

The ARF: Reflections and Refractions, 1988-2010

A presentation made at the public forum titled “The ARF at 120: A Critical Appreciation,” held at the New York Hilton Hotel on Nov. 21, 2010
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Ladies and gentlemen, since I have been invited here as President of the Zoryan Institute, allow me to start with a brief word about the institute. It was founded by a small group of Armenians in 1982, absorbed with questions about their history, identity, and future as a nation. They concluded that there was a crucial need for a place to think critically about the Armenian reality. Intellectuals, scholars, and the community at large would raise substantial questions about contemporary Armenian history and identity, and help develop new perspectives on vital issues, both current and future. Its primary goals would be for the Armenian people to express their history in their own voice; to understand the forces and factors that shape the Armenian reality today; and in doing so, to engage the community in a higher level of discourse, but without claiming that it had all the answers.

It is from this perspective that I will attempt to reflect on the ARF’s role in the Diaspora and Armenia for the past 22 years, since the beginning of the Karabagh Movement. Because of time constraints, I will present an abbreviated analysis using only selected examples. Hopefully, we can get into more detail during the Question & Answer session.

To start with, I will give a little background on my experiences with the ARF. I attended ARF schools, where we learned not only about Armenian history and geography, math and science, but also read *Roubeni Housher*, *Zartok*, and about the lives of Christapor, Simon Zavarian, Stepan Zoryan, and what their work meant for the nation.

As part of our education, we learned from the voluminous *Hayastani Hanrabedoutiun* by Simon Vratzian, the last Prime Minister of the Armenian Republic, how the first republic was established, the spirit in which the constitution was developed, the challenges that the young country faced, the importance of democracy, and the participation of other political parties, women and minorities in the Armenian parliament. Running throughout our education was the Genocide and the demand for its affirmation and justice. A free, independent and united Armenia was equally emphasized. The ARF was successful in indoctrinating the youth with the importance of civic engagement and inspiring them with the literature to which I just referred.

In the Diaspora, the ARF was visible in all aspects of Armenian society, in the social, political, economic, religious, cultural and educational spheres and, last but not least, in sports. They created a sense of community through their centres, provided a place for everyone, from youth to the elderly, and promoted Armenian history and identity.

When I came to the US for my university education, I lived in California, where I worked as a volunteer translator for *Asbarez*. As a university student living in the US in the 1970s, I was inescapably confronted by the discord over the war in Vietnam. We learned about how the government was misrepresenting to the people what was happening in the war. The youth began questioning authority and the legitimacy of the government and its agencies. A true social

revolution was taking place. Naturally, Armenian youth also began to question the authority of their own leaders, whether of the church or the political parties. Unfortunately, it soon became clear that these traditional institutions were dedicated to keeping the status quo. While I had grown up with the ideals and principles of an organization that was to be decentralized and governed from the bottom up, I eventually realized that the ARF had actually become highly centralized and was run from the top down. Furthermore, it had developed an institutional attitude towards individuals and other organizations that could be summed up as “if you are not with me, you are against me.” The fact that the ARF had drifted from its original principles led to great disappointment and disillusionment, not only for me, but also others.

With this background, let me now turn to events that took everyone by surprise and resulted in important opportunities missed by the ARF and almost all Armenian Diaspora organizations. In the mid-1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev announced new policies of *perestroika*, meaning restructuring, and *glasnost*, meaning openness. The relaxation of censorship and attempts to create more political openness had the unintended effect of re-awakening suppressed nationalist feelings throughout the Soviet republics. The Karabagh Movement was one of the first efforts by a Soviet people to test these new policies.

On February 20, 1988, Nagorno-Karabagh, conscious of the complete depopulation of Armenians from Nakhichevan and the trend towards the same in Karabagh due to the policies of the rulers of Azerbaijan, passed a resolution calling for unification with the Armenian SSR. Protests quickly developed into a hugely popular mass movement, with an estimated 1 million people filling the streets of Yerevan during the last week of February, listening to speeches and shouting “Gha-ra-bag! Gha-ra-bag!” Peaceful protests in Yerevan supporting the Karabagh Armenians were met with anti-Armenian pogroms in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait.

Gorbachev's inability to solve the Armenians' problems created dissatisfaction and only fed a growing hunger for independence among the Armenians. Clashes soon broke out between Soviet Internal Security Forces (the MVD) based in Yerevan and Armenians who decided to commemorate the establishment of the 1918 Republic of Armenia. The violence resulted in the deaths of five Armenians. Witnesses claimed that the MVD had used excessive force and that they had instigated the fighting. Further firefights between Armenians and Soviet troops occurred in Sovetashen, near the capital and resulted in the deaths of some 26 people, mostly Armenians. The actions of these people responding to *glasnost* emanated in practice from a right asserted from below, a philosophy that the ARF had taught in its institutions.

It was surprising, therefore, that the response of the ARF to this movement was to issue a joint statement with the Hnchak and Ramkavar parties, which, while pledging their support for bringing Karabagh within Soviet Armenia, concluded as follows:

“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 economic, productive, educational, and cultural life to heavy losses; that [harm seriously] the good standing of our nation in its relations with the higher Soviet bodies and other Soviet republics.”

Naturally, coming especially from the ARF, which embodied the national liberation movement, this was not well received by the people in Armenia and Karabagh, nor the leaders of the Karabagh movement. This was especially true after the pogroms against Armenians in Sumgait, Kirovabad and Baku. Some within the ARF felt this appeal to not upset the status quo was a betrayal of the revolutionary ideals of the party and its principle of struggling for freedom and independence. Others went as far as accusing the ARF of not wanting the success of a movement over which the party itself did not have control.

People started to question the role that diasporan political parties could assume in an independent Armenia. What should be the role of a party based outside of Armenia? Could a diasporan political party act against the interests of the government of the homeland without also acting inadvertently against the interests of its people? While the ARF had filled its supporters with a spirit of engagement and activism, it shook their faith by demonstrating its aversion to change and supporting the status quo.

Just around this time, we too at the Zoryan Institute had a relevant experience with the ARF. Some of the founders and early volunteers of the institute had, like me, grown up within party institutions, but had made a conscious decision to establish Zoryan as an institute completely independent of any of the traditional community organizations. In March 1988, the party's top leadership in Athens demanded to have its representatives form the majority on the institute's board of directors. Naturally, this was not acceptable to our board, which was made up of scholars, including non-Armenians. The party then issued an order to all of its members on April 1, 1988, to withhold support from the Zoryan Institute, with the threat of disciplinary action, including dismissal from the party. Fortunately, with credit to the new leadership of the ARF, this decision was reversed some 18 years later, and we now enjoy cordial cooperation with the ARF, as with all organizations.

Going back to the Karabagh Movement and Armenia's independence, the ARF, being severed from Armenia, did not play an active role and was in essence an outside observer of the events, as were most of the diasporan organizations. Nevertheless, it disapproved of almost everything done by the Armenian leadership and the Hayots Hamazgain Sharzhum (HHS). The ARF stayed away from the celebrations held in the Armenian Parliament when the referendum to break away from the Soviet Union passed with an overwhelming Yes vote. The ARF felt that it had the legacy, the political experience, and the right to govern. During the presidential election, it anticipated that, based on its historical record, the people of Armenia would welcome the party with open arms and sweep it into power. Instead, Levon Ter Petrosyan won the election with 83% of the vote. This was only to be expected. The Karabagh Movement was innate in Armenia, understood the people, the power bases, and the local social and political dynamics.

From the outset, the ARF leadership did not hesitate to reprimand and rebuke the Armenian Government for its actions. In an interview, the chairman of the ARF described the rulers of Armenia as just adolescent children in international politics, pointing to the ARF's 100 years of political experience. Even before Armenia declared its independence in September 1991, and Levon Ter Petrosyan was elected president in October, the Dashnak Party's official organs, such as *Troshag*, were vilifying him with the worst sarcasm and innuendo in their pages.

Actually, when the ARF registered as a political party in Armenia, it did not allow itself the time to earn the confidence of the people. Time was needed to integrate with the power centers of the country, such as the army, the rapidly emerging private sector, cultural institutions and the Church before running a candidate for the presidency. Instead, the ARF simply relied, once again, on its historical legacy, and used its leverage from the Diaspora, in terms of financial and human resources. To offset the ARF's leverage, the Ter Petrosyan government, as governments will always do, used other Diasporan organizations, such as the AGBU, other traditional political parties, and particularly the Armenian Assembly, as their liaison with the Diaspora and a counter-balance to the ARF's influence in the USA, where the ARF was best organized. Levon Ter Petrosyan even appointed a protégé of the Armenian Assembly, Raffi Hovannisian, as his very first Foreign Minister, for several reasons, one of which was to help reduce the influence of the ARF in Armenia and the Diaspora.

President Ter Petrosyan was so bitter towards the ARF that in a famous television speech on December 28, 1994, he unfairly banned the party, claiming evidence of a plot hatched by the ARF to engage in terrorism against his administration, endanger Armenia's national security and overthrow the government. He not only shut the party down in Armenia, jailing a number of its members, but also had the ARF declared as a terrorist group in other countries, affecting the freedom of movement of ARF's leading members.

One wonders how things might have turned out had the ARF and the HSh taken the opportunity to reevaluate the historical moment and their roles at this critical juncture, and see if they could have worked together, rather than attack each other.

During the 1996 presidential election, the ARF protested loudly the government's violence against the opposition, the beating of opposition parliamentary deputies, the shutting down of opposition party headquarters, and the sending of tanks and troops into the capital. Within days of Robert Kocharyan becoming president in 1998, however, the ARF was rehabilitated.

The October 27, 1999 assassinations in parliament caused a major crisis in the country. The Republican Party and the Yergrabah movement, led by Vazken Sarkisyan, who was now assassinated, engaged in self-destructive political infighting. The People's Party (Demirchyan's party) split into two. The political situation was in turmoil. Prime Minister Antranig Markaryan stepped forward to put the interests of the country ahead of his party and put together a coalition, as Kocharyan himself did not belong to a political party. In this chaotic scenario, the ARF, as a newcomer, became a viable alternative, as it filled an ideological void within the political spectrum, and slowly gained momentum. The party claimed it was in the coalition to change the system from within, and people believed it. The ARF had some initial successes. It established its infrastructure as a political party, with offices, administrative and political staff, media outlets, Hay Tad activities, and it also began the process of moving its Bureau headquarters to Armenia.

The ARF entered parliament in 1999 and joined the ruling coalition in 2003. In 2007 again, its members assumed ministries, including Agriculture, Education and Science, Labor and Social Affairs, and Healthcare. These were critical areas that could have used some of the leverage that

the ARF has in the Diaspora to benefit Armenia, but in the long term, resulted in a lost opportunity.

In 2008 the ARF joined a coalition with the Serge Sargsyan government, despite the March 1, 2008 presidential election fiasco, when there were voting irregularities, beatings, arrests, a 20-day state of emergency leaving some ten people dead and hundreds wounded, and a crackdown on civil and political rights throughout the year, whereby freedom of assembly and expression were heavily restricted, and with opposition and human rights activists imprisoned, where many still remain in prison today. In spite of all this, the ARF remained a silent bystander, if not a participant, by association.

There was certainly a lot to protest under both the Kocharyan and Sargsyan administrations, as reported by such reputable organizations as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the World Economic Forum, to name only a few.

- Arbitrary use of the rule of law, or lack thereof, and selective protection of private property.
- Concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Oligarchs controlling imports and key sectors of the economy for their personal benefit, creating a huge gap between them and the majority of the people, who live below the poverty line.
- Unemployment and reliance on external resources.
- Rampant government corruption. Use of government for partisan purposes.
- Government control over electoral process, minimizing the role of the electorate and perpetuating an elitist, non-responsive party system.
- Concentration of political power in the hands of a few.
- Political prisoners, intimidation, beatings, killings.
- Political censorship of media.
- Demographic decline. People, especially the youth and those with saleable skills, leaving the country in droves. Lack of youth inhibits conscription for Armed Services.

These are just some of the serious threats and challenges to the country, as well as to any Armenian political party hoping to serve the country.

The ARF has certainly demonstrated its ability to successfully mobilize the masses to protest forcefully in communities around the world, when the need is there. Unfortunately, the ARF's criticism of the Kocharyan and Sargsyan government regarding the failures and/or threats listed above was only minimal at best, in stark contrast with their strong criticism of the Ter Petrosyan administration, which was also corrupt, as well as of the Sargsyan government during the Protocols. This raises serious questions. Was its silence in the face of all these threats and injustices the price that the ARF was willing to pay just for being part of the government? Was being in government more important than being true to the ARF's core principles? What material benefits did the ARF achieve for the people of Armenia as part of the coalition for 10 years, when the situation in Armenia, as described above, is now worse than ever?

Finally, in April 2009, the ARF left the coalition, due to its opposition to the Turkish-Armenian Protocols. However, this occurred only after April 24, the 95th anniversary commemoration of

the Genocide, by which time President Obama had made his declaration that he would not interfere with a genocide resolution, as the parties were negotiating.

Undoubtedly, the ARF is searching for its place and role, now that it's out of the government. Unfortunately, the ARF's participation in the coalition still taints its moral authority, for the time being. However, being out of the coalition liberates the party and gives it the opportunity to change its modus operandi, refracting completely in a new direction. The ARF should now come up with a clear vision for the future of Armenia, or be part of a group that does, and promote that vision through its well organized structures in the Diaspora and Armenia. In doing so, the party may even provide constructive criticism of government policy, should the latter fail to realize that vision.

History has shown that the ARF works best when it follows its grassroots, bottom up, decentralized principles. What does that mean today? If the ARF is to be truly a decentralized party, then it should serve its local constituency and be accountable only to them, as no country should tolerate any political party which draws its ideology and resources from abroad.

There must be two distinct organizations, linked only by ideology, one dealing with Armenia-centered issues, elected by its members in Armenia, and accountable to the people there, the other focused on Diaspora-centered issues, elected by its members in the Diaspora and accountable to them. This does not mean the Diaspora-based ARF should not work for the betterment of Armenia. The ARF in the Diaspora could work more closely with other Diaspora-based organizations to bring real reform and change in Armenia. To start with, all political parties in Armenia should be able to compete on a level playing field. They should all have the same opportunities of funding, freedom of expression, and media coverage. This would lead to better governance, and therefore the rule of law. The Diaspora, collectively, must hold the government accountable, with specific conditions and standards, for its ongoing support. This would promote democracy, so much needed in Armenia, and through such cooperation, help create sustainable economic development in Armenia.

This cooperation would involve consultation, brainstorming with experts, and openness to divergent opinions. It would last beyond the review being conducted during this 120th anniversary, and be an ongoing effort. By promoting such cooperation and raising awareness of it among the people, the party could demonstrate its leadership and enhance its legitimacy.

In conclusion, the ARF has to consider a refraction in its direction. This means that preserving the traditional culture and calling for Genocide recognition, which it has done so successfully, is no longer enough. Experience teaches that those who stick with the status quo in this ever changing world eventually become irrelevant. Thus, if the ARF is truly to become an agent of change, it should adopt a new agenda that touches the people of Armenia on all levels. That project should become a national agenda, a project I call the "Armenia Project."

One nation, one culture, and one people starts right here in the Diaspora.

ARF Chair Antranig Kasbarian's Comments on the Presented Papers

(Below are Antranig Kasbarian's comments on the presentation above. For all of the presented papers and his entire comments, please visit

<http://www.armenianweekly.com/2011/03/19/weekly-publishes-proceedings-of-groundbreaking-public-forum/>)

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Greg Sarkissian's presentation, I would say, is probably the most provocative—offering trenchant critiques that sometimes hit the mark, other times miss, and in some cases cross the line from criticism to antagonism. Space doesn't permit me to respond comprehensively, so allow me to choose several points of particular importance:

With regard to Armenia's independence and the Karabagh movement, I think it's quite necessary to evaluate the ARF's role in the process. No doubt, the ARF made some startling misjudgments as it sought to become a factor in Armenia's political life. Its bid for the Presidency against Levon Ter-Petrosyan in 1991, in retrospect, must be viewed as premature at the least, folly at worst, as the party assumed that the historic, even mythic place it held in the hearts and minds of Armenians could be translated into results at the polling stations. This clearly was not the case—people voted based on numerous considerations, most of them tied to their daily lives, of which the ARF was not yet a part. And even if, as many claim, the elections were not entirely free or fair, here again the ARF was in no position to contest election rigging, because it was not a factor in the corridors of power where such decisions were being made. Clearly, the party had sought to jump-start its activity in Armenia, only later realizing that it hadn't gone through the needed preparatory steps—building solid cadres, conducting propaganda work among the people, and much more—to become relevant in a day-to-day sense.

Having said as much, I think Greg has left out some of the ARF's real accomplishments during this phase—most prominently with respect to Karabagh. Having been there during the war years, I can say with confidence that here the ARF did mesh with local activists, often winning over the best and brightest cadres—the Artur Mkrtchyan, Emil Abrahamyan, Georgi Petrosyan and others—who went on to lead a movement and eventually assumed the reins of power in the fledgling NKR. Proof of the ARF's influence may be found not only on the battlefield, where the party gave nearly 30 commanders to the war effort, but in the prolonged and at times violent effort of Ter-Petrosyan to unseat it from power, using Robert Kocharian and Serge Sarkisian as his tools.

I also question the comments concerning Armenia's independence, and the ARF's stance regarding it. Yes, the ARF had long been the champion of an independent Armenia, and thus should have been mindful of the signals it was sending when it signed the 1988 joint communiqué. But it is wrong to characterize this move as heresy, or as completely incomprehensible. On the contrary, the move was quite comprehensible, when viewed within the political choices available at the time. Specifically, the ARF was following the orientation laid out by Igor Muradyan—early leader of the Karabagh Committee before being ousted by Ter-Petrosyan and Vazgen Manukyan—who warned that in the larger scheme of things,

independence would come sooner or later, whereas the Karabagh struggle would prove to be the most intractable of all problems, and the one requiring greatest focus and sacrifice. In the view of Muradyan, the ARF, and quite a few others, Armenia's political maneuvers had to prioritize Karabagh above all else, meaning that a confrontational posture with Moscow—which still held the strings to Karabagh's resolution—should be avoided, if at all possible. In this light, the downplaying of Armenia's cause-as-independence struggle made good sense. In retrospect, of course, it appears that Moscow really had no intention of solving our problem in the manner we had hoped; but at the time, the option sought by the ARF certainly was plausible, if not persuasive, to many.

Finally, with regard to the Zoryan Institute, I'm not sure how much to say, other than that Greg's opinions differ fundamentally from ours. Suffice it to say that the ARF's "boycott," such as it was, was grounded in objections that were real and based on our working experience. Specifically, there were many of us during the late '80s/early '90s who felt that the Institute had strayed from its mission of academic research and documentation, and instead became a vehicle for the political aspirations of its Director, Jirair Libaridian, a high-ranking party member who resigned from the ARF, then left the Institute to become a policy advisor to Ter-Petrosyan. I can say that eventually, after the Institute and Libaridian parted company, there has been a gradual rapprochement leading to normalization of our relationship with the Institute.

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