

The Opposition Losses Dr Yohannes Ligiam; Misses His Sharp Criticisms And Constant Calls for Reconciliation

(By Friends and Colleagues in Struggle)

The far away Asian town of Kyaing Tong in eastern Myanmar (Burma) once had little to do with the Eritrean village of Ashera, near Hagaz. But today, the two places can claim something in common: the Burmese town on 14 July 2008 witnessed the sudden death, of massive heart attack, of Dr. Yohannes Ligiam, and small Ashera welcomed a month later his remains for burial at the Jan-Habin cemetery on 12 August 2008.



Yohannes Ligiam Tedros of the Hasri family was born in 1952 at Meblatakh in Ashera, some 30 kms south of Keren. After completing secondary and high school grades in Keren and Asmara as a brilliant kid, Yohannes obtained his medical doctorate from Bologna in Italy and later specialized in tropical disease in Antwerp, Belgium, and mastered community health at Liverpool University.

Throughout the 1970s, Yohannes was among the militant students who gave real life to the activities of the General Union of Eritrean Students (GUES) in Italy. Partly because of him, many Bolognese medical students and politicians became ardent supporters of the Eritrean liberation movement. It was also during the 1970s, while still a student at Bologna that young Yohannes organized medical teams of doctors and nurses who provided surgical and medical treatment to hundreds of victims of war at improvised field hospitals inside areas liberated by the Eritrean Liberation Front, an organization to which he belonged.

Yohannes, as a doctor, educator and humanitarian activist, have in particular had great passion to sympathize with and treat people infected by the new scourge named HIV/AIDS against which he struggled in many places of three diverse continents. The last spot was Burma/Myanmar. His project was located near the Chinese border and it was while in a preparation to fly to a field mission in a remote-placed project that his heart stopped beating. And when the bad news reached his UK-raised daughter, Senet, and his wife, Betty, in London, the first think they could possibly have thought was how much Yohannes loved Eritrea with his birthplace of Meblatakh in Ashera. Yohannes thought that the cruel PFDJ dictatorship that prevented him from visiting home would

die before him and always talked to Senet and Betty that his best last days will be spent at home, the “real” home. The wishes were taken up in their literal context by Senet and Betty who insisted to take Yohannes back home, to his real home at Jan-Habin, for eternal rest.

Besides to Betty, Senet, and the extended family circles, the passing away of Dr. Yohannes Ligiam is a loss to the Eritrean opposition camp to which he belonged and which will miss his many writings calling for sensible action to remove the dictatorship.

The many writings of Dr. Yohannes expressed frustration with the situation in Eritrea after 1991 and the failure of the opposition to become a promising alternative force. For instance, in one of his articles on this subject, Dr. Yohannes wrote: **“It is difficult to understand let alone to accept why people who struggled thirty years for freedom and democracy ended up with a dictatorial and with such an opposition not fit for purpose.”**

Reprinted below, and to be read in his memory, are two exemplary articles Dr. Yohannes contributed to Eritrean web sites during 2007.

May his soul rest in peace.

Friends and comrades-in-struggle.

Eritrea: Establishing an effective opposition: 06/05/07 - Y. Ligiam (Dr)

We are all saddened and directly or indirectly affected by the economic, political and social deterioration in Eritrea. The PFDJ system has failed and betrayed people’s aspirations, hopes and opportunities. In addition to its political and economic ineptitude, it has dismantled the coexistence element and the social fabric of the country. Neither the women and children nor the elderly have been exempted from the impact and those who can are leaving the country in droves with considerable risk to their lives.

While the situation for the last ten years has been as bad as it can be and it is getting worse; while the opposition camp fails to grow up and meet the challenge it is necessary to draw our attention to the long term impact of PFDJ’s mismanagement of the country which:

- Has created a mistrust among the various Eritrean communities
- Destroyed quality of education (the future) and persecuted religion
- Imprisoned innocent people through kangaroo courts
- It has betrayed people’s trust and desire for a legitimate parliament.
- Pushed the country into a permanent emergency status

It is very sad to see in such a critical phase of make or break of a nation; Eritreans particularly those who are outside the country are unable to find a unitary strategy to challenge the regime.

Food for thought for all including the silent majority, individuals, civil societies and the fragmented opposition organizations and their followers.

Considering the state of the opposition camp, it is time to explore a strategy on how to make the Eritrean opposition camp more relevant – to the urgency of the situation and to the question of viability of a national entity.

Normally, when a situation in a specific country deteriorates the opposition camp becomes relevant to people, gains strength and establishes an alternative hope. Oddly enough in Eritrea, despite the deterioration of the situation and despite that the PFDJ's system has been discredited internally and externally the opposition camp has failed to grasp the opportunity. The opposition camp has failed to dent the actions of PFDJ and it also failed to demonstrate that it is a safe alternative to PFDJ's system both to the people and to international institutions. In a situation of life or death of a nation, the Eritrean opposition's camp track record has been disappointing and irrelevant.

The handicap of existing alliance:

- Endless fragmentation followed by divergence of the people and of the struggle
- Lack of accountability to the people
- Failure to establish a relevant international politics
- Lack of vision and strategy of building a nation
- Lack of clarity of objectives / roles and responsibilities
- Prioritizing organizational interest to that of the people and the nation
- Dwelling on differences and not in the common national interests
- Failed to build a bigger picture / to provide leadership / to build National consensus
- Failed in providing a strategic plan to construct an effective National opposition
- Failed to provide hope to those who are suffering under the PFDJ system.

The defenders of the status quo in the opposition might say – this is a democratic process and people have the right to differ and to express their views. In principle no one would disagree with this statement. However, a democratic process that doesn't have a defined objective, a strategy and cannot focus to the specific problem in Eritrea becomes irrelevant to stop people's suffering and to prevent a nation from disintegrating.

Having divided the Eritreans in exile into different factions and not being able to be seen as a viable alternative to PFDJ's system within Eritrea, are the two detrimental factors of the opposition camp. At the same time, the opposition camp has become a source of a negative propaganda for PFDJ to terrorize the people.

The recent news that EDA has succeeded to overcome the problem of articles 4 and 5 of their Charter. These articles had become a major source of controversy and waste of time and resources among the opposition groups. **It should not be forgotten that the issues of 4 and 5 have been created by the organizations themselves and not by the people. Eritrean people have not given any mandate to any opposition on future governance or political system.** This is a mandate of the people, through a Representative Parliament and the Constitution that will be approved in due process. Any other suggestion is undemocratic.

If the Eritrean opposition camp is to be relevant to the situation and if it is to respond in a dignified manner to the urgency of “the cry for help”, there are two fundamental issues to be reviewed:

Definition of the objective:

Eritrean people have many economic, social problems and thanks to the notorious social engineering of PFDJ they will have new challenges and grievances that they will have to deal with. However, the biggest problem Eritreans face is PFDJ’s betrayal and the denial to the people to establish a Legitimate, Representative Parliament where people can exercise their power to deal with existing and upcoming problems.

Therefore, the main objective of the opposition camp must be to provide people with a legitimate parliament – which is a starting point to resolve ALL other problems of a nation. The objective, strategy and resources of the opposition should therefore, be limited and focused to overthrow the dictatorship and prepare a political platform to establish a Legitimate Parliament.

Definition of Roles and Responsibility:

It is not the role of an opposition camp to define beforehand the Governance system that should prevail in future Eritrea. **The opposition can democratically express its views on future Eritrea but does not have any mandate to decide on behalf of the people.** When the opposition camp is divided into Federalists, Jihadists, and Socialists, Pseudo-democrats ...etc, it is a distractive and dangerous process that leads nowhere except to further fragmentation and distraction from the real problem.

Therefore, the so called democratic process of the opposition camp is a blind end and will take us nowhere except to become a laughing-stoke of PFDJ and to nurture its oppression on innocent people.

The opposition groups need to reflect that:

- they do not have the right to decide what the people want
- they are acting outside their mandate
- they are putting the cart before the horse
- they have put the people’s priority in the backburner
- they have put organizational interest above the people’s suffering
- they have championed irreconcilable flagships that are irrelevant and untimely

The opposition camp needs to realize it hasn’t got a mandate to resolve the economic and social problems and further less to determine the future governance of Eritrea. Such posture and abuse of circumstances is neither timely nor relevant to the situation in Eritrea and will never gain people’s trust. It is not a democratic process as it is a copy-cut of PFDJ actions “we decide for our people as we know what is good them”.

If the intention is to maintain a single national entity, the fragmented opposition camps have to review their priorities and to re-evaluate their role and more importantly to be accountable to people’s objectives. They have to do the “impossible” i.e. to come to a single political platform – to overthrow the system - for the sake of those who are suffering and for the sake of the future of the nation.

The strategy:

The only way forward is that all the opposition elements (block I & II, civil societies, individuals) need to come together to a National Covenant and establish a single objective and a single strategy on how to overthrow the oppressive system. They can exercise their organizational “convictions” and “interests” until the cows come home during the transition period.

At present the single priorities are:

- Establish a single voice/strategy of opposition to PFDJ
- Establish a coordinated action plan to overthrow the system
- Provide international credibility/alliance to the opposition
- Coordinate time, energy and resources of the opposition to the **single** objective
- Plan to manage the transitional period effectively on agreed terms and framework.
- Register the legitimate grievances of the people to be dealt by future Parliament.
- Establish and support opposition elements within and outside Eritrea
- To freeze individual organizational interests and strategies until the transitional period.

Desired outcome from a National Covenant:

- Definition of objective/s (to review and focus on their duty bearing role)
- Definition of roles and responsibility / review of the various positions.
- Election of a National Council in Exile and an Executive
- Election of an executive to lead the Action Plan, accountable to the Council.
- Executive to coordinate and bring together the voices, energies and resources of the opposition camp –
- To promote the national and the common interests of the people.
- Executive to bring efficiency, effectiveness and national & international credibility through active involvement of all Eritreans.
- All organizational grievances to be studied and documented through an elected commission to be forwarded to a future parliament.

Advantages of a National Council and its Executive:

- It brings together energies and resources of the opposition camp
- It becomes one train that carries all Eritreans in one single track towards one specific destination i.e. a legitimate representative parliament.
- A single objective, voice and a single action plan gives national and international credibility
- It is accountable (because of its defined role) and encourages people’s participation
- It gives a defined hope to those who are suffering under a dictatorial system.
- It guarantees a smooth transitional period when/if the PFDJ system implodes where the alternative is chaos and civil war.

Transitional Period:

- Executive to coordinate and manage party formation, introduction of pluralism and the election process i.e. the transition period towards a legitimate Parliament.
- Executive to oversee the transitional economic, political and social administration.
- Executive to forward popular grievances to the parliament’s attention.

- The executive will provide a political platform for people to exercise their political rights and party allegiances.

Conclusion:

People, if they are given the means and the opportunity of ownership can solve their problems. This is the basic element for democracy and if the opposition groups believe in democracy they have to practice it.

National, regional, religious, political, social and economic problems are not unique to Eritrean inhabitants. The denial of a Legitimate and Representative Parliament is the biggest betrayal and the source of all problems in Eritrea. It is also the only platform where we can meet the challenges of a viable nation.

The single expectation of people in Eritrea from the opposition camp is to overthrow the oppressive regime. People have not given a mandate to any opposition group the prediction and the definition of what system and governance should prevail in Eritrea, this is a mandate for the people.

Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA)
Serious blow to people's hope and faith-
Why aren't we impressed?

Yohannes Ligiam 13.03.07

It is difficult to understand let alone to accept why people who struggled thirty years for freedom and democracy ended up with a dictatorial government and with such an opposition not fit for purpose.

It has been reported that the Eritrean multiple opposition factions were able to score success in their programme but failed to elect an executive leadership for their next stage.

Hidden agenda, ineptitude, childishness, incapacity or irreconcilable differences in any case it is sad and it is shameful. Failing to agree in a technicality matter of election is like throwing the baby with the bath water and they have lost a historic opportunity. Therefore, all the faith and hope we had invested on the Eritrean opposition to come up with a coherent vision and action plan to relieve the sufferings in Eritrea has been buried in Addis-Ababa. Historical irony?

The outcome tells me that the real problem is not the failure to elect an executive but the various groups have fundamental differences on how to manage their group interests above and beyond the nation's interest and the fate. It would have made sense if the failure were due to fundamental political, economic, social issues that the groups couldn't agree upon. Failing to elect an executive and therefore, to dash away the faith and hopes of millions is nothing less than a mockery to the plight and the sufferings of Eritrean people. Furthermore, it magnifies the mistrust between the various communities that has been created by the ELF and EPLF era and has been well established by the PFDJ in its divide and rule strategy.

Since 1993, Eritrean people abroad and inside hoped that the opposition will grow and mature politically and will replace the dictatorship that has denied them opportunity, stability and democracy. Instead of maturity and coherence the oppositions' reality has developed to further fragmentation and the opposition ended up being part of the problem instead of a solution.

The opposition has failed in its objectives, in defining its role and in identifying its priorities. For the people who are suffering both the dictatorial actions of PFDJ and the oppositions' political misdemeanor bear equal responsibility. The candle is being burned on both ends whatever the justification and innocent people continue to die in prison, people suffer from acute and chronic malnutrition and furthermore the future of nation as a viable entity is being put in danger. The result of the two blocks (3 and 7) from the congress in Addis is a thin end of a wedge that will exacerbate the misunderstanding, mistrust and non-reconcilable interests between the highlanders and lowlanders. The failure in Addis has far reaching consequences to the viability of a nation more than the immediate demonstration of ineptitude on the part of the opposition.

Ironically, this period would have been the best opportunity to replace the PFDJ dictatorship. The PFDJ system has been discredited internally and externally in terms of its record in human rights and economic stagnancy. It has been deemed as the spoilt child of Africa. The youth are fleeing the country in droves whenever they can. The prisons are full of innocent people. Despite this golden opportunity to free the oppressed, the opposition finds itself in a political wilderness of power struggle and has become a laughing stock of the dictator.

If the opposition is to succeed, the factions and their followers have to review three fundamental elements of their existence: Objective, role and priority of an opposition

In terms of objectives:

Eritrean people have one desire – to replace an oppressive Government with a legitimate parliament. People do not have any expectation or have not given any responsibility to any opposition group to decide on their behalf or to resolve their future problems. People rightly expect to resolve any political, social and economic issues that exist and that might arise in the future through a legitimate parliament and governance established through its parliament. This objective has been given various sectarian interpretations by the various factions and their respective blindfolded followers. This sectarian interpretation and pseudo-democratic process has only created confusion, benefited the dictator and deepened the mistrust among various communities.

In terms of identifying roles and strategies:

If an opposition that struggles to free its people, is determined to decide beforehand on how people should be governed and what system should prevail in the future, this is an act of sabotage to people's aspirations and their right to determine the system through the ballot box. Isn't this what PFDJ did, "I know what is best for the people". The Eritrean oppositions are formed of Federalists, Jihadists, Trotskyites, and Pseudo-democrats...etc who want to impose their "political" vision as conditions for freedom of the oppressed and some of them have the

dream of replacing the dictator. This strategy of struggle can not be less dictatorial than the actions of PFDJ as it undermines the rightful owners of power and the basis of democracy. If factionalism and organizational interest is the only track record of the opposition groups to date, what does the future hold if some or all of these groups were to come into power?

In terms of priorities:

The outcome in Addis has openly demonstrated that the priorities of the people in Eritrea and that of the various factions and their followers (who ironically all live outside the country) are not the same. People in Eritrea are in their limits of survival, the situation is such that people risk their life in order to escape from the Eritrea and some have even dared the mighty Mediterranean Sea with tragic consequences. Well, the actions and the lack of coherent action of the opposition groups do not demonstrate that the people's suffering is a priority. The priorities of the factions' seem to be more on who will replace the dictator, which organization and which interest group and it has clearly become only a lip-service to the level of suffering that exists in Eritrea.

What is to be done?

“People have leaders they deserve” weather this is by element of force or by legitimacy, which is rather relative. PFDJ controls the system and is able to do exist because it has the support of the people who benefit from the system. At the same time, the opposition factions have divided and controlled the hearts and minds of Eritreans abroad to their own end. The posturing of the various factions to know what is the best system of governance for the people is outside their remit and role. And more importantly, in addition to perpetuating the oppressive regime the strategy of the various factions undermines the national viability of Eritrea.

We are all aware that within Eritrea people can not rebel or organize against the dictatorial regime, considering the oppressive system that prevails. Their only hope of relief lies on those people who have fled the country and are able to organize a coherent action of opposition. Unfortunately, our incapacity to make the various factions accountable to the expectations of the people and our incapacity to criticize their inconsistency is prolonging the suffering of many. This is time to bring the factions in line to the objective of the people and to stop following irrelevant factional strategies blind-folded.

The people outside Eritrea, therefore, have a unique responsibility to make the various factions accountable and to make them focus to the objectives and priorities of the people. To remind the factions that their role and responsibility is limited to one thing and one thing only to restore power to its rightful owners i.e. the people. This objective does not require more than a single political strategy and military organization. Urgent situations require urgent and committed responses not pseudo-democratic posturing.