WHY WE DO NOT TRUST SERZH SARGSYAN

Posted on October 11, 2009 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By Vicken Gulvartian, Los Angeles, 10 October 2009

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The President of the Republic of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan was in Los Angeles a week ago as part of his mythical mystery pan-Armenian world tour to listen to the opinions of the Armenian Diaspora on the issue of the Armenia-Turkey Protocols to establish diplomatic relations between the two countries. 400 people were gathered at a banquet that was described on the invitation as an occasion to honor Mr. Sargsyan. There wasn't much honor to go around on this tense occasion. Half of those present were not in the mood to bestow honors upon him. They did not rise when he entered the hall, they did not applaud his warm calls for a prosperous Armenia, and they did not lift their glasses when he (the emphasis is on "he") proposed a toast to the eternity (Haverjutune) of the Armenian nation. We had heard the same rhetorical sound bites before.
The gravest disrespect and dishonor of the evening came from Mr. Sargsyan himself, whose 5 minute-long speech was a mush (lapa) about the sentimental value of the city of Yerevan, and Alexander Tamanyan. Yes, Tamanyan-the grand architect and master planner of Yerevan in the 1920's. The evening was over in 30 minutes, the audience was caught looking at each other and asking if there was anything else to do or hear. None Came. Some lined up to shake hands with Sargsyan, a few took a picture of their sons and daughters with him (they probably think that it looks good on the mantle), and the rest of us left. We were mocked, and taken for useless diasporans (Ardasahmantzis) gathered for a free meal. The next day, local Armenian TV showed a government - issued communiqué about the warm reception Sargsyan was receiving everywhere on his tour of the communities. Old soviet-type habits die hard, I guess.

Bottom line: Sargsyan's popularity rating in the Diaspora today is roaming at right about zero. It has reached a point where we do not trust him anymore. The Armenia-Turkey matter is not the cause, but simply the precipitator of a sickness that has afflicted our relationship even before he was elected president of Armenia. It is time that we call the issue of trust by its real name- A mess.

Why we do not trust Serzh Sargsyan?

I can think of 3 reasons. Add to the list if you happen to be hayastantzi, and have to continuously

support your loved ones still living in Armenia, to see the dram repetitively (and intentionally) devalued by the Central Bank of Armenia against the dollar, and then listen to the daily grief and anguish of your relatives unable to make ends meet, with no hope in sight.

First: Serzh Sargsyan's Armenia is deeply corrupt. Sounds almost like a cliché. Well, it is corruption of the cruelest kind (bordering treason), if entrusted power is abused for private gain in an economy where the GDP is made up primarily of foreign grants, loans and remittances by wealthier cousins oversees. His only, so called, crackdown against corruption so far has come in the tourism sector, against customs officers realizing that it was a hindrance to an easy income to Armenia (a no-brainer). 95% of foreigners entering Armenia each year are diasporans, arriving in droves, tongue hanging out for an experience of a lifetime. At the other end of the same airport, 50,000 Armenians citizens leave their country each year to never return again. Sargsyan's predecessor is known to have cynically said that there will be more left for those staying. More of nothing is still nothing appe jan!

Sargsyan's Armenia occupies the 109th spot on a list of 180 national entities on a corruption report published annually by Transparency International. Number one (Norway) being least corrupt, and number 180 (Somalia) being the worst. The list is compiled based on reports of nepotism, fraud, bribery, racketeering, and extortion. In Armenia, foreign aid is pilfered; laundered monies find their way to foreign banks via fake companies. Health care, schools , roads, water purification stations are in disarray in areas less than an hour away from Yerevan (next time you visit Armenia, make a point to visit the city of Hrazdan). The government has no job creation programs, but is perfectly well versed to pitch pet-projects to well-intentioned old amerigahyes visiting Armenia ready to donate to a charity. The Republic of Armenia is a 2 billion dollar corporation, and Sargsyan is its CEO. He assumes foreign aid, he allocates funds for government projects, he authorizes the selling of assets, pays the bonuses, grants privileges and trade monopolies ,and gets rid of "undesirable elements" by sometimes imprisoning them, and at other times having their faces beaten to a pulp. All this in a country where 20 % are unemployed, and 15% live below the international poverty line of less than 2 dollars a day. Do you know where your priorities are Mr. Sargsyan?

Second: There's something wrong in Armenia's perception of what the Diaspora is, and it seems to be at a disagreement of what our obligations are towards each other. After the independence of Armenia in 1991, a great number of Diaspora organizations turned their attention and resources towards Armenia. Many new ones were created for the sole purpose of promoting the welfare of the people of Armenia. We dissolved the traditional role of our organizations with the hope that a free and democratic Armenia will carry the mission of azkabahbanoom in return for our promotion, moral and political support of the aspirations of a people and country that had just emerged from 90 years of isolation.

I now realize that we made a mistake in tying our own aspirations completely to Armenia. The new leadership saw us as nothing other than two different people who happen to speak the same

language. What a shame!

Today, the Armenian consulate of Los Angeles has only one goal, to solicit donations for the acquisition of a new building to house the consulate. It has organized no commissions, no committees, and no gatherings of professionals or experts, and no briefings anywhere or anytime in L.A. The Diaspora has been awaiting inspiration and organization, and the Republic of Armenia has been absent from the scene. Look at the lack of planning from the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and you can tell the lack of urgency from Yerevan to inspire the communities. The only time we are important is when we have to foot the bill of one conference or another, one state visit by a government mission or another. We think that we are lucky in Los Angeles, New York or Paris for being in such close proximity to an embassy or a consulate, but in reality the attention paid to us is not much different than Yerevan's handling of remote communities in Amsterdam, Madrid or Prague.

While Diaspora organizations stood by Armenia-through earthquake, independence, war, blockage, and reconstruction -subsequent administrations continued to mistreat the Diaspora, until Sargsyan outright changed the rules of engagement. It has now come to a point where we have no choice but to state: It is not a matter of what we can do for Armenia anymore, but what Armenia must do for us. Enough is enough.

Third: I have no problem about dialogue with the Turks, or any attempt for good neighborly relations with Turkey. Ask Armenians everywhere, and the majority of us are in agreement about striking good relations with Turkey. The problem of trust, however, is exacerbated by Sargsyan's choice of a bargaining chip on the negotiating table. To even agree to put the Genocide in a deal for the exchange of a "bowl of rice" is arrogant opportunism worthy of a cheap card player, who believes he is too shrewd, too smart to miss a hit even with a weakened hand against an ugly opponent across the table… who smokes like a Turk. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

We woke up one morning to find out that we are caught in an Armenia-Diaspora dispute over the sanctity of the Genocide. We were not expecting that, from the leaders of Armenia.

Considering that Sargsyan is Karabaghtzi, and one of the leaders of the Karabagh liberation movement, how will he cope with the pressure to put Karabagh on the negotiating table? That may not be the case this time around, but it is coming. It was the Karabagh issue that broke Armenia's ties with Azerbaijan, consequently culminating in a dispute with Turkey, and the closing of the border.

Sargsyan is as qualified to negotiate for Karabagh, as he is not qualified to even discuss the Genocide. It is disturbing to even hear unofficial remarks of Armenian officials, in reference to the Genocide being an experience exclusive to Western Armenians (arevmedahyes). A point that is commonly heard, and read in reports from various foreign internet-radio-press news outlets. Turkey seems to be at work, lying as usual. The fact that a clause to "Implement an impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems (i.e. Genocide)" seeped into the Protocols, attest to Sargsyan's ignorance of a cataclysmic historic event that all

Armenians, and the civilized world, know as ... a fact.

Sooner or later Yerevan will be told to engage Azerbaijan on the issue of the Karabagh conflict. I hope that Sargsyan, who is clearly susceptible to pressure, will be around to handle it. He claims to have received support (political jargon for pressure) from the international community in his latest dealings with the Turks. For Armenia's sake, I say, good luck!

For now, as a Karabaghtzi, Sargsyan's primary responsibility is to order the Karabagh leadership to dig deep, and stay put in Karabagh. They have been the first to quit and leave for Armenia, leaving behind a destitute population to their own fate, while they are "bogh ashkhadoom en elly" (making some dough). The very leadership of the Karabagh independence movement is absent from the scene - Kocharyan, Ghookasyan, and now Sargsyan. They have crashed effectively upon Armenia. The glory of the victory was once theirs (and we all applauded them, and supported them), but today the burden of survival is the people's. Where is the tactical logic? Where is the moral responsibility? Where is the inspirational leadership?

If there was a popular referendum held today to either approve or reject the Protocols, the Armenian people will reject it. If Sargsyan was a leader of an open and free society, then his approval rating would have left him no choice but to resign. On the trust factor, he will score an overwhelming zero.

Even if the 1000 people known as "Friends of Serzh"- who control the foreign aid, the courts, the Central Bank, the Diaspora Ministry, the health care system, the admissions committees of the State universities, the import routes of commodities and raw materials, the licensing of small businesses, and the Justice Ministry that had a dirty hand in the Dubai pleasure industry -voted for him, he will still have a major trust problem with the remaining millions of us everywhere.

And next time Mr. Sargsyan, please leave Alexander Tamanyan out of your speech. Don't insult our intelligence. Tamanyan was a genius, and you, Mr. Sargsyan, are not Tamanyan.