

A Chat with Mengisteab Asmerom, Head of ELF-RC and EDA Information Offices

By
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(This is an interview recently held in the form of a quick brainstorming over current major issues of great concern to Eritreans with “Mengis” or Mengisteab Asmerom, member of the Executive Committees of both the ELF-RC and the Eritrean Democratic Alliance - EDA. Below are excerpts from the cha with the man who carries in his finger tips all daily developments in the Eritrean arena. Good reading.)

When asked about the governing clique (PFDJ) in Eritrea, Mengis started to comment as follows:



“The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) was a fraternal organization that was our partner in the struggle for national independence. After its 3rd congress in 1994, the front was dissolved and replaced by the so-called Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice or PFDJ. At that time, the provisional government was talking of allowing multiparty politics in Eritrea after the referendum is conducted. Later on, it said democracy will be allowed after a constitution is drafted and the law on party formation is adopted etc.

“At other times, regime leaders, and on top of them Isaias himself, said that future parties will be formed only from within the circle of the EPLF or PFDJ, thus brazenly denying any right to other forces to establish political parties in Eritrea. Anyway, to this day, nothing has been done on the pledge to form parties in independent Eritrea. Nor has PFDJ emerged as a functioning party. Eleven years have passed for it without holding a second congress since its formation. PFDJ has no regular or extraordinary conferences and no common leadership. In fact, one finds it impossible to talk of PFJD as a governing party. No mistake that the regime is a one-man dictatorship!!

“Springing from this reality, I see it wrong to call the regime Shaebia, after the name of the front, or to assume PFDJ is a party. There is no trace of a party ruling in Eritrea. The regime is the uncontestable Isaias himself. As such, it has to be called for what it is: One-Man Dictatorship or the Isaias regime. “

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What Mengis thinks the strategic blunders of Isaias are:

“One can easily enumerate the following points to be the major strategic blunders of the dictator in Eritrea:

- His total loss of sight to the phenomenal changes in worldview that favour the promotion of democracy, good governance and human rights;
- His unjustifiable belligerent attitude and actions towards all neighbours;
- His disrespect and show of enmity to the international community and international organizations.

“Needless to say, the political, economic and social crises bedeviling today’s Eritrea and its people are the direct outcome of these crazily wrong policies of the uncalculating dictator.”

Mengis on our neighbourly relations:

“We have organic links with our neighbours: like shared languages, cultures and blood relationship. If we fail to live in peace with these neighbours, it will be absolutely impossible to have any better relations with others. We have no choice but live in peace with our neighbours – no luxury of changing our neighbours at our whim. Dictator Isaias puts neighbours up when he is personally in good terms with them, and turns them to enemy camp when he so feels. In his vacillating relationship, he expects the rest of us to follow his crazy ways. When Isaias fumbled for excuses and created enemy with the Sudan, his flimsy justifications included that the Sudanese government was sending fundamentalist subversives to Eritrea to destabilize his regime. Today, he advocates on behalf of fundamentalist Muslims in Somalia and says they can bring stability in that country. When he was in good terms with Ethiopia, he was talking of his “visions” beyond the borders clearly meaning that the establishment of a confederation between the two countries was a great possibility. When the relations between the two were disrupted mainly because of his doings, he reverted to talk about ‘aggressive Ethiopian’s intentions to violate Eritrean sovereignty’. Out of his imaginations, Isaias gives funny labels to Eritrean patriots opposed to his crazy ways and describes countries and organizations that cooperate or have relations with Ethiopia as ‘enemies’ of the Eritrean people.

“We in the ELF-RC are of the conviction that there should be a clear distinction between the permanent relations of peoples from those ever changing relations between governments. We are not supposed to be peoples whose relations depend on the whims of our governments and leaders. Our best interests as peoples are served by peaceful, good neighbourly relations and not by tensions and conflicts. The conflicts incited by dictator Isaias aiming to prolong his stay in power have nothing to do with the interests of our people. It was those who were killed, disabled and displaced Eritreans who suffered of the war and not Isaias and his cohorts. The callous dictator and his small clique of sycophants are still enjoying the best in life. Relations between governments are ephemeral but the relations between peoples are everlasting. Therefore, it is of paramount

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importance for every people watch out not to spoil good relations and peace with one's neighbours. Our peoples need to watch out not to be misled by falsehoods of patriotic-like slogans used by selfish and power hungry leaders.”

Mengisteab on EDA and its Member Organizations.

“The establishment of the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) was a step in the right direction. Its establishment helped cool down unnecessary conflicts between several organizations and created a conducive atmosphere for dialogue and for merger between some organizations. This helped reduce the number of EDA member organizations. However, I do not see these developments to be enough by themselves because the tasks and challenges for change in Eritrea require more from EDA which will have to transform itself into a capable and effective political force. As we in the ELF-RC take it, the EDA is a coalition of organizations with different political programmes. But it will be much helpful if those organizations with related programmes forge a mass party. Such development will no doubt strengthen the EDA. The congress of the existing alliance which is due to take place within weeks is expected to introduce some important changes within it. It has been our position to let the alliance operate under a minimum programme acceptable to all. Likewise, there are expectations for some amendments in the constitution of the alliance. It is also high time that transparency in the alliance and due consideration of meritocracy in electing its future leadership are taken more seriously than ever before. In addition to that the strengthening of the alliance requires the introduction of fresh blood with fresh ideas at the top echelons. In a word, making EDA effective calls for changes in the charter and work approach.

“Holding of a congress is a new development in the EDA structure, and it is my belief that those leaders who come out the upcoming congress will know they will be answerable to the congress and thus work much harder than in the past to give concrete results. It is the position of the ELF-RC that the EDA congress be open and transparent to all by inviting as observers Eritrean civil societies, human rights advocates and journalists who are opposed to the dictatorial regime in Eritrea. Even if the EDA cannot cover their transport costs, it can at least cover their food and accommodation expenses at the congress venue in order to encourage their participation.

“As I see them, the top priority tasks of the alliance in the immediate future include intensification of cross-border operations on mass awareness and organization, taking actions that can be painful to the one-man dictatorship, and enhancing the information and diplomatic activities of the EDA and its member organizations.”

On the Formation of a Mass Party:

“I feel the importance of further expounding the raison d’etre of the decision of the 6th ELF-RC Congress on the formation of a mass party:

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- We need not be prisoners of the past history. For sure, the different experiences under our ELF/ EPLF distinctions are part of our history. However, we have concluded that we need not view our future through the prism of the past which is gone for ever. When we think of our future as a people, we understand that former members of Jebha or Shabia have the same vision, programme and aspiration for the country and its people. We all wish to establish a new prosperous Eritrea in which peace, equality, justice, respect for human rights, and freedom of conscience and worship prevail under a multiparty constitutional democracy. But dwelling in our past and simply defending our past histories will not help us see a common future. Therefore, let us set aside history to historians and move ahead to build our future.
- A party already established or to be established on the basis of ELF or EPLF historical calculations only cannot be the right party for future Eritrea of all Eritreans that we envision. There are a large number of young Eritreans born after the ELF lost big influence inside Eritrea. They have a vision for Eritrea but may not find it easy to be part of an organization like the historical ELF about which they knew very little. It is going to be about the same with the EPLF; children who were about or below the age 10 at the period of liberation are in their early 20th today and knew little of the merits of EPLF except those spoken in its name by the PFDJ that they now hate. Thus a large number of Eritreans have little belonging also to the old EPLF.
- We are aware that more than 5 relatively major organizations, smaller groups and dispersed individuals share the same or almost the same visions and programmatic stipulations that are stated in our political programme and we firmly believe all these can come under the umbrella of one mass party. When free elections are availed in a democratic Eritrea of the future, these forces will have little chance of being separate entities and win votes. Thus, a political formation that will prove unviable in the future cannot be a winning strategy today. The wise choice is to gear these forces into viable party or parties that share similar visions. This will for sure facilitate for the people to belong to a party of their choice.
- The aspirations for unity are strong because they believe unity is strength. Their wish to see EDA strengthened is based on this conviction.

“Regarding our move towards forming a mass based party, the leadership of ELF-RC has formed immediately after the 6th Congress Information and Assessment Committees in many parts of the world where Eritreans reside and continue making contacts with civil societies, media outlets, human rights groups, intellectuals, youth and women discussing the subject of party formation. The indications so far are encouraging and promising of good results. The committees did not encounter any views opposed to the call for a mass-based party and this is a manifest reassurance that we have a conducive ground to

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form the envisioned party that can lead Eritrea in the transition from dictatorship to good governance.”

On the current situation of the Eritrean people, Mengis said:

“The living condition of our people is worsening by the day. Food, fuel, electricity and other basic needs of the people are rationed; employment, education and other public services are becoming unavailable. Gross violations of basic rights of the people have become beyond description. Such daily occurrences in the country include continued imprisonment of parents and demand for huge sums of money on pretexts that they helped their children to leave the country; detention of journalists, persecution of ‘small’ religious communities with use of divide-and-rule tactics against the major religious establishments; summary execution of youth who try to escape from the atrocities of the regime etc.

“At the present, the regime has lost the confidence of the entire nation. The people’s measured moral and material support that existed in the past is no more there. Our people are now waiting for redemption from the forces opposed to the regime. People’s wrath has already started to show up against high officials of the regime and their property, to wit: recent actions taken in the villages of Tzazega, Adi Bakhuakhuay, and Wekerti. These small flickers of uprising will no doubt turn to a conflagration one day soon to burn the evil regime out of existence. In addition to this, there are various unorganized examples of initial resistance going on. Religious orders denied the right to assemble are doing it despite the risks they face; those who leave the country for business purposes or scholarship are not returning home; children are intentionally failing in classes in order to escape going to Sawa on forced conscription and service.

“Eritreans in the Diaspora have been showing their resistance in many forms. Those who used to pay the imposed 2% tax and those who once granted huge sums of money and gold to this regime are not doing the same today. We can thus rest assured that our people are engaged in a mounting resistance against the dictator and his regime.”

Mengis talking about the Eritrean army

“The dictatorial regime has until now depended on the military and the security apparatus, especially the upper ranks of officer class. The ordinary soldiers are on their part are trying to escape the slavery they are subjected to by taking all measures possible to escape. In the process, many of them risk their precious lives while many others land in PFDJ dungeons where they languish for limitless period. The regime buys the temporary loyalty of its numerous generals and colonels through money and privileges and at other times through its divide-and-rule tactics. Some are kept very close to the dictator for sometime until they are distanced and replaced by others. Nowadays, even the once “loyal” officer class is losing confidence in the doings of the one-man dictatorship and it may not take long before we witness mass arrests, persecution and killings of the officer class itself. But until now, the only small group of people not seriously yet affected by the evil doings of the regime is his generals and colonels in the

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armed forces. But the bad day is in the offing for them all since none of the ordinary soldiers is willing to continue receiving orders for war and slave-labour”.