

Looking Beyond the Demise of Dictatorship

Department of Information and Culture

Eritrean People's Party

October 20, 2009

When colonialism ended in Africa, the political power of many African countries fell into the hands of few dictators who were either tribalists or subservient to the colonial interests. The rise of such many dictatorship governments in postcolonial Africa was mainly attributed to the lack of matured political parties that could have formed the basis for transition to democracy. As a result, the postcolonial legacy and the ascent of African dictators to power produced years of oppression, illiteracy, poverty, disease, corruption, civil wars, and military coups in the continent. For example, Liberia, Sera Leone, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Nigeria, Congo ...etc are among many other African countries that fell into the postcolonial native dictatorship governments.

Ethiopia also fell into the same trap as other African nations when Emperor Haile Slassie was deposed from power by popular uprising in 1974. In essence, when the absence of both matured political organization and leadership became clear, the Ethiopian military lead by Mengistu Haile Mariam saw the power vacuum and took control of the government.

Somalia is another African country that falls into this category. Once the Somali tribes and ethnic groups joined forces and removed the former dictator Said Barre from power, they failed to establish a united national government. Instead, the leaders of various tribes looked to consolidate their own power by manipulating tribalism and ethnic identities, which resulted in ethnic rivalries and tribal wars.

Similarly, Eritrean people gained our independence after pursuing both armed and non violent means of struggle for almost 50 years. But after independence, the political power of the nation fell into the hands of a one-man military dictatorship because we did not have a matured and a strong political and social organization that could have been used as a basis for establishing democracy. As a result, Eritrean people are now being subjected to incessant poverty, illiteracy, disease, war, suffering, oppression and violations of their human rights by the ruling party of PFDJ.

On the other side, we need to be cognizant of the fact that the long war for independence in Eritrea has also produced huge military armaments and a highly militarized society, which makes Eritrea one of the most unstable countries in the region. Thus, as the opposition of the people against the ruling regime gets momentum as a result of the injustices and sufferings, Eritreans will face a daunting task of developing a strong, united, and democratic force that is capable of leading the opposition at the national level. Failing to do so, Eritreans could end up in a situation of ethnic wars, civil wars, and military coups like the rest of African countries.

Further, our advocacy for a strong and viable umbrella organization stems from our unwavering conviction on national unity, the type of unity that underlines the interest of the nation ahead of

regions and nationalities. In addition, while we are advocating for strengthening the national umbrella organization, working toward finalizing the unification process among EPP, EDP, EPM, and EDRM/Gash-Setit also exemplifies our strong commitment both to the unity of our people and unity of our opposition forces. Our vision and goal is to foster a sustainable national unity that can overcome ethnic divisions and wars that have destroyed many African countries.

We have always advocated that the concept of unity should have two sets of interpretations from Eritrea's perspective. First, all political organizations and parties that have different political programs should organize themselves under one umbrella organization. Second, all political organizations and parties that have the same programs should unite and establish one party. And it is working. Not only is the approach working, but its acceptance among our people and the opposition force grew. For example, from the representative of the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) to individual members of EDA and others, the unity process in progress among EPP, EDP, and EPM was supported officially through various solidarity messages conveyed at the 24th Joint Eritrean Festival 2009 held in Frankfurt, Germany. Others have expressed their support through internet networks and Pal Talks. One such support came from Mr. Hassen Salman, Chairman of the Eritrean Islamic Congress, during his Pal Talk discussion on October 14, 2009. Mr. Hassen further expressed his willingness to unite with any organization that holds the same programs like his organization. This is crucial, positive, and in the right direction.

While unity is gaining strong support from every segment of our society as a strong manifestation of a national agenda, there are two groups that don't have any stake in the national unity. One is the dictatorial regime whose interest is not shared either by the Eritrean people or by the Eritrean opposition forces, and the second is the other face of the dictatorial regime whose interest is to promote religious and political extremism by instigating violence in our society.

Unity is key ingredient both for our nation and national identity. Without unity, we cannot defeat the dictatorial regime, nor can we build a prosperous, democratic, and sovereign nation. Yet, when it comes to building a democratic Eritrea that would avoid future economic and social crisis and political instability, we need to think beyond the removal of the current regime – and that is we need to focus on establishing democratic governance supported by robust political parties, as well as by allowing a crucial public engagement in governance and policy-making process.