# TWO FRIENDS WRESTLE WITH OUR NATIONAL CHALLENGES

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**Category:** Opinions

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The prescriptions provided will hardly make a dint in modifying or changing the present ugly situation in Armenia. Momentous changes do not happen because of *hayrenasiroutyun*, although that is always invoked. It is waste of time if local and near-abroad politico-economic factors in the context of neo-liberal onslaught are not taken into serious consideration, in addition ignoring the major stakeholders on a mass scale.

Without that approach the wrong prescriptions will be presented to the public. In the name of democracy an oligarch was elected in Ukraine, similarly in almost all post-Soviet republics.

Despite the West-Russia recent "conflict", the West is ultimately and in essence in cahoots with Russia.

**Ghazaros:** For me it's simple: democracy means respecting the other, because I would like to be respected. Who gives me the right to impose my view on others? That I might think I am smarter? I do not believe in the Platonic concept of the philosopher king. I believe humans have intrinsic consciences, as well as fears. I believe that all human beings want the same thing: a decent life and a chance for their children. That collective aspiration, when allowed expression, reduces the fear that underlies most of evil.

Invariably, opponents of democracy fail to give an alternative. The closest is the 'philosopher king'. I would far less trust a person (or group, or party) than a system where a majority properly monitors, through democratic checks and balances, the performance of the assigned leaders whose leadership can be pulled or given. Democracy is messy and imperfect, but I fail to see the alternative.

I end with the simple point: I respect my fellow human beings. Call me Christian, but that's what I think.

**Tavit:** I wish I had the time: there is so much to say.

I, too, am Christian in spirit, if not in the letter as defined by the Church. So, too, I am a Buddhist, a Hindu ... in my daily words and deeds. I also think I am a democrat.

Didn't the Founding Fathers of the United States believe in democratic principles? They did, but not for slaves and women. Wasn't Erdogan elected president recently? But it was a majoritarian democracy. These are a few examples to underline that we can't define democracy in abstract terms. My reading of history has led me to believe that governments and their apparatus always represent the interests of a dominant economic class(es), irrespective whether they are a republic, monarchy, theocracy, etc. It's a Marxist point of view, yes, but I have not seen a better interpretation of what a state apparatus constitutes.

Thus, when a strategy is planned and prescriptions formulated, and if the above factor is neglected, then all efforts will transform into just attempts, but will not lead to success. The corollary--pre-parliament and other civic forums--will be easily manipulated by the oligarchic system if they fail to establish the broadest possible coalition and a sound socio-economic platform that can address average Joe's woes, and establish organic relations with movements with similar interests and ideals in the near-abroad. Crumbs will be thrown at them as we have observed since the birth of "free" Armenia.

Incidentally, I hope the above will not be interpreted as validation of the former order. I was probably among the first in Armenian progressive circles who was critical of the old system, starting in the early '60s.

**Ghazaros:** What do you mean by "the near-abroad" when you say "establish organic relations with movements with same interests and ideals in the near-abroad"? Do you mean a similar 'revolution'

needs to take place in Russia? If yes, I agree. My biggest fear in what we are trying to do is that the Russian oligarchy, which controls Russia, will not tolerate a democratic Armenia. On the other hand, waiting for the Russian bear to reform, and letting our country to depopulate, is not an option. Once again we are stuck between a rock and a hard place. Either we find a way to reform AND maintain good relationships with Russia or we accept the status quo... which means we accept impotence, loss of the notion of nation, and our death in the winds. Most importantly, why do you assume things will be different in a year or 10 years from now? We will still be surrounded by enemy countries, EXCEPT that we will be weaker and weaker. We will reach a point when we would be so weak that we would have no choices. If we don't do something soon, it will be that much harder to do so later. Punting the can down the road is no solution. There is therefore no escaping what needs to be done. We should stand up as a nation, while we still can.

**Tavit:** Your reading of what I had in mind by "near-abroad" is correct. Add the other former Soviet republics where similar attempts have been made.

There should be a two-step strategy:

1) **Immediate and Intermediate** re Armenia. Here we are in murky waters. We can't agree on specifics and it's hard to define the "how". Even then it won't be sustainable. I have thought a lot about what can us in the Diaspora do. Maybe a bunch of "disciples" should make rounds with influential/rich Diaspora Armenians to negotiate with the RA to open businesses that are under their direct control, thus providing jobs on a mass scale, not 10 or 100 positions. The economic factor is the greatest threat. People will continue to flee if they have no jobs. I am sure concerned people can think of other means but it seems we lack the spirit of implementing what are proposed. We should take a leap beyond slogans.

2) **Long-term** as hinted in previous e-mail: Without it, no matter what is done in Armenia, it will not be sustainable in the long term.

**Ghazaros:** The recent events in Ukraine/Russia are actually good for us. Russia isolated itself, and now needs us, more than when it was the new darling of the West. It is therefore an opportune moment for us to put our house in order, to save our country, and … continue to be Russia's best friend.

As I vacillated between action versus no action, I chose action. I find it extremely important that we save the SOUL of the nation, that we FEEL that we ARE a nation, that we CAN be strong. Through this, many people will put hand to hand and stay and return and build. If we abandon the country to the crooks, we abandon our people, and our people will abandon us, the nation.

**Tavit:** "Russia isolated itself"? I am not so sure of it. It was already isolated by NATO and its allies. A 2% to 5% drop in Russian markets? Russia has endured much greater economic losses throughout its history.

Did you see the picture of French volunteers supporting the pro-Russian protesters in Ukraine? It was in Toronto Star. I don't go by what the state department or CNN tells. That's beside the point though.

My main contention is to have a hard look at the geopolitics of the region and not be carried by slogans. Anti-Russian and pro-American sentiments are rife in Armenia, and that does not bode well at all. Secondly, talking about *hayrenasiroutyun* and democracy are not going to save the day. Diaspora has to find concrete economic leverage that can tip the balance. That's what I am advocating. All the rest is mostly talk. Can we mobilize the influential-rich diasporans in the right direction? I.e. establishing businesses on a large scale under the control of the diasporans? It's a hard sell, but can we find a bunch of disciples to convince people? Of course the oligarchy will try to undermine and scuttle such an effort.

I don't want to pretend or be in a situation to tell the Armenian people in Armenia what to do. I would like to believe that they know better. But with respect to Diaspora, some concrete plans need to be explored. Meetings, seminars and the like of course have a role in sensitizing people, but without concrete plans all efforts, in the end, may be fruitless in helping the people in Armenia.

People need bread. That should be the focus in my humble view. Can we deliver it?

**Ghazaros:** Please see my responses to the points you've raised:

Russia is an oligarchy. Go ahead, and deny it. Russia is not a socialist utopia. The West may be heavily influenced by the wealthy, but at least there are some limits. If you open your mouth in Russia against Putin's thievery and thuggery… you know what happens.

What does “French volunteers supporting the pro-Russian protesters in Ukraine” have to do with anything? The Ukrainians want to turn West not because they prefer the trees in the West to those in the East. They simply see the plain fact that liberal democracies, however imperfect, are more successful than oligarchies, whether of the Soviet style or the modern thug style. Putin is using and fomenting nationalism to mitigate the failings of his oligarchic system. Certainly the Russians in eastern Ukraine have the right to join Russia, and definitely the West should let them do what they want, but the Russian people, whether living in Ukraine or in Russia, have the right to be respected and heard. And the day will come that the whole of Russia will rise and toss the Putin oligarchy, and demand to own their own country.

You say, “I don't go by what the US State Department or CNN say.” Yet, with all due respect, you choose to live in their bosom, and not that of Mother Russia's.

Our threats are twofold: Turkey and Azerbaijan in the near future. If we allow depopulation to continue and a slight shift in Russian geopolitics takes place, we will be swallowed by Turkey and Azerbaijan. Therefore, we need to be internally strong, united, a united people. And that we cannot be when we accept frauds as leaders, and lies and lies and lies.

Unless the nationalists among us feel we are one people--at least those of us with nationalist feelings hang together as one--and build Armenia, we will allow thieves to rob us, silence us, own us, and have a Diasporan leadership which does not dare/care to raise a peep, and that it's everyone for himself, then we will send our children to English school and want to emigrate.

I don't understand what part of the mafia you are missing. Maybe during your visits to Armenia you've had no actual dealings with these people. They only care about their financial interests. You can mobilize all the wealth in the Diaspora and the oligarchic network will steal it and frustrate everyone to hell.

You baffle me. What control of Diaspora? It's like saying let us go to a place wholly controlled by the Mafia and establish there a free island. You are dreaming with rose-colored glasses. I think you are so influenced by your ideology that you don't have a real view of Armenia or Russia.

Do you want to try the *Hayastan Himnatram* approach? Of every $2 raised by the *Himnatram* $1 is stolen by the Armenia mafia. People are becoming aware of this. Your fantastic idea may have a chance to work if people felt we have a government from the people, for the people, which reminds me to address your earlier point about American democracy. You criticized its founders for leaving out the slaves and women. Well, it got better. Did it not? Blacks, women and now gays. Why? Because there is sufficient free discourse in the West that there's room for good to slowly prevail. Of course, the rich have more power. They are rich. But there are limits to what they can do with that power. There are limits, unlike in the Soviet Union or Putin's or Sarkissian's oligarchies, where there are no limits.

Of course Armenians in Armenia know better. They do. Hovhannissian, despite not having a program, won the election, because people do not like to be robbed and roughed up by thugs who enjoy impunity. Hopefully, the civic society by reorganizing itself will be more ready. When we have a national government, we might have a chance to convince the wealthy of the Diaspora to increase their contributions. Then the Kirk Kirkorians will increase their contributions and not run away, then we might be able to fix the healthcare system so that our elderly will feel safe enough to retire in the homeland, then businesses may feel safe enough to open shops…

Armenian Renaissance has one task: helping Armenia's civic society. That task takes place in the Diaspora. Armenian Renaissance will simply tell the truth; let politicians do the politicking. We will stand by our people and if they are being robbed, if our country is being ravaged, we will, at least, stand up and say: "No!"

The concrete plans will come from Armenia. We consider we are a single people. There's no such thing as Diaspora and Armenia. One people. Our job is to support what our people want to do.

You cannot deliver anything substantive to the people because there is a thief between you and the people. If you want your bread to reach the people, you have to help remove the thief from the door.

The present rulers are fascists. Maybe looking at them through a new prism will help you see them for what they are.

Dear Tavit, let me return to the essential point: Our enemies are strong and only getting stronger. Not changing how we govern ourselves equals accepting the status quo, with which we now have over 20 years' experience. It means accepting the present trajectory characterized by despair and depopulation. Allow me to paraphrase a quote by Rabbi Hillel:

**If I am not for myself, who will be for me?**
**If I am not for others, what am I?**
**And if not now, … when?**