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## A REFLECTION OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL RAMGAVAR YOUTH'S POLITICAL THINKING DURING 1912-1913 VIA ISTANBUL-BASED **VERADZENUNT**

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## “**VERADZENUNT,**

### **Boîte Postale Ottomane, No. 140 Constantineple**

#### INTRODUCTION

Several months after its foundation in 1912, the Constitutional Ramgavar Party's<sup>1</sup> University Students' Union of Istanbul published *Veradzenunt*<sup>2</sup> (*Renaissance* in Armenian) as its official mouthpiece. Back then, most of the Istanbul-based Armenian political parties possessed their own publications, which were expressions of and iconic symbols of modernity, owing to the fact that they formed a crucial means of communication.

*Veradzenunt* began as a monthly periodical and maintained this status on the whole with rare exceptions. Sometimes its publication was interrupted because of year-end university examinations, and due to this, a few issues were combined in one. Initially, Sahag Mesrob and then Setrak Dourgerian undertook the gazette's directorship.<sup>3</sup>

Various young Ottoman-Armenian intellectuals, mostly university students, such as Roupen Gamsaragan, Levon Adjemian,<sup>4</sup> Armenag Haygouni, Hovhannes Boghossian, Mikael Natanian,<sup>5</sup> and Haroutyoun Kavoukdjian, to name a few, wrote articles for the periodical.

*Veradzenunt* enabled Armenian youth to raise their voices and express their opinions regarding a multiplicity of matters. Most of the written essays dealt with political, social, scientific and literary issues. As the mouthpiece of the Constitutional Ramgavar youth, the periodical also propagandized their cultural and social activities organized in Istanbul, Egypt and various Anatolian branches. Apparently, the periodical was also sent to places outside Istanbul like Egypt, the USA, Europe and Russia.

Naturally, printed in the heart of the Ottoman Empire, *Veradzenunt* was very reactive towards internal and external Ottoman political events. Moreover, as will be seen, it committed itself to the pluralist version of Ottomanism (*Osmanlilik*) and advocated for the Ottoman Constitutional regime. At the same time, it also highlighted various aspects of Armenian national affairs.

The Constitutional Ramgavar Party is one of the under-examined Ottoman-Armenian political organizations. In this paper, I intend to reflect on the Ramgavar youth's pre-WWI political thought, basing the reflections on *Veradzenunt's* issues of 1912 and 1913, which I was able to secure. I would also like to note that the fate of the periodical is rather vague, since the last issue at hand was that of November-December 1913.

#### OTTOMAN POLITICAL CONTEXT ON THE EVE OF *VERADZENUNT'S* PUBLICATION

In the years 1912 and 1913, the Ottoman Empire passed through a period of political turmoil. After the general elections of April 1912, through manipulation and fraudulent practices, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) dominated the Ottoman political scene down to the Empire's disintegration in 1918. Under the banner of the Ottoman Constitution, the CUP gradually established a single-party regime,<sup>6</sup> which was more or less a continuation of, rather than a rupture from, Sultan Abdul Hamid II's reign.

Furthermore, in the same period, the Ottoman state was in the midst of a series of devastating internal and external wars. The first was against the Italians in 1911-12 in Libya, followed by the Balkan wars in October 1912. As a consequence of the ongoing armed conflicts, the Ottomans lost vast territories, mainly in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

By this time, the Young Turks had also adopted a Turkish nationalist ideology altering the pluralistic definition of *Osmanlilik*. The CUP's stance further complicated the turbulent situation by intensifying tensions between Turkish and non-Turkish Ottoman factions, in view of the fact that the minorities' nationalist sentiments also reached their apex threatening the Empire's subsistence.<sup>8</sup>

To please his subjects and as a panacea for the fabricated elections of April 1912, on August 5, Sultan Reşad called for new parliamentary elections. However, the sudden eruption of the Balkan wars aborted them, keeping the CUP dominant on the Ottoman political landscape.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE OTTOMAN FATHERLAND (HAYRENIK) IN THE CONSTITUTIONAL RAMGAVAR IMAGINATION

Like other contemporary Ottoman Armenian, Greek and Arabic periodicals,<sup>10</sup> *Veradzenunt* held an antagonistic attitude towards the CUP's

Turkish-oriented Ottoman nationalism. In fact, the Constitutional Ramgavars backed Ottoman pluralism, which, of course, was better for Armenian interests. They aspired to solidarity of the multi-ethnic Ottoman nation.<sup>11</sup> According to Levon Adjemian, one of the Ramgavar intellectual youth, collaboration and cooperation between the various Ottoman factions paved the road for the fatherland's progress.<sup>12</sup> The Ramgavars visualized Armenian existence within the Ottoman realm.<sup>13</sup> Being 'Armenian alongside Ottoman' was their philosophy as they believed in dual identities.<sup>14</sup>

However, the Ramgavars were not unique in this. As Rober Koptaş has insightfully stated, almost all of the Armenian political organizations operating in the Empire advocated the constitutional regime and showed respect towards the Empire's territorial integrity.<sup>15</sup> Like other Armenian and non-Armenian subjects, the Ramgavar youth also pinned great hopes on the Ottoman Constitution and parliament.

Abraham Lincoln's "of the people, by the people, for the people" served as their guiding spirit.<sup>16</sup> Party members encouraged young Armenians to join their ranks to fulfill their citizenship duties<sup>17</sup> and perhaps become modern through displaying interest towards their *vatan's* political life. Naturally, as a democratic political group, in almost every editorial, the Constitutional Ramgavars championed the people. For them democracy signified both engaging the people in political life and working for their interests.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the fact that the Constitutional Ramgavars lacked a representative in the Ottoman parliament, their journal continuously threw light on Armenian participation in the Empire's constitutional life. As Koptaş has suggested, the Ramgavars constituted an elitist party that failed to attract the support of the masses. Thereby, they remained in the shadows, since the CUP preferred to forge alliances with the more popular Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF or Dashnaks).<sup>19</sup>

In June 1912, *Veradzenunt* expressed sympathy towards the election of Dashnak partisan Arshak Vramian<sup>20</sup> as a deputy in the Ottoman parliament, claiming that he represented Armenian interests.<sup>21</sup> From the Ramgavar point of view, ideological and political rivalries were not as important as Armenian national interests. Nevertheless, with the endorsement of intimate ties between the CUP and the Dashnaks, the Ramgavars criticized and disapproved of the ARF's political acts.

Noting the CUP's single-party monopoly and the Dashnaks' collaboration with their Turkish "brothers," the Ramgavars called for multi-party political rule, which would be much more beneficial to the entire Ottoman nation.<sup>22</sup> In its editorial of July 1912, *Veradzenunt* described the second constitutional period as a form of "second oppression" following Abdul Hamid II's reign.<sup>23</sup> The same Hamidian political customs and practices still widely prevailed making

no major difference, affirmed the journal. Hence, for the Ramgavar youth, the structural change in the regime was nominal rather than real.<sup>24</sup> The Dashnaks and the Young Turks were accused of exploiting the people instead of serving their interests.<sup>25</sup>

By the time Sultan Reşad called for new elections, the Ramgavar mouthpiece, being afraid of the Turkish nationalist stance that was leading the country towards destruction, urged Armenian political organizations to form alliances with anti-Ittihadist parties.<sup>26</sup> However, as previously mentioned, the Balkan wars left the Ramgavar political dream unachieved. On the eve of the wars, *Veradzenunt* demonstrated further hostility towards the "war-loving" Dashnaks and Young Turks. The Constitutional Ramgavars dreamt of a peaceful Ottoman homeland, devoid of wars and armed conflicts.<sup>27</sup> They also warned the Dashnaks of their close relations with the CUP by reminding them of the recently perpetrated Adana massacres of 1909. Learning lessons from the past was crucial to avoiding future pitfalls.<sup>28</sup> They were right in their judgment to a certain extent since, in 1915 and after, major mass murders were committed against the Armenians.

As much as they were concerned with Ottoman territorial integrity, the Ramgavars also sympathized with the nationalist movements of the Balkans, stating that this was the road for their national existence.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps this position was taken to oppose the CUP's Turkish nationalist approach. But, in July 1913, when the war had terminated, *Veradzenunt* revised its anti-Ottoman state position, claiming that it desired to observe the Ottoman Empire's political eminence (*Osmanyany Gaystrutyany medzutyany amenks papakogh enk*).<sup>30</sup>

In light of the Arab Nationalists' Congress in Paris in 1913, *Veradzenunt* also celebrated the decentralizing calls in the Empire's Arab provinces. It asked the Ottoman government for the implementation of similar reforms in other corners of the Empire.<sup>31</sup> Seemingly, the Constitutional Ramgavars had the Armenian case at the back of their mind, but such reforms were aborted by the sudden eruption of the First World War.

#### ARMENIAN NATIONAL LIFE FROM THE RAMGAVAR YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

In addition to expressing viewpoints concerning Ottoman politics, *Veradzenunt* also highlighted and mirrored the prevailing social, political, religious and educational undertones of the Ottoman-Armenian community.

To begin with, the young Constitutional Ramgavars represented the "conservative" "Europeanizing" ideas in Armenian political life. These two terms are rather contradictory, but were presented to instill Western democratic ideas among Ottoman-Armenians through explaining European electoral processes, the Western scientific method, French Auguste Comte's sociological discipline, and Bergsonism, to name a few. But, at the same time,



the Constitutional Ramgavars objected to the flow of foreign political ideologies such as socialism and capitalism into Armenian communal life. They argued that such political doctrines were successful in Europe, since they originated to solve local conundrums. Ottoman-Armenians, for their part, were advised to find solutions relevant to their own problems.<sup>32</sup>

Armenag Haygouni, one of the leading members of the Party, recorded that Armenians had to replace their xenophile attitude with an Arab-style xenophobic attitude, to maintain their own language and national identity. He took Arabs as an example since, in his opinion, they lived in tribes and hence refrained from interacting with foreigners or being influenced by them.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, this is an overgeneralization, since not all Arabs were Bedouins leading such lives and many were educated in foreign institutions and influenced by Western ideas.

Apparently, to prepare "modern" youth and elevate the Ottoman-Armenians' social, political and economic status, the Constitutional Ramgavar periodical guided young Armenians in applying to various Ottoman state-owned higher educational institutions (such as the Ottoman Arts, Military Medical, Military Veterinary, Commercial, Engineering, and Idadi schools as well as other schools).<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the University Students' Union also ran a counseling office for the above mentioned-purpose.<sup>35</sup>

Besides their conflicts on Ottoman political matters, the Constitutional Ramgavars were also in constant disagreement with their Dashnak counterparts over a variety of national issues. First, they were opposed to the ARF's attempts at politically manipulating Armenian educational institutions, which were supposed to cultivate free thinking instead of brainwashing children with any party's ideology.<sup>36</sup>

Seeing themselves as members of an anti-revolutionary and anti-socialist political party, the Constitutional Ramgavar youth also disapproved the idea of merging revolutionary and educational activities. Singling out the assassination of educator and ARF revolutionary Raphael Yeretsian in Van, *Veradzenunt* accentuated the importance of engaging in one thing at a time. In the periodical's view, educating children signified a "peaceful" revolutionary undertaking, owing to the fact that the educator empowered his pupils by driving them out of ignorance.<sup>37</sup>

On one occasion, in August 1913, *Veradzenunt* also touched upon the religious conditions of Cilician Armenians. Adjemian, the author of the article, showed disappointment about the villagers' lacking religious and national consciousness. Moreover, he was alarmed at seeing the widespread educational activities of Protestant and Catholic missionaries operating throughout Cilicia with the aim of proselytizing the Armenians.<sup>38</sup> It is worthwhile to note that this does not sound strange, since another Cairo-based contemporary periodical

called *Miyutyun*<sup>39</sup> shared similar views in its "Problems of the Provinces" (*Kavari Tsaveren*) section written by Mikael Natanian, the general secretary of AGBU Cilicia.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Veradzenunt* serves as a crucial primary source in delving into the political mindset of the Constitutional Ramgavar youth. Through their organ, the young Ramgavars expressed their opinions regarding political, social, educational and religious matters in the world surrounding them. Generally speaking, they held a conservative, anti-socialist and anti-revolutionary stance and followed what can be described as Western European constitutional principles.

As previously mentioned, the Ramgavars advocated the Ottoman constitution, condemned the Balkan wars, and verbally fought against their Dashnak and CUP political rivals. They strained to preserve the Ottoman Empire's pluralistic nature, believing that various Turkish and non-Turkish communities formed the one and only Ottoman nation. Moreover, they viewed themselves in relation to other Ottoman subjects, mainly the Arabs.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Constitutional Ramgavar Party was founded in 1908 in Cairo, Egypt, in the wake of the Young Turk Revolution. In 1921, the Party was merged with several other parties such as the nationalist Armenagans and the Reformed Hunchaks forming the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party also known as the Ramgavar Party, in British-occupied Istanbul.

<sup>2</sup> The Constitutional Ramgavar Party also had *Lusartsag* (*Light Releaser*) in Istanbul as its official mouthpiece.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, "From the Life of the Constitutional Ramgavar University Students' Union" (SR Ousanogh Miyutyun Gyanken), *Veradzenunt*, August 30, 1912.

<sup>4</sup> Levon Adjemian (Van, 1888-Yerevan, 1951). He was a writer, editor and a translator who studied at Getronagan School in Istanbul. After WWI, he settled in Egypt. In 1947, he repatriated to Soviet Armenia along with many other Armenians.

<sup>5</sup> Mikael Natanian was born in Van in 1867. He was educated in Megerditch Portukalian's school in Van and later became one of the founders of the Armenagan Party in 1885. He majored in agriculture in Paris. At a later stage of his life he was also appointed the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) General Secretary of Cilicia and after the First World War, he also served as the AGBU's Educational Inspector in the Near East. He died in Beirut in 1954.

<sup>6</sup> M. Şükrü Hanioglu, "The Second Constitutional Period, 1908-1918," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey Vol. 4: Turkey in the Modern World*, edited by Reşat Kasaba, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 72-73.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 87, 89.

- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 78, 83.
- <sup>9</sup> Hasan Kayali, "Elections and the Electoral Process in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1919," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 27:3, 1995, p. 277.
- <sup>10</sup> Hanioglu, p. 100.
- <sup>11</sup> "Electoral Work" (Endragan Kordze), *Veradzenunt*, August 8, 1912.
- <sup>12</sup> Levon Adjemian, "Who Are We?" (Ov Enk Menk), *Veradzenunt*, August 13, 1912.
- <sup>13</sup> "Our Aim" (Mer Nbadage), *Veradzenunt*, May 3, 1912.
- <sup>14</sup> It is noteworthy that *Veradzenunt* introduced its readers to the works of Ottoman poets. For instance, the translated poems of late Ottoman-Turkish poet Tefvik Fikrat (1867-1915) appeared in various issues of the paper. Fikrat had studied in the Galatasaray Lycee in Istanbul. He advocated freedom of speech and liberty. Some of his poems opposed Abdul Hamid II's rule. After the adoption of the Constitution, he expressed great hopes for a brighter future in the Empire.
- <sup>15</sup> Rober Koptaş, "Armenian Political Thinking Before and After the Young Turk Revolution," *Haigazian Armenological Review*, Vol. 35, Beirut, 2015, p. 75.
- <sup>16</sup> "Our Aim" (Mer Nbadage), *Veradznunt*, May 2, 1912.
- <sup>17</sup> "The Need for Being Organized," (Gazmagerbutyan Bedke), *Veradzenunt*, June 6, 1912.
- <sup>18</sup> "Reforms with the People" (Parenorokoumnere Joghovurtov), *Veradzenunt*, August 1-2, 1913.
- <sup>19</sup> Koptaş, p. 75. The Dashnak Party was founded in Tbilisi in 1890 by Christapor Mikaelian, Stepan Zorian and Simon Zavarian. This political group advocated socialism.
- <sup>20</sup> Arshak Vramian was a Dashnak leader and a member of the Ottoman parliament elected in 1912 from Van province. He was killed in 1915.
- <sup>21</sup> Harutyoun Kavukdjian, "Victory," (Haghtanag), *Veradzenunt*, June 27, 1912.
- <sup>22</sup> "Electoral Work" (Endragan Kordze), *Veradzenunt*, August 1-2, 1912.
- <sup>23</sup> "Demagogy and Democracy," (Ampokhavarutyun yev Ramgavarutyun), *Veradzenunt*, July 4, 1912.
- <sup>24</sup> "Electoral Battle" (Endragan Baykar), *Veradzenunt*, September 8, 1912.
- <sup>25</sup> "Demagogy and Democracy," (Ampokhavarutyun yev Ramgavarutyun), *Veradzenunt*, July 4, 1912.
- <sup>26</sup> "Electoral Battle," (Endragan Baykar), *Veradzenunt*, September 3, 1912.
- <sup>27</sup> Aram Der Zareh, "War and the Socialists," (Baderazm yev Engervaragannere), *Veradzenunt*, October 8, 1912.
- <sup>28</sup> Harutyoun Kavukdjian, "Our Fate" (Mer Djagadakire), *Veradzenunt*, October 12, 1912.
- <sup>29</sup> "Promising Days" (Husatrutyun Orer), *Veradznunt*, January 2, 1913.
- <sup>30</sup> Anonymous, "Ottoman Progress" (Osmanyen Harachkhagahtsutyune), *Veradzenunt*, August 31, 1913.
- <sup>31</sup> "Reforms with the People" (Parenorokoumnere Joghovurtov), *Veradzenunt*, August 1-2, 1913.
- <sup>32</sup> Assadour Assadourian, "Socialist Schools" (Engervaragan Tebrotsner), *Veradzenunt*, July 23 & 25, 1912.
- <sup>33</sup> Armenag Hayguni, "Im Azks Taparahadoumnner," *Veradzenunt*, June 9, 1912.

- <sup>34</sup> Harutyoun Kavukdjian, "The Admission Examinations of State-Owned Higher Educational Institutions," (Dzrakir Bedagan Partsr. Varjaranats Mdit Knnutyunnerun), *Veradzenunt*, June 28-31, 1912.
- <sup>35</sup> Anonymous, "Notice" (Azt), *Veradzenunt*, July 19, 1912.
- <sup>36</sup> Levon Adjemian, "Students Must Be Organized" (Ashagerdnere Bedke Gazmagerbvin), *Veradzenunt*, May 9-10 & 12, 1912.
- <sup>37</sup> Mi Na, "Educational Problems" (Gertagan Hartser), *Veradzenunt*, November-December 27 & 31, 1912.
- <sup>38</sup> Levon Adjemian, "The Religious Condition of Cilician Armenians" (Giligyo Hayoutyan Gronagan Vidjage), *Veradzenunt*, August 4-5, 1913.
- <sup>39</sup> *Miyutyun* was the mouthpiece of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) founded in Cairo in January 1912.

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(Ամփոփում)

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1912ին, իր հիմնադրութենէն քանի մը ամիս ետք, Հայ Սահմանադիր Ռամկավար Կուսակցութեան Համալսարանական Միութիւնը սկսաւ հրատարակել իր պաշտօնական օրկանը՝ *Վերածնունդ* ամսագիրը Պոլսոյ մէջ: Պարբերաբերթին կ'աշխատակցին արեւմտահայ երիտասարդ մտատրականներ ինչպէս՝ Ռուբէն Կամսարական, Լեւոն Աճէմեան, Արմենակ Հայկունի, Յովհաննէս Պօղոսեան, Միքայէլ Նաթանեան:

Հեղինակը օգտագործելով *Վերածնունդը* իբրեւ սկզբնաղբիւր՝ կը ներկայացնէ քիչ ուսումնասիրուած հայ սահմանադիր ռամկավար երիտասարդութեան քաղաքական միտքը եւ անոր որդեգրած դիրքը օսմանեան հայրենիքին թէ՛ ներքին եւ թէ՛ արտաքին քաղաքական իրադարձութիւններուն հանդէպ, «օսմանցիութեան» գաղափարախօսութեան եւ՝ սահմանադրութեան հանդէպ:

Միաժամանակ, յօդածը լրարձակի տակ կ'առնէ սահմանադիր ռամկավարներու ըմբռնումները հայ ազգային կեանքին նկատմամբ: