

Hrant Dink and Armenians in Turkey

By Hratch Tchilingirian

The assassination of the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink on 19 January 2007 and its aftermath highlighted both change and resistance to change in Turkish society. To understand how far Turkey has travelled in the past generation, Hratch Tchilingirian examines the role of Hrant Dink himself in the context of the Armenian community of which he was voice, critic, and emblem.

Marmara [Istanbul], 19 October 1994).

This was the moment Hrant Dink fully entered public life. The occasion, the pressure, the times themselves were such that he chose - publicly, confidently and courageously - to address the "discomforts" and "burdens" put upon his community by the state and a highly politicised media. It was the moment Hrant Dink openly began to deal with the dilemma of being simultaneously a citizen of one country, Turkey, while being part of another nation, Armenia.

A time of silence

It was never going to be easy, for the challenge was at once institutional, legal, and political.

The Armenian community, like that of other minorities in Turkey, experienced shame, humiliation, harassment and intimidation across the long decades from the 1950s to the 1990s without being able to speak up in its defence - and in a very different atmosphere to later controversies over Article 301 and even minimal debate about the genocide of 1915. The Armenian community in Turkey in this period was characterised by its reclusive existence and collective silence.

The defining institutions of the Armenian community in Turkey were and are the church and the school. Both faced (and face) perennial problems that kept Hrant Dink and his colleagues awake at night. The interference and heavy-handedness of the Turkish government in the Armenian community's process of electing a patriarch (in 1990, and again in 1998) were among the arduous legal problems enmeshing this key Armenian body. On the second occasion Hrant wrote:

"We are sad ... The (Armenian) community is deeply hurt by the uncertainty created by the escalation of the senseless crisis about the election of an acting patriarch. These are trying days ... We are observing with shame" (see "*Uzgunuz*", *Agos*, 21 August 1998).

The situation with the Armenian schools was (and is) no better. Hrant wrote many columns about the state of Armenian schools in Turkey, and took special interest in their administration. While criticising his own community for its shortcomings, he also berated the Turkish government for imposing numerous administrative restrictions on minority (and not only Armenian) schools.

Hrant passionately recorded the constant indignities experienced by Armenian educators. In August 1998 he wrote:

"If I am not mistaken, it was three years ago ... One of the vice-directors of the ministry of national education's Istanbul office - who was later convicted of corruption and bribe-taking - said the following to the "vice-principals" he appointed (whom the minority schools call "Turkish vice-principals"): "You are our eyes and ears ... You are to inform us of even the minutest mistakes

that these people make." He said this in the presence of the minority school principals, with total disregard for their dignity and common courtesy.

"... And what was I fantasising all these years ... With my 45-year-old brain, I was thinking: 'would, one day, a minister of national education start the ceremony for the new school year in a minority school?' Sweet thoughts ... My naïveté ... Sorry ..." (see "*Kinkel ve Valilik*", *Agos*, 21 August 1998 - translated excerpts posted on).

A voice of dignity

Hrant Dink and his colleagues were symbols as well as agents of change in relation to the Armenian community in Turkey. They were determined to express the indignation and resentment they experienced as citizens of the Republic of Turkey. If society and the political system did not allow them to voice their fears, concerns, and hopes for their community and for Turkey, the silence surrounding them - they believed - must be made audible.

It was to a large extent this combination - of the hunger to speak and the desire to address the "existential" problems surrounding the Armenian church and educational establishments - that sparked the creation of the bilingual weekly newspaper *Agos* in April 1996.

The five colleagues who founded *Agos* were: Diran Bakar, a lawyer; Luiz Bakar, also a lawyer and (since 1994) the spokesperson of the patriarchate; Harutiun Sesian, a businessman; Anna Turay, a public-relations professional; and Hrant Dink, who at the time owned a bookshop.

The founding members - as is the case with any equivalent innovative project - were to have their differences in subsequent years. But at its heart, *Agos* (and Hrant in particular) remained consistent in the effort to open channels of communication and dialogue between the reclusive - and at times isolated - Armenian community and Turkish society.

Hrant defined one of the newspaper's purposes as "(trying) to identify and explain our problems to the government and to Turkish society", while acknowledging that "because of this, we sometimes have problems" (*Armenian International Magazine*, 11/3, March 2000). His core belief was that prejudices could be overcome by education and dialogue.

The target of this education and dialogue was not just misunderstanding and prejudice in Turkish society, but the Armenian community itself. Hrant's critical discourse about the Armenian community, and especially the Armenian patriarchate, was unpopular, costing him supporters and even friends.

In June 2001, for example, on the occasion of the 1,700th anniversary of Armenian Christianity, he wrote: "The Armenian church has suffered divisions throughout history and it is evident that it has not learned from its own history.

The 'one nation - one church' rule, which has been repeated almost everywhere during these last years, is nothing but a slogan void of content" (see "Spiritual Chess", *Agos*, 1 June 2004 - translated from Turkish by Anahit Dagci).

At the same time, many found his passion, genuine concern and sincerity disarming. Most people in the Armenian community saw *Agos* as a courageous publication where issues related to Armenian identity and community were discussed with refreshing openness, reason and a genuine desire to build bridges across large divides - whether within Turkey, with Armenia or with the diaspora.

In the course of this work, Hrant came to a profound realisation: that the resolution of the problems of the Armenian community in Turkey was intimately related to the progress of tolerance, democracy and freedom in Turkey.

Armenians, here and there

Dogu Ergil observed after Hrant's death that he had "aimed to promote the idea that there are other ethnic-cultural groups in Turkey than Turks and Muslims, and (that) they can very well blend into the nation cleansed of stereotypes and biases". Hrant wanted, said Ergil, to "defend Armenians against majority fanaticism in Turkey and to defend Turks/Turkey against the fanaticism and hypocrisy of foreigners and diaspora Armenians" (see "", EU Turkey Civic Commission, 25 January 2007).

In recent years, the "Armenian issue" - as the problem of the genocide is referred to in Turkey - had indeed become a central theme in Hrant's public discourse. The centrality of the "Armenian issue", in fact, has come to cast a shadow over the other problems of the Armenian community in Turkey: ownership of property, community foundations, education of clergy, school administration, and church elections among them. (Why, for example, should the affairs of minorities in Turkey still be "administered" by Turkey's council of ministers, interior ministry, the security and intelligence agencies, and the foreign ministry?).

If the central, heated question of genocide came to dominate discussion of Armenians and Turkey, it is one that Hrant Dink and a considerable segment of the Armenian diaspora could not agree on. On the eve of the 24 April commemorations in 2002, for example, he addressed members of the Armenian diaspora in France in an interview with *L'Express* newspaper.

"Do not seek Armenian identity among the 1915 graves", he advised. "I am ready to discuss all issues with you ... I am proud to be a Turkish Armenian. I want to represent, with my newspaper, the rebirth of this society. Armenia will never be safe unless Turkey achieves democratisation. I believe Turkey may be a chance for that young state which is on the brink of drowning. Tomorrow, thanks to Turkey, Armenia will get the chance to become neighbors with the European Union. Turkey is Armenia's only chance" (*Turkish Daily News*, 23 April 2002).

More than the semantics of the issue, Hrant's approach to the issue of 1915 and Turkey-Armenia relations fo-

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