

Eritrea: Q & A with Wolde Yesus Ammar- EPDP Chairman

By Michael Abrha



In this interview, Wolde Yesus Ammar underscores the most pressing challenge of getting the opposition forces to speak with one voice and sheds light on some of the tools his party will use in bringing change to Eritrea. As Chairman of the new Eritrean People's Democratic Party, Wolde Yesus believes it won't be long before the Eritrean people seize their destiny and end tyranny. He was asked first how he characterized the merger between his own party, the Eritrean People's Party (EPP), the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP) and the Eritrean People's Movement (EPM) to form the new Eritrean People's Democratic Party (EPDP).

WOLDEYESUS AMMAR: The birth of EPDP through the merger of political organizations with quite different backgrounds is a timely occurrence for our people, who, I believe, now have something to celebrate. No doubt that this merger will revive hope and confidence in the hearts and minds of our people by proving to be a quantitative and qualitative change and a measurable step forward in Eritrea's usually slow political evolution.

Q: What will the Eritrean people hope for? And how do you explain the measurable quantity and quality in this merger?

WA: A good question. Unity is always a source of strength and the Eritrean people highly value the unity of their political organizations. There has been frustration caused by the state of fragmentation in the Eritrean opposition. The merger of four opposition organizations into one entity, EPDP, will help restore hope and confidence in our people. I am calling it the merger of four by taking into consideration the merger achieved in May 2009 between the EPP and the Democratic Resistance Movement of Gash-Setit, which was a founding member of the national alliance nowadays known as the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA). Our new party is not only bringing together a sizable number of committed freedom fighters from Eritrea's mainstream opposition parties, but it is also laying down a favorable ground for Eritreans from all walks of life to join this new entity. This is a historic opportunity for building a viable party that can play an effective role in the current struggle to remove the regime and, subsequently, in the much harder task of establishing a stable and democratic Eritrea for its entire people.

Q: How can you assuage the existing fears that no party in the Eritrean opposition in exile is immune from fragmentation?

WA: It was quite long time ago that we started dialoging for unity amongst ourselves. For example, the ex-EPP and the ex-EDP were engaged in unity process since 2005. Similar process of the former two with the EPM and the Gash Setit Movement started in 2006. We have taken our time to make sure that the major differences are ironed out based on deep convictions and political realities of the day, and to tolerate each other on the minor differences, like how we interpret past events. Shades of differences could not stop us from looking at the larger picture. We know many parties in the world remain intact even with big differences and functioning left, center and right wings while we Eritreans keep fragmenting

into different parties if we happen to have even less than 10% difference in our views and work approaches. We have now learned from our past mistakes, and are determined to stop the fragmentation trend, at least for EPDP. Yes, we have created measurable immunity to ensure the healthy continuation of this party for many, many years to come without harmful dissidence and fragmentation.

Q: How different is EPDP from the other opposition organizations? Can you cite examples?

WA: EPDP will strive to be an embodiment of real change in Eritrea and its opposition politics. It is a national organization working for all Eritreans and it is already sending the right message to Eritreans inside the homeland and those in diaspora. The method and the means of struggle defined in the documents of the party are a paradigm shift in Eritrean politics. The post-PFDJ Eritrea is also well defined in party documents. How the EPDP resolved the time-consuming arguments about the 1997 constitution, the question of flags and the border issue are also unique and realistic conclusions reached by EPDP. These are some of the real changes introduced by the new party.

Q: Talk about the significance of the merger in Eritrean politics and how it contributes to the campaign to end dictatorship in Eritrea?

WA: In this merger, we are bringing together two erstwhile political thoughts, two historical schools in modern Eritrean politics: that of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's liberation Front (EPLF). The past and unending ELF/EPLF (i.e. Jebha and Shabia) divide in Eritrea had damaged unity of our people. The former ELF-RC, which became EPP two years back and is now merged in the new formation of EPDP, was the mainstream personification of the ELF that proved to be Eritrea's major national democratic organization for decades. The Gash-Setit Movement consisted of fighters who shared ELF experiences. On the other hand, the EDP and the EPM, both of which were founded and led by most senior freedom fighters who realized Eritrea's independence in 1991 and who opposed the dictatorial ways of the Eritrean president after 2001, did represent well the historic EPLF in the Eritrean opposition camp. Therefore, this merger of Eritrea's two political schools of the past half a century is very significant by itself. People who belonged to both camps in the past will now have no problem in joining the EPDP, a suitable amalgam of those two schools. Members of Eritrea's younger generation who hated the ELF/EPLF divide of the past will now have no problem to stand with the new entity and thus take part in building a viable democratic party for a new Eritrea.

Q: But how does this translate into action?

The struggle to change the existing evil system of government will be enhanced in many ways by this merger. People in Eritrea, including those hundreds of thousands in the conscripted army did not until recently see any viable organization in the fragmented opposition camp that could emerge as a stabilizing alternative force. There indeed has been a need for our people to see at least one or two alternative political forces for the post-PFDJ Eritrea. This very fact of establishment a viable party will hearten our people and the army to act against the regime and work alongside the opposition camp for change. This is very important first step.

Secondly, EPDP will have increased organizational capacities to mobilize Eritreans against the regime at all levels, both inside the homeland and abroad. EPDP will struggle to create its own replica structures inside Eritrea by ensuring its presence in many key locations inside our country. These and other measures will help accelerate the downfall of the shaky regime in Asmara.

Q: What is the next step for EPDP's relations with the umbrella organization, the Eritrean Democratic Alliance and the other individual parties within it?

WA: The national alliance created in March 1999 has not proven to be effective during all its existence. We all agree EDA should change to become more effective. But it will not be a better organization until its member organizations are made more capable than they are. This is why the EDA encouraged the merger of member organizations with similar political visions and programs. The birth of the EPDP is one giant step forward for the future prospects of turning EDA into a working alliance. Other groups will hopefully narrow down their differences and merge into meaningful political organizations. On our part, a high-level delegation will soon engage EDA in a dialogue for discussing stumbling blocks preventing its advancement and effectiveness.

On the other hand, we will keep contacting individual EDA members for cordial relations and closer bilateral cooperation in mobilizing a much larger segment of our people for the struggle to change the dismal political situation in Eritrea and replace it by a democratic system. We will also continue discussing with a few political organizations within EDA and outside it to consider joining us in the EPDP which is planning to hold its first congress in the summer of 2011.

Q: Do you have any plans for increased relations with the ethnically and religiously based groups who are struggling to restore and preserve their rights within a unified Eritrea.

WA: We have plans to discuss and create good relations with all types of organizations in the opposition. The EPDP believes that its programmatic provision of decentralized governance in the future state of Eritrea accommodates all the fears and concerns of ethnicity-based organizations. Eventually, and in principle, it should be possible even to come into one party with ethnic-based organizations because EPDP embraces all of Eritrea's ethnic, geographical and religious segments. For now, closer coordination with ethnic and religion-based organizations is among the top priorities for EPDP.

Q: How about strengthening relations with civil society organizations, women and youth associations?

WA: Indeed, we have plans to enhance relations with youth-related associations and civil society organizations and provide them with the necessary support and encouragement to work with political parties in the opposition. As we all know, the young generation, say those below the age of 35, constitute up to 75 per cent of the population. This generation requires hard work to fully appreciate the struggle for change and democratization in Eritrea. We in EPDP have opened a full-fledged Executive Office for youth affairs and this shows how much we strive and aspire to win the hearts and minds of this critically important segment in our society. Likewise, the Eritrean civil society bodies mushrooming in exile should be helped to coordinate with the political organizations to be able to play more effective role in the current struggle to remove the regime and in the equally important post-dictatorship phase of establishing a democratic state abiding by the rule of law. The civil society bodies include all the functioning human rights and democracy advocacies, media outlets (websites, radio projects, paltalk rooms, private journals, blogs etc) as well as associations of professionals like the recently formed Eritrean Lawyers' Society in North America.

Q: What is EPDP focused on regarding foreign relations?

WA: EPDP will focus on urging friendly countries to make real pressure to bear on the dictatorial regime so that it could be forced to relinquish the political power that it usurped from the Eritrean people. We will work on enhancing and/or creating relations with countries neighboring Eritrea. We will also give particular attention to the recommendations passed at the November Brussels conference urging adequate support for Eritrean political opposition organizations, civil society members, refugees, and Eritrean communities in the Diaspora.

Q: What has been the reaction of foreign governments to the merger?

WA: We have not yet contacted them with official delegations after the merger declared on January 1, 2010 although we already knew the favorable and supportive positions of many friendly parties, governments and their diplomatic missions long before the merger was declared. High-level delegations are now on their way to Africa and other places to explain further the objectives of our party and its strategies for success and smooth work relations with friendly countries now and after the downfall of the dictatorial regime in Asmara.

Q: Is the Eritrea-Ethiopia border issue a dead issue?

WA: No, it is still a live issue that can explode once more unless it is resolved on the basis of the already reached final and binding decision of the Border Commission. The regime in Asmara should not be left alone to exploit the border issue to deprive the people their basic human rights and to keep over quarter of a million Eritreans in war trenches. If the two sides still disagree to reach mutual agreement to rearrange border lines, then the arbitration decision should be implemented.

Q: EPDP has declared that it supports the UN sanctions on Eritrea. How does the measure help in expediting, if any, the emancipation of the Eritrean people?

WA: The UN sanctions are targeted to affect the regime and its movements and weaken its capacities for control. The very fact of imposing targeted UN sanctions on Eritrea can also sharpen the wrath of the people and embolden them to resist it in their different ways. The full implementation of the targeted UN sanctions should include restrictions on the illicit money transfers, money laundering and tax extortions of the embassies of this regime in many countries. The cumulate effect of such actions can indeed help in the removal of the dictatorial regime in Eritrea. But it needs much work by Eritrean opposition forces working alongside countries and concerned UN agencies.

Q: There is widespread perception that peaceful means is not going to bring about change in Eritrea. What is your reaction?

WA: This perception is understandable among Eritreans whose great-grandfathers, fathers and themselves witnessed continued armed conflicts throughout Eritrea's history of existence for the last 120 years. Today, use of violence or armed struggle is not the best form to bring about change in Eritrea today. It is the opportune time for our war-fatigued nation to engage in an effective nonviolent and democratic struggle to remove the regime and make sure that its replacement will not be dictatorial system of governance. The other choice is pointless for now.

Q: But the regime will not allow anyone to mobilize the people inside Eritrea?

WA: That is true. Yet, our party will do what it takes to reach the Eritrean people through all means of modern communication as well as by being present inside the country. In addition to what we can do from afar, we will continue organizing the people inside the country.

Increased efforts will be made to strengthen the underground existence of the party inside every part of Eritrea. But, taking the belligerent nature of the regime into consideration, we will of course retain the right of self-defense.

Q: How does your approach and method of struggle compare to past African struggles for liberation?

The era of liberation movement in the Third World and its victory strategy through the barrel of the gun lasted for about a quarter of a century between the 1960s and the 1980s and ended then. No Eritrean political organization worth the name should claim today that it is engaged in an armed struggle to crash the conscripted 250,000+ army and dislodge the dictatorial regime through sheer violence. The Eritrean people, the vast majority of whom are below the age of 35, are not for it. Nor can any dreamer for armed struggle obtain the material and logistical support to engage in armed struggle today. All the talk about a full-fledged use of arms against the regime is uttered for public consumption. As I know it for real, all the Eritrean opposition organizations are trying to mobilize the people, including the army in their own different ways. What they are doing would not be called armed struggle. The only difference they have (we have) is in the use of language describing the effort being made to awaken Eritreans to resist the regime peacefully. We in EPDP have started using the correct language in describing what we are doing, and it will take a bit more of an effort to unify our language in the entire opposition camp. That is all what is needed.

Q: There are rumors and innuendos circulated in some quarters that EPDP is about to open a dialogue with the ruling PFDJ. What are the origins of these speculations and is there any truth to them.

WA: This is idle talk that does not even deserve an answer. The sources of such idle talk are the very ones who know very well that there cannot be such dialogue. It is true that the EDA has a declared position of welcoming the rogue regime for peaceful dialogue for democratic change in Eritrea but this is an incorrigible regime that will not resort to rational action. No self-confident party like the EPDP would be expected to bow to the rogue regime in Eritrea. Probably those irresponsible sources letting out such rumors may be interested to trade their honor and bow to the mercy of that regime.

Q: Eritrea's history has by and large been very violent and the current regime is ruthless and violent. Is EPDP's peaceful plan a new African experiment or are there any particular foreign experiences where you can draw lessons from?

WA: The strategy of our peaceful and democratic struggle has taken the violent nature of the regime into consideration. And that is why our members will need to resort to self-defense while mobilizing the people inside Eritrea. EPDP's resolution to conduct peaceful struggle is not a new experiment. In fact, almost all regime changes effected since the mid-1980s in many places were carried out through peaceful struggles although unwanted violence intersperses such successful movements. Examples abound, including South Africa's 1994 resounding victory against apartheid, and what the MDC is doing in Zimbabwe in spite of all the difficulties. Iranians are also engaged on this type of successful path for real change and democratic life. We should not play down the potential of Eritreans; they will one day rise up and seize their destiny in their own hands as did the peoples of the Philippines, Chile, East Europeans and Balkans during the end of the last century and what the

Ukrainians, Georgians and others did in recent years. This is what will happen in Eritrea, and soon. But we in the opposition camp must help it happen. EPDP will play its role.

Reminder: Wolde Yesus Ammar will give a Paltalk presentation at 9pm Berlin time this Saturday at Modayna Paltalk Room. He will talk about the merger process leading to EPDP formation and the challenges facing the national alliance. For more information about EPDP please visit Nharnet.com.

Note: The Editor welcomes any ideas and suggestions from the public on how this Interview Program can be improved and enhanced.

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