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اللجنة القيادية المشتركة

الحزب الديمقراطي الارتري
الحركة الشعبية الارترية
حزب الشعب الارتري

JOINT LEADERSHIP COMMITTEE

ERITREAN PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT
ERITREAN PEOPLE'S PARTY
ERITREAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Options for Democratization

Paper for the EEPA Brussels Conference on
'Joining EU/US Policy towards Eritrea and the Horn'
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A Short Introduction to Today's Eritrea

When Eritrea attained sovereign statehood nearly two decades ago, many people hoped it could become a model state that Africa would envy to emulate. Unfortunately, this expectation was frustrated when the would-be 'Renaissance' leader turned to be another African dictator. During most part of our 'independent' existence, we have suffered a great deal in many aspects. Nor were our neighboring peoples in the Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen spared the consequences of the belligerent behavior of Eritrea's tyrannical leader, Isaias Afewerki. Facts prove that Isaias is driven by hatred and vindictiveness against imagined enemies, including Western style democracies; his insatiable ambition to become the regional deal-maker also compels him to continue taking sides even with terrorists and religious fundamentalists. Needless to say, the incomprehensible military adventures and economic policies of the regime and its isolation from the world contributed to the pauperization of the entire Eritrean nation that has now lost the stamina of standing up for its rights. Citizens, especially University students, political leaders, business owners and former freedom fighters had been languishing in prisons without a day at court of law. As we all know, eleven of the founding members of People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), most of them former leaders of the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF) and ministers in the Government popularly known as the Group 15, who initiated the ideals of reform, are in jail since September 18, 2001 and no one knows their whereabouts. The Eritrean dictator repeatedly states that he will not allow free elections for many more decades, and for sure, under this repressive regime, avenues for change are closed. Eritrea's nascent press was banned and possibilities of student activism killed in 2001. The only university the country had is closed, and senior high schools were shut down and replaced by programs at closed camps where military discipline and absolute obedience to authority are more important subjects than knowledge and political awareness. In short, today's Eritrea is a country where:

- No constitution exists and no rule of law can be dreamt of;
- No basic human rights are respected;
- No freedom of press and assembly allowed;
- No free worship by the faithful permitted;

- No private entrepreneurship allowed to thrive;
- No higher education encouraged; the list is long.

We believe things went wrong in Eritrea partly because mistakes were committed from the start by concerned actors, including the EU and the US.

- The Eritrean people put much trust in one man who betrayed his organization and its promises to the people;
- Eritrea's neighbors, while well aware of the existence of other important actors in the country's socio-political diversity, did not ask for inclusiveness from the start in 1991;
- Neither did the UN, the USA, and the EU give thought to the importance of laying down from the start some building blocks for a democratic system in new Eritrea to help it start things correctly based on lessons learned from past mistakes in Africa.

The outcome of those missed opportunities is manifested in today's Eritrea; the country has literally become the biggest prison where citizens are systematically made to remain mistrustful of one another. Simply said, people in Eritrea live as hostages of the oppressive regime.

The Eritrean Opposition Camp

Since Eritrea's emergence as an independent state, there existed exiled organizations that refused to give in to the will of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). At the start of the current decade, the old opposition in exile was joined by other significant elements from inside the homeland following the regime's crack-down in September 2001 against party members who demanded for change of course – from dictatorship to a constitutional multiparty system of governance. Many erstwhile sympathizers of the regime in the Diaspora also opposed the regime and formed a number of civil societies.

Today, Eritrea's exiled opposition organizations and networks of civil society groups enjoy the sympathy of a large and fast growing percentage of the Eritrean Diaspora whose total number outside the Horn of Africa region exceeds 200,000. It is also to be recalled that according to the regime's own 1997 estimates, there lived in Ethiopia about 450,000 Eritreans or "Ethiopians" of Eritrean origin and in the Sudan lived another 550,000 Eritreans or "Sudanese" of Eritrean origin. For instance, apart from the forcibly deported Eritreans from Ethiopia, the regime has done very little to facilitate the return of Eritrean refugees from the Sudan. The refugee outflow from Eritrea has also been increasing by over 50,000 every year since the border conflict with Ethiopia started 11 years ago. Nowadays neighboring countries, Europe and the US are awash with new refugees who have managed to escape the grip of the brutal regime. Amongst them we see many ex-combatants who sacrificed almost everything to liberate the country. Thus, it is easy

to weigh the importance of the Eritrean Diaspora which has multiplied in size within a short period of time. It is difficult to say what percentage of Eritreans inside the country “support” the regime, but it is very easy to guess that many of the quarter of a million conscripts in the army and the rest of the hapless population are opposed to the excesses of Isaias Afewerki’s endless political, military and diplomatic blunders.

Undoubtedly, the vast majority of Eritreans nowadays wish an end to the regime in Asmara. However, due to severe control mechanisms that the government has imposed on them, they still find themselves weak and helpless to change their dire situation. Moreover, we are witnessing the fact that the number one wish amongst the conscripts is to leave the country for good and live elsewhere. After a hard-won independence, we all expected to return back to our homeland. Instead, the trend is just the opposite.

The Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA)

We in the exiled opposition organizations have in recent years closed our ranks around the national umbrella, EDA, which represents the wishes and aspirations of the large majority of Eritreans. It is an organ that coordinates opposition activities and mobilizes the people for the removal of the regime which rejects their call for unconditional dialogue for democratization. Our national umbrella possesses a common charter that vows to build a decentralized, democratic multiparty state of Eritrea that shall submit to the letter and spirit of a national constitution establishing representative institutions to guarantee Eritrea’s unity in diversity. Yet, EDA and its member organizations need empowerment by all concerned peace-loving and democratic peoples and countries to accomplish the desired task without much loss of time because the urgency of the situation of our suffering people.

For your quick information, the EDA is a national umbrella which consists of 13 organizations, whose past state of fragmentation is now being addressed correctly. Of the 13 EDA member organizations, three parties are in a unification process. Their planned political and physical merger that will take place in December 2009 shall bring together the mainstream offshoots of the old Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the old Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) under a national democratic program and will enhance our people’s profound wish for unity and the hope for change in Eritrea. All three are secular organizations striving to build a multiparty democratic state in post-dictatorship Eritrea. They are:

1. The Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP)
2. The Eritrean People’s Movement (EPM)
3. The Eritrean *People’s Party (EPP)*

Among the other ten EDA members are the following four which recently agreed to form a united front under the name: “Eritrean Solidarity Front”. These are:

1. The Eritrean Liberation Front
2. The Eritrean Islamic Islah (Reform) Movement
3. The Eritrean Islamic Party for Development and Justice
4. The Eritrean Federal Democratic Movement.

Two ethnicity-based organizations also this year formed a common front called the “Democratic Front of Eritrean Nationalities”. They are:

1. The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Eritrean Kunama
2. The Democratic Organization of Red Sea [Eritrean] Afar.

Other EDA-member organizations include the following

1. The Eritrean National Salvation Front
2. The Eritrean Islamic Congress
3. The Eritrean Nahda (Renaissance) Party
4. The Eritrean People’s Democratic Front.

Options for Democratization

The EDA has long ago declared its readiness to talk for the democratization of the state of Eritrea. However, it is difficult to imagine that Isaias would accept to dialogue for smooth transition from dictatorship to democratic governance with an opposition that he does not even recognize. This being the case, the charter of the national umbrella allows its member organizations to use the best means possible at their disposal to mobilize Eritreans everywhere towards removing the regime. EDA member organizations believe that further delay to replace the current dictatorship in Eritrea with a democratically elected government will lead to further tragedies in the Horn of Africa. Eritreans will be displaced in much greater number than at the present and worsen the refugee problem in the neighborhood and elsewhere. The Asmara regime will also continue to stir conflicts in the region in alliance with extremist forces bent at destabilizing states and societies.

The parties I directly represent at this conference (i.e. EDP, EPM and EPP), support a peaceful and democratic struggle to remove the regime by people-power. We are of the strong conviction that enhancing a party or parties that Eritreans trust and consider as democratic alternative/s to the regime in Eritrea will hasten democratic change in our country. So far, little outside attention has been given to the paramount importance of building a democratic force or forces in the Eritrean opposition camp to guarantee that Eritrea will not become another failed state because the Horn of Africa and the world at large cannot afford to have another Somalia.

What EU and the USA Can Do To Help Eritreans

The EU and the US approaches towards the regime in Eritrea have not been successful throughout the past two decades. Based on lessons learned, we strongly believe that the Western democracies should have and still can take measures that would force the regime to democratize Eritrea. These may include the following actions:

- Stopping any technical assistance to the regime, including EU's €122 million.
- Making sure that humanitarian assistance is not manipulated by the regime.
- Restricting the illegal activities of the embassies of the regime abroad. It is well known that PFDJ embassies everywhere are engaged in intimidating the Eritrean Diaspora which is subjected to limitless financial extortions that include 2% taxes and forced contributions. Agents of the embassies are also engaged in illicit money transfer activities from many countries.
- The international community still has the duty of seeing to it that the final and binding decision on Ethio-Eritrean border conflict is fully implemented. This will for sure deny the Asmara regime any excuses against democratization.
- Sanctions? - Ordinary Eritreans whose contacts with neighboring countries were cut long ago are already under undeclared sanctions. It can be stated that UN sanctions usually harm the general population more than the targeted regimes. We in the opposition would go for any action against the regime in Eritrea if that action is helpful to the welfare of the people and without any collateral damage to the innocent citizen. There have been strong calls for sanctions against the regime for quite some time now. Therefore, when it is decided to take this measure, it will for sure be advisable that the international community come with workable humanitarian programs that can avert further harming the already pauperized Eritrean people.

The totality of these measures should add up to effectively bear on the Eritrean regime to submit to unconditional dialogue with the opposition, thus responding to a standing call of the Eritrean national umbrella, the EDA.

Urgent EU/US Support for Eritrean Non-State Actors in Exile

Our request to friendly countries to stop supporting the regime in Asmara should not mean stopping support to Eritreans in general. Members of the growing Eritrean Diaspora already constitute about 1.5 million, most of them in the neighborhood of Eritrea. Assisting this big number of Eritreans would mean a lot in building a post-dictatorship Eritrea. Therefore, we see it legitimate and timely on the part of the Western democracies to provide substantial support for capacity building of Eritrean non-state actors in the Diaspora. This is where an EU/US join action should come in, and for the following target groups and projects:

- Educate Young Refugees in the Horn: Channelling the funds suspended from reaching the Asmara regime for projects on vocational training to upgrade the skills of young Eritreans in refugee camps in the Sudan and Ethiopia.
- Support Diaspora Communities: Empower Eritrean communities and civil societies by providing them with resources and facilities.
- Educational Media: After a century of successive wars, many Eritreans have been subjected to negative influences propagated by the regime – that of military adventures and bunker mentality at a cost of writing off democratic ideals and human rights which need to be rectified as soon as possible. To do that, therefore, radio broadcasts and related educational programs need come into play in order to deconstruct such frame of mind and reinstate a democratic culture and respect of basic rights.
- Supporting EDA and its member organizations: This may sound untenable at first glance. However, the 13 political organizations making up this national alliance are the outcome of the total absence of basic human and political rights in Eritrea. The national umbrella and its individual members do represent all Eritreans aspiring to build a peaceful and democratic state, and they deserve solid support. One immediate opportunity for friends of Eritrea is to support a planned National Conference of all Eritreans opposed to the regime in order to strengthen the struggle for change and democratization. The EU and the US can contribute to a better future in Eritrea by drawing their attention and generous support also to this project.
- The opposition camp, and in particular the three parties I represent, strongly feel that we need to plan and prepare as of now for post-dictatorship Eritrea. Being aware of this urgent need, we have initiated the task of preparing a Transitional Plan. For sure, we need help in developing it further on top of the support needed for capacity building and resources to help us educate our people on democratic values.

Finally, we wish to affirm our conviction that it is high time for the EU and the US policy makers to seriously consider providing political and material support to the national alliance as well as to deserving members of that alliance so that the Eritrean people can have a democratic alternative/s for post-dictatorship Eritrea.

Thank you for your attention.

Woldeyesus Ammar

For:

The Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP)

The Eritrean People's Movement (EPM)

The Eritrean People's Party (EPP)