely interested in engaging the Diaspora in its policies to tap into this potentially valuable resource. ... others have spoken in this forum about the recently announced initiative to form a dialogue committee. There are undoubtedly other ways.

Davit Zargarian PhD, Ottawa 7/9/08

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Received directly through Keghart.com:

In defense of Onnig Beylerian (although I am certain that he could defend himself very well) I would like to say as follows:

1. All your commentators are absolutely right about the Diaspora being hopelessly divided, led by organizations, whether religious or secular that have no clue how to help us face our survival challenges and so on. The crucial thing that they tend to overlook is that Armenia, by its very nature and existence is today the ultimate tool for the preservation of an Armenian identity and ultimately the Diaspora itself. The truth is that the Diaspora constitutes a large part if not actually the majority of the Armenian "nation" (assuming a loose definition thereof, hence the quotation mark). Whether we like it or not, the Diaspora and Armenia have a symbiotic relationship. That is a fact. We can deny it until we are blue in the face but it will not change that reality. Therefore it is in the interest of the Republic of Armenia itself (again assuming that the preservation of our nation and our identity is its primary purpose) to include the Diaspora in its plans.

2. On the collective level, the Diaspora has absolutely no clue as to what it means to run representational and democratic institutions. Neither does Armenia for that matter. On the individual level, there are numerous Diasporans who have the experience, the training and the will to participate in founding and shaping the core of new democratic processes and institutions in Armenia. Therefore, it is that potential that needs to be harnessed.

3. Whether Diaporans like it or not, Armenia will make decisions that affect it and by extension all Armenians that do not live in Armenia. For example, if Armenia falls into a dictatorship, or becomes a safe haven for corrupt mafia type oligarchs, we shall be affected just by association. We might not like it, but that is a fact (how many of you have suffered simply because you carried Middle Eastern passports?). Our great artists are our goodwill ambassadors, but our criminals and corrupt officials also shape stereotypes about us. If Armenia decides to negotiate with Turkey in the name of the Armenian nation, which in international law, it has all the right to do so, it can "give away" our lands, our claims and our cause for the sake of let's say good neighbourly relations. I do not agree with that, but that is certainly a very probable scenario. Therefore if the decisions of the goverment of Armenia impact me as a person, I want to have a way to influence that government.

4. We must not confuse principle with process. Or between form and content. The principle proposed by Onnig Beylerian is I

believe correct because of the above and many related subsidiary issues. What the critics are suggesting is that we do not have a process to make it happen, therefore they are arguing about form. Yes, it is true that we do not have a process, it is true that it would be very difficult, it is true that we would fall into a "representation without taxation" syndrome (whereas now we actually have "taxation without representation", as the Diaspora is essentially treated as a miliking cow). But those are debates about mechanics, which can be overcome if we have the courage to challenge the status quo. They are not debates about purpose. Many formulae can be suggested and can be argued about. But let's start proposing them.

In the final analysis, if we say that the Diaspora should have no say in how Armenia evolves except by sending money, then we are saying that it should be condemned to die slowly (or rapidly, whatever the case may be). Either that or we should all pack up and move into Armenia. And maybe that is a viable alternative for the future. So who's doing the packing? Are we ready to make an Armenia that we would feel comfortable moving into? Which brings us right back to the point as to how we can contribute to building a better country.

Viken L. Attarian
Mount Royal, Quebec, Canada
7/27/08