

# Armenia is a troubled nation

*Jason Epstein*

*Pajamas Media on April 24, 2008.*

Despite years of generous American financial assistance, Armenia's economy remains in a shambles. Corruption is endemic — the public believes that most wealth created in recent years has only benefited the oligarchs — unemployment is high, and the prices of basic necessities continue to rise. It is no wonder that the country's population keeps declining — the most recent Central Intelligence Agency estimate was just under three million, a 15% drop since 1994.

While Armenia has never been a model republic, the February 19th presidential election and aftermath were particularly disturbing moments. Principal opposition parties questioned the legitimacy of both the process and results, which gave the ruling Republican Party of Armenia's candidate, Serge Sarkisian, a majority of the votes cast. Subsequent acts included the beating and killing of protestors, arrests of opposition leaders, a three-week-long state of emergency — which included blocking access to the Internet and closing of opposition newspapers — and a continuing ban on opposition rallies in the capital of Yerevan. These repressive measures earned a rebuke from Human Rights Watch, as well as the White House and the European Union presidency. Former president and opposition candidate Levon Ter-Petrossian described the vote and subsequent mayhem in *The Washington Post* as “the rape of our democracy.”

Regrettably, the reaction to the ongoing political crisis in Armenia from its Diaspora has been tepid, at best. The Armenian Assembly of America released a few unremarkable statements, including one expressing the need for the violence to end and rule of law to be followed — but not assigning any blame. The typically more outspoken Armenian National Committee of America posted even less — a single neutral statement about the crisis could be located deep in the bowels of its web site. (On the other hand, references to genocide and need to further increase American foreign aid to Armenia were tattooed all over the group's homepage.) There were a few days of scattered protests at the Armenian Consulate in Beverly Hills but little else was organized. In contrast, powerful organizational resources remain mostly focused on emotional issues that have little impact on the lives of ordinary men, women, and children in Armenia.

Armenian-American groups spend an inordinate amount of time and resources pushing supporters in Congress to pass a resolution calling on the White House to recognize the Ottoman attacks on Armenians during the First World War as genocide, a charge vehemently challenged by most Turks and Turkish-Americans. This effort has been pushed for years while not even recognizing the close strategic relationship of the United States and Turkey. This latest, however, was particularly damaging to the United States at a time when the Pentagon relies heavily on Turkish support for ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. (Little wonder then that Roll Call political analyst Stuart

Rothenberg called the now-dormant resolution one of his five nominees for “The Worst Political Idea of 2007.”)

In the weeks following the bloodshed in the streets of Yerevan, the Assembly and ANCA repeatedly attempted to varyingly justify or explain away the Armenian military’s attack on the armed forces of Azerbaijan on the border of the internationally recognized occupied Azerbaijani territory of Karabakh. Such an action typically befits a regime trying to deflect attention from its domestic troubles.

The organizations also banded with sympathetic Senators to torpedo the nomination of Dick Hoagland to be ambassador to Armenia, all because the career diplomat did not cave in and deviate from White House policy by proclaiming the tragic events in the Ottoman Empire as genocide. President Bush recently nominated Marie Yanukovitch, another longtime foreign service officer, for the long-vacant position. When she refuses to deviate from US policy, will her candidacy be derailed too? And how exactly do Assembly and ANCA arrive at the conclusion that not having an American ambassador in Yerevan since 2006 helps the Armenian people?

Every year, on April 24th, Armenians in Los Angeles and elsewhere remember the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Armenians during the final days of the Ottoman Empire. However, the time for Armenian-American institutions to grow up and play a leadership role on behalf of the ongoing crisis in their ancestral homeland is long overdue. They must pressure President Sarkisian, and others brought into the new government, to expeditiously enact meaningful economic reforms, promote democratization, undertake tangible steps to resolve the Karabakh dispute, and find common ground with the Turkish people on the tragic events from nearly a century ago.

*Jason Epstein is the President of Washington, DC-based Southfive Strategies, LLC. He was an advisor to the Turkish Embassy from 2002-07*