

# Massis Weekly

Volume 27, No. 40

Saturday, NOVEMBER 10, 2007

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*In Memory of Heros Marie Tchilingirian*

## Revisiting Political Ideology and Strategy

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The immediate reaction of a casual observer of Armenian life in the Diaspora to the 120th anniversary of the first Armenian political party is, arguably, of irrelevance. While the majority of diasporans are familiar with the "three traditional political parties", they are hardly familiar with the program and history of these national institutions that have preserved Armenian political and cultural life in dispersion for over one hundred years. True, like all other institutions that have been around for a long time, Armenian political parties in general and the Social Democratic Hnchakian Party (SDHP) in particular have a host of challenges confronting them at this juncture of their history. Asking the right questions in organizational life sometimes is more important than listing new ideas that lead to nowhere. But before contemplating some key questions that need to be asked, it is worth highlighting the foundational ideas that shaped the thoughts of the founders of SDHP back in 1887 and defined the activities of subsequent generations of members.

Social democracy and the liberation of the Armenian people -- from "injustice, brute power and slavery, economic, political, social and material inequalities"-- were the founding ideological and strategic pillars of SDHP (See *Hnchak*, Nos. 11-12, October-November 1888). While over the last 120 years the world in general and the Armenian people in particular have seen enormous changes, the fundamental principles of social democracy and freedom in the legacy of SDHP have relevancy to the present. The challenge to the party leadership today is to articulate that link and relevancy to Armenians living in the 21st century.

It should also be noted that long before the term was invented, *globalization* was at the heart of the foundation of the Social Democratic Hnchakian Party. The party was founded in Geneva by seven Armenian intellectuals from the Transcaucasus with the immediate aim of liberating Ottoman Armenians. Ideologies developed in Europe were articulated for audiences in the "Orient". Soon after the formation of the party, all the founding members started to learn the technology of the time -- typesetting -- as an essential tool of their work. (The metal types for the party paper came from Venice, prepared by the Mekhitarist Monks.) SDHP had branches not only in the Armenian heartland, but also in Europe, the US and the Middle East.

SDHP was founded to struggle against, as its founders stated in their program, injustice and inequalities. They believed that "the complex and unjust state of things can be reformed only by the *socialist organization*, by the direct means of people's constitution, by giving each person in society real capacity of participation in the administration of all public affairs". They argued that it is only through such approach that "the natural and undeniable human rights are preserved" (See *Patmutiun S. T. Hnchakyan Gusaktsutyun*. Vol. 1, Beirut: Shirak Press, 1962: 32-37).

The wider historical and sociopolitical context of the founding of SDHP was the modern socialist movement of the late 19th century, which was rooted in the working class movement in Europe, where the founders studied and lived. The two influential ideas were the democratic-liberal ideology and socialism, which were dominant in the political discourse of the time. Naturally, liberal democratic ideas were not confined to Western Europe. For instance, the democratic structure of the Armenian National Constitution established in the Ottoman Empire in 1863 is attributed to the prevalence of the idea among Armenian intellectual circles in Constantinople and the provinces. On the other hand, the socialist ideology as subscribed by the SDHP founding members was essentially Marxist, but shaped through the prism of the Russian revolution.

In general, the socialist movement adopted by SDHP founders envisaged a socio-economic system – including socialized ownership of the means of production – in which the community has control over property and distribution of wealth in order to achieve social and economic equality in society. The control of the "community" was to be directly exercised by the workers' councils or indirectly by the state. Karl Marx (1818-1883), the 'father' of modern socialist philosophy, suggested that socialism would become a reality after the proletarian (workers) revolution, whereby the means of production would be owned collectively. Society would then progress into communism – that is, a classless, stateless social organization based on "common ownership of the means of productions, wherein the state would be nothing else but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat."

Even as socialism provided the founding ideology of SDHP, this wider human liberation agenda gradually changed into a narrower "national liberation" movement of the Armenian people. For instance, while the concepts of "historic materialism" and class struggle were not applicable to the conditions in Western Armenia -- where religion and racial variables were more dominant – a significant segment of Armenian intellectuals in the Caucasus subscribed to "classical socialism", infused with nationalism, a new national consciousness.

In the short term, the main concern of SDHP was "the economic and political conditions of the Armenian people in Turkish Armenia". As described in their short term objectives, politically the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were "completely without rights, condemned to slavish silence, and [expected to be] extremely loyal. They are "unmerited as witnesses in court; guilty when killing for self-defense; [considered] offensive when complain and cry about their miserable condition; [are] persecuted for religion; do not have security of life and abode; [and are] subject to destructive and indignant attacks by brutal tribes". For all of these, the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire have "reached a state of political and physical destruction and material poverty" (*ibid*).

The Party believed that this untenable situation would be resolved only by "overthrowing the supreme authority of Turkey over the Armenian people" and through "workers-ruled

[*ramkapetakan*] political liberty and national independence.” Indeed, the idea of revolution as a means of radical change was a prevalent political goal and strategy in the late 19th century, not just for Armenian political parties, but to a host of other peoples living under the yoke of empires.

Once Turkish Armenians were liberated, the longer term objective of SDHP was to liberate the Armenians living in the Russian and Persian empires as well. The three liberated entities of the Armenian nation would then form a “Federal Workers-ruled Republic” [*dashnaktsayin ramkapetakan hanrapetutiun*]. What was unclear in the party program was where this new independent, free Armenian Republic would be created – which parts of Western Armenia, Transcaucasus and northern Persian were to be included in it? This was an essential question that was not articulated by the founders and eventually caused divisions in the party.

What is extremely relevant today on this 120th anniversary is the fact that insecurity, indignation, discrimination, and injustice continue to define the situation of the Armenian community in Turkey today. Although not on the scale of the 19th century, the lives of some 70-80,000 Armenians living in Turkey are as perilous and concerning. Similarly, the conflicts in the Caucasus have not been resolved and national security concerns are high.

On the ideological level, SDHP’s “socialist values” are hardly mentioned or discussed in the current discourse of the Party and its activities. “Injustice, brute power, economic, political, social and material inequalities” -- as articulated 120 years ago by the founding members of the party -- are burning issues today as well. While socialism as practiced in the USSR failed miserably, it is still alive in various forms of intensity in Europe (e.g., Britain under Labour Party, Spain under the Socialist Workers' Party, France under Lionel Jospin's Socialist Party, etc.) and is more visible in South America.

Indeed, in recent years, especially after the end of the Soviet Union, globalization -- the integration of economic, political, and cultural systems the globe over-- and the political economy of “transition” have become hot topics in regional and international relations. While strong economic growth as a result of globalization has improved the lives of people around the world in absolute terms, the process of globalization -- especially technological changes -- has often been blamed for the widening gap between rich and poor. As a result of the current world economic system -- shaped by a global capitalist market (the “New World Order”) -- there is growing social polarization around the world. For instance, the wealth of the 475 billionaires in the world is equivalent to the combined incomes of more than 50 percent of the world's population, that's about three billion people. Another staggering example of inequalities in wealth distribution is the fact that the assets of the three richest people in the world exceed the combined GDP of 47 least developed countries.

Today SDHP needs to address not only contemporary Armenian national issues, but also global concerns. Without engagement with the wider society and the world, the party -- and any political party in the Diaspora for that matter -- would become marginal, static and parochial. It is not a secret that the membership in Armenian political parties is dwindling. Serious questions need to be asked by the party leaders. What does SDHP -- and Armenian political parties in general -- need to do in the coming years to remain relevant to Armenians in the Diaspora and Armenia? What is the main ideology or philosophy that defines SDHP today? Which elements of the founding principles of SDHP are still relevant today? What kind of human and material resources are needed to articulate and

disseminate those principles and values? How should political, cultural and social goals be implemented in various parts of the world where Armenian communities are spread?

In our Diaspora reality today we could either look at our historic national institutions as precious museum-like antiquities to be celebrated and cherished (such as the church and parties) or make them vibrant organizations that shape and enrich our communal life. Today it is not enough for choices to be attractive, they need to be convincing and add value. There is much to be learned from the past and there is much to think and do in the present.

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