

Three International Observers Walk Into An Election, See . . .

By John Hughes
ArmeniaNow editor

Any more it doesn't matter
Who's right or wrong
We've been injuring each other
For much too long

Kris Kristofferson
Nobody Wins

Let us thank God for the OSCE and the CIS and any other acronym-ed international observation missions who come here every five years to tell us that the blossom of freedom gets lovelier every season and that things are just sweet as pie here election-wise.

Bless them. They come. They observe. They write meaningless reports. They go home. Where would we be without them?

If you read the reports of the observers, here's what you know about Tuesday's voting process:

- There were a few technical glitches

- The counting process needs some improvement

If you believe what was reported on this website or on plenty others:

- Cash was paid for votes
- Proxies were temporarily kidnapped

- Proxies were beaten
- Ballot boxes were stuffed (Personal favorite: by "workers" changing a light bulb in one station)

- Soldiers were transported station to station to cast multiple votes

- Citizens' votes were monitored by their employers

Are we talking about different elections? ("Oh, sorry. You asked about ARmEnia? We thought you said ROmAnia.")

No. It does appear, though, that after banging their multi-lingual heads against the wall for so many years telling outsiders just how screwed up things really are with the voting process here, the OSCE et. al. have changed the definition of "international standards".

For example: The individual incidents of wrongdoing, the CIS report said, could not influence the final outcome. Translation: Let the brass knuckles fly, so long as enough bodies are left standing to constitute a majority.

No doubt there are improvements

since the first times international observers were coming here. Ballots are more distinct; votes are deposited in transparent boxes; passports are stamped to indicate that a voter has already voted. Good.

But to endorse what happened Tuesday, as these missions have, requires lowering the bar on the democratic process to a level that neither Armenia nor any other country should brag about clearing.

It appears that none of the observer missions brought mathematicians with them. Otherwise there surely would have been mention of the staggering display of civic duty exhibited here on Tuesday.

So great is the process here, that, according to figures from the Central Election Commission, a bit more than 70 percent of the voting populace did the deed. Incredible as it is to think that 7 out of 10 hold their duty so sacred, the CEC is being modest. Let us clarify:

About 2.3 million Armenians are registered to vote here. But: That number includes about 500,000 (according to various estimates) now abroad who, for the first time with this presidential election, were not allowed to vote. That brings the number down to about 1.8 million. According to the CEC, nearly 1.7 went to polls Tuesday.

There's the headline friends: "94 Percent Turnout in Mid-winter to Perform Patriotic Act." International standards my hiney, that's galactic!

Its shortsighted slight of Armenia's patriotism aside, the OSCE report was spot on with one observation:

"Armenian authorities made genuine efforts to address shortcomings noted in previous elections."

For sure they did. Having seen the shortcomings of 2003 when their fraud was not sufficient to avoid a runoff, this time around the authorities secured their power in the first vote through stepped-up efforts.

The learning curve shortens. Give us five more years, and the whole voting deal will be streamlined into a nod or a show of hands.

". . . there is need," the OSCE report says ". . . to tackle such concerns as lack of public confidence in the electoral process . . ."

Yes indeed there is. Thanks for pointing that out.

By Armen K. Hovannisian

In his editorial of February 21, 2008, Appo Jabarian of USA Armenian Life Magazine criticized Raffi Hovannisian, Armenia's first Foreign Minister and current member of the National Assembly (Parliament). Jabarian also considered it both ethical and professional to ridicule Raffi's father Richard, son Garin, and the "Hovannisian household."

We know that Jabarian strongly inferred that Hrant Dink was an agent of the Turkish government. But what charge does he bring against Hovannisian? Jabarian is not quite bold enough to utter the words himself. So he quotes.

He quotes Hayots Ashkharh, the Armenian tabloid assigned to conduct the government's official propaganda. He quotes an unidentified, but immediately identifiable, "Armenian activist." He quotes one Ashot Grigoryan from Slovakia.

They claim, in one way or another, that Raffi Hovannisian has committed "treason!" That, supposedly, was Hrant Dink's crime, too.

The crime here?

In an August 2007 letter to Turkey's president Abdullah Gul, Hovannisian's use of the term "Great Armenian Dispossession" instead of the term "Armenian Genocide" is condemned as "highly insulting." Jabarian views Great Armenian Dispossession as "more acceptable to the Turks." In other words, Hovannisian was "pandering" to the "enemy."

Here is Hovannisian's "pandering": In an article published in European print media on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, Hovannisian wrote:

"The Armenian Genocide and its final act turned ninety last week...The lessons, risks, and dangers flowing from the Genocide and its contemporary continuation are all the more poignant because the Armenian case was not only the physical murder of most individuals making up the nation, but also the violent interruption and forcible expropriation of its millennial homeland and way of life...Can the heirs to Turkish perpetration translate self-interest into seeking atonement, and can the descendants of the great Armenian dispossession agree to move on? Will we, or our children, ever see the light, let alone reflect back from the heights, of the post-Genocide world?"

Hovannisian used that same phrase—the Great Armenian Dispossession—in his writings in the Wall Street Journal:

"The Young Turk leaders of the Ottoman Empire, for example, were responsible for the great Armenian dispossession of 1915, which included all the components of the crime of genocide, the destruction of the historic Armenian homelands, and the murderous finality for millions of human lives."

There's more. In The Middle East Times and in United Press International in 2006, Hovannisian wrote:

"The catastrophic dispossession of the Armenian homeland by the rulers of the Ottoman Empire; the subsequent Bolshevik-Turkish pact partitioning Armenia and effectively ten-

dering Karabagh, Nakhichevan and other integral parts of the Armenian patrimony to Soviet Azerbaijan..."

Do these sound like treason?

The Young Turks did not merely claim the lives of several million people. Though its consequences continue, the massive killing of Armenians is finished. But it was not only the wholesale massacre of a people. The usurpation of the homeland was no less egregious and persists to this very day, making modern Turkey complicit in the crimes of the Young Turks.

Jabarian relieves himself of some high and mighty rhetoric, accusing Hovannisian of "ruining the work we have done for years and decades."

We?

There may be occasional interest in Jabarian's opinions, despite his complicity in the silencing of Hovannisian's own activities. Surely, if Jabarian was so eager to "expose" Hovannisian's letter to Gul, which has been publicly available and accessible since it was written six months ago, he would have also come across other newsworthy events and reports, including "Armenian Cultural Resolutions in the Council of Europe" and "Raffi Hovannisian at the Council of Europe."

On January 25, 2008, in Strasbourg, Hovannisian authored and introduced a motion, cosponsored by 25 members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The motion begins with the following words:

"The genocide of the Armenian people...resulted not only in the death and dispossession of more than two million human beings but also in the decimation of the Armenian patrimony, its ways of life, and its foundational contributions to western culture and world civilization."

(<http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc08/EDOC11510.htm>)

This, not in a letter to Gul, but on the highest international platform—on his own initiative, suppressed by the Armenian government-controlled media, including the Hayots Ashkharh of which Jabarian seems to be so fond. Ignored, too, by Jabarian's own newspaper.

There is much work "we" have done. Some of us advocate for the recognition of history in the most influential chambers of international politics. Others seem to bask in yellow journalism and personalized campaigns of character assassination.

Raffi Hovannisian didn't leave the United States for Armenia because Armenia had a better political system. He moved to the homeland to participate in transforming the system—from what it is not to what it should be. The greatest contribution an Armenian can make to his homeland is to love it while acknowledging its flaws and helping to change it for the better.

In spite of the fear and envy of some in official circles in Armenia and the scorn of the likes of Mr. Appo Jabarian, Raffi Hovannisian will be back in Strasbourg next month to keep pushing for the recognition and reversal of the Great Armenian Dispossession.

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Human Rights Watch Concerned About Armenian Election Violence

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Law-enforcement authorities opened criminal cases but has not yet charged anyone in connection with some of those incidents, including the reported kidnapping of a Ter-Petrosian proxy from a polling station in Abovian, a town 15 kilometers north of Yerevan. The proxy, Larisa Tadevosian, said she was driven out of Abovian and beaten up by three men after refusing to turn a blind eye to fraud. She identified one of the assailants as the chief bodyguard of Gagik Tsarukian, a wealthy businessman close to outgoing President Robert Kocharian.

A similar incident was reported in

Yerevan's northern Avan suburb. Two Ter-Petrosian proxies there claimed to have been kidnapped and severely beaten by a group of men led by Ruben Hayrapetian, another government-connected tycoon.

HRW also urged the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to "look into election-related violence and ensure that its final report on the vote records these incidents." The preliminary election report by some 400 representatives of the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament who monitored the February 19 election made only a brief reference to "a few isolated violent incidents" reported by the Ter-Petrosian campaign.