

Is the historical Dashnak party still a driving force in Nagorno-Karabakh?

Nationalist party founded at the end of the 19th century which kept on acting abroad during the Soviet time and nowadays strongly rooted among the diaspora, the Dashnak or Dashnaksutiun (abbreviation of Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaksutiun which means Armenian Revolutionary Federation or ARF) played a key part in the Armenian History. First secretary of the Dashnak division in Nagorno-Karabakh, Jirair Shahigjian highlights the problematics

Jirair Shahigjian receives us in the newly renovated Dashnak HQ in Stepanakert, two steps away from the Nagorno-Karabakh presidency. Since April 2004, he is the first secretary of the Karabakh section of the party. On the wall, a Dashnak flag adorned with the words « Freedom or death », a black and white picture of the three founders of the party created in 1890 in Tbilisi, in Georgia : the marxist C.Mikaelian, the populist R.Zarian and the bakuninist S.Zavarian.

Jirair Shahigjian speaks fluently Armenian and Persian. Not surprising for an Iranian of Armenian origins. The interview is thus done with the help of Nara, a young militante polyglotte, fluent in Russian and English.

« The Dashnak line is a Social policy and it aims at the friendship between peoples », starts Jirair Shahigjian, with a solemn attitude. « There is nothing specific to Karabakh. We follow a same and only national line, identical to the one in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, notably for the recognition of the genocide. Every four years, during the International meeting of comitees, a vote takes place about the main lines of the national politicity. The last one was held in February 2003 » .

But the Stepanakert representation has to adapt to stakes specific to the has to the enclave. Alike the example of the thorny issue of displaced/refugees. « The precarious refugees? situation is a political and before all financial issue. If we just want to mention the aid for houses construction, this depends on the budgetary choices of the government. », as he thinks. Interviewed about the Dashnak stand about the Nagorno-Karabakh, the first secretary has rather to dodge : « We are today independent. But Dashnak is in favour of the defense of a Great Armenia. » .

The offices of Dashnak have just been renovated, and the desks are well equipped with computers. But the budget and financial resources of the party are still taboo. There a lot of gossiping around the financing of local political forces. The party in power, MDA, would be supported by local businessmen and the diaspora.

Dashnak could be no exception to the rule. Its first secretary asserts that each supporter gives 3% of its salary to the party. In addition, the party benefits from various sponsorships and donations, from Karabakh businessmen.



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Surmounted by the three Armenian, Karabakh, and Dashnak flags, the HQ bustles around by an incessant comings-and-goings of militants and voluntaries. Bought in 1998, the building shelters the secretariat of the party, with its ten or so full-time employees, but also young qnd students sections, or also the editorial team of Aparaj, the organ of the Press of Dashnak. Bimonthly created in Stepanakert, Aparaj printed to 1,000 copies, for a

strictly Karabakh circulation.

31 years old, Jirair Shahigjian is a probing example of the weight of the youth inside the party. « We have created several youth associations : the first one aimed at schoolchildren and tries to improve the studies, the two other ones gather University students as well as activists » , as he explains.

Borned in Ispahan, and now married to a Karabakh woman, Jirair Shahigjian was very active in the Dashnak representation in Teheran. He left his country in 1996, since he refused to be any longer under pressure of the power over the Iranian youth.

Nara, 22 years old, our translator, has been involved for now ten years in the life of the party. Voluntary worker, Nara knew about the Dashnak by her parents. She is nowadays committed in the student association of the party, which gathers 150 students, of which 50 active militants. « By now, our workgroup prepares the municipal elections of August 8th » , explains Nara.

Every week, according to the community policy of the party, the representation also organises seminars gathering voluntaries and supporters. The objective ? To follow the international and national news, around two themes : the evolution and the History of the Armenian people.

« Our party has opened offices in the regions for example in Shushi, but it is true that decisions are taken here, in Stepanakert » , as confides Jirair Shahigjian. According to Rozanna Ishkanian from the newspaper Demo, Dashnak has indeed developed into the regions. « To prove it, a part of the Dashnak deputies of the Parliament are coming from the districts of Hadrut (three of them), or Askeran, two regions at the border with Azerbaijan { the districts of Hadrut and Askeran are respectively located at the South-East and East of Nagorno-Karabakh, editor? **s note** } » , explains Rozanna. « Even if they are particularly active in those Eastern regions, they lack readability » .

Their impact on the local political life yet stops at the villages. The great municipalities are still at the hands of the MDA. In addition, the local elections are known for being rigged. According to Jirair Shahigjian, the stake is still the Karabakh « capital » , the decision-making center of the regional political scene.

Present among the government, the party holds the Education, Culture and Sports portfolio, at the hands of the minister Armien Sarkissian, and his principal private secretary.

But, according to journalists and specialists of local Policy, the prospects of Dashnak could not break away from its eternal anti-establishment part in which the party seems to be contented with. The population does not acknowledge this political force as an alternative power.

A stand rejected by Jirair Shahigjian. « As a matter of principle, we are not systematically for or against the government in power. Even if we agree about the main lines of the domestic policy of the government of Arkady Goukassian, we disagree about its external policy, as well as about its budgetary allocations» .

With nine deputies in the Parliament, the Dashnak influence is undeniable. As for the future of the party, Rozanna Ishkanian is being skeptical : « since Dashnak did not hesitate to take up arms à prendre les armes during the war, the party was welcomed by the public opinion. After 1997, Dashnak made an alliance with the president, that is what lost them as regards the presidency. And now, the party claims to be critical toward the government in power. »