

## The Peaceful and Democratic Means of Struggle

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At present, a contentious debate is going on among Eritreans as to what method or means of struggle we should use in order to remove the regime of PFDJ from power in Eritrea. Indeed, in the past, we all have had almost the same experience on views related to conflict resolutions, which can be summarized into two orders, orders that shaped our understanding on conflicts throughout our history: contradictory conflict vs. non contradictory conflict. The groups or forces that hold opposite or different ideas don't have a whole in common and cannot coexist in mutual harmony except when they are confronted with a common enemy, which could be brief in terms of time span. In other words, we held the view all along that contradictory conflicts are interactions between two or more forces whose basic goals and aims do not agree. Hence, the contradictions between such forces are solved by using force to the extent that one must eliminate the other. In contrast, the non contradictory conflicts are relations not only between two or more political groups/forces whose fundamental goals and aims coincide, but also recognize and accept peaceful coexistence between them.

To restate the point again, we have always maintained the view that contradictions between forces/groups with different political principles cannot be resolved peacefully, or democratically. The thought of such conflict is even more pervasive in our social and family interactions in which embracing differences, agreeing in our differences, and exercising mutual tolerance are vividly nonexistent. In short, our experiences and our assertions have not been to resolve contradictions by peaceful and democratic means, but to destroy, negate, and eliminate others whose views were different from ours. To put it in another way, we maintain the view that peaceful coexistence, as well as political and social harmony /relations presuppose holding the same thoughts and outlooks. Such view underlines the suppression of political and social contradictions through the use of force or violent means, and not through the use of peaceful and democratic means.

We know full that Eritrean political journey has been mired in persistent disagreements and contradictions. The journey also shows that we have always tried to resolve those contradictions through the use of force. We also know we were never resolutely committed to resolving and ending such conflicts by peaceful and democratic means. As a result, the violent culture went on for years and culminated in the present state of hostility and bitter coexistence. This is hard but brute truth: in pursuing the violent means to solve our conflicts, we have allowed conflicts to persist; we have impaired our ability to seek for a lasting and fundamental solution; and we have allowed the culture of violence and animosity to fester, which overtime removed us far away from handling and managing conflicts through a peaceful and democratic means.

How do we change the culture or the belief that conflicts or contradictions can and should be ended through the use of violent force? The answer is change – change that is aimed at resolving conflicts, based on a peaceful and democratic approach, regardless of their scale or level of existence. The underlying driving force should be to attend to new ideas and open the political stage of Eritrea for democratic way of solving contradictions and conflicts, which must focus on facilitating transition from the past and unworkable to the new state of change and democratic objectives.

The process of solving conflicts through peaceful and democratic means should consider the following fundamental points:

1. People should have the right to choose and hold any view that they believe in and agree with.
2. Forces/groups and entities that hold different views should believe that they have the obligation to coexist peacefully with others, regardless of the depth and intensity of their differences.

3. The equal rights of individuals must be respected, regardless of the status or position they have in the Eritrean political lives or in other spheres.
4. Ensure participation of citizens in establishing the constitution and thereafter adhere to the principle of supremacy of the law, rule of laws, and provisions stipulated in the constitution and
5. Focus on resolving the present problems with forward-looking and thinking strategy rather than dwelling on the shortcomings and animosities of the past.

Undeniably, resolving problems through peaceful and democratic means is not an easy endeavor because it requires showing patience and mutual tolerance, open-mindedness and change of violent culture. It also requires that individuals or entities who desire to resolve conflicts through peaceful and democratic means should first place themselves on an equal level with their opponents. This is crucial because peaceful and democratic culture does not operate within the realm of hypocrisy and insincerity. Hypocrisy wrapped in practices such as undermining others, trying to stand above others, and imposing irrational actions on others is the work of those who promote violent behavior in our midst. Worse, violence has many other dimensions how to stifle peaceful and democratic coexistence, which among them is to control and swallow the weak.

Yes to some, violence may seem to solve and slow down the progress of conflict in the short term, but it does not appear to produce a long-term solution. In our history, the use of violent actions never solved conflicts: for example, consider the conflict between the former Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), a.k.a **Hareka** and the ELF, the conflict between ELF and the anarchists, a.k.a **Falul**, ELF vs. the ultra right; conflict between EPLF and the rightist group, EPLF and the leftist group, a.k.a **Menka**, and the major conflict between ELF and EPLF. Again, there is already a lesson we learned from our history: and that is the violent means we used has completely failed to solve our conflicts. The point is there is no single instance in our history in which the use of violence has ended conflict. Instead it created a vicious cycle of violence that typified retaliation, hatred, and festering animosities in our history. In the contrary, the peaceful and democratic approach is a proven means, which can resolve our multi-faceted conflicts without resorting to violence, and yes it is an approach that can potentially create an environment of tolerance and spirit of reconciliation in future Eritrea. Our point here is not a mere peace, but transformation of our society into a peaceful and democratic culture.

The other debate that is raging among Eritreans is how to resolve the current conflict between the Eritrean people and the ruling regime of PFDJ, which is the main objective of our peaceful and democratic strategy. But the debate, from our point of view, already ran into a serious problem because it seeks to displace the regime through the use of violent means, which is a view we have held and known throughout our history and did not produce any outcome. In fact, this is the true manifestation how much our thoughts are dominated by the logic of violence; and how much determination we have to continue resolving conflicts by violent means despite the indisputable negative record of it in our history. The debate further highlights the contradiction between the violent path that we have mastered for decades and the peaceful and democratic approach, which is being introduced as a new means of struggle to change the culture of violence.

Unmistakably, violence is easily traceable in our history. We see it in many of our political lives. For example, in our experience the winner takes it all attitudes appear to dominate everything. The idea mirrors winners and losers in our political struggle rather than seeking an inclusive approach in which no one is aggrieved and excluded from any given process. Such experience acquired in our history also not only encourages domination by individuals and groups, but also promotes violent means as the only alternative action to achieve our goals, which oftentimes causes things to degenerate into further conflicts. This cycle stifles the progress of change and peaceful coexistence in future Eritrea.

No question violent action has become part of our political culture. For example, EPLF resorted to violent means and defeated ELF militarily a decade before independence was achieved. After independence, the ruling regime of Isayas and his clique took political power in Eritrea through the use of violent action. Since

then the regime of Isayas continues to ravage Eritrea with all forms of violent actions. But the former EPLF, which now rules Eritrea, is not alone in the violent political culture. The ex ELF groups were also trying to eliminate EPLF through the use of violent actions and dominate everything. So, the hate and hostility was mutual. This simply shows how the violent culture was and is rooted in our political culture. We must change it.

Now, the past violence is indefensible. Now, there is alternative; a peaceful alternative. We have awakened to the realities of our country where we know our enemies and friends, as well. The truth is all Eritreans, regardless of the side they were in, struggled and thousands of them died in pursuit of one objective: independence and freedom of Eritrea and its people. But Isayas regime betrayed them all. And more than that, the regime of Isayas betrayed the nation, betrayed the Eritrean people, including members of the Eritrean Defense Forces from day one, and kept escalating its repression for almost two decades now. In time of this unparalleled and indiscriminate oppression and subjugation, we need to forge alliance around the principle of peaceful and democratic struggle and not resort to violent actions. We can ill afford to engage in violent actions either with the Eritrean Defense Forces or with the Eritrean people as this will squarely benefit not only the repressive regime of Isayas, including the delay of its removal from power, but also any form of violent means will degenerate into further cycle of conflicts and contradictions. We can only defeat Isayas regime by convincing and raising the awareness of Eritrean people to embrace peaceful means of struggle.

Certainly, many people perceive that peaceful and democratic method cannot achieve the desired goals; and even if it can, they say, it will take longer time to produce the needed outcome. Of course, those who express such a doubt have always known nothing, but a violent method as a short roadmap to victory. This is what they know, and nothing else. In reality, the peaceful and democratic approach is an aggregate of phases that focuses on bringing Eritrean people together to fight the injustice in Eritrea without dwelling on hostility and animosity of the past or resorting to violent culture. Moreover, peaceful approach is an investment for future Eritrea that seeks and guarantees fundamental and sustainable solution. We have the means, let us do it.

Some people also equate peaceful and democratic struggle with negotiation. They further inject the violent nature of Isayas regime, which is indisputable, into their argument precisely to justify the use of violent action with a blind faith into the consequences of the action itself on one hand and to undermine the peaceful approach on the other.

In conclusion, we would like to leave you with the following messages that might help us see the benefit of peaceful and democratic struggle from a different angle without getting into details:

1. We need to identify the enemies, as well as the friends of Eritrean people. We believe all oppressed Eritreans are friends in the struggle for justice. They must work in concerted action in the struggle to remove Isayas regime. They should not spend their time and energy in accusations and counter accusations; this will simply reinforce the regime of Isayas and perhaps delay its displacement from power. Above all, rapport and mutual tolerance on any of their differences must be accorded, including preventing conflicts from festering into further hostilities.
2. At first, the removal of Isayas from power was not our choice. In the wake of our independence, Isayas regime was charged with task of running the provisional government of Eritrea, with unrestricted opportunity and clear responsibility to unite the country on basis of peaceful and democratic path. In reality, Isayas and his clique resorted to violent path and betrayed us all. We, too, bought into the regime's behavior and we simply rolled over into its violent path, which is precisely how the regime wants us to behave.
3. On negotiation, well, if today Eritreans were invited to negotiate with Isayas regime assuming, hypothetically of course, that Isayas leaves power and decides to open a new chapter in Eritrea in

real consultation with the Eritrean people, we believe nobody would reject such a call. The Eritrean Democratic Alliance would not reject such a call, either on the basis of the provision it has on its charter. But the reality is Isayas regime does not believe in peaceful and democratic change of regime in Eritrea. This is the reason why Isayas regime should be removed from power by civil disobedience and popular uprising. But, let us not mix the objectives of the peaceful and democratic strategy for some political expediency that does not benefit the democratic struggle of Eritrean people.

4. Peaceful and democratic path is not a passive, complying, or docile movement as some would like to describe it. It is a movement that requires higher sacrifices, devotions, and creativity, accompanied by various non violent strategies and wide range of resistant forms that targets the regime's institutions, as well as capable of influencing the people to change their stand against the regime and making them to join the movement to topple regime. But above all, the strength of peaceful and democratic approach is that it is against violent action and culture, with a goal of achieving a sustainable peace and democracy in our society.