
Hostility And Condescension From The Department Of State

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The following editorial appeared in the June 28 edition of the Armenian Reporter, which is an English-language weekly newspaper distributed across the United States. The chief editor, Vincent Lima, is based in Yerevan.

On Wednesday, June 25, David Kramer, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor, held a press conference at the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan. In his opening statement and in his responses to reporters' questions, Mr. Kramer exhibited a degree of hostility and condescension toward the Armenian state that reflected poorly on the United States.

Mr. Kramer prefaced his attacks with the observation that "the United States and Armenia have very good, strong ties. We are friends, and friends speak candidly with each other."

He then proceeded to deliver a far-from-friendly and far-from-balanced discourse with advice for the government and no one else.

Freedom of media and assembly

Noting a downward trend in Armenia's democratic development in February and March, Mr. Kramer recalled first that the United States "strongly recommended that the government restore all freedoms of assembly and the media." He did not acknowledge, however, that the Armenian government has already done so.

On March 1, then-President Robert Kocharian had invoked his constitutional powers to declare a state of emergency and had put in place restrictions on the media and the freedom of assembly. He lifted the restrictions on the media in part in mid-March and in full upon the expiration of the state of emergency on March 20. As before, the whole gamut of voices can be heard in print and electronic media. And there is a greater diversity of voices on television today than there was before the elections.

Restrictions on the freedom of assembly were written into law in mid-March. But the law has since been amended along the lines recommended by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. The City of Yerevan and the Police made a set of hard-to-understand decisions initially to ban an antigovernment demonstration scheduled for June 20, but police relented at the appointed time and 15,000 people gathered peacefully.

Rather than noting this progress, Mr. Kramer moved the goalpost. He said he wanted to see the television station A1+ back on the air. (This television station lost its broadcast frequency back in 2002. Public Television offered at the time to carry A1+'s decidedly antigovernment news programming daily, but the owner declined. With a finite number of TV frequencies available, and all of them taken, there can be no question now of depriving a station of its seven-year license in favor of A1+. And the United States is not the competent authority to determine which businesses are best qualified - in terms of capital, talent, their business plan, and so on - to win the next tender.)

A friendly representative of a friendly nation might have acknowledged that Armenia had in fact restored freedoms of assembly and media and welcomed the

fact; one way to build on this progress, he might have added, would be for the government to should ensure that the next time television frequencies are up for licensing, the process is transparent and free of political interference.

A credible investigation

Mr. Kramer reiterated the call for the "launch of a serious, credible investigation of the events of March 1." An investigation has, of course, been launched. Does Mr. Kramer believe it has the potential to be the kind of serious and credible investigation we'd all like to see? Hard to say, since he ignored it and made his own recommendation instead: model the commission after the 9/11 Commission, he said, in which notwithstanding a great deal of mutual distrust, the two parties were represented in equal numbers. (He did not mean the United States and Al Qaeda but the two major U.S. political parties.)

Well, it so happens that Armenia's parliamentary parties are entitled to equal numbers of seats on the commission that was formed last week. That means the opposition Heritage Party with 7 members of parliament was offered two seats and the ruling Republican Party with over 60 members was also offered two seats. Non^_parliamentary groups have also been offered nonvoting seats.

Prisoners

Mr. Kramer reiterated the call for the "release of those detained for expressing their political views." Asked by the daily Hayots Ashkharh whether he had studied the criminal cases pending against the individuals detained in connection with the events of March 1, Mr. Kramer said he had not but was inclined to believe the word of U.S. Embassy staff over any documents assembled by Armenian investigators. It is proper that State Department policy makers should trust the professionals who are their subordinates; it is not proper for them to cast aspersions on the professionals who staff Armenia's law enforcement bodies. It's a question of respect.

As for the substance of the issue, this page too has raised questions and concerns about the criminal investigation into the events of March 1. While there is clearly a case to be made that Levon Ter-Petrossian and his team sought to come to power by bringing about a collapse of the state apparatus (he was calling for and counting on defections), charges that an armed insurrection was in the works have yet to be substantiated. In addition, the fact that no one has yet been charged in connection with the deaths of 10 individuals is cause for concern.

Legitimacy

Asked by RFE/RL about the U.S. attitude toward the new Armenian administration, Mr. Kramer outdid himself: Robert Kocharian is no longer the president, he observed, and U.S. officials deal with the new occupant of the presidential office as the president.

We expect the United States to encourage Armenia in a series of positive ways to help Armenia become the democratic state it aspires to be. As people who care deeply about Armenia and its people, we want to see the U.S. government continue to monitor democratic developments in Armenia with care. Our diplomats - and indeed the assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor - must speak out when they see problems. By the same token,

they must also recognize progress; they must likewise recognize that all elements of society have an obligation to play a constructive role.

The Bush administration and the State Department should reexamine their approach to Armenia - lest their continued posturing serve further to destabilize Armenia and Armenia's efforts to move forward.

As we move closer to the presidential and congressional elections in the United States and meet with elected officials and candidates for office, we need to encourage the United States to take a constructive, balanced, and informed approach to supporting Armenia's transition.
