

## The Consequences of Disunity in Eritrean Society

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Today, there are more than thirteen political organizations in the Eritrean opposition camp. Most of them, if not all, trace their history back to ELF and EPLF: the two organizations that had dominated the politics of the Eritrean liberation struggle until 1981, a year when ELF was forced out of the Eritrean field. Their programs range from ethnic and religious politics to secular ones. Moreover, in post independence Eritrea, there has been a phenomenal rise in the number of Eritrean political groups, including quasi political groups, vowing to defeat the dictatorial regime of Isayas Afeworki.

Yet, the last eighteen years had taken them from the claim of unifiers to divisive groups, from the claim of fighting against the unconstitutional order of the country to groups dismissed and labeled as multipliers of problems, and from the claim of fighting for one united democratic Eritrea to groups as ethnic and religious promoters, and from the claim of democracy to groups wedded to violence and guns.

As a result of all this, the frustration, outrage, and anger of Eritrean people over the inability of the opposition forces to secure unity have been persistent and frank. In addition to their dismay over the repeated failures of achieving unity, Eritrean people continue to be bewildered on the intricacies, secrets, and games being pursued by the opposition forces in order to avoid unity and/or to prevent any semblance of unity from taking place. They were even more mystified on the reasons as to why unity could not be forged between forces that advocate the same political persuasions and visions.

The Eritrean People's Democratic Party believes all these problems are rooted in the past, notably in the liberation history. Yes, our past is painful; it is marred by factional conflicts, mistrusts, and undemocratic practices, but it no longer presents a solution. Instead, we need to uproot the foundation of disunity and the practices of political divisiveness. But first, we must admit they exist; we must recognize the destructive role they played in the past.

Hence, acknowledging our past mistakes is one thing we should all embrace as a means of avoiding from repeating the same mistake; and as a way of learning from those mistakes and improving our political struggle for democracy. Here are few examples:

1. The past unity and/or coalitions and alliances among Eritrean political groups were always narrowly designed that in most cases did not embrace an all-inclusive process. In reality, the decision-making and action of unity, therefore, has been left

historically to the liberation era groups without much input from the majority, particularly women and youth. All discussions revolved around few leaders and their sympathizers who played imperative role in the decision-making process of unity without being accountable to anybody. The process lacked democratic practices at every level. It was the nature of the process itself that was one reason among others why a number of organizations ventured into an ill-fated unity - unity venture that was always doomed from the start.

2. All unity agreements were focused on short term strategy that did not have any bearing on the struggle for democracy. Political expediency was always more important than the interest of the nation; in truth, all past unity was being formed by parties that did not have concrete desire to effect any positive and durable changes in the lives of Eritrean people. In other words, the process has never been to strengthen the ability of Eritrean people to successfully grasp the importance of unity and hence influence and build a democratic capacity and culture that could have prevented the perpetual source of conflicts and disagreements among Eritrean forces.
3. Unity among Eritrean forces has never been to transit from the traditional practice of liberation rule embedded on domination, factional conflicts, mistrust, and culture of violence that aims to avenge wrongs and redress conflicts to the culture of democracy and peace that envisions a sustainable nation.

The consequences of such a deeply disunited and divided opposition forces can be summarized as follows:

1. It gave the ruling regime Isayas Afeworki unfettered freedom to wreck havoc in the country,
2. It left the opposition to wonder without any meaningful support from the Eritrean people.
3. It created a problem serious enough to polarize Eritrean society, which may evolve to become a threat to the language, religion, and ethnic diversity of Eritrean people.
4. The disunity has been negatively impacting the likelihood of institutionalizing Eritrean politics towards a consolidated multiparty political system.

Interestingly, despite failures the call for unity never ceased. There has been continuous call for unity that encompassed diverse proposals. Some of the calls represented a short-term unity among the opposition forces designed to depose the current regime from power; some of the calls embraced unity of different forces based on programs; and other calls pointed to unity that would bring ethnic groups together.

Such calls were coming from true Eritreans who cared and understand the dreadful state of affairs of the country; and from Eritreans who knew that if the fragmented opposition forces did not make unity among themselves the country would fall to its knees.

At last, the message was heard loud and clear. Three organizations , namely the Eritrean People's Movement, Eritrean Democratic Party, and the Eritrean People's Party began a promising initiative one month ago, when they brought their three organizations together and merged into one political party: the Eritrean People's Democratic Party (EPDP). Now, with the establishment of EPDP, all of that and much more, are shifting as Eritreans finally turn to the real unity.

The objective of unity, however, is not only bringing different groups or achieving the task of reconciliation among political parties. Eritrean People's Democratic Party views unity that extends far beyond the realm of unity itself. EPDP strongly believes unity as a national project that provides a framework for strengthening the diversity and social fabric of Eritrean society on the one hand and, promoting the collective identity and political sovereignty of Eritrean people on the other hand. Looking to the future, therefore, we are committed to identifying and altering the mindset of the liberation era, and the rest of the institutions and political structures that serve as a foundation for the current political divisiveness among Eritrean opposition forces.

Eritrean People's Democratic Party understands the difficulty of departing from the liberation era concept of unity to the current unity that creates a ground conducive for the development of democracy and freedom. But, if we work hard and acknowledge our past mistakes, we have the power to change our future. We also believe any unity born out of the liberation experiences and constructed with a view to reviving them cannot produce positive outcome.

In sum, we urge and call on the Eritrean political forces and others to pay attention to the unity not only as a tool for defeating the current regime or bringing different political groups together, but also as a foundation upon which we can build a strong nation and sustainable democracy. In order to do all this, Eritrean political forces need to acknowledge their past mistakes and take measures to introduce change and build a meaningful unity than to wonder in activities that do not help to achieve the dreams and hopes of our people.