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A JOURNEY OF ACTIVISM: GARO PAYLAN'S QUEST FOR JUSTICE

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By Dickran Khodanian on October 12, 2016

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BELMONT, Mass □ little over a century ago, Armenian lawyer and writer Krikor Zohrab was a member of the Ottoman Parliament where he vehemently defended the rights of Armenians and their interests. Fast forward to 2016, ethnic Armenian member of Turkish Parliament of the Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) Garo Paylan has without a doubt personified the legacy of Zohrab with his charismatic nature and valiant spirit.

On Oct. 4, the Armenian community of Greater Boston gave an overwhelming welcome to Paylan at the First Armenian Church of Belmont, as he continued his visits to various Armenian communities across the United States. The event was sponsored by the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research (NAASR)/Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Lecture Series on Contemporary Armenian Issues, and co-sponsored by the Kaloosdian-Mugar Chair in Armenian Genocide Studies at Clark University, the Hamazkayin Armenian Cultural and Educational Society, the Society of Istanbul Armenians of Boston, and the Tekeyan Cultural Association.

Paylans presentation centered around the recent developments in Turkey and the current situation of the Armenian community there, during which he described the realities that Armenians in Turkey face, while highlighting the resilience of the community in their pursuit of justice.

Paylan set an example for not just Armenians around the world but to all those who are pursuing a path to justice by any means. With his grandparents being genocide survivors from Malatya, and settling in Istanbul, Paylan discussed different experiences from his childhood □□□□ he first heard the story of his grandparents survival to when he was required to hide his Armenian heritage in the public to avoid being treated differently.

Paylan brought to surface the harsh realities that exist in the modern state of Turkey and explained that the current situation is not too different than how our ancestors were treated under the Ottoman Empire over a century ago. He stressed that for the minorities and the oppressed in Turkey, their rights are limited, they have no protection, and they experience constant injustice. The lack of democracy and democratic values □□□□ other things □□□□ caused Turkey to enter one of its darkest periods in history, according to Paylan.

However, witnessing these hardships, listening to the stories of his grandparents, and experiencing the lack of fairness as an Armenian all became motivation for Paylan to become a tireless activist in pursuit of human rights, justice, and democracy in a country where he feels a

sense of homeland.

Paylan emphasized how nothing will change for the Armenians in Turkey unless Turkey becomes a democratic state. And in order for this to take place, all the minorities must care about each other and learn from one another. To only care for your identity is a disease, said Paylan.

It was with this conviction that Paylan and group of likeminded leaders including Kurds, and Turks came together to establish the HDP with the mission to fight for all minorities and make sure all of their concerns equally get heard.

During his presentation, Paylan addressed the circumstances following the attempted coup in July, explaining that its only result was an even more gruesome government, whose focus has become to remove anyone they see as a threat to the current government. Coups have become recurring events in Turkey and have not lead to any uniting factor, and instead have become a tradition.

Paylan called on the diaspora to play an active role in the struggle for rights for the Armenians in Turkey because they too have roots and distinct ties in Western Armenia. He stressed that when most of the Western world plays politics in the Middle East turns a blind eye to the values of freedom and basic rights, it should be the responsible of all Armenians to support each other and stand strong in our pursuit for democracy and justice. Armenians have a right to the Western Armenian world, said Paylan, while stating that Armenians must be more organized as a nation if we want any rights to Western Armenia.

When asked whether he is concerned for his life in Turkey or if he might suffer the same fate as Dink, Paylan answered that simply being an Armenian in Turkey is enough of a reason for his life to be in danger and that in the pursuit for justice and activism in the realm of human rights, there is no room to be afraid.

Despite all of the challenges and obstacles that has come his way, Paylan has stayed true to his principles and has demonstrated that there is no room to fear when defending the very basic foundation of human rights. He brought with him a rare breed of activism in Turkey that has challenged all that is corrupt in Turkey.

His bravery has inspired many around the world and continues to do so through his relentless journey of activism. And he has showed the global community of Armenians that Armenians in Turkey are equally as invested in Hai Tahd [] Armenian cause [] are willing to achieve their goals by any means necessary.

Kaynak/Source: