

First and Constituent Congress of the Eritrean People's Party

Congress Proceedings and Analysis

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Introduction: The newly born Eritrean People's Party (EPP) conducted its first congress between 25 and 30 July 2008 under the slogan: "Our Party is the product of change in our way of thinking and doing things". The hall was graced with slogans written in Arabic, Tigrinia and English.

Some of the slogans read like this: "to be effective and to be heard, we need to act and speak out in unison"; "Yes, democracy is possible!"; "Let us build a people-based mass party whose goal and trademark is unity and change".

Speeches: There were many speeches presented at the opening ceremony. Mr. Amanuel Habte, the chairman of the preparatory committee, stated in his opening speech that the congress was the outcome of a decision taken by the ELF-

RC two years earlier. This was followed by a solidarity message of the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) presented by its vice-chairman, Mr. Haj Abdelnur. Also presented were the solidarity message of each and every EDA member organization. The only absence at the opening ceremony was that of the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrean Kunama. Speaker after speaker wished the congress a success and commended the start made to achieve democratic change and promote political plurality in Eritrean politics.

Following the solidarity messages, the keynote address was presented by the outgoing chairman of the ELF-RC, Mr. Woldeyesus Ammar. At the podium, Mr. Ammar was flanked by leadership members of the organization in a manner that appeared to be a final a goodbye to the name of their organization and a resolve to maintain the essence and the [positive] legacies of the struggles of the ELF-RC. After commending the hard work exerted by the preparatory committee, Mr. Woldeyesus Ammar presented a brief outline of the achievements of the organization in the past two years. He said members of the organizations organized about 100 public meetings

and seminars during the past two years, and officially declared the dissolution of the ELF-RC by passing over its possessions to the party being formed. He added that since its formation in 1982, the ELF-RC further deepened the contents of the political programme of 1975 through its 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th congresses. He said the reports for the past two years will be added to the accounts of the previous congresses to preserve historical archives, and confirmed that the party to be formed will come out with a democratic programme that will reassure democratic change in Eritrea.

Mr. Ammar stressed that the territorial independence achieved in 1991 failed to bring about the much awaited national unity and democratic governance. He added that reverses were registered in the area of people's unity because of the mistakes of the regime. He called for the correction of past mistakes by all opposition organizations and the preservation of the positive legacies. In particular, he spoke expressed great hope in the future role of the young generation. At the end of his lengthy but attention absorbing speech, Mr. Ammar paid gratitude to the support of the Ethiopian people and government and called on the government of the Sudan to reconsider its recent decision against the Eritrean opposition organizations.

The next to take the podium was Mr. Haile Ghebru, chairman of the [Joint Party Formation] Commission, recounted in detailed the activities undertaken since the Commission was formed in mid-2007. He stated that many public meetings were conducted in carrying the message of party formation to the people, including [the recent] party conferences in Australia, Europe and North America. Contrary to allegations by a few elements, the activities of the Commission, he said, were open and free to all sides and he commended the cooperation made by the leadership of the ELF-RC.

On his part, Mr. Hibur Ghebre-Kidan, the chairman of the Sana'a Forum and representative of the Ethiopian government, reassured his country's continued support to the Eritrean opposition till Eritreans achieve democratic governance in their country. He highlighted the importance of merger between organizations with similar programmes, and noted the importance of having a national umbrella for the Eritrean opposition.

Congress Proceedings

Election of congress secretariat: After the opening session, the next session elected a secretariat chaired by Mr. Gherezgheher Tewelde, with Mr. Haileab Andu as vice-chairman, and five other members for recording minutes of the congress in Arabic and Tigrinia.

Members of Congress

The congress started after checking the quorum. The congress expected 152 elected delegates from 17 countries. However, it was 123 delegates who could reach the congress venue; 29 delegates could not attend [for various reasons].

Congress Observers

There were three delegations as observers. They were: the Horn of Africa Studies Center; the Eritrean Center for Media Services, and delegates from the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP). It was in consideration of the accord reached between their two organizations that the EDP was given observer status [not given to any other political organization]. The Horn of Africa

Studies Center and the Eritrean Center for Media Services were attending for the second time congresses organized by the ELF-RC, and I take this opportunity to thank them for this gesture.

Congress documents

Draft documents presented at the congress were the draft political programme and the draft party constitution.

First: **The Political Programme:** besides the preamble and the conclusion, the draft programme had 7 chapters about the name and emblem of the party, its objectives, as well as political, economic, social programmes and foreign relations. In light of the importance of these issues, I wish to state as follows:

1. Securing human and democratic rights; establishing a democratic governance that ensures division of power; participatory decentralized system of government; a non-partisan national army that can defend the constitution and a popularly elected government.
2. Rehabilitating the damage caused to the economy of the country; securing that land is the possession of the people; accepting free market economy, and equalizing the unbalanced economic development of the regions.
3. Giving focus to educational and public health services; ensuring social justice; paying attention to the vulnerable sections of the society like women, children, the old aged, the disabled persons, families of poor farmers and refugees.
4. Establishing regional and international diplomatic relations that safeguard world peace, mutual interests and respect.

Second, **party constitution:** The party constitution has a preamble and 7 chapters with 32 articles spread over 29 pages. I will mention in passing a few essential points in the constitution:

1. The leadership has three levels: the Central Council, the Executive Office and the Secretariat.
2. Unlike in the 2006 congress, the youth and women's affairs were given separate executive offices. The old military office was named the Department for Internal Affairs.
3. The offices of the Speaker and Chairman were rounded up in one office of the Party Chairman....

The Election Process

The congress designated a 7-person election committee that included three independent observers. The committee elected Mohammed Nur Ahmed as its chairman.

Election of Central Council

The congress formed a 39-member Central Council with four other reserve members. Haile Ghebru received the highest vote of 107 out of 110 valid ballots cast. Women obtained [four] members at the Central Council. A good number of young persons were also elected. The election was slightly different from the usual election processes. At the end of deep and long discussions, it was agreed to make the election a mixture of open ballot and proportional representation consisting 7 regions of the world from where the delegates came. Each region was given the right to present a set number of candidates. Delegates from each of the 7 regions then selected their candidates in a secret ballot. The 59 candidates from the 7 regions were put under one list and presented for secret balloting by the whole congress.

To my view, this is a unique experience in Eritrean politics that deserves a deeper study. Although one should not make a hasty judgment on the matter, I believe it was able to secure fair representation of the geographical and social spread among members of the party, and the system was not contradictory to the known democratic elections.

The closing session

The congress of the Eritrean People's Party ended on 30 July 2008. The closing ceremony was started when invited guests, representatives of the opposition organizations, the vice-chairman of the EDA and Mr. Hibur Ghebre-Kidan, representative of the Ethiopian government and chairman of the Secretariat of the Sana'a forum took their respective seats.

The closing ceremony started with the announcement of the results of the election to the Central Council. Political resolutions of the congress were read in Tigrinia by Mr. Gherezgheher Tewelde, and in Arabic by Mohammed Adem Artaa. This was followed by congratulatory messages presented by Mr Hibur and Mr. Haj Abdelnur. Mr. Mohammed Nur Ahmed spoke on behalf of the independent observers who attended the congress.

The Simret musical troupe from Shimelba camp for refugees was giving entertainments at intervals of the speeches to closing session participants.

The following observations can be made about the debates, presentation of papers and discussions held during the congress days:

1. The 6th ELF-RC congress was held on 25 July 2006. The Constituent and First Congress of the Party was held as promised after two years starting on 25 July 2008. This is something that deserves commendation.
2. The [Party Formation] Commission exerted big efforts in submitting congress drafts to ELF-RC members and other individuals long before the congress was started. Thus it was only on certain sections that the congress stopped to discuss unresolved issues. Besides, the draft papers were posts in the websites for many people to have a look at them. This showed transparency that welcomed the views of others.
3. As Mr. Woldeyesus Ammar stated at the opening message, the ELF-RC did not succeed to accomplish all what it aimed to accomplish [like having other organizations joining them at the party formation]. However, we cannot say that the ELF-RC did not register a success. At this critical time for the opposition, the ELF-RC, which prepared itself for change from old way of doing things, has attracted over 150 new members in the party formation process, and also made headway towards unity with the Eritrean Democratic Party. This is a big success in itself.
4. Although the delegated women representatives at the congress were only 6 and their participation quite low, one should affirm that the Eritrean People's Party has shown its great interest in the participation of youth and women.
5. In spite of some extended debates, the congress was free of any misunderstandings. We observed people debating big issues with all seriousness and with high responsibility throughout the congress days.