

The Past is Still with Us

Department of Information and Culture
Eritrean People's Party
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Eritrean People's Party is one of the few political organizations and civil society groups that embrace peaceful and democratic struggle (nonviolent means) to remove the dictatorial regime in our country. This strategy is not only to remove the present dictatorship, which is the immediate national objective, but also to build a society that values the culture of nonviolence, peace and democracy. It is also a strategy that focuses on empowering Eritrean people to guard their freedoms against any future dictatorships in post PFDJ rule. More importantly, creating a society that evolves to believe in nonviolent struggle is also less likely to engage in violence when it comes to solving any social or political conflicts.

In the context of Eritrean history one of the goals of the peaceful and democratic strategy is also to avoid the repeat of the liberation era political and military conflicts under which most of the current Eritrean political organizations were born, shaped, and molded. Those liberation era conflicts, Eritrean People's Party believes, have obstructed the development of peace and democracy in post independent Eritrea.

With this violence still reverberating in our political culture, it is very unlikely that those who chose violent armed struggle to overthrow the current repressive regime in our country would be able to transform violence and conflict into sustainable peace and democracy.

In order to have greater understanding on the peaceful and democratic form of struggle and other forms of struggles, it is vital that we look back on our past experience, as well as its impact on the current struggle against the repressive regime.

The legacy of the armed struggle

Without delving into details, thirty years of armed struggle did not only teach us how to defeat the Ethiopian occupation, which has no parallel in our history, but also taught us how to depend on violent political institutions and groups. For example, the histories of the ravaging civil wars in the early 70s, the utter failure to secure a national unity between ELF and EPLF in the late 70s, and the final drive out of ELF from Eritrea by EPLF in the early 80s are some of the underlying past experiences that left a permanent mark of violence in our thinking and behavior. Throughout the history of our armed struggle, Eritrean political organizations in general and EPLF in particular became so militaristic that they defined everything through the eyes of guns and violence against one another. Overtime, this violent and hostile culture provided a new context by which each Eritrean organization identified itself as the only group to lead, as the only political front to bring democracy, as the only group to preserve the unity of Eritrean people, and as the only organization good for the country.

Not only did they work to undermine one another, but also adopted violence as a guiding principle to liquidate, eliminate, and purge groups and individuals considered a threat to the main establishment of the day. Ultimately this militaristic culture brought a political and social outcome that undermines the principle of democracy and freedom in our present-day Eritrea. This culture still defines the current Eritrean political organizations.

Indisputably, the one-man dictatorial establishment currently ruling our country is the true manifestation of the legacy of 30 years armed struggle, which evolved to believe in a military might and violence as means of staying in power.

How the armed struggle history is weakening the Eritrean opposition

Undeniably, since 1999, there have been some signs of improvement towards reconciliation and joint work between the current Eritrean political organizations. However, the strategy of working together to remove the dictatorial regime in our country has not grown in a way that renounces violence and focuses on building a

peaceful society. In other words, the trend towards formulating a clear strategy on how to remove the regime of Isayas is lost by a number of political organizations that still claim to wage a violent armed struggle to change the current situation in Eritrea. This is the culture we are very familiar with, which is nearly a greater a risk as much as the dictatorial regime we have in our country. Yes, very unfortunate, but the past is still with us.

At the same time, the claim of democracy and peace is a common catch word in the Eritrean political organizations. To be true, there is nothing wrong with claiming democracy. And yet, the absence of democratic discourse is unmistakably apparent in their actions: the personal ill wills are undeniable, the narrow organizational interest is still in place, the lack of internal democratic practices is still visible, the political inclusiveness is absent, and the lack of serious commitment and substantive engagement is unquestionably obvious. The language of peace and reconciliation never gained strong ground in our political orientation. This is all an explicit expansion of the liberation era politics, which largely explains why the current Eritrean political organizations are more receptive to violent means than to a peaceful and democratic resistance. The point: the danger lies in being so absorbed in the armed struggle state of mind, which is unquestionably a prelude to hostility, instability, and violence in future Eritrea

The notion of waging a second round of armed Struggle

Many Eritrean political organizations believe we should wage an armed struggle (violent means) to overthrow the current dictatorial regime from power. This strategy drew its entire lesson from the liberation era, which totally depended upon the use of force. And yet, many of them have not stated it openly and publicly how to go about waging such an armed struggle in the current context of Eritrean politics. Nevertheless, if it happened it would be the second round of armed struggle in the history of Eritrean people that would not bring democracy, and prevent or transform conflicts peacefully.

Yes, in many respects, not stating the armed struggle strategy clearly in their programs and policy statements seems an implicit reluctance to pursue it. And when it is explained, the language would be so obscured that it eludes anyone who wants to understand it, including members of those organizations that advocate for it.

But if they believe the most effective means of removing Isayas regime is violence, which most of them do, and want the Eritrean people to stand up for the path of violence instead of the peaceful and democratic resistance, what is wrong in discussing the strategy openly in their writings, policy statements, and public meetings in a language that the public can clearly understand and weigh its options on it. For example, the economic destruction that comes with the violent armed struggle, the human and property loss, the societal hostility and the cycle of violence that may ensue, and the psychological effect of war to society; but most importantly how such a violent means can translate the current injustices and lack of peace into durable democracy. We say this because ill-defined policies and programs do not provide Eritrean people a chance to learn and understand how violent means can be an alternative to nonviolent resistance that can effectively get rid of the repressive regime in our country.

Having said that we believe the underlying problem with the violent armed struggle strategy is far deeper and troubling, i.e. it does not lead to the goal of creating peaceful and democratic Eritrea. For a quick reference, over the last 30 or so years, Eritrean people have paid high price, gone through enormous destruction and violence to the extent of eroding their cultures, traditions, heritages, and beliefs. Eritrean People's Party believes we need to deconstruct this culture of violence not by another round of violence, but by pursuit of peaceful and democratic means. The advocacy of violent means or armed struggle is not the right strategy; this is rather simply a frustration and political expediency to keep the status quo in place. And the status quo is not an option.

Conclusion

The depth and proclivity for using violent means to solve our political and societal conflicts to some degree has become a norm in present-day Eritrea. To date, we are unable to change the military culture and mentality we carried over from the liberation era to that of peaceful and democratic revolution that can enable us to change the undemocratic regime in our country.

Eritrean People's Party strongly believes that our opposition to the regime cannot move forward until we learn and abandon the debilitating political and historical experience we hold from the liberation era. To address this, Eritrean People's Party believes that we need to choose the peaceful and democratic struggle, which is the most viable approach that can represent the host of problems and challenges our society faces, as well as a path that will enable us to transform conflict and violence into durable peace and democracy. The ultimate payoff to Eritrean people in this struggle is not only the demise of PFDJ rule, but also the type of political system that comes thereafter, which all will depend on the form of struggle we choose to follow.