

**Interview: "We are democracy, peace and good neighbourliness ..."**

Wolde Yesus Amaar

***Wolde-Yesus Amaar is currently Chairman of the Eritrean Liberation Front- Revolutionary Council (ELF-RC).***

*An author to a book titled Eritrea: Root Causes of War and Refugee, he is among the people who were struggling for the liberation of Eritrea along side Isaias Afwerki with whom he also had acquaintance since child hood.*

*In this interview with The Reporter, Wolde-Yesus speaks of the current situation in Eritrea, the opposition movement at present and the role that neighboring countries and the international community is playing to support such movement. Excerpts:*

**Can you give us a short profile of yourself?**

My name is Wolde-Yesus Amaar, born in the 1940s near Keren, I completed elementary in Keren and then I went to Asmara in 1961. I completed high school in Asmara, and then I got my B.A degree in Addis Ababa.

I worked for the *Ethiopian Herald* up to 1975. And then I went to the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and I was in the information service of the Eritrean Liberation Front up to the liberation of Eritrea in 1991. After that I worked for the UN while still maintaining my leadership membership in the ELF. I worked for the UN between 1991 and 2003. I was on leave for some time and when I was called back to my job. My friend Seyoum Oqbamichael who was Chairman of the ELF-RC died, and then I was elected to the chairmanship of the ELF revolutionary council

in December 2005. And I am still the chairman of that organization in the Eritrean opposition.

***If you are born in the 1940s then you are about the same age as Isaias Afwerki, do you know him closely?***

Yes I do. I did not only know him, I was very close to him as he was very close to me. In middle school in 1961, we first met in Asmara in grade 9.

The team I first met in Asmara was Isaias, Haile Woldetinsae also know as Haile Diru' and many of his ministers, Seyoum Ekoubamichael my colleague in the opposition who died last year, and many leaders in the opposition.

We were in the same secondary school between '61 and '65. I am from Keren and Keren was the hotbed of politics at that time and it still is. And I was therefore a factor in influencing Isaias as a leader and the team as a whole in the Eritrean nationalist militants as student movement. I did know him very well and I influenced him. Between '61 and '65 we conducted yearly demonstrations in Asmara.

And that was exactly the period that Asmara became politically conscious mainly in the new wave of struggle that was initiated by the Eritrean Liberation Front in 61.

So I did know him very well and in September '65 we came to the university here and up to June '66 he was in the university. Unfortunate for Eritrea, he failed in class the first year. He started school in September '66 and then he decided to go.

He decided to go hide his face because he was so arrogant that he could not stand being spoken of as "Isaias is repeating the first year in campus." We were not happy to see him going

because we knew he was not the right person to go at that time.

And it was on October 17, 1966 to be exact, that I saw him off from Merkato after spending a night in Star Hotel in Merkato. With him were Haile Woldetinsae, Muse Tesfamichael-a latter day leader of the Menka' movement in the EPLF. There were also others who are still ministers in Isaias's junta.

**Are you surprised by his behavior and character since your childhood?**

Actually, not very much, he was always very rude and not a man of compromise. He is not a unifier and was not a friendly person even in high school.

He is violent as well. His belligerence is there. I remember an incident in grade 11 where he quarreled with a Peace Corp teacher and slapped the teacher. I still remember that incident. Just like that. He was sent off for a week and he came back, but you know he still has that character. And he still does it to his ministers today.

So, I am not surprised and I was not even happy to see him going then because there were better people than him, like Haile Diru' and Muse Tesfamichael. There were others who were much better than this person who simply did it to hide his face from his failure. He never accepted being inferior or a failed student at that time. I am not surprised that Isaias is what he is today.

***In the 1960s you were among the guys who were in the movement for the liberation of Eritrea, now it is forty five years, have any of your dreams come true?***

At that time as teenagers, we were very angered that the Eritrean flag was lowered and that the parliament was shut down.

All other African countries were gaining independence; of course all African countries are artificial.

So we said why not an artificial existence. We are an identity, a colonial state and we deserve that and it is through the will of everybody that the unity can come. Not by Haileselassie imposing himself.

Now the independence of Eritrea through any means was a wish of everyone of my generation and we were happy that Isaias led the last stage of the liberation. But we did take part in it at a bigger scale. We were happy when Eritrea became independent in 1991.

And then everything went wrong, everything was tumbling down, and big regrets because the leader was Isaias. That is the big regret. He started the wrong way with all the mistakes that Isaias can make. He divided the Eritrean arena into seventies, by his writing and by his divisive language.

He is a sort of regional mobilizer, and we actually were not sure that he will succeed in making a state. So when Eritrea became independent and Isaias at the top, we knew the character of the man as dictator, he was always dictating within the EPLF.

He was always going his way and he killed people like Muse Tesfamichael and others that we had in the early days.

And so everything turned down for Eritrea, unfortunately Isaias being the leader of that movement made Eritrea what it is today.

Because that is the character of the man and Isaias could not be any different. For instance the first declaration he made was that all the other organizations will not be allowed in Eritrea. Then he said that others will not be allowed to deal with referendum, he said "I am the only one who will organize it."

Unfortunately, Ethiopia and the world community did not press him to let others participate in the referendum. That is a blame we had against Ethiopia at the time. They could have told him, "These people fought for liberation and they must take part." And the Union should have done the same.

It was a mistake done at that time. He went his dictatorial way from the start.

Then he started to draft a constitution with out the participation of any one.

He refused the participation of the ELF and other organizations.

And after some time he was fighting against Eritrean opposition, then he started to fight against all neighbors. He was sending his slurs and bad mouthing the whole region and everyone the international community and the African Union. He became an enemy of everybody.

Finally, he became a rogue leader of a pariah state that Eritrea has become.

***What is the situation like in terms of human rights and democracy in Eritrea? Because people are imprisoned but we never hear of them going to court, if some body openly bad talks Isaias outside Eritrea somebody back home has to be punished..., how come with all these educated Eritreans outside and in Eritrea, there is not a strong shout for democracy and respect for human rights, for constitution, for free press?***

It sounds very strange. But Isaias is what Isaias is, worse than Polpot of Cambodia at this stage. In Africa, I was reading the State Department's release of the worst human rights violators in the world. Eritrea was one and I think it will take the lead and maybe be the only country in Africa, if Isaias is to get more days.

But what is happening to Eritreans? At first the euphoria was there. You know all these poor people against all odds regaining their independence and all, they were saying "let's give him some time."

After some time Isaias was the deviser and mobilizer on certain very sensitive grounds.

He was then telling the world: "If I am not around, if EPLF is not around, if what I am doing is challenged, then you will lose it all, because Ethiopia is there to grab Eritrea at any moment."

Then you have his view on Jihadists. All his life he has been talking about Islamic Jihadist. For forty years he has been telling us of Jihad and extremism, even when we did not have any knowledge of what Jihad and extremism were.

He is a liar, but to unify his group he does that. To this day he is threatening the population. "You have half the population in Eritrea Muslim and they are being supported by this and that bad guys and they are ready to slaughter you and grab yours..." these are the things he says.

He misled our struggle and he is still misleading our people. The poor folks get misled for some time but now, I assure you that over 90 percent of the Eritrean people- educated and

uneducated- are against this regime.

***So how do you see Isaias talking about Jihad and Islamic extremism and then finally he finds himself in Mogadishu?***

Well that is not strange. He does such things when it favors his ways-very temporary things. Even on Jihad he has fabricated things in the past and he is fabricating now. He says: "Jihad and these Islamists are a solution in Somalia," this just being temporary to harm Ethiopia or anybody he thinks he needs to harm.

But he does this for a very short sighted interest that he has of irritating people, not for the interest of the Eritrean people. He is harboring Ethiopian extremists who do not accept the reality of living in peace with Eritrea. These are guys who do not accept the existence of Eritrea.

He is sleeping in one bed with these guys, what can one say about such a person? He is crazy.

***You have said that Eritreans have begun to oppose the regime there, do you have indicators?***

Yes we have. The Eritrean people are against Isaias. The avalanche is not here yet to take him tomorrow, but the Eritrean people are very angry at Isaias as Ethiopians were angry at the Derg.

They [Ethiopians] did not like it but they did not feel the strength to take it out until some force came. The Eritrean people are waiting for such a moment.

It takes for a people a long time to appreciate what is going on and then to gather the strength. Now they feel that they are weak, they are angry and anger means anything.

In Ethiopia, you had a corner of the country that was neglected and it was looked down upon. They got angry and it took the TPLF to turn the skies and brought victory to the Ethiopian people.

In Eritrea the same will happen.

***Are you saying they are waiting for a leadership?***

Yes, they are waiting for leadership from an Eritrean force.

***Will they get it?***

Yes they will get it.

***When?***

Starting now.

***How?***

In the Eritrean opposition we are just mixing the bad and good things and without a leadership-leadership meaning, a strong force within an umbrella. We have that umbrella and we need that umbrella to lead our people.

***Is this umbrella any different from the previous***

***umbrellas we have heard of and seen before?***

It is going to be different.

***Is there anything encouraging?***

Yes, because the forces with similar programs are starting to come closer.

In Ethiopia for example you had an alliance and the alliance needed a strong force to guide it. In Palestine all through out their struggle they had a force within the PLO or the Fattah. We did not have Fattah or TPLF in our alliance but now we are creating it.

***Recently, there was a congress, as a leader of the ELF, were there any different things that gave you a sense that Eritrean opposition have a chance to come together and be a strong opposition?***

Yes, one thing is we just improved, and revised a charter. In the charter there were some words and mentioning of some ideology which were not fit for the meaning of our alliance. For instance the Sharia: the Sharia is not just the daily life of divorce and marriage. When a Muslim says Sharia he also means Sharia the State. Religion and State have no difference in the Quran and in Sharia.

So when they wrote it [the charter] they meant that. We have been fighting; we have been asking our people and organizations to just take this out. We don't need it. In Eritrea you can not impose the Sharia in any part of our country and it is still the determination of peoples. Ultimately it is the rights of people yes, but the fragmentation of ethnic groups has no place in our country. Their rights, yes they need to demand them, and

they deserve them but fragmenting Eritrea into ethnic groups is not our program as ELF-RC.

These two articles have been removed from the charter. It is a victory by itself.

Isaias was saying in the past: "look at their charter, they are mentioning Sharia, they are mentioning nationalities up to cessation," now he will not have that card in his hands.

The second thing is the ELF-RC being a major organization in the opposition and the Eritrean National Salvation Front- which used to be composed of three organizations, and the Eritrean Democratic Party, these three and with some other organizations within and outside the alliance are forging a block that will give a real alternative to the regime in Eritrea.

Our people will be given hope of change by an alternative which was not looked at, an alternative which was not existing. They felt that it was not there.

And with this I feel the days of Isaias are counted, he may celebrate this coming Independence Day but I doubt he will do so again.

***The opposition has come under an umbrella, but are you talking about democracy, human rights, elections, constitution...or are you still talking about the old issue of an Eritrean flag?***

This change is already in and has been going on for the last six or seven years and it is for democracy and peace, for good neighborliness, for good governance, for human rights in Eritrea is all in the writings of these organizations.

At least this has been the language of the major organizations that I am talking about. They are coming together because they have opinions they share on democracy in Eritrea. We have agreed during our ELF-RC congress that decentralization will be instilled in Eritrea.

And decentralization meaning in a multi party country, in a democratic country, all the regions will have the right to administer their local affairs. with that a unified Eritrea that can co-exist with all its neighbors in peace and democratically.

All these issues are our issues, and specially the issues of the major block that is emerging in the Eritrean arena these days.

***Are Eritreans in the Diaspora reading you correctly?***

I can not say that they were reading us correctly. They were feeling that we were weak; they were feeling that we were not coming closer to each other as organizations to salvage the country and they have all the right to feel so, because we did not do headway in the past several years.

Now we will show the fruits of the intervention of these groups and the two blocks that we are leading at this hour.

***Do you think you can also win the hearts of the EPLF followers and the army?***

That is a good question. We have been addressing ourselves to the people in Eritrea; it is not only the Diaspora that matters. We have half a million Ethiopians of Eritrean origins and Eritreans in Ethiopia, and half a million in the Sudan. This is true

and was even registered in the Eritrean archives. There are one million Eritreans in the neighborhood, and 60,000 outside the region and about three million in Eritrea.

Our focus is on the people inside the country and our focus is on the refugees and youth that are coming out of the country to Ethiopia, at Shimelda, to the Sudan and Kilo 26 and all these places. We are concentrating our energies on these people.

We have an international radio broadcast from Frankfurt; we have radios in the region in Sudan and Ethiopia. So we are focusing on our people, appealing to the army that the change is for them, and that they are the victims of this regime.

And the civil servants in Eritrea including the cadres of this regime, we are addressing them, saying that we are on the same boat in suffering because of this regime. We are saying that Isaias and the small clique must be removed before the situation gets any worse.

By the way, we have people like Mesfin Hagos who were the defense minister in Eritrea; we have Abdalla Adem who was an Ambassador in the Horn region for the EPLF.

Mohamed Nur Ahmed Muzi who was an ambassador in China, so we are not only ELF, we are ELF and EPLF combined, we are Eritreans now. These names are behind us now we are not leaving them behind and we are coming to the slogans of democracy, peace and good neighborliness with all countries and living in prosperity as other people in the region. We are very much concerned about the region as well.

***So what do you envisage to change the government in Eritrea? Are you planning an armed struggle, an uprising***

***from within, a coup d'etate by influenced EPLF guys?  
There is a program, there is a vision but how do you plan  
to implement it just by a radio station?***

Radio stations and their messages are as strong weapons as any...

***I am asking whether you have clear strategies and tactics  
on how to take this program to the end?***

Yes. For instance our strategy is to use all possible means to get the people conscious and to get them to rise against the regime-where ever they are outside and inside the country.

Those who are outside sending this unwanted two percent contribution, sending money to this regime and helping, going to its meetings, we are working with them so they will stop from doing that.

That is drying the seed for this regime.

***Is it happening, can you see it?***

Yes, it is happening now. And inside we are beaming our message. We have a propaganda unit. We do not have arms, we do not have guerrilla fighters, and this is not a guerrilla fight no.

***So it is a peaceful struggle?***

We do not call it a peaceful struggle. We call it using all possible means to remove the regime and to mobilize our people. Our propaganda units go into Eritrea and distribute pamphlets and if anything comes their way they will defend themselves. That is

what we have. Some of the organizations have this, some don't but it does not make any difference.

Our message is to mobilize the people outside and inside and let them ask for democracy, for change of this regime and for laws, the rule of law and to bring the thousands imprisoned to the rule of law. That is not happening but if people start it, if people demand this I do not think we need weapons to fight. That is a major weapon for us.

***There are parties which are not members what is the difference?***

Some members are outside the alliance but this is because they did not complete our formalities, like they did not have congress, they did not have a political program and they did not seem active in the arena through magazines or radio stations and all these things. As soon as they prove or become active against the regime they are welcome to join the block.

***Are you optimistic this will happen?***

Yes, it is happening. It is happening because the people are angry at the regime as I said earlier. The people have finished the course with the regime. And like everybody neighbors and the international community have cut with the regime and Eritreans have done so now.

***If an Eritrean mother comes to you and asks "if Isaias is removed and you are put in power, what will you do?" what will you tell her?***

The first thing is we will make peace with ourselves and our

people. We will grant all the liberties that we fought for, for decades, it is fifty years since '41.

So the mother will know that her sons and daughters will not die in the unnecessary wars that Isaias has created. Even the civil wars of ELF and EPLF were because of Isaias.

The wars with Yemen and Ethiopia are the makings of Isaias. The mother will clearly understand that Isaias out, anybody at least, will not be a cause for the death of her sons and daughters.

That is one big prize for the mother.

And then aim for peace, peace with neighbors. Eritrea is impoverished now, but why?

Eritrea is rich because it is the neighbor of Ethiopia, Eritrea is rich because it is the neighbor of Sudan, and Eritrea is rich because of this sea with fish and the countries across. If we shut ourselves from these neighbors we are poor. Isaias made Eritrea poor. Like Saddam Hussein did. You know I worked with Saddam Hussein in Iraq when I worked with the United Nations.

The Iraqis were telling us: "we are not suffering because of the sanctions of the United Nations but because of the policies of Saddam Hussein. We are shut with the borders of Saudi Arabia, closed with Kuwait no border with Iran, no good border with Turkey no border and trade with Syria. The only line of communication was the 1000 kilometers desert line from Baghdad to Jordan."

And Iraq is a good example of what happened to Eritrea when it closed its borders from its neighbors. And the people are poor today.

They are suffering because of Isaias's Saddam like policy that has imprisoned Eritrea.

***Will you have a constitution, a democratically elected Parliament and free press and so on?***

Yes. That is what we are all fighting for, what the whole of Eritrea was fighting for. Even EPLF fighters were fighting for these but they were deceived.

They were fighting for these rights for our people, and this man stopped every thing.

***Do you believe that they feel they have been deceived?***

Yes they do. In 1993 there were uprisings in the army asking for their demands. The disabled fighters demonstrated and they were killed. It is an oppressive regime.

***Are you networking with Eritreans in the Diaspora, those in the US, in Africa and other places? Are you in contact with them?***

We are networking with our people in the Diaspora with the limited resources that we have.

My colleague- my predecessor and I were in Australia meeting with Eritreans in the Australian cities. We go to Canada and most American cities, and in Europe also we have seminars. We have annual festivals in the United States and in Europe.

Before coming here I was in the Scandinavian countries. In Germany in several cities public meetings were held.

Mesfin Hagos, Abdalla Adem and I held a joint public meeting in Frankfurt where we met thousands of our people last September.

A very large crowd came to the meeting. People are becoming more confident of the coming together of top organizations with similar programs-national democratic programs.

So we are networking but the limitations are there.

### ***What limitations?***

The limitations are that during the liberation struggle days, we had the support of many people, we had the sympathy of the people as a whole, and there were other countries that used to help us during our liberation days. That is not there now.

***Do you not think this is the right opportunity for you? Because, the world today is more ready to help people stand for human rights and democracy than any other time. Are you sure the world is going to lend you help?***

I hope so. For instance Africa, the Organization of African Unity had a way of helping liberation movements in the old days.

Today I do not hear of an African institution to help democratization in Africa.

For instance this is a dictatorial regime, it is a regime that restricts elections and democracy and they are not supporting the opposition.

I would disagree with you because Africa at this hour is not ready to help democratization.

We have been asking, we have been calling to these people

asking for their help but they don't show you the right way.

***Is it because African countries are not ready to help or is it because you were not loud enough about democracy issues and bringing your democratic interests to the surface?***

In our limited way we have been approaching, we have been sending our programs, we have been sending our messages to the embassies for instance in Addis Ababa. We have been approaching them, and I hope they will listen to this call.

But they have not been responsive. We have asked for meetings with several embassies and asked from visits with countries and the response was cool you know.

An independent country Eritrea an independent regime, they are afraid of the sovereignty of that country etc...

This inhibition should be stopped. Africa was blamed by Eritreans, because Africans were not responding to the call of the warring Eritrea. They did not help Ethiopia and Eritrea to make peace. They are to be blamed for that.

And now they will be blamed for not heeding to the call for democracy and democratization in Eritrea and in any countries where dictatorial regimes are reigning.

***Having you approached the international community for help?***

Yes the Europeans, we have been approaching the Europeans and they are very sympathetic, they know the rouge regime in Eritrea, they know the dictatorial nature of the regime, in

Brussels the European Union headquarters we have heard these good gestures.

But materially they have not come forward. And we need material help not only declarations. They have declared that Isaias is a bad guy, like the European Union for instance.

After that they should come and approach us, but they tell you: "do it by yourselves" and you just can not do it all alone. That is the limitation. Only the neighboring countries are supportive and it is unique.

Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen have been supportive in the last few years although not enough, not in a strong way, not in the way it should be. All the same they have been supportive and that is to be commended. And that is for democratization not for destabilizing Eritrea, no. It is to democratize their neighbor.

***Do you believe the Horn will be different one day as the agenda of Eritrea and Ethiopia will be based on cooperation and development alone, do you envisage that?***

I believe so. That is our agenda. We want to be in peace with Ethiopia, We want to be in peace with the Sudan, we want to be in peace with the whole region. We even envisage a vigor region for the whole people of the region and that is our future outlook.

#### **Fact box**

#### **Composition of the two Eritrean opposition blocks**

**Block one**

ELF-RC  
by Wolde-Yesus Amaar  
EDP

Headed

Headed by Mesfin Hagos  
Eritrean National Salvation Front  
by Dr. Beyene Kidane

Headed

**Block Two**

Islamic Reform Movement  
(Hareket Islah al-Islami al Eritri)  
by Abu Suheil

Headed

Eritrean Islamic Party for Justice and Development  
(Hizb Islami lil Adala wa Tenmiya)  
Sheik Kahlil Mos Amir

Headed by

Democratic Movement for the Liberation  
of Eritrean Kunama  
by Kernelios Osman

Headed

Democratic Movement of Red Sea Afar  
Ibrahim Haroun

Headed by

Eritrean Liberation Front  
by Hussein Khalifa

Headed

Eritrean Peoples Democratic Front (Sagem)  
Tewolde Gebre Selassie

Headed by

Eritrean Federal Democratic Movement  
Bashir Ishaq

Headed by

**Neutral party**

Alnahda Party

Headed by Al Noor Idris