

ERITREA: URGENT NEED FOR NEW MODELS OF STRUGGLE AGAINST TYRANNY

By

A joint statement by *Our Voice* and *The New Eritrea Movement*

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Introduction: The Truth about Our Situation

Saying that “Eritrea is in an *aferkubu* situation” has now become a cliché. But, there is some truth in it. Most people will mention the needless impoverishment of the population, absence of civil liberties, no freedom of the press, no constitution, no independent judiciary, no parliament, etc. The list is long. To this should be added the loss of so many lives through wars, drowning at sea, deaths in the Sahara Desert or in the hands of the *Rashaidas* and the *Bedouins* and in the notorious prisons of EFDJ.

According to the Eritrean National Statistics Office report of 2014, the population of the country was around 3.5 million at that time. This sharply contrasts with the magic figure of 6.5 million concocted by the regime for public consumption. The Eritrea regime has now got plenty of enemies which it has manufactured, and the Eritrean people have suffered a great deal as a result. But, what is usually forgotten is that the Eritrean dictator, Isaias Afwerki and his regime have done the greatest damage by spreading deformed ideas, warped thinking, primordial form

of selfishness and blind hatred, existential fear, the value of brute force and the *diminution of moral values*, human dignity and of life itself - which strikes directly at the core of one's identity as a properly functioning human being. This is the extent to which the humanity of the Eritrean people and their very existence has been violated. As if all this is not enough, the regime has considerably changed the demographic structure of the Eritrean society, its ethnic composition and orientation. In fact, our old notion of Eritrea may no more exist. The nation of Eritrea is at serious risk. It is indeed an *aferkubu* situation - if it is not too late. It is really troubling indeed.

1. Rectification of Names

To avoid confusion, we wish to deal first with the issue of naming. This is what the Chinese call ***Rectification of Names***. In the *Analects 13.3*, Confucius famously says that the first thing that must be done in conducting the affairs of state is to "rectify names" in such a way that words will match their appropriate meanings. Otherwise, there will be confusion in thinking, and proper social transactions will break down. Social standards will be blurred, and it will be difficult to deliver rewards and punishments according to merit. Thus, a lord should be a lord, and not a thief or a brutal murder and a bandit; a minister should be a proper minister; and a father should be a father, not his children's torturer. If names do not match what they refer to, then they should be changed. This applies to Isaias Afworki and his collaborators in crime. There is a yawning gap between what they actually do and what they profess to be. The presidency of Isaias Afwerki is in itself invalid because of this - and he has never been given a mandate to rule by the Eritrean people. In short, he is a dictator and not a president. That applies to all his generals, ministers, ambassadors and others with undeservedly high ranks and titles. Their duty was to serve and defend the Eritrean people, and they have miserably failed in carrying out their oath of duty. Therefore, they should all be stripped of their titles. Isaias Afwerki is clearly a bandit who rules by force, illegally perched at the Asmara Palace.

2. The Eritrean Crisis and the Impotence of the Opposition

The Eritrean crisis and the shape it has taken is rare in world history for a people that sacrificed so much for its liberation from tyranny which has ironically now turned into a nightmare. Eritrean independence has been achieved, but not its liberation - which was the main point of the struggle. Sadly, the present crisis is now calling for yet another liberation struggle. Unfortunately, the Eritrean opposition is in serious disarray and has not been fit for purpose to date. Therefore, there is the need for a serious re-think of the entire struggle: the introduction of new thinking, the drawing of new strategies and tactics, addressing ethnic, religious, regional, etc. divisions and going beyond them, the busting of old and harmful myths (such as false personality cults of persons who otherwise have feet of clay despite their exaggerated moustaches), and the realignment of opposition forces in a new way. In short, we need new

models of struggle. If the existing Eritrean political parties find this unacceptable and persist in their old divisive and acrimonious ways which have proved disastrous, then a new well-informed and earnest strong political group with a clear and genuine popular mission should be formed to remove the dictatorship at the earliest with minimum cost and collateral damage. All these factors should be carefully thought through and presented in a detailed discussion paper which should be widely distributed. We believe that it is the ideas and solutions convincingly and rationally presented (not hollow sound bites with hidden motives) that will pull mass membership and following in support of the great national vision to be drawn with public consultation. So long as the present Eritrean opposition groups do not put their acts together in time, their membership may be expected to be gradually absorbed by the new, coherent and powerful political group.

In any case, it is crucially important to recognize the need for a major shift of attention from the old leadership (which has largely become an impediment) to the incoming generation of Eritreans who are looking for new answers: a new vision and a new roadmap of struggle.

3. Value Chain and the Missing Links in the Eritrean Opposition

We think it extremely useful to apply what is known as **value chain** to insure clarity and a sense of direction in our struggle and revive it from political listlessness. Writing on the use of **disruption theory** as a means of overhauling the failed status quo and finding new and effective ways of doing things, the American thinker and entrepreneur **Jay Samit** says that any successful product is characterized by its value chain which has what he calls “**links**” consisting of (a) **research and development**, (b) **design**, (c) **production**, (d) **marketing and sales**, and (e) **distribution**. All products begin with research and development. A severe weakness in all or any of these five *links* can result in the failure of the product and the entire business. This model applies not only to business and economics but also to human endeavor in general, including politics.

The product we have been trying to manifest is the removal of the dictatorship in Eritrea and the installment of democratic dispensation. We now need to ask: why has the Eritrean opposition been ineffective for so long and even weakening with the passing of time? We can find the answer by holding the mirror of the value chain. **There have been weaknesses not only in some of the links of our product, but in all the five.** In fact, one crucial part i.e., research and development has been almost entirely missing. The design we have been trying to manifest has also been ill-thought and crude and the production process deformed. One contributing factor for the said failures is that large sections of the Eritrean public have withdrawn from the opposition as a result of disinformation, lack of direction and paralyzing despair. This touches on a number of the value chain links. However, what is extremely lamentable and inexcusable is that there have been many agents (***bizuhat hankolti***) within the

opposition and outside who have been working day and night to disrupt our struggle against tyranny. I say this from experience.

The Eritrean people have already proven themselves to be capable. We, therefore, do not believe that it is beyond their ability to rectify the situation. The problem is that the opposition has largely failed so far to provide the required leadership. But, this is not the end of the game. We should now stop the mistakes we have been making for so long, start with research and development and come up with a brilliant plan (design) of struggle in a collaborative effort. If we pursue the present route without raising serious questions and mending our ways, we shall be doomed.

4. The Centre of Gravity of the Crisis

One of the first principles in any political and/or military action is to identify the **Centre of Gravity** (COG) of the enemy and target it. According to the well known Austrian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz: **“The first principle in strategy is that the ultimate substance of enemy strength must be traced back to the fewest possible sources, and ideally to one alone. The attack on these sources must be compressed into the fewest possible actions - ideally, into one.”** Evidently, the Centre of Gravity of the Eritrean crisis and much of the Horn Region’s troubles is Isaias Afwerki and to a lesser extent his small cabal of associates who may be not more than ten. We thus need to focus our efforts essentially on Isaias Afwerki. He is the main pillar holding the edifice of oppression in Eritrea. Once that pillar is somehow removed, tyranny will end. We should never divert our attention away from the fountainhead of our troubles and get side tracked and lost in tangential issues. The Eritrean opposition media should make sure that the pressure on the notorious dictator is maintained continuously without wasting people’s precious time on secondary and tertiary issues.

5. The Need to Remove the Dictatorship by any Means Necessary

Can we destroy this pillar of evil by demonstrating in the major capitals of the world, by crying our eyes out, by beating our chests, by mounting a huge **tchaw-tchaw** of lamentation, by appealing to the various diplomatic missions and multilateral agencies, by invading Eritrean embassies, by writing articles or participating in the social media condemning the dictator, etc? Of course, all such activities can help, but they will not prove decisive on their own as we have seen. We believe that **what will unseat the DICTATORSHIP at the earliest is some kind of force applied effectively to the centre of gravity.** To avoid un-foreseen serious repercussions in the aftermath of the ouster of the dictator and dictatorship in Eritrea, we think it proper to leave considerations of viability, legality and operational details of the inevitable decisive action on the ground to the incoming leadership of the re-organized and united opposition front. The said **broad opposition front** should quickly establish a united and integrated leadership with

wide acceptance. The leadership should start to operate immediately in some form or another within Eritrea and abroad. It should also constitute the main voice of the Eritrean people, get international recognition and gradually take power away from the bandit regime in Eritrea.

6. The Benefit of Forming a New Leadership of the Opposition

How can we reverse the present status quo of paralysis in the Eritrean opposition and form a new type of leadership that can take us forward quickly? We need to go back to the notion of **Value Chain** and **Missing Links** discussed earlier. Accordingly, we wish to suggest that a group of planners be set up at the earliest from amongst Eritrean academics, researchers, intellectuals of various kinds, ex-fighters who know the Isaias regime from inside but are no more part of it, ex-members of the Eritrean military who have leadership and fighting experience, people with wisdom and foresight who have public acceptance, etc. None of them should be encumbered by the divisive politics of the past. Care must also be taken to make the **Committee of Planners** as much as possible representative of the major sectors of the Eritrean society in terms of ethnicity, religion, region, gender, age, class, etc.

The next question is: how can we set up the Committee of Planners? This is difficult to answer and may prove controversial. One idea is for a group of initiators to put up an announcement on the media seeking volunteers for this big and important task. Nominations may also be accepted. This opportunity should be open for any Eritrean who is not a part of the regime or an agent of it. All those who volunteer or are nominated could then be invited for a conference and come up with criteria for selecting the final members of the Committee of Planners who should not be more than seven. The Committee of Planners can then set up sub-committees as required.

The purpose of setting up the Committee of Planners is to come up with a research based design document entitled: **ERITREA: THE WAY FORWARD**. The document should chart out the modalities, the strategies and operational details (in other words, **THE ROADMAP**) we should follow to oust the dictatorship and establish a peaceful, united, democratic and prosperous Eritrea at peace with itself and its neighbors.

The paper should be widely circulated among all political parties and groups, civic and civil organizations, prominent individuals and all other Eritreans and friends of Eritrea to seek consensus. The document should then be revised according to the feedback obtained to reflect a common ground that will bring people together. The revised version should then be distributed to get further remarks and additional adjustments made on it. A final version should then be prepared based on the second cycle of feedback. The next step is to collect signatures of those who support the substance of the final draft. The last stage could be to

organize a national conference of people representing all the major sectors of the Eritrean society who subscribe to the roadmap - and set up a provisional national assembly. The size and proportion of representation may be worked out by the organizing committee to be set up in a transparent, fair and verifiable manner with the right of independent appeal – according to guidelines drawn by the Committee of Planners.

The process should be full-proof to prevent a repeat of the **Awassa fiasco**. Otherwise, it will not be worth the effort. How can this be done? To avoid conflict of interest, all Eritreans who prepare the roadmap and members of the organizing committee should have no party affiliation and they should not be aspirants for the political offices they would be trying to organize. The names of the members of the Committee of Planners and the Organizing Committee should be announced to the public and each of them vetted for fair play.

To insure better democratic practices, it was felt better to follow the general mechanisms of choosing representatives by conducting elections at the *local baito* level in every town and city and stage by stage up to the national assembly (or *hagerawi baito*) level - in a **bottom-up approach** as proposed by the **Global Initiative**. The national assembly could then elect an executive committee (mostly made up of technocrats) that could legitimately speak on behalf of the Eritrean people.

This might look plausible, but there is a problem. Although a brilliant idea in itself, the bottom-up approach does not yield results soon enough, as we have seen so far. Sufficient number of people at the grassroots level do not come to meetings to elect their representatives for the said purpose and on time. The reason could be fear, despondency or even despair. There are also other complicating factors. Therefore, a quicker and more certain way of forming the **transitional national assembly** and the **executive committee** might be to first come up with a clear and fair method of working out a profile of the various sectors of the Eritrean society (assisted by sociologists, demographers, etc.) and then **selecting key representatives** from each sector with wider public consultation in a transparent and fair way. To do this, clear criteria of selection that have wide acceptance should be worked out. As we said, the first condition is that all those who want to participate in the process must accept the said roadmap. Those who don't will be left behind. The national assembly will include, among others, the existing Eritrean opposition political party members as well (be it as individuals or as representative of their parties), excluding PFDJ and its agents. However, they will not have the right to dictate terms because they pre-existed the new arrangements. It will be a level playing field: every Eritrean will have the right to compete for influence, but in a fair and transparent way. The old shenanigans and smoke and mirrors tactics that have bedeviled and crippled the Eritrean opposition (as in Awassa) for so long must end.

The Executive Committee, elected and empowered by the transitional national assembly, should act as the legitimate representative of the Eritrean people.

“Himamu zeyfeleten zey’amenen medhanit neyrikebelu, kem zibahal”, all we are doing is acknowledge our difficulties and saying that we need a new change of direction. Since we are just beginning the process of clearing the mess of the past, our initial aim should not be perfection in everything. It is enough to just make things go in the right direction despite a lot of shortcomings. The perfection will come gradually with constant improvement and experience. We know that **selecting** representatives rather than **electing** them (to begin with) in the way suggested is not perfect, but it delivers results that can more or less work within a reasonable time frame. We have tried the bottom-up approach as a possibility, and we have found out from experience that it will take a long time. We can’t wait that long any more. But, we intend to return to it later as a vital instrument of democracy. All this might look needlessly circuitous. But then, what is the alternative? Are there viable short cuts? There are no easy answers. Anyway, the Organizing Committee and its sub-committees in consultation with the Eritrean public may have to further explore other possibilities. For now, we believe that what we are proposing seems to be enough as a starter. Otherwise, we have no personal vested interest in the matter - and we are not aspirants for any political office anyway. We are just trying to do the right thing and state the truth as we see it.

We believe that the proposal presented in this section addresses the main **Links** in the **Value Chain** template. All the same, what we are proposing is not definitive. The present version of the text is only the first shot, so to speak. We are prepared to make the necessary changes on it depending on the feedback we get and come up with a better preliminary policy paper.

7. Forging New Alliances, Not Manufacturing Enemies

The Eritrean regime and Isaias Afwerki personally, have been deliberately manufacturing enemies and plunging the Eritrean people into various wars with at least six countries: Sudan, Yemen, Ethiopia, Djibouti and even the Democratic Republic of Congo. Now, there are reports that the Eritrean military has been fighting in the Middle East on the side of Saudi Arabia as well. Eritreans have gained nothing from all these wars - except making painful sacrifices. Yet, Isaias Afwerki, **the motor of trouble** and **the spoiler-in-Chief** of the Horn Region (who incidentally has never sent any of his children to the war front) still remains in power and continues to do mischief by spreading mayhem. The strategy that is being proposed here is the opposite. We seek peace, solidarity, prosperity, the development of common strategy and unity for the benefit of all the peoples of the Horn Region, especially in the relationship between Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Sudan and Djibouti. Indeed, we think it proper to establish a commonwealth of nations in our region - in place of strife.

8. Creation of the *Red Sea Commonwealth*

There is a lot we can learn from the success of the **European Common Market** and subsequently, the **European Union**. We know what happened in Europe during the Second World War. After so much destruction and the loss of over 60 million lives, the bitterest of enemies in Europe (Germany and France) have become the best of friends and allies, and decided to live in peace and common prosperity. We believe that we can do something similar in our region, and maybe better, under eight separate modalities which we shall now outline but not discuss. (Each of these points is presented in detail in another document which may be available on request.)

- 8.1. Public Diplomacy and the New Era of Understanding
- 8.2. Respect for National Sovereignty
- 8.3. Free movement of People and Labor
- 8.4. Free Movement of Goods and Services
- 8.5. Use of the Ports
- 8.6. Common Currency
- 8.7. Military Alliance
- 8.8. Permanent Secretariat

Obviously, the formation of the Red Sea Commonwealth will be a gradual process and will take time. However, the very fact of thinking about this possibility and working towards it even in small steps, we believe, will help dispel a lot of the suspicion, hatred and bellicosity that have needlessly blighted the relations amongst the nations and peoples of the Horn Region for so long. We are now offering a vision in which all of us in the region can come together and live in peace, solidarity and common prosperity. However, this cannot be done so long as Isaias Afwerki remains in power.

Conclusion: Our Future Prospects

The future of Eritrea as a sovereign and stable state is better insured by building strategic alliances with the countries and peoples of the Horn Region, especially Ethiopia and Sudan. Eritreans have nothing to gain from standing alone as trouble makers in the region because it suits the Isaias regime. The people of Eritrea are clearly fed up of this regime, but ousting it has proven rather illusive so far.

Many Eritreans thus ask: do we perhaps need help from our neighbors and friends to remove the regime? Help is always welcome, but may not be required. Eritreans have proven themselves to be resourceful, committed and capable. It is certainly not beyond their power to remove one man and his handful of collaborators. They can do it on their own. The present

status quo of the Eritrean tragedy (which needs serious **disruption** as described above) is maintained partly by a combination of five serious weaknesses on our part: (a) shortage of good, creative and research based solutions on a range of important national issues, (b) lack of clear thinking devoid of prejudice and bigotry, (c) fear and suspicion of the “other” deliberately instilled by the regime, (d) the absence of a credible roadmap that can give people a sense of direction and hope, and (e) above all, lack of a genuine, committed, united and effective opposition leadership to do the job. Once such weaknesses are largely overcome and a united, powerful and credible leadership of the opposition that is well informed and can really think (and not just guess) emerges, we are sure that the Eritrean people will do as they must and get Isaias out - and carry on with their lives. He has stayed in power for so long not because he is powerful but because we have been weak so far - but not anymore!

What will happen after the removal of the dictator? We believe that the Eritrean military and civil administration should be retained but with significant changes, especially at the top. But, we think it imperative that they undergo a rigorous re-orientation program. Such measures will be important to avoid the serious mistakes that the Western powers made in Iraq, Libya and other places. Many people fear the possible collapse of the Eritrean state, the subsequent chaos that might follow and the intervention of unsavory forces from near and far if Isaias Afwerki is removed. A careful consideration of these worst case scenarios, however, suggests that such dangers can either be averted or overcome with careful planning, mobilization of allies and taking appropriate action before the event. We must properly do our homework. Although the danger is recognized, there is good reason to believe that Eritrea will never be a failed state after Isaias Afwerki. In fact, it is expected to be a peaceful, stable and prosperous country.

Once the dictatorship is abolished in Eritrea, democratic elections are expected to be held throughout the country and abroad - and a new parliament, an executive body and independent judiciary will be installed. A new constitution will also be drafted and ratified that will cement a secular, viable and stable state.

We now invite support in the matter from all Eritreans and friends of Eritrea in promoting this important mission for the good of all.

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