

“Democracy in Armenia and Diaspora-Armenia relations”

Paper presented to the
Second Annual PFA Forum on Armenia-Diaspora Relations
February 28 – March 2, 2010
Washington D.C.

Dzovinar Derderian
Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies
School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University

A stronger Armenia is a democratic Armenia. There are not many more resources that this country can rely on. A democratic Armenia will assure a fairer distribution of economic assets within the population of Armenia, and increase the sense of security towards individual rights for the citizens of Armenia. These are vital components for preventing further immigration from Armenia, and a future demographic crisis which could be Armenia's number one security threat in the near future. Furthermore, a democratic Armenia means an internally stronger Armenia so its foreign policy could not be easily manipulated by other nations.

Armenia is a new republic, and one can expect turbulences in its efforts to build democracy. Freedom of press, freedom of speech, and equality before the law are aspects that have worsened rather than ameliorated in the past twenty years. These are, however, vital components for democracy. There is no simple recipe to build democracy. One aspect truly necessary, however, for any government is the need to be criticized, pressured and made known that they will be held accountable for their actions. My intention today is to analyze Diaspora-Armenia relations and how to direct these relations in order to encourage democracy in Armenia.

I do not intend to suggest that the Diaspora alone can contribute to a stronger democracy in Armenia, nor do I intend to suggest that the current state of democracy in Armenia is a result of the nature of Diaspora-Armenia relations. The organizations, however, within the Diaspora that are the strongest and have the loudest voice have done little to assist Armenia's democracy. In the contrary, their attitudes show that they do not give much importance to democracy in Armenia. I will argue that this has been the case because of the way that Diaspora-Armenia relations have come to be perceived, because of the way these relations have evolved and because of an inherent value system in the major organizations within the Diaspora that is not prone to democracy.

In order to better explain these three components I will enumerate a number of disagreements that the Diaspora has had with Armenia, the agreements that the Diaspora has had with Armenia and conclude with a section of how Diaspora-Armenia relations have evolved in the past 20 years. This paper will start with events that took place before Armenia gained its independence because the events that occurred then were vital for the formation of the Armenian state as well as the reorientation of the

Diaspora. Throughout the paper the meaning of the term Diaspora will change because the Armenian Diaspora has changed throughout the past 20 years. I will, however, attempt to define the term Diaspora throughout the paper, and define in the context of Armenia-Diaspora relations.

I. Disagreements between the “Diaspora” and Armenia

In the past twenty years or more disagreements between the major Diaspora organizations and Armenia have revolved around issues concerning Turkish-Armenian relations, challenge against authorities by Armenia’s population or individual conflicts. In the beginning of the 1990s the most outspoken institutions on behalf of the Diaspora were the Social Democrat Hnchak Party, the Armenian Liberal Democratic (Ramkavar) Party and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) (Dashnak) party. These organizations did not necessarily reflect the views of the majority of Diasporans, but the voices of these political parties were the loudest, and the press and populace paid attention to these voices the most. In the past twenty years, the Hnchaks and Ramkavars have lost much of their voice, but instead other organizations including the Armenian Church branches have increasingly politicized their voices.

When the Karabagh movement started in the late 1980s the leading parties believed that the Karabagh issue is something that should be solved through the leaders of Soviet Armenia and the Soviet Union, notwithstanding the demands of the people. Thus, in a rare joint statement of the Dashnak, Hnchak and Ramkavar parties, which was released in the fall of 1988, they declared,

“We [...] call upon our valiant brethren in Armenia and Karabagh to forgo such extreme acts as work stoppages, student strikes, and some radical calls and expressions that unsettle law and order in public life in the homeland; that subject to heavy losses the economic, productive, educational, and cultural life; that [harm seriously] the good standing of our nation in its relations with the higher Soviet bodies and other Soviet republics.”¹

The Armenian Republic had not been declared independent yet, when signs of disagreement arose between Diaspora organizations and the Karabakh movement

¹ Libaridian, Gerard J. ed, *Armenia at the Crossroads: Democracy and Nationhood in the Post-Soviet Era*. Blue Crane Books: Watertown, MA 1991, 129.

leadership in 1990. After the independence a major issue became the inclusion of the Armenian Genocide in Armenia's Declaration *on* Independence, not of Independence. In regards to the Genocide, the declaration said "The Republic of Armenia stands in support of the task of [achieving] international recognition of the 1915 Genocide in Ottoman Turkey and Western Armenia."² Organizations in the Diaspora had fought hard to have such a reference included in the Declaration on Independence, while the Ramkavar party was still unhappy for not having a statement about Western Armenian territorial claims in the declaration.³

Once Armenia's independence was achieved through a popular movement and global political evolutions, disagreements surfaced between the first President of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrossian's (LTP) administration and the Diasporan parties. The ARF had the most disagreements with LTP. The ARF favored a closer relationship between Russia and Armenia, they disagreed with LTP's administration's policy towards Turkey, with the administration's privatization policies, and criticized the fact that the Armenian government was not respecting human rights, was undemocratic and corrupt. The two camps also disagreed on issues concerning dual-citizenship. The ARF was banned in Armenia in 1994, which raised the enmity between them and the authorities of Armenia.⁴ "The Dashnaks presented the ban not only as a sign of the dictatorial nature of the homeland's regime, but also as a wholesale rejection of the Diaspora."⁵ This conflict between the ARF and LTP lasted until the latter's resignation in 1998.

Following the 2008 Presidential elections in Armenia and the crackdown of the protests thereafter, demonstrations did take place in the United States and elsewhere. Most of these protests occurred in California, condemning the authorities of Armenia and in support of the citizens of Armenia. These, however, were not led by the traditional organizations of the Diaspora. The majority of those who participated in

² Libaridian, 1991, 110.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Panossian, Razmik, "The Armenians: Conflicting Identities and the Politics of Division," in King, Charles and Neil J. Melvid ed. *Nations Abroad: Diaspora Politics and International Relations in the Former Soviet Union*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO: 1998, p. 91.

⁵ Panossian 1998, 91.

these protests were people who have migrated from Armenia after its independence that is in the past 20 years.⁶

The last significant disagreement between the ARF and the Armenian government was during the 2009 attempts to ameliorate Turkish-Armenian relations. This time ARF's disagreement was with President Serge Sargsyan's administration, with which they previously formed a coalition. Again the disagreement was between the ARF and the Armenian government. Protests that took place throughout the world were organized by ARF wings.⁷ At the same time in October 2010, when the Armenian General Benevolent Union, Knights of Vartan, the Armenia Assembly of America, the Western and Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America issued a statement in support of the protocols and the President of Armenia.⁸

A few arguments can be deduced from these examples. First, one can measure the value-system of major Diasporan organizations. The strong organizations in the Diaspora are more vociferous against the Armenian authorities, when it comes to foreign policy issues towards Turkey and Azerbaijan, and when it comes to challenging authorities of their exclusion from high-level politics. We hear complaints about human rights violations, only when the Diaspora parties themselves are the victims. Democracy seems to be necessary when it applies to the parties, but does not seem to be as important when it comes to the people of Armenia. This seems to have been a trend since the Soviet times. Large protests that disrupt authoritarian regimes are looked at unfavorably by Diasporan organizations.

Furthermore, a sense that there is a rift between the Diaspora and Armenia appears mostly when there is disagreement between the ARF and Armenia's authorities. When 1000s of people protested in Los-Angeles, California against the fraudulent elections of 2008, nobody spoke of a rift between the two entities. The protests were hardly spoken of in the major Diasporan newspapers and less so by international major

⁷ See, Castro, Tony "Local Armenian Community Protests Controversial Presidential Election," Los Angeles Daily News (March 4, 2008) <http://www.armeniandiaspora.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-124508.html>; "Levon Ter-Petrosiani ajacicneri cuicy Los-Angelesum" (Feb. 25, 2008) <http://hetq.am/am/politics/elections-08-los/>; "Armenia A Political World Turned Upside Down." (March 11, 2008) <http://www.eurasianet.org/armenia08/news/031108.shtml>

⁸ "Joint Statement of Major Armenian-American Institutions Welcoming the President of the Republic of Armenia." (Oct. 1, 2009) <http://www.aaainc.org/index.php?id=755> (Accessed Feb. 22, 2010).

newspapers. When the Dashnaks protested against the protocols, the whole world spoke of a rift between the Diaspora and Armenia. This is partly because the ARF is better organized, has better means of PR. It is also of how the foreign newspapers, Armenia's press, and Diaspora's journalists make it out to be.⁹ Finally, by reaching out to the Diaspora, the Diaspora Minister Hranush Hakobyan and President Sargsyan, sent a message, probably unintentionally, that they are out to save their relations with the Diaspora, making the existence of a rift much more obvious. It might be that opposition to the Protocols is stronger among the Diasporan population than their opposition has been towards any other issue preoccupying Armenia. To view this as creating a rift between the Diaspora and Armenia is in itself dangerous because this is a disappointment of some Diasporan, not all, with the authorities of Armenia.

II. Examples of Strong Support to Armenia

Along with disagreements, support has also existed between the leading organizations of the Diaspora and the Armenian authorities. Support came financially for the Karabakh war, for rebuilding Armenia, and political support by the lobby groups in the U.S. Congress to provide more US funding to Armenia, some of which went to democracy building projects.

The Diasporan organizations, however, made their position clear towards democracy in Armenia in 2008. After the controversial presidential elections of February 19, 2008 and the March 1, 2008 crackdown on protesters the Armenian Assembly of America, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the Armenian National Committee of America, the Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern/Western) and the Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America (Eastern/Western) released a statement calling for all parties to act within legal boundaries and expressed their support for the newly-elected president.¹⁰

⁹ For examples see, Harumyan, Naira, "Diaspora's Self-Organization". (Feb. 5, 2010) <http://www.lragir.am/engsrc/comments16720.html>; Sassounian, Harut, "Sassounian: Armenia-Diaspora Unity Must be Preserved at All Cost," (Feb. 2, 2010) <http://www.armenianweekly.com/2010/02/02/sassounian-armenia-diaspora-unity-must-be-preserved-at-all-cost/>; Hakobyan, Ruzan, "Rifts Emerging in Armenian Community," (Feb. 2, 2010) http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/feb2010/gb2010022_564431.htm

¹⁰ "Joint Statement on Recent Events in Armenia" (March 17, 2008) http://www.anca.org/press_releases/press_releases.php?prid=1419 (Accessed Feb. 23, 2010).

These examples, also, show that the major Armenian organizations have never put out a statement in support of the opposition or the popular movements of Armenia. There have been various efforts by Diasporan individuals or groups to provide humanitarian aid, conduct grassroots work, show solidarity with pro-democracy activists, etc., relatively independently from Armenia's government. Examples are the Children of Armenia Fund, Orran, Tufenkian Foundation, the Armenian Missionary Association of America, Izmirlian Foundation and a number of other organizations. By and large, however, these organizations are not heard and they are not the main forces (as positive as they are) that define Diaspora-Armenia relations.

III. Evolution of Relations between the “Diaspora” and Armenia since the 1990s

Levon Ter-Petrossian built the All-Armenia Fund to institutionalize all the funding that came from Diasporans abroad. Unlike his successor he did not dedicate much effort into building strong relations with the Armenian millionaires of the Diaspora, such as Kirk Kirkorian, Louise Simone, the Hovnannians, Kafesjian, Charles Aznavour etc. Furthermore, he believed that he had to keep the Diaspora out of Armenia's foreign and domestic politics. Therefore, he opposed the idea of dual-citizenship and banned the ARF-legally because “the ARF was a “foreign” organization controlled from abroad”.¹¹

Kocharian assumed “that the Disapora can be organized up to its potential, that those who speak for it in fact can marshal all of the Diaspora's resources for the national agenda as defined by a president of Armenia, and that the Diaspora's potential will make a significant change in Armenia's fortunes.”¹² When Robert Kocharian came to power as president, he believed that the Diaspora was an asset for Armenia that had not been wisely and fully exploited by his predecessor. He believed that through the right use of public relations a lot can be gained from the Diaspora. Through his efforts to bond with the Diaspora, he first lifted the ban on ARF and thus gained the favor of the ARF. His administration organized Diaspora-Armenia conferences in Yerevan, to show the Diasporans that the Armenian authorities cared for their input.

¹¹ Panossian 91.

¹² Libaridian 1999, 102-103.

He portrayed his administration as being more nationalistic, and more anti-Turkish, concepts that win the favor of Diasporans, and he tried to play the Genocide card to win the Diaspora on his side. These were, however, public relations tactics, rather than a true commitment by Kocharian to these ideologies. In an interview with the CNN-Turk in 2001, he made it clear that genocide recognition was a moral issue and that he expected no reparation from Turkey.¹³ He believed that there is a possibility of bringing political, social and economic unity to the nation, which he understood as all of the Diaspora and Armenia.¹⁴ Though Kocharian did not achieve the unrealistic hope of uniting Armenia and its Diaspora, he consolidated his power, when it came to major organizations of the Diaspora and strong figures of the Diaspora. In this way he minimized criticism of his administration throughout the Diaspora.

Thus, there should be little surprise that there were more disagreements and criticism of the Ter-Petrossian administration than of the Kocharian administration from major Diasporan organizations. Though cordiality and unity is often espoused for, the grounds on which Kocharian created this unity was disruptive for Armenia's democracy. It muted any criticism of violations of human rights, and disregard of the legal system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what has happened in the past twenty years is an increasing cooperation between the major Diaspora organizations, major Diaspora figures and the Armenian authorities. Much less cooperation has occurred between the strong organizations of the Diaspora and opposition groups in Armenia. Such a situation might be because of the fact that the major Diaspora organizations from the beginning have seemed to favor regimes that will show their fist to Turkey, even if that I at the cost of being authoritarian domestically. Such regimes have not proven able or willing to achieve Diaspora's goals towards Turkey.

¹³ "Kocharian Discusses Territorial Claims in Interview With Turkish TV" (Feb. 1, 2001)

<http://www.asbarez.com/44407/kocharian-discusses-territorial-claims-in-interview-with-turkish-tv/>

¹⁴ President Robert Kocharian's Speech at the Armenia-Diaspora Conference, (Sept. 22, 1999)

<http://groong.usc.edu/ADconf/199909/speeches/kocharian.html>

The Diaspora is a multi-faceted entity, with millions of people of different backgrounds and mentality. The main organizations of the Diaspora are not necessarily representative of the Diaspora population. The leaderships of these organizations, by and large are not elected, nor do they consult with their few thousand members on a regular basis or when stating a position on major events. Most significantly, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, with its lobby arm the Armenian National Committee of America, is the most organized of the institutions within the Diaspora. Therefore its voice is most heard and most often confused as *the* voice of the Diaspora. To see a deterioration of relations between the Diaspora and Armenia, when the ARF had conflicts with Levon Ter-Petrosian, when the ARF disagreed with the Armenian authorities over the protocols, is not only seeing the Diaspora as a monolithic entity. We must take into consideration the grassroots of both entities and put more emphasis on those.

Furthermore, the organizations with the strongest political voice in the Diaspora have shown that they have little commitment to democracy in Armenia. Thus, I see a need for reevaluation of the value system of Diaspora organizations. The Armenian Diaspora is not an organic entity where ideas come from the bottom up. That is the political position of the Diaspora is not shaped by its people, but by its leaders. The Diaspora, however, has not been as successful in shaping the policies of Armenia. It has shaped rhetoric, but it has not shaped policy.

Policy Recommendations

The Armenian government, including the Ministry of the Diaspora, instead of making nationalistic comments when speaking to Diasporans, should explain their foreign policy goals to the Diaspora, and prove that they are ready for ameliorated relations between Turkey and Armenia, as well as raise trust among Diasporans in the actions that they are taking. The Armenian government is not obligated to do anything for the Diaspora, but the Armenian government is not in a position to completely ignore the Diaspora because the latter has some influence on the international stage. Diaspora has proven that it is strong. For example, it opposed a Genocide denier like the nominated US Ambassador Hoagland to Armenia from taking office. Thus, it is in the

Armenian government's best interest to speak and win the favor of Diasporans and their organizations, when it comes to foreign policy issues.

I will not call for the Armenian Diasporan organizations to stop meddling in Armenia's foreign policy, because I do recognize their power and respect their commitments. But the Armenian government by calling for further unity between the Diaspora and Armenia will have an increasingly harder time separating itself from the voices of the Diaspora when negotiating with foreign powers. To me only the Armenian citizens have the right to influence the foreign policy of the Armenian state. They are the ones who will go to war if war breaks out in Nagorno-Karabakh, they are the ones who will suffer from the war. This view arises from my simple belief in democracy, and if I want democracy in Armenia, I must also allow the citizens of Armenians to have a louder voice in their own country than those of us in the Diaspora, and I will stick by this rule even if I have disagreements with the majority of the people in Armenia. Now, there were beliefs that in Armenia the people did not participate in mass protests against the protocols and generally do not have an objection to the protocols because they are misinformed and the government keeps them misinformed. Then, I would recommend to the Diasporan organizations: fight for freedom of speech in Armenia, fight for freedom of expression and freedom of press, buy a TV station, make sure your voice is heard. But you must remember that you will not win the fight if you fight for your own voice and freedom of speech only, you will win only when you fight for each Armenian citizen's freedom of speech.

The local opposition groups in Armenia should emphasize the dangers of the current type of Diaspora-Armenia relations; criticize openly this elite type of relationship with a few rich individuals. People in Armenia should understand that the Diaspora is a powerful entity, that will sometimes abide and sometimes collide with Armenia's interests- and this is a healthy exchange. Dialogue and cooperation between the various sectors of the Diaspora and Armenia is vital and significant to both because of their respective knowledge and potential to assist each other.

Diaspora's role in supporting the development of democracy in Armenia will not derive from a united Diaspora or from the utopian idea of unity between Armenia and the Diaspora organizations. Unity is not in the benefit of Armenia's authorities when it

comes to having independence while conducting their foreign policy and unity between the Armenia and the Diaspora is not in the benefit of democracy in Armenia because it inhibits criticism. Rather we will have to reassess the democratic values of each organization in the Diaspora, a re-evaluation of our understanding of Diaspora-Armenian relations, and be inclusive of the smaller Diaspora organizations that do not appear much in the press, but who nevertheless contribute much behind the curtains. The Armenian government should come to a better understanding of what the Diaspora is, its problems and strength, its mindsets and hopes.

Bibliography

“Armenia A Political World Turned Upside Down.” (March 11, 2008)

<http://www.eurasianet.org/armenia08/news/031108.shtml>

Castro, Tony “Local Armenian Community Protests Controversial Presidential Election,” *Los Angeles*

Daily News (March 4, 2008) <http://www.armeniandiaspora.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-124508.html>.

Hakobyan, Ruzan, “Rifts Emerging in Armenian Community,” (Feb. 2, 2010)

http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/feb2010/gb2010022_564431.htm

Harumyan, Naira, “Diaspora’s Self-Organization”. (Feb. 5, 2010)

<http://www.lragir.am/engsrc/comments16720.html>

“Joint Statement of Major Armenian-American Institutions Welcoming the President of the Republic of Armenia.” (Oct. 1, 2009) <http://www.aaainc.org/index.php?id=755>

“Joint Statement on Recent Events in Armenia” (March 17, 2008)

http://www.anca.org/press_releases/press_releases.php?prid=1419

“Kocharian Discusses Territorial Claims in Interview With Turkish TV” (Feb. 1, 2001)

<http://www.asbarez.com/44407/kocharian-discusses-territorial-claims-in-interview-with-turkish-tv/>

“Levon Ter-Petrosiani ajakicneri cuicy Los-Angelesum” (Feb. 25, 2008)

<http://hetq.am/am/politics/elections-08-los/>

Libaridian, Gerard J. ed, *Armenia at the Crossroads: Democracy and Nationhood in the Post-Soviet Era*. Blue Crane Books: Watertown, MA 1991.

Libaridian, Gerard J. *The Challenge of Statehood. Armenian Political Thinking since Independence*. Blue Crane Books: Watertown, MA, 1999.

Panossian, Razmik, “The Armenians: Conflicting Identities and the Politics of Division,” in King, Charles and Neil J. Melvid ed. *Nations Abroad: Diaspora Politics and International Relations in the Former Soviet Union*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO: 1998.

President Robert Kocharian's Speech at the Armenia-Diaspora Conference, (Sept. 22, 1999)

<http://groong.usc.edu/ADconf/199909/speech>

Sassounian, Harut, “Sassounian: Armenia-Diaspora Unity Must be Preserved at All Cost,” (Feb. 2, 2010)

[http://www.armenianweekly.com/2010/02/02/sassounian-armenia-diaspora-unity-must-be-preserved-at-all-cost/;](http://www.armenianweekly.com/2010/02/02/sassounian-armenia-diaspora-unity-must-be-preserved-at-all-cost/)