

JUMPING OVER THE REALITIES AND DIVERSITY OF THE ERITREAN SOCIETY: A LEAP IN DARKNESS

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“If history repeats itself, and the unexpected always happens, how incapable must Man be of learning from experience.” (George Bernard Shaw, Irish dramatist and socialist, 1856-1950)

To begin with: Did Eritrea inherit a homogenous history? Non-historical minded respondents would answer the question with “YES”. But if we study the origins of the Eritrean population, we would find that none sprung from the Eritrean soil or landed from the Eritrean sky. Some came to Eritrea crossing the Ethiopian escarpment, while others either crossed the Sudanese desert/hills or the Red Sea (“Wadbahar Amtseyo”, as the Massawis joke on one another). This gives Eritrea a diverse past of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious identity. That diversity has formed a mosaic different from the questionable American “melting-pot”. I could imagine it as a plate of a very colourful salad beautifully mixed by professional hands, where we could vividly see each component of the combined vegetables; in contrast to a bowl of soup in which all ingredients have melted into one dish. A long historical process of social development will, at one point of history, change the plate of salad into a bowl of soup, but this is our reality at present. That is why we have different political parties organized on ethnic/linguistic, religious, and regional lines, in addition to a very few organized, comparatively speaking (not absolutely), on ideological or multi-national basis, overall reflecting the different components of our identity and multiculturalism. The same thing could be said about our opposition websites that use either Tigregna or Arabic, in addition to English, whose use is only limited to those elites educated in the English medium of instruction. However, some of the websites try to combine two or three of the languages. Consequently, this is the diversity with which we are blessed and for which we could be envied by some.

Similarly, some radio programs broadcast only in one language, and that is fine and understandable, as long as they do not have enough financial resources and are broadcasting general things. The odd part is manifested in those that broadcast very important statements related to state building and the fate of the country in only one language, but want us to believe that they are addressing the whole Eritrean people, as if all Eritreans speak or listen to the same language. Even their other programs, specially their radio interviews, are not all-inclusive when it comes to the identity of their interviewees in terms of geography, ethnicity, culture, religion...etc. (except in songs they play for listeners). It seems that, knowingly or unknowingly (I opt to give them the benefit of doubt) they are only concerned about a part of the Eritrean people, not the whole. Should I call them one-eyed or cross-eyed media outlets? How could we build a solidly-united, strong, just, law-abiding and egalitarian society when our media outlets say

something and do the opposite? As a citizen, every Eritrean should feel that he/she has something in those programs and it is designed for him/her. Accordingly, for many Eritrean citizens, the definition of Eritrea is sometimes becoming very confusing and vague when they see the fears instilled in them by the wrong policies of the regime are sometimes reinforced by the thoughtless or preferential treatment (not necessarily intentional) by some calling themselves dissidents of the regime. That alerts them to question: What would future Eritrea look like in terms of justice and equality, if the present rulers and the future ones have the same mentality? I hope no hard feelings here, but I do not need any permission from anybody to read my mind so that we could correct our path and re-build Eritrea into a country we dream and aspire it should be.

It is sad to observe that the high and the mighty take multiculturalism and diversity portrayed by citizens, as an "identity crisis". They also see the issue as a taboo that should not be raised, giving themselves the right to define the identity of other Eritreans, telling them what they are and what they are not. Multi-ethnic and multi-cultural identity of the Eritrean people is a fact; some need to get over it. As an identity is self-consciousness, nobody has the right to define my identity for me and tell me what I am and what I am not. I know that these folks have good intentions, but they are seriously uninformed. To put it candidly, I do not understand why a person speaking in a certain language bothers others so much. Nobody is demanding that others should speak in that language. It is a sad state of affairs if everyone looked the same, spoke the same, dressed the same, and thought the same. Don't you think that our country would grow stagnant and appear disgustingly monotonous? It is here to emphasize that a pluralistic society like that of ours, should be open and free, and each of us should generally have a laissez faire attitude toward others.

There are many who think multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious diversity is a disadvantage and a source of instability by itself. For them, one country cannot afford more than one identity and so they conclude that one has to die in order for the other to live. To them, sadly enough, all cannot live together. This is one of the traits of right-wing extremism that opposes political and cultural pluralism. But the unique political system of Switzerland, a small country located at the intersection of German, Italian and French languages and cultures, shows the opposite. In fact, it is the most stable democratic system in today's world, offering a maximum of participation for its citizens. In this connection, I would like to share with the readers the following quotation by Brian Beedham who gives us assurances that diversity is a source of strength if handled wisely, fairly and realistically, saying:

«It is astonishing how little the rest of the world knows about the way Switzerland runs its politics. Even its next-door neighbors in Europe, though vaguely aware that it is a deeply decentralized country, do not really understand the other, more important part of the Swiss system -- the part that could turn out to be a model for everybody's 21st century democracy.»

The attempt above was to emphasize that, we, Eritreans making up a multicultural society, are brothers and sisters tied together by the same fate (whether poverty, prosperity, happiness or calamities) and we can live in one single state, provided that we recognize our differences, appreciate them, and take them into consideration whenever we talk about solutions related to nation building. On the contrary, jumping over the realities of the society and its diversity when talking about or planning nation building or national reconstruction, would make us end up in the vicious circle of practicing exclusion and marginalization on some components of our society, plunging the country into a serious disaster. As we were able to see Switzerland as the best model of a good handling of diversity, we need to see the opposite, the worst model too.

World history, including that of Africa, is a witness to many civil wars and incidence of disintegration that in some cases led to the formation of new states. All that came as a result of forced assimilation, intolerance, exclusion and marginalization, through disguised and twisted policies and mechanisms. The most glaring and the bloodiest example of disintegration caused by mishandling of diversity is that of former Yugoslavia, where factions became agitated and demanded more autonomy after the death of Tito in 1980, but their demands had been ignored and their aspirations thwarted until the fall of the USSR in 1991. Nonetheless, the collapse of the Soviet Union escalated ethnic tensions in Yugoslavia to unprecedented levels, causing a series of bloody civil wars. That triggered a complicated process of disintegration which was not complete until 2001; the final result being the formation of seven states (Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro) within the boundaries of the former Yugoslavia. Therefore, the best way to keep the country united is by accepting diversity and avoiding any type of intolerance, exclusion and marginalization that could cause tensions because we do not know where that would lead to. In few words, this is the only way that insulates any country from the fate of disintegration that have evolved in different models, that of Yugoslavia being the bloodiest of all. What relevance do these background issues have to us as Eritrean citizens?

When dictators are removed, more often than not, a power vacuum is left in their wake, violence or civil war erupts, and even worse regimes could come along to fill in that vacuum. As the regime in Eritrea is believed to be at the verge of collapse, how do we insulate the country from the disasters we saw in many countries? It is this foresight that forces us to think very carefully about how we could avoid disastrous situations by building trust among the different opposition contingents (organized and non-organized) and forging all into one working team to see, with the same eyes, the danger hovering over the head of the country and prevent it, before the ax falls over the head, making all security arrangements to control the situation immediately before we see the country turning into another Libya or cantons (territorial divisions of the country) run by militias. A very bloody Civil war has been going on in Libya for over two years. As a result of that, tens of thousands have lost their lives (very heavy human cost) and billions-worth of property has been destroyed, educational establishments closed, normal life disrupted, people internally displaced, the country

deserted, all services ceased, instability created a conducive atmosphere for terrorist groups and bandits, including the so called the Islamic State (IS). Add to these, the lost opportunity for reconstruction and democratization process, coupled with a very bad reputation the country has internationally earned.

Nobody denies that the political parties within the Eritrean opposition and their collective institutions (EDA and the Baito) are very weak, ineffective and disunited; a fact which has seemingly delayed change in Eritrea. Nevertheless, one would seriously ask: Which of the following two options could be safer in order to avoid chaotic situations, instability and possible disintegration when the regime collapses?

- Discarding the role of the opposition political parties and civic organizations organized on different lines, as some tend to campaign.

OR

- Bringing all forces (organized and non-organized) together, merge all into one single working team, and work together: to have the same vision about future Eritrea, have one action plan, and take off as one united team.

The fact that there are military wings for some opposition organizations (not saying that is a bad thing), especially those based on ethnic, regional and religious groups, and the fact that we cannot rule out the possibility that others could follow suit, compounds the matter, potentially creating additional risks as critical as those unfortunately evolved in Libya. In addition to that, the social composition of the Eritrean Defense Forces, to a large extent, reflects the diversity we had discussed above. From that point of departure, one would ask: Are the Eritrean Defense Forces insulated from polarization in case the regime collapses? Moreover, the regime has distributed lots of automatic weapons to the people under the pretext of neighbourhood patrols, may be, they could be used to create chaos, armed robbery or looting, rape, and malicious acts of revenge (name it) against one another when a vacuum is created. This is a very dangerous time bomb planted. These realities and the fears they constitute, support the recent moves of MEDREK to forge a working team so that the country avoids chaos and disintegration. I am sure, any Eritrean adult could see that, unless he/she puts on blinders. If so: Why do some make too much fuss over the facilitating role of MEDREK?

The idea of electing committees from the bottom up, is the vision originally presented by OUR VOICE some months ago, and is a genuine vision to which we will eventually shift. Nevertheless, it is amusing to see that some circles that have not lifted a finger to advocate it publicly before MEDREK came up with its scheme, hijacked the initiative now, became its advocators and are presenting it as if they are the original authors; a shameful plagiarism. Connecting all of these dots, one would tend to believe that the thing behind the debate does not seem to be a strong belief in democracy, as is claimed to be, but using the initiative as a tool to fight MEDREK's facilitation efforts. If this is not the case, those circles should have advocated for the initiative from the first day of its announcement by OUR VOICE. In summary, the campaign is definitely a reaction to the initiative by MEDREK. But it is worrisome to be boggled by the question: Where would such behaviours lead us to?

Elections from bottom up at this stage are not realistic because what the current tasks need is to forge a broad alliance of all forces, without excluding any, to do the following:

- Ensure the winning of political power with the least military confrontations.
- Keep the country together or prevent disintegration.
- Ensure stability, law and order, and the continuation of normal public life.
- See to it that the national borders and ports of entry are well-guarded, and the national sovereignty and national security are at their best, while the country is not cut off from the outside world.

These tasks, as we saw them carried out in similar situations in other countries that offered best practices to be emulated, need creatively and tactfully building on what exists and slowly moving to new styles of work, as suggested by OUR VOICE, while figuring out what could be taken from this initiative and that to ensure public participation at this stage. Here we should not miss the point that we are talking about a country polarized along ethnic, regional, cultural, linguistic and religious lines, a situation demanding tact, creativity, and wisdom to be parts of the whole game. The possible risks and the vulnerability have already been discussed and there is no need for repetition. That is why the title of this piece is worded the way it appears. Again, everybody should be ready to take historical responsibility, maybe a legal one too, for whatever stand he/she takes at this historical junction. History is merciless.

Furthermore, there is an important point that needs to be raised in relation to elections. It is not shocking anymore that, unfortunately, Eritrean elections as we see them in our communities and political life, have been conducted on stage-arranged basis or massively rigged and overwhelmingly manipulated, with results pre-determined and falsified. Do you think at one stroke we can stop fraudulent voting practices and have free and fair elections, breaking the culture of Gedli? On the other hand, even if we assume that we can have free and fair elections at this stage: Could we have results that show a balance in terms of geography, political affiliation, ethnicity, religion and culture? That balance is very critical at this stage for all the reasons I have tried to explain. But once political power is won by the people and transitional stage is consummated, then we could have internationally-observed elections to ensure they are free and fair, after educating ourselves and our people intensively on elections and on how election process should be conducted, and making the necessary preparations to ensure its success, fairness and reliability. We cannot underestimate the challenges we would face in order to have free and fair elections in a short period of time. It is laughable to hear about free and fair elections at this stage, as if the speakers about that came from another planet.

It is healthy to have different Eritreans debating over what is the best that serves the interests of the people and the desired change. However, debate is one thing and smear campaign, depicting hostility, is another. In fact, personal attacks are out of line and Eritrea needs less of this attitude.

We just turned the page on 2015, which was extremely horrible for our people, and was characterized by divisiveness among the opposition forces, as it was in the previous years. We hope that MEDREK and all opposition forces (organized and non-organized) will have their hands full trying to deal with it this year, while we urge MEDREK and OUR VOICE to engage in discussions and work through issues where they have different perspectives and agree on how they could cooperate to complement each other. At the same time, I think some circles have to stop their rhetoric that seems to carry the ever

present self-righteous style to depict themselves as the only ever right and significantly above all others in intelligence, logic, patriotism, and the so called political correctness, ending all the insanity around us. This is the only way to prove that they are not what they claim to hate. Short of that, the slogan "Melke Yefres" makes zero sense.

HAPPY NEW YEAR.