

Reaching Out

It is probably telepathy. I had settled on the above title a couple of days ago to reflect on current opposition politics when another article titled 'Reconciliation' appeared on opposition website. I debated whether to change the title but chose to stick to it because it best characterizes the current opposition politics.

After a couple of months of absence, it is difficult to pick a topic to resume my writing campaign because so much has transpired during this time. For this article, I will simply outline some of my observations.

By the River of Mereb

An ancient song:

By the river of Mereb, we stood weeping,
Looking across into a land that seems never meant be,
My parents sacrificed their lives so I can live in peace,
But the darkest period in our history has descended upon us,
Governed by a den of hyenas,
Our own with no compassion, empathy, humanity, fairness,
The privileged few who live in luxury,
While I and thousands others prohibited from feeding our wives and
children,
Forbidden to take care of my ailing uncle and his wife,
Who lost all their three children for glory and freedom of Eritrea and
Eritreans,
Unable to feed my family,
Forbidden to take care of my wife,
Forbidden to tuck my son into bed,
What am I to do labouring through 13 years on slavery campaign,
While the privileged few enjoyed their lives,

I wiped my tears off my face,
Washed my face with the water of Mereb River,
Turned my face towards South,
It was a crisp sunny morning,
With a fresh breeze hitting my face,
I looked into the uncertain world that awaited me,
But I knew, finally, that for good or bad,
My destiny belongs to me,

I started to run,
Took two steps forward, and stopped,
I wanted to look back,
I couldn't let go,

I resisted the urge,
I started to run again, picking up speed
Into an uncertain world.

National Security or Mass Exodus

The most lethargic reason for maintaining young Eritreans in perpetual bondage is to safeguard the national security of Eritrea. When I opened my Google news this morning, it was telling me another 245 Eritreans have landed in Italy on two fishing boats. Over 50,000 YOUNG Eritreans have fled Eritrea in the last 5 years. Another 100,000 have disappeared inside Eritrea refusing to sit idle on purposeless warsai yikealo project.

If this isn't by itself a threat to Eritrean national security, what is?

It is also interesting to note as the old saying goes, 'the dog barks after the hyena had cleaned house and left'. During the peak conflict with Woyane, PIA was making jokes at Woyane while Eritrea was left totally unprotected. We survived Woyane onslaught to ordinary Eritreans' braveries. After Woyane had done its damage on Eritrea and left, we are told that we need to defend our nation.

Those who defend Eritrea are ordinary Eritreans as they have done for decades – despite self-serving and corrupt leaderships.

EU's Development Aid to Eritrea

We are told that EU intends to proceed with development aid to Eritrea. EU tells us that it will closely monitor these development projects to ensure that development aid is used for its intended purpose.

But EU's development aid to Eritrea is fraught with legal pitfalls. As EU has acknowledged that it will closely monitor these projects, it is deemed to be the employer and financier of these projects that will be undertaken using slave labour. EU can't feign ignorance or argue that it will overlook slavery for greater socio-economic good. EU can't put forth any legitimate reason why it should finance projects using slave labour.

The Declaration of Human Rights bans any form of slavery, which is not just defined by 19th century treatment of blacks or thousands of years of white slavery of being tied to physical chains and "owned" by a master. The fact that some Eritrean servicemen receive pittance every month doesn't change the definition of slavery. Rather, slavery is any act that violates the rights of humans to act according to their own freewill. This freewill can't be taken away at the whims of a dictator or individuals who are pursuing their self-interest or who are burdened with their own dictatorial paranoia.

As commendable as International Criminal Court is, its main sponsor, EU, must begin by cleaning up its own house by upholding international declarations it has signed. Excuses are slippery roads which EU can't afford to embark on if it wants to play positive role in bringing about change in the world.

In my view, EU should proceed with economic or development aid to Eritrea, but under the strictest condition that EU adheres to the Declaration of Human Rights in undertaking these slavery projects, lest one day it itself becomes a plaintiff in ICC.

Western Support for Eritrean Democratic Cause

As Ms. Senait Yohannes lamented in her article, Western officials tell Eritrean opposition groups and individuals that more Eritreans in Diaspora must get involved in opposition activities in order for these foreign officials to help Eritrea's democratic cause.

But this is idle chatter!

Reality check says that despite our desire for Western support for our cause, there isn't much that Western governments can do to bring about political change or reform in Eritrea or other authoritarian states. The following are some cases to ponder,

- Cuba: despite total US embargo against Castro for nearly 50 years, despite the 24X7 anti-Castro radio campaigns, despite the strong financial support for anti-Castro opponents, and being only a stone throw away from the US, the US hasn't been able to dislodge Castro
- North Korea: despite similar campaign against the Kim dynasty, the West hasn't been able to bring about positive change in N. Korea. In fact, South Korea and Japan prefer to help N. Korea achieve economic success in order to bring about political progress and stability in N. Korea,
- Zimbabwe: despite UK's all out political, diplomatic and economic war against President Mugabe, he remains as entrenched as ever
- Burma: despite a flurry of UNSC and West's campaign against the authoritarian leaders following the recent public uprising, the Burmese junta remains as entrenched as ever even despite a natural catastrophe that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Burmese

These are only some of the worst offenders along with Eritrea. There are other soft dictators or wanna-be dictators in the making which the West doesn't know how to handle.

So what do we expect from Western government knowing fully that they are powerless in bringing about change against determined dictators?

- The West can help where it can help – which is to help Eritrean refugees,
- The West should stop lending money to the regime that will sink the country into debts that future democratic governments will be shackled with.

Wisdom is reserved *not* for those who can attain and retain power, but for those who know when to quit. The latest example is President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan. He could have clung to power using the same dictator manual that PIA and company religiously follow. *But he saw the coming quagmire and wisely stepped aside, dumping the coming storm on the opposition's lap. And that is the ultimate wisdom!*

Case in Point:

From Bosnia to South Ossetia to Badme

The West opened a Pandora's Box by unilaterally recognizing the independence of Bosnia. What are the criteria for recognition? Russia has taken a page from the West and is using the same reasons for recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

What does this mean for Eritrea? It is suffice to say that this doesn't bode well for resolving the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia. With international legal mess, where no universally accepted principle is being applied to resolve international issues, Badme is forever relegated into backburners of international issues.

'Kab Seb Zitetsebeye, Bidewu Beleye!' There can't be a wiser saying ... and Min. Haile Drue reflected this 8 years ago.

What should be our primary motive for our campaign in Diaspora?

Over-expectations bring fatigue if expectations are not realized within the timeframe we expect certain events to take place. It is for this reason that the manner with which we frame our expectations plays critical role in our opposition stamina against the regime.

If we wake up every morning expecting the regime to fall that day, soon we will tire out, leading us to resignation, which will in turn weakens the opposition movement. Instead, we should wake up every morning telling ourselves that our struggle to free PFDJ's hostages and to bring change in Eritrea is simply our moral obligation. We should fulfill our moral obligations without much expectation, other than the fact to know we can sleep better at night knowing that we haven't forgotten those who sacrificed their lives so that our children and we can have better future.

These brave men and women could have lived like the rest of us [**Livin' la Vida Loca**] by paying lip service to a dictator. But their conscious wouldn't allow them to see their Eritrea, the Eritrea that over one hundred thousands precious Eritreans sacrificed their lives for, sink into the abyss.

Some countries such as the US with their Vietnam MIAs and Israelis don't even leave behind their dead. They honor their dead because it gives the living citizens pride in their country and their cause. It is for this reason that we can never abandon those brave men and women who stood up for us. We send out signals to those who stand up for us that we will never abandon them.

As irritating as Isayasawiyan are, we should ignore them. PFDJ festivals have been abandoned by the adult Eritrean population in Diaspora and are barely a night out for Eritrean teenagers whose attendance at these festivals is more a reflection of their search for identity than support for a dictatorial regime. Closer observations reveal that PFDJ festivals have failed to achieve their objectives, and we shouldn't give them any more weight than what they are – utter failures.

The tragedy in Diaspora politics isn't that too many people don't understand the sophisticated machinery of dictatorship, but the lack of empathy, which is to put oneself in somebody else's shoes. If we can't think from the heart, which we all are endowed with regardless of our backgrounds, everything else is lost.

BEST OPPOSITION NEWS

The ever growing rapprochement between EPP (ex-ELF-RC) and EDP is probably the biggest news in years of political opposition. What started out as a merger or reconciliation of ELFNC-EPLFPM into Eritrean National Salvation Front (ENSF) is now shaping up into a solid footing with the latest news. For those who understand the significance, this rapprochement is probably the most earth shattering news that has gone with little expression of enthusiasm within the opposition camp. We now find out that the venomous hatred that we witnessed for years was only skin deep – its political wound didn't heal for lack of reaching out. The leadership of EPP and EDP are showing us that the political paranoia created by Isayasawiyan is just a political 'midingar'. With a little amount of 'reaching out', we can reconcile our political differences and build the Eritrea that our hundreds of thousands our martyrs sacrificed their lives for.

For all our self-righteous opinions, nothing is more enduring than "reaching out". *Sustainable progress* can only be achieved when we pursue inclusive politics. **No amount of steel and concrete can make up for "reaching out"**. Solid nations are built on 'reaching out'. *We must reach back in order to reach forward.* We can't simply bury the past, but must first acknowledge

it. Eritrean struggle for independence from the forties onward must be correctly reflected in our history, in our symbols and in our institutions. There were no organizations that failed, but organizations that had to evolve. One organization wouldn't have succeeded without the lessons learned from the previous organization. The dynamic nature of organizations requires that one dies and another born – just like living creatures, *or at the very least evolve beyond recognition*, with new ideas and new people. For clarity, certain processes can live but organizations themselves must evolve – through one process or another. It should be etched in our brain that life is about evolution, which requires constant change. Failure is when we stop to evolve – when our thought processes constipate. You can't implement 1950s ideology, no matter how packaged, abandoned by every country in the world in 2008. The world has evolved!

Life is all about managing contradictions. There is good and bad, day and night, hot and cold, bitter and sweet, love and hate, man and woman, smart and dumb, happy and sad, idealism and realism, life and death, etc... Success in life is about managing these contradictions. Physical contradictions can't be changed, e.g. man and woman or life and death, and thus one is forced to manage it. However, emotional and other non-physical contradictions are grey areas that we must manage. Is the pursuit of happiness the ultimate goal? Or should we simply avoid sadness? In pursuing happiness, are we enticing sadness with it? How do you live comfortably in the grey zone?

Politics is probably the greatest grey zone we live in. It is already complex enough to manage one's own internal contradictions. A society is the aggregate of all individuals managing their own internal/personal contradictions. Politics is about aggregating all these contradictions. Those who can't reconcile their own personal [internal], esp. political contradictions can't reconcile aggregated contradictions of societies. They become part of societies' problems rather than its solutions.

At the aggregate level, no one will argue that the most important task in building a sustainable democratic system of government is to establish institutions. But would institution alone bring about a sustainable democratic system? In reality, institution is about group decision making process similar to a committee where no one is accountable. Decisions are slow and everyone wants to take credit for other people's work while passing off all the responsibilities and blames to the next guy. The contradictory form to institution, or group decision making, is an individual decision maker – a leader. One without the other will skew the contradiction into one direction leading to a disaster. In other words, the grey zone is found when institutions are designed to control a single decision-maker who must lead a nation with a bridle in his/her mouth. One without the other courts a disaster leading to pendulum politics leading eventually towards dictatorship.

Eritrean opposition politics has tendency to be self-righteous. Of course, every political party in the world wants to project the image of righteous cause. But the difference among the prudent ones and idealist ones is the ability to understand that politics thrives in the grey zone and thus one must be able to reconcile "what is" to "what should be" – call this pragmatism or prudent politics. It leads to backroom compromises – reaching out. Hatred, anger, grudge and bitterness have no place in politics. This is politics' occupational hazard one must accept in order to avoid clouding one's judgment in a world where one is forced to continually reconcile contradictions. As the old goes, 'if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.'

We need politics that doesn't love too much, and doesn't hate too much, lest we cloud our judgements. We don't need those who hate and express their endless anger in their self-righteous politics, but need those who are able to manage us through the grey zone without violating our fundamental values. It is about pragmatism and prudence!

The first thing I examine in any political organization is the key decision maker. It doesn't matter whether that organization is registered as 1234 Inc. or 9877 Inc. If a political organization doesn't have a publicly known key decision maker, then it doesn't belong in the political sphere. Without a leader who is willing to step forward and become personally accountable for the actions of its political organization, we will have shadowy organizations whose functions can only be counter-productive to our cause. It is always difficult to hold institutions directly accountable, but is much easier to hold a key leader accountable. As contradictory as it may seem, political opposition with obsessive 'idealist' tendencies aren't playing positive roles at *this juncture* in our struggle. *Extreme* 'idealism' or even 'realism' at the other end are each contradictory forms that are poisonous in themselves. These positions should be used only as push-pull factors to find a balance within the grey zone of *blended* political 'idealism and realism'. Even the grey zone isn't static (stationary) at one point, but must move around within dynamic factors. It is for this reason that we must assess and reassess our political positions everyday to reflect the realities of dynamic world.

In my view, *Mr. Mesfin Hagos* remains the most important and key figure within the opposition camp capable of reconciling the contradictions we face within the political grey zones. He is one of the most experienced and pragmatic leaders within the opposition camp, and in fact, within the entire Eritrean politics. *We can only succeed against the regime when we allow our trusted opposition leaders to operate within that grey zone at their own discretion.* Don't second guess every morning in the comfort of one's home! Human history is replete with examples of why we can't hit two birds with one stone and that we can't have our cake and eat it too. If we agree that bringing change is the most critical task at this time, then other concerns will become lower priorities. In contradictory world of nature, we can't have it both ways. "United we stand, divided we fall!"

We need leadership that is able to operate within the grey zone of our history, our current predicaments and our antagonists. I believe that the key leaders of the major opposition political parties are increasingly becoming more comfortable operating within the grey zone; able to reconcile the deep contradictions that we can learn from rich human history.

Of course, sometimes political judgment appears to be a tad in short supply within the opposition camp, but again, an ounce of live action is better than a pound of self-righteous politics in the comfort of one's home. **Political judgement is like a 'guessing game'**. If you ask two people to guess a number between 1 and 10, and if the first person guesses 1, it would be stupid for the second person to guess 10. Instead one should say 2, thus occupying the entire spectrum from 2 to 10. Similarly, PIA has been guessing 1 or 2 due to political quagmire, and the opposition has a tendency to pick 8 or 9. Why not usurp the entire spectrum by picking a number [i.e. political position] that usurps the entire political spectrum? That is pragmatism!

As we are witnessing in the American presidential campaign, the key issue isn't about concrete and steel, but political judgement, because everything else follows good political judgement.

More bits and pieces ...

The Socio-economic Quagmire

From time-to-time, I come across Eritreans who tell me how well Eritrea is progressing socially and economically based on the propaganda fed to them on EriTV. Even with my limited knowledge, I am amazed listening to these individuals explain their *convoluted* understanding of socio-economic progress.

I have come to understand that many relate how well the government is performing to their own personal performance. If the individual *never* owned a house, he/she is impressed if the government builds even one house. If the individual owns three houses, he/she is impressed when the government builds more than three houses. We tend to compare how well a nation is managed by our own tiny world around us. We forget that a government isn't judged by one or two expensive houses it builds, but how it can meet the housing needs of tens of thousands of young Eritreans who reach the age of adulthood every year. We lack the mental capacity to aggregate the needs of tens of thousands of individuals and how this regime has failed to meet these needs.

The ten or twenty million US dollars PIA spends on illusionary projects and endlessly shown on ERITV doesn't buy you one penthouse on Fifth Avenue in New York. Give us a break!

OBAMANIA

Isayasawiyans (PIA) have gone into political schizophrenia. They tell us they support Obama without understanding what he stands for. They can only support Obama in their state of political schizophrenia – two diametrically opposed beliefs for same underlying principles of change, accountability and transparency. **We want change we can believe! We want politics that builds bridges, NOT walls.**

1. Obama stands for change. Isayasawiyans are as allergic to change as one can get. In the words of Obama's during his acceptance speech, (at around 7 minutes, CNN)

Eritrea, we are better than these ten years,
We are a better country than this!

We are tired of broken promises and failed policies of PIA

To all Eritreans, I say, "Enough!"

2. We want a change we can believe, where 'Awet N'Hafash' is what it should be, justice and equality. It means farmers are able to sell their crops to the highest bidder, and not be stripped off their crops by force and sold at cheap prices to Isayasawiyen army officers at Nfa 1,500 per quintal while the rest of the population is forced to pay Nfa 7,500 per quintal for teff. Enough!
3. Nobody is interested in YPFDJ, XPFDJ, TVPFDJ, NOPFDJ, MAYBEPFDJ, SUMMERPFDJ, FESTIVALPFDJ or any other meeting of so-called PFDJites. What counts is the real PFDJ/EPLF? If PFDJ/EPLF truly exists, why not call a meeting of the Central Committee or (even better) Congress of PFDJ? Why 'tiwuywuy'? We demand this meeting be held immediately! Enough!
4. Shabait.org has taken a cue from one of PIA's interviews and has anted up its propaganda machinery. But this is the ultimate exercise in futility. The question remains, who is the audience? Shaebia.org can plaster its website and others with articles but it doesn't change the fundamentals one bit,
 - a. Domestic audience is too busy lining up for bread, kerosene and other basic necessities while its breadwinning members are idling on PIA slavery campaign, modeled after China's 1958 the "Leap

Forward” and the Cultural Revolution – ideologies discredited by its own authors.

- b. Diaspora Eritreans have largely abandoned the regime. The irony of Diaspora politics is that those who must send money to Eritrea to support their families are the ones most frustrated with this regime. Those who cheer the regime have little connection to the people there, mostly unaware of the tragedy, and who send the least money to Eritrea.
- c. Foreign governments, and foreigners in general, will heed to reports from Amnesty International, CPJ and other international organizations and won't bother with Shaebia.org.

So who is the audience for Shaebia.org ... convincing the convinced?
What a waste!

On this 47th Year of the start of our struggle, this article is dedicated to my good friend, Joshua



<http://www.lulaband.com/?q=audio/play/14>

<http://www.lulaband.com/?q=audio/play/93>

We are firmly holding your torch in our hands until the torch reaches its destination!

The Struggle keeps changing its form, but it is always there!

Berhan Hagos
August 30, 2008