WAN-CONGRESS AN OPPORTUNITY WE SHOULDN'T WASTE

Posted on January 22, 2010 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

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A few days ago Viken Attarian of Montreal, well known to the readers of Keghart as a free thinker, emailed the following observations, mostly about the Western Armenian National Congress to the Toronto-based 24April forum. As always, Attarian's words are well thought, measured and delivered. "Thread" in the text refers to the body of multiple emails sent by many participants of the forum while discussing the subject.

It is hard to resist commenting on this all-important topic . I would certainly pay to have a published copy of this thread alone. A lot of grey matter has gone into it.

From my perspective, the big picture should include the following thoughts as well:

1. Comments have been made about the traditional political parties and whether they did a good job or not and what their role is (leading the Diaspora, doing a good job in schools etc.). Please think hard about this. Historical context aside, what would happen if the Liberal Party of Canada said that they were doing an excellent job running the schools in the city of Montreal? What would happen if the Republican Party in the US saw its mission as running churches? What would happen if the British Labor Party thought that their success should be measured by how effective they were in building community centers? Political parties are relevant only in terms of social policy, government, opposition, and other related issues. Measuring their success or failure by assessing how well they did somebody else's job is frankly beyond the ridiculously absurd. Would any business owner evaluate their employees that way? For example, would an insurance company evaluate its risk analysts by measuring how well they did the receptionist's work?
In the context of an independent RoA, having Armenian political parties operating in the Diaspora is doing exactly that. The WAN-C would not replace this dysfunctional situation, that is why it is NOT challenging the authority of any political party. It is the political parties that perceive it that way. But frankly, they would perceive any child's scream that the proverbial "emperor is naked" as a challenge. My guess is that the plans to undermine the WAN-C have already started, although I am hoping to be very wrong in this matter.
2. Having made the previous point, it is of course a historical fact that the political parties and many other organizations have operated, and continue to operate in the Diasporan landscape. That fact cannot be ignored. It is therefore expected that any initiative or proposal that would come for any global action must at least invite them to participate. The Organizing Committee of the WAN-C has done that. In fact they have been openly asking everyone to participate for quite some time (at least 2 years as far as I know).3. One of the fundamental crises of the Diaspora (and sadly also of the RoA) is the crisis of legitimacy. As long as this crisis is not resolved there can be ABSOLUTELY NO issue of a just and legal resolution of the claims of Armenians against Turkey (property claims, genocide claims, personal claims, deprivation of human rights' claims, religious rights' claims etc.). This is a necessary condition. The defendant being Turkey (the successor state to the Ottoman Empire), who

is the plaintiff? This is a simple legal concept, but for us who are caught up in the infinite Diasporan divisions, we seem to get blinded. The RoA does NOT represent the Diaspora (it doesn't even act democratically to represent its OWN citizens). So who does? Until we resolve this issue there can be absolutely no step forward on this front. The WAN-C is a step in that direction.4. The real issue in my mind is NOT whether there should be a global body representing the Diaspora. The real issues are a) whether as a global nation Armenians can learn to take advantage of this unique opportunity of being one, b) whether they can create vehicles and mechanisms to exercise an ability to mobilize globally and collectively advance through lessons learnt in the process of doing so and c) whether such action is possible on a narrow common issue around which we should be able to rally and agree upon, in this case, the pursuit of just claims against Turkey through an international legal process. We have been able to do this on a smaller scale e.g. through the All Armenia Fund, we know how to collect money from our communities. We need to move up to a newer scale of operations. This is the opportunity that the WAN-C would represent.

5. Where is any other serious, concrete, credible and public alternative? The 100th anniversary of the Genocide of Armenians is around the corner. Where do we want us to be on that front? What are we doing in our existing organizations in preparation for that date that is radically different from what we have done so far and has the hope of moving us forward?

It is for the above reasons that I support the initiative of the WAN-C.

Having said all this, there are some points that the WAN-C should definitely address, before it can count on the larger scale support of all of the Diaspora:

A. A serious effort to address the issue of its name. There could be legal reasons for naming itself as a Congress of Western Armenians to represent the plaintiff. But, as S. and others have pointed out, there are problems with the fundamental assumptions on that front. One has to evaluate the risk of the failure of the claim of legitimacy vs. the risk of a true wider scale support from Armenians. In my view, this should be an issue of debate both prior to the Congress in November and also on its agenda at that time.

B. The WAN-C website should be shut down and they should start from scratch with a professional approach to manage its content and functionalities. As a minimum, nothing should be published before it is a) properly edited and evaluated for content reflecting its mission, b) screened for a message of inclusiveness and not the opposite, c) translated properly. As it stands, the quality of the texts leaves a lot to be desired. The website should also have country/region/topic specific forums which can be highly useful to gather feedback on its actions and to collect input and generate ideas and enthusiasm.

C. The WAN-C organizers should seriously consider putting in place a basic representative participatory voting structure (to be discussed) which is likely web-based, to enable a democratic process. While the devil is in the detail on this front (security, IT infrastructure, voting rights, weighing

of votes etc.), they have to start thinking about this now.

D. The WAN-C should clearly and unequivocally reinforce the message of its independence and transparency. This would mean identifying its sources of funding, as well as DISTANCING ITSELF FROM ANY REAL OR PERCEIVED MANIPULATION BY THE GOVERNMENT OF THE RoA. The WAN-C is ultimately an experiment in democracy for the Diaspora. There have been too many failures to allow us to fail again. The cost is simply too high, as the impact will be on all future generations of Armenians. While a tactical cooperation with the RoA is of course part of the agenda, but in my view, it cannot and should not be seen as a tool of the government of the RoA to dominate the agenda of the Diaspora.

E. At some point, a clear effort should be made to publicize a very high level agenda of the legal plan, e.g. through the main themes on specialized and security-managed forums of debate. After all, while I want a healthy discussion, I certainly would not want to show all the detailed battle plans to any adversary.

The former points are questions of fundamental principle, the latter points while still very important are matters of operational detail (except D). I support the principles, I can work to implement the details, with the hope that I will get the support to do so. As for the point D, it should be addressed now and on an ongoing basis. In fact, it should be part of the global strategic approach of the organization.