UNITY SYMPOSIUM - COMMENTARIES (VIDEO)

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Category: Opinions

Panelists Prof. Arpi Hamalian of Montreal's Concordia University, Viken L. Attarian, VP of Policy Commission of Liberal Party of Canada (Quebec Section), Antranig Bedrossian, president of Nakhijevan Institute of Canada, former member of Armenian National Committee and Hamazkain Executive of Canada commented on the speakers' presentations during the Unity Symposium held on March 19, 2011 in Montreal. Vrouyr Makalian, LLB, acted as moderator of the panel discussion and of the Q&A session which followed.
Mr. Bedrossian's commentary is appended as text. He specifically comments on Harut Sassounian's "Popularly Elected Structure to Represent Diaspora Armenians" and on the projected Congress of Western Armenians, the two main proposals around which recent discussions have revolved.
Similarly attached is the statement by former Assistant Secretary General of UN, Deputy Executive Director and Secretary General of International Organizing Committee of the proposed Western Armenian Congress Dr. Souren G. Seraydarian.

The panelists made insightful comments.

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Below are the video recordings.
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Thoughts on Harut Sassounian's Proposed
"Popularly Elected Structure to Represent Diaspora Armenians"
&
The Projected Congress of Western Armenians
"Organizing for Our Inalienable Rights"

Presented at the Unity Symposium, 19 March 2011, Montreal
by
Antranig Bedrossian B. Comm. CMA BA
President of Nakhijevan Institute of Canada

My thoughts will cover the following areas of the proposal: the geographical scope, the election of community leadership, the interventionist aspect, the transnational entity, the definition of national interest.

The geographical scope

a) The proposed model intends to incorporate all Armenian communities of the Diaspora, regardless of their differences in approaches to democracy. However, each Armenian community reflects the political, cultural, socio-economic traits of the country of residence. As these countries have a different perception of democracy, its practical application differs accordingly. Therefore the proposed model seems to be more appropriate for Armenian communities established within the geographical space of entrenched Western liberal democracies (North America and Western Europe) and its periphery (Latin America, rest of European Union and Australia). On the other hand, some other communities (Middle East, Iran, Russia, and Ukraine) represent a different concept of society. This reality tends to limit the geographical application of the model in the intermediate future.

b) In this context, where do we classify Turkey's Armenian community which is considered indigenous to Asia Minor? Where is the place of Convert and crypto-Armenians in this proposal? I believe that the time has come that we expand the definition of Armenian identity in order to integrate these two segments of the Armenian nation that were isolated from under Ottoman and Turkish occupation of the Armenian homeland.

Election of community leadership

The proposal, through democratic elections based on the principle of "one man, one vote", intends

to legitimize community leaders and establish mechanisms of governance and accountability. However, who will be the potential candidates? Given the political and economic nature of functions pursued, many elected persons will come from economically strong segments of the Armenian communities, including businessmen, professionals, academics etc. Will that be considered representative enough of various community segments, socio-economic tendencies such as worker, gender and ecological movements? Will the ordinary Armenian community member find itself genuinely represented, his/her opinions and aspirations truly understood and defended by the elected leaders? This proposal takes its inspiration from the model of representative democracy. But don't we see that even this approach in practice is encountering working difficulties in the Western liberal democracies? Critics in the West often point to a deficit in this democratic model: elected representatives cater less to their electors' demands and more to holders of powerful economic interests. After a while, we can expect to see the same deficit taking place in the elected leadership of the Armenian communities.

Moreover, this system paves the way for the wealthy segments of a given Armenian community, strong in economic power, but minority in number, to acquire effective leadership and through elections legitimize their voice in the community decision making and conduct the affairs in accordance with their worldviews and interests, not necessarily shared by those of the majority members of that community. This will provide the wealthy Armenians the legitimacy to govern which otherwise they don't possess. **This is democracy more in form, but less in essence and does not leave adequate space for alternative decision making in favor of the popular segments of the community, representing the majority. It only gives them the lobbying option to promote their positions with the elected governing bodies, where the relative power makes a difference.**

The interventionist aspect

By permitting the elected leadership to decide the most qualified and acceptable Armenian community candidate in a local election of the country of residence, in the event of many candidates, the model becomes **interventionist.** The choice of the most qualified candidate then takes place according to the worldview and the interests of the leadership, which may not be with that of other segments of the community. The elected leadership thus acquires the right of last consideration in the choice of Armenian candidate entering the election race of that country. To what extent is this democratic?

The transnational entity: the global governing body of the Armenian Diaspora

This takes place when proposed 350 delegates, from Diasporan communities, organize the governing body's chairmanship, various subcommittees and other structures. Elected candidates of the transnational body conduct limited number of meetings per year. This leads into the constitution of a bureaucratic structure, which although formally accountable to the transnational body of delegates, can develop itself into an executive apparatus, acting according to its interests and remain distant from community grass roots, acquiring the character and the modus operandi of

corporate structure. It then becomes less democratic, less accountable and more hierarchic like transnational corporations.

Through the relative power of Armenian communities, major powers (US, France and Russia), can acquire a decisive, but contradictory influence in the decision making processes of the transnational entity. This may not be within the collective interest of the Armenian Diaspora.

The definition of national interest
The term "national interest" needs to be defined. The nationalist approach of this term implies those major issues that receive significant Armenian collective support; the socio-economic approach can however reflect the hidden private interests of the dominant wealthy forces of the Armenian Diaspora seeking to legitimize those interests.

To summarize, this model needs more refinement to make it democratic both in form and in essence. Provision should be made so that the full spectrum of socio-economic tendencies, from left to right, of each Armenian community, are adequately and fairly represented at both levels of the community leadership and the delegates to the transnational entity. The objectives and the decision making processes adopted, as well as the projects voted for should reflect that spectrum. This arrangement can best maintain the spirit of "unity in diversity".

Mission
Different elements are introduced between the original mission statement and the latest draft proposals.

It primarily intends to create a unified structure to pursue the various claims of Western Armenians from Turkey, spread across the Diaspora and Armenia. It does not intend to constitute a Diaspora unified structure for all Armenians.
Latest additions to its draft proposals include *"development and implementation of Pan-Armenian plans in support of Armenia and Artsakh"*, "*assist the Diaspora in the preservation and awareness of Western Armenian identity"*, "*cooperation with all nations and peoples"*. These added statements dilute the centrality of the original mission - that is pursuance of claims from Turkey-, duplicates the work of other Diaspora organizations and gives itself the prerogatives of a non-territorial state structure.

Elections and delegates
Since delegates from various Armenian communities will not be elected, therefore there are no delegates but members from these communities who would form the constituent assembly.
Socio-economic spectrum
The composition of the congress should reflect various socio-economic tendencies of the Diaspora, from left to right.
Interpretation of history
The preamble of the initial declaration contains a rather one-sided interpretation of historical events

for the period 1878-1921. All reference to these events and their interpretation are misplaced in the declaration and they should be discussed within the appropriate institutional structures.

Claims on behalf of Western Armenians from Turkey

Where claims for properties are made for generations of Western Armenians, possessing appropriate documents, any recovered proceeds should be deposited in a **trust account** and then distributed to the claimants directly. Particular attention should be paid to the situation in Armenia. In order to prevent the illegal appropriation of these funds from some people in authority, claimants from Armenia should receive the proceeds directly.

Avenues should be explored whether it would be possible to get general compensation from Turkey for **moral loss and damage sustained** for descendants of the survivors in 1915. Such funds whenever received should be deposited in appropriate **trust account** and disposed of according to the wishes of those descendants: to remit them directly or allocate them for rebuilding Armenia and Artsakh. Any funds that will go to assist rebuilding Armenia and Artsakh, should be administered jointly with Diaspora, in order to ensure their proper disbursement.

Organizing for Our Inalienable Rights

Speech by Dr. Souren G. Seraydarian delivered at Unity Symposium
March 19, 2011, Montreal

In few weeks we will commemorate once again the 24th of April. Once again we will be talking to ourselves . On the day after we will have a good conscience having completed a national duty and having paid respect to our victims. Once again we would have insisted that there was a genocide. Was it to convince the international community, the republic of Turkey, the Turkish people or perhaps ourselves?

Efforts and funds have been dedicated in connection with the recognition of the genocide. Undoubtedly a very useful and remarkable activity but without palpable impact. Let us take the example of France. The Parliament adopted a resolution by consensus recognizing the Armenian genocide. It was a moral satisfaction without any palpable outcome concerning the inalienable rights of the descendants of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire.

We passed over the point of recognition. As Mark Guiragos put it “REPARATIONS” is our word.

In order to be claimants we have to be organized and well prepared. We have to put aside emotions and feelings and approach the issue with pragmatism, political awareness and legal arguments.

In the past several attempts were made to organize the diaspora (1979,1983,1986 as well as the World Armenian Congress of Aprahamian in Russia). Internal disputes and struggles , the absence of standing institutions and lack of follow up activity or action laid finally to their failure. They basically remained intellectual exercises.

Today there are several possible scenarios . I will mention three of them. The first is to organize the Diaspora as presented by Sassounian in the video you just watched. .It entails the holding of elections in each and every Armenian community of the Diaspora and form a representative body, a parliament of the Diaspora. Under this scenario the Republic of Armenia should take care of its interests . A model was elaborated for use by the CCAF, the coordinating loose institution of the four political parties . If successful the model could be extended to other communities. The model is already facing difficulties because of several reasons; Churches, AGBU, cultural and sportive and benevolent associations and different clubs are not members of the CCAF; the silent majority of the French of Armenian origin do not seem to have the will to register on electoral lists in addition to other internal ,personal and organizational matters. This does not mean , that these issues could not be overcome. It is an ideal scheme, would , however, require a very long time . A luxury we can not afford.

The second scenario is the concept of a pan-Armenian Council (Azkayin khorhourt). A global Armenian Organization which would include the Republic of Armenia and the Diaspora. A good idea . You should judge the feasibility yourself. It will be of consultative nature operating in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Armenia as well as principles and provisions of international law.

(refer to membership and the problem of proposed representation in the senate).

The third proposal is less ambitious and relatively modest compared with the two I just mentioned. Thus it is more realistic, motivated and feasible at this stage. The Western Armenians, descendants of the survivors of genocide and deportation citizens of the Ottoman Empire are the legitimate claimants of their rights. Not the Republic of Armenia. The Republic of Armenia , a sovereign, independent ,member of the United Nations, has its own prerogatives and has to respond to geo-political, economic, social and good neighborhood imperatives. An organized representative body of Western Armenians, a nation forced away from their lands (Rights of the Nations Manifesto of 1976) will earn the international right to represent itself. It will also be beneficial to the motherland and Artsakh, as it will be able to facilitate most of their dilemmas.

Why western Armenians and not Diaspora? Because hundred of thousands of Descendants of the victims live in Armenia and over two millions in Russia . They have their own compatriotic associations (hairenagtsagan mioutions). The term is used to identify the Armenians who lived throughout the Ottoman Empire from Constantinople to Van and Aleppo, from Cilicia to Trabizond and Edirne to Kars.

In order to organize the Western Armenians there is a need to create institutional and representational capacity to address all the issues of legitimate violated rights. Hence a group of some 40 historians, lawyers, intellectuals and business men from France, Armenia, Russia, Syria, Lebanon , USA, Austria and Iran established in 2007 an NGO (International Organizing Committee

registered under French Law to prepare a Congress or a Convention of Western Armenians. This Organizing Committee held 12 sessions as well as scientific seminars in France, Switzerland , Cyprus and Armenia. Three publications were printed and distributed. The first reflected without comments all the inter Armenian talks and negotiations between 1913 and 1921, the second was a summary of the Cyprus seminar dealing with the main issues of Armenian claims and last but not least the book of prof. Vahan Melikyan (haygagan bahantchadiroution , arevmedahayeri 3rt hamakoumari anhrajechdoutioune). Why the 3rd Congress? Because two such congresses took place in Yerevan in 1917 and 1919 to deal with the refugees and represent the Armenian demands to the Paris peace conference. They failed among others because of disagreements between Boghos Noubar Pacha and Aharonian and the insistence of one political party taking over the power in what remained of tsarist Russian Armenia.

The International Organizing Committee is now ready to call for the Congress before the end of this year. The Committee will be dissolved as soon as the Congress has elected an Assembly and a permanent Council .

The Representative bodies will deal with official entities, national courts, regional and international tribunals, NGOs, international and regional organizations, lobby groups and why not with Turkish intellectuals and lawyers convinced of the need to overcome their history and recognize the fact of medz yeghern or genocide.

The Council should address all the issues related to territorial and property claims (private and public), the unlawful deportation of citizens from their original place of birth or residence, making them stateless, human rights deprivations upon past and current violations of human rights .All issues prohibited in international law and conventions.

The representative bodies should also prepare and eventually participate in any dispute resolution mechanism such as arbitration which may be instituted to achieve the above mentioned goals .

Ensure that the Armenian cultural heritage is safeguarded by the Turkish authorities in accordance with the provisions of Appendix 4.1 (articles 37 through 45) of the Treaty of Lausanne concerning Protection of Minorities.

Establish and maintain contacts with all the Armenian Communities (kaghtodjakh) as well as the Republic of Armenia in order to ensure complementarity.

It will have to establish two funds one to finance the ongoing activities of the executive Council in addition to a legal defense fund to initiate tribunal cases and to face the systematic legal actions carried out against institutions, professors, politicians who denounce the denial and the denialists of genocide. Hence the need to establish crossed strategy amongst Armenian lawyers, of course adopted to local national laws.

Last but not least I have to mention that five of the members of the Committee attended the USC

symposium in November 2010. In discussions with all concerned we concluded that there is no incompatibility between our endeavour and the proposal of Sassounian. They are indeed complementary . If the idea of holding world wide elections succeeds and the elected body is by-partisan and not monopolized by a political party we could eventually join it as the organ dealing with the claims. For the time being we cannot wait until a world -wide Diaspora parliament is created.

During the past three years our members paid visits to many large Armenian communities including Lebanon, Russia, France, Germany, Austria, Argentina, Uruguay, Canada and the USA. We met representatives of all political parties, AGBU and compatriotic associations. They all welcomed the idea in principle. Each had a different approach in nominating representatives or participants to the convention, combined of course with different degrees of caution and suspicion.

I am not a linguist but if I had the possibility and the authority I would eliminate from the Armenian language two words “paits yev sagayn”. Please do not tell me why something cannot be done but rather how it can be done or at least how it can be improved. If nothing is done , nothing will change and we will continue our defeatism.