

## **In Lieu of Eritrean & Ethiopian Ties**

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### **Background:**

For the most part the following critical issues and their analyses in this article are exclusively relevant to understand how the PFDJ regime has been consistently handling the Eritrean and Ethiopian ties since its days as a guerilla fighter front in the bushes.

From the outset, the Eritrean and Ethiopian ties for nearly a century can be considered as links filled with never-ending disruptions; where some segment of the population of every generation has been uprooted before it finishes whatever it has started in terms of progress and cohabitation with each other.

To this very day, those same trends of disruptions and disturbances persistently continue to linger around, with no end to the scene in all aspects of livelihoods. To this effect let me point out key factors that keep on disrupting the internal dynamics within Eritrea and even further affect its lasting ties with Ethiopia.

### **Eritrean Livelihood:**

In Eritrea the euphoria of independence dwindled already right at its inception phase long ago before even it was well grasped by the Eritrean public. Contributing factors to such public frustration, anger and out cry for help and cooperative opposition ventures are so many. Let me only summarize the following obvious reasons. The Eritrean population still lingers with abject poverty subjected to untold tough living situations. Key causes include, but not limited to, (a) protracted land expropriation by Shaabia, (b) endless national service programs exerted on the public, (c) crop expropriation and multitude restrictions of trade on food and other items, and (d) seasonal crop harvest decline due to drought. Needless to say, Afewarki's regime has passed a decree prohibiting the sale or purchase of grain without government permission. Indeed, it has imposed tight control on consumable items including oil, wheat flour, sugar, and the like; where their prices has increased by nearly 40% for a long while now. What does this mean? For the Eritrean population with meagre or no income sources, the main problem are lack of affordability. Even the rations that were supplied through the so called "fair price shops" have been slashed; or are distributed occasionally. On top of these, just as I write, the energy supply crisis is yet unresolved. In a nutshell, with each day that goes by life is becoming extremely difficult and severe to cop with.

In the end, viewed from Eritrean perspectives, the above accounted challenges provide a reflection of the absence of transparency in terms of PFDJ Regime's handling of decisive matters pertaining to domestic administration. The end result has become quite astonishing. One observes and hears about thousands of recent arrivals who have joined the Diaspora Eritrean groups. These are young escapees or better identified as the Sawa refugees. Vast majority of them are usually concerned with their daily problems of survival, and wish to forget the harsh life they left behind in Eritrea. Indeed several of them shockingly express extreme emotions about their harsh experience and do not want to be reminded of it, or even of Eritrea itself. This is one of the gloomy features of the current Eritrean reality that promotes serious questions in various corners of the globe with deeper implications for Eritrea's future.

### **The Moslem-Christian divide**

Actually, the Moslem-Christian divide continues in Eritrea. Frankly speaking, it has not yet given chance for "Eritrean nationalism" to blossom and ripen; the means to unify the two distinct groups remains remote. Each religious group's manifestations are carried out by adopting defensive identities alien to the other religious group. Recently a Kunama organization has accused Afewarki's PFDJ regime by calling it as the Tigrinya regime of genocide. Likewise the Afar organization along the Red Sea has accused the ELF and EPLF of genocide and has initiated petition to bring the leadership and cadres of these two guerilla forces in front of the ICC. Periodically, red flags and complaints are continuously popping up everywhere from various minority groups ; and yet we are hiding our heads under the hot sand and keep on denying as if nothing is happening in terms of dismay against Afewarki's PFDJ-regime. As a matter of fact, Eritrea remains distinctly divided into two opposing religious camps whose culture has been moulded around each according to one's religious belief; namely the: 'Moslem-Christian divide'. The gap dividing the two remains distinctly visible both at the leadership and at the community levels. Even outside Eritrea, each religious group living in Diaspora maintains its own distinct habitation and association separately. The depth of the

Moslem-Christian divide' is so severe that the two religious groups have nothing to do with one another as there is nothing in between to hold them together. On a more serious note, the Moslem Eritrean group looks towards Islam and towards the Arab world for its likely change and progress while the Christian group looks towards the sophisticated and the capitalist Western world for its ideological inclinations. Given these two conflicting or contradictory life styles within today's Eritrea, it makes one wonder why then these two groups even want to live under one roof. And if the nominal marriage of convenience between the Moslem-Christian groups hasn't worked for the last 6-decades, why do Issayas Afewarki and his PFDJ regime's cronies expect the Moslem-Christian divide to disappear on its own? Evidently, it is clearly visible as the Moslem group is more pulled towards the Moslem neighbouring communities in the Arab world while the Christian group is ambivalently caught-up with choosing side – either to adjoin itself with its Christian neighbours inside Ethiopia; or remaining aloof by its own for other circumstantial reasons that I cannot dwell on at this moment. In any case, Shaabia / PFDJ regime's suppression of the Moslem-Christian divide cooking in a pressure cooker for so long is still pretending to tell the wide world that such a problem doesn't exist within Eritrea; and doesn't want to resolve it either.

### **Romanticizing Eritrean Liberation Struggle:**

Viewed from Eritrean perspectives, in what follows, I will provide a reflection of the absence of transparency in terms of Eritrean Regime's handling of decisive matters in lieu of the standing and the obvious Eritrean and Ethiopian ties.

For the Eritrean youth in particular, the 1961-1991 (or the 30 years) skirmishes between Eritrea and Ethiopia are propagated as: "liberating the Eritrean land and people from Ethiopian colonial occupation." If that was truly the case, let us then ask ourselves the following: didn't Eritrean populations possess directly their own rural and urban lands within Eritrea proper when we were in unity with Ethiopia in the period ranging between 1961 and 1991? Were there any Ethiopian landlords in Eritrea at that period at all? On the contrary, weren't many of the Eritrean elite groups enjoying access to and ownership of all types of resources (including land, senior government positions, business firms and other assets) inside Ethiopia? The naked response to this question is that the Eritrean people were directly in ownership of their land better during the so called "1961-1991 Ethiopian colonial occupation" than they are presently having access to and ownership of it under Issayas Afewarki. If liberating "land" can be considered as a strong justification point for the creation of a nation, who had indeed, denied the Eritrean people to make a nation out of Ethiopia where they had extended access to resources on top of what they inherited within Eritrea proper? Who had denied them from running business within the rest of Ethiopia itself? But if it was the sole desire to have a nation all for the Eritrean people – a nation that we don't want to share with the rest of Ethiopians – then the question to be answered is: why do we opt for that? If the dream of all the huge sacrifices the Eritrean population made was to establish a democratic nation – then why did handful Eritrean youth and elites struggled along with the rest of Ethiopians for a free democratic Ethiopia, while others opted to go the solitary way deep into the Sahel? If neither the liberation of land nor the aspiration for democracy explains the goal of the 30 years of Eritrean fight against Ethiopia, what could it have possibly been the case that initiated and ignited the liberation struggle in the 1<sup>st</sup> place? Was it Egypt that remains suspicious of the Nile that instigated the whole lot as rumors go in some corners? Was it the Arab-patrol-dollar coming to the top echelons of the frontal leadership circle? Were the Eritrean and Ethiopian ties in all honesty a typical colonial relationship for initiating armed guerrilla struggle? Was Ethiopia really that colonialist? Were the Eritrean people deprived of access to either Eritrean or Ethiopian resources during the times of unity? Could the outright conflicting desires of the Moslem-Christian divide be accommodated and enable us for forging a sustainable nation building as such amidst cries being heard by the Kunama and the Afar just to mention the two? Has the PFDJ regime's militaristic stand a copy paste of the Mafia framework, which we know of since a long while?

I may not have the full answers for all these breathtaking quarries. All I can indicate is the following. Those who do not respect the rights, origin, belief and culture of others, will not genuinely defend theirs. Accordingly I'm not sure if the myth-filled denial and fabricated nationalism that persists in today's Eritrea under Afewarki and his PFDJ regime's will ever hold water and remain sustainable as the signs of splinter movements are underway among non-Tigrinya nationalities of Eritrea. Rest assured key factors are surfacing clearly. After three decades of armed struggle and two decades of de facto Eritrean independence, most Eritrean people still remain caught-up in a state of denial and in a myth of nation

building that never has been and that will not materialize. And the whole liberation struggle and experiences gained thus far point to the following five crucial factors whose socio-economic opportunity costs would have been totally different had it been possible to halt those who brew disillusion from the very start of the liberation struggle:

- 1) Both the urban and the Diaspora Eritrean population segments are caught up with deep denial and utter confusion of what they see and hear. Particularly, looked at through a prism and examining matters in search of evidences between two points (starting from one end and moving through to the other end), one may arrive at two distinctly differing results: (a) At the 1st end of the connection, the death toll that have been reached by the fighting forces on either (the Eritrean-Ethiopian) side of the isles thus far boils down to futile attempt. (b) At the 2nd end of the ties, the much boasted about victory talks and anxiety are all echoing quite unreasonable victory dances and crocodile tears for killing each other for nothing. The negative impacts attained through both demographic and material losses caused by the series of skirmishes carried out thus far have depleted the Eritrean population growth rate in particular and its economic progress by significant percentage. The disruptions caused both in rural and urban communities have solely hampered the Eritrean society from potential recovery and progress. The main reasons being the militaristic operations and life styles that were on the ground since the early 1960s; and still the periodical skirmishes between Eritrea and Ethiopia are immensely intensified regardless of the huge human, logistic, economic, and environmental losses made thus far. Indeed, to this very day, the war tension and causing the usual interruptions from normalizing livelihoods are still ongoing as both sides are firmly and decisively standing armed and alert for any likely ignition of further skirmishes along the un-demarcated Eritrea and Ethiopia border lines.
- 2) In those days, when it suspected that EPRP could not back, bend, or deliver EPLF's "colonial Ethiopia" claim, Shaabia quickly broke its ties with EPRP; and immediately opted to inculcate and work together with Woyane (TPLF) as its dependable ally for maintaining their very existence. Since 1997 however, those ties have become dysfunctional. But when we look at the Shaabia-Woyane ties in retrospective: (a) without the help of TPLF, it wouldn't have been possible for Shaabia to push ELF and soon after that EPRP from their vicinities all the way to Sudan. (b) In the early 80's, particularly when Shaabia's armies were diminishing and becoming shaky due to massive death toll and casualties in the trenches of Sahel, it was thousands of TPLF guerrillas that rescued Shaabia to defend its base against the Dergue army. Indeed the survival of both EPLF and TPLF would have been impossible if the two didn't cooperate in those decisive moments. Let me cite a case in point. Had they not been in close collaboration with each other and demolish Dergue's Nadow brigades, neither of these two guerrilla movements would have made it to their respective capitals. Hence for what has taken place as the result of the initial bondage and during the honeymoon period (1991-1997) the two groups remain tied to a stick in common responsibility regardless of the damage was done by both or either one of the two regimes.
- 3) Issayas Afewerki's regime is known for its immense brutality and Mafia-like handling. Without any doubt, PFDJ regime is pulling Eritrea through a classic communistic administration.
- 4) A failure in the experimentation of tightly supervised hard labour programmes is an outdated communist style of nation building.
- 5) Issayas Afewerki and his PFDJ regime remain prisoners to fantasies of their own making; and prefer to remain at standby where projection of "colonial legacy" has given them the excuse to impose a totalitarian political pathway that leads solely to military garrisons; to which the overwhelming silent majority of Eritrean people are saying: 'Enough is enough!

### **Eritrea's Survival at Stake**

A critical question that demands urgent attention at the moment is the survival of Eritrea as a nation since it is ill-functioning and speedily moving towards its total stagnation. Another danger in front of us is PFDJ regime's endless forced labor, which has driven and continues to drive thousands of Eritrean youth out of the country [\*See Gaim Kibreab, Forced Labor in Eritrea, Journal of Modern African Studies, 47, 1(2009)]. Thirdly, despite continuous denial efforts being exerted by Afewerki's regime, Eritrea is a country in deep trouble in all aspects. As mentioned above, its economy is in shambles and on the verge of collapse with worsening social consequences. The reason why we are suddenly held in stagnation reminds me the

traditional saying that goes: “*LaHmi Hawi weledet, key’tiliHso nededet key’tgedfo weledet*”. Its literal translation depicts: “A cow gave birth to fire; she couldn’t lick it as it burned; she couldn’t leave it be; as it was its baby”. There is no shame in siding with the truth. But those who have been burned by Issayas Afewarki’s PFDJ regime, and yet identify themselves with it are always in a dilemma just like the cow that delivered fire as her baby. But the naked question facing us all is: For how surely can the PFDJ sustain Eritrea solely depending on *Sawa* training camp and its companion project, the so called *Warsai-Yikaalo* Campaign, and consider them as the sole guarantors of Eritrea’s security? I have my serious doubts as things are on a shaky ground and soon falling apart.

### **Conclusive Remarks:**

In summing up let me ask the following: Is independence from the so-called “Ethiopian colonial occupation” worth all the sacrifice that the Eritrean people have continuously been paying as an all-consuming-50-year-long odyssey and as the only bloody path it took the Eritrean population thus far? I can only suggest three likely fear-factors that cry out for resolution. Indeed for the sake of humanity, these 3-factors must be resolved or given due response. Without solving these 3 issues it will be difficult for Eritrean society to pave the way and bring lasting peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

- 1stly, as the whole of the Eritrean population has been living and continues to live behind trenches all along the non-demarcated long-border-lines between Eritrea and Ethiopia; it is still too early for Eritrea to claim a victory in its independence. As a result, Eritrea has become an absolute and unequivocal state of collective serfdom; a nation of military garrisons and guerrilla warfare camps where overwhelming majorities of our nearly 4-million Eritrean peoples still remain incarcerated in military garrisons. Eritrean populations are no where near to fully claim that they are free people in the true sense of the word! The burning heat of oppression from the regime circle is felt everywhere. Failure to resolve the Eritrean-Ethiopian key disputes could exacerbate governance, health, and humanitarian problems further. Yearning for lasting solution remains in the distant future. After all, the Eritrean revolution was waged haphazardly, by folks with divergent aspirations.
- 2ndly, Ethiopia’s legitimate access to the sea through the port of Assab is still pending. This issue is a time bomb that may irrupt any moment be it while TPLF is on power or during its aftermath. Beyond today’s short-sighted geographical seizure of Assab port by Eritrea, the two sisterly nations must resolve this serious matter through a negotiated settlement in the way that Assab will no longer become a permanent source of future instability between Eritrea and Ethiopia. If halting disruptions and maintaining sustainable stability and socio-economic relations between these two states is to be given a chance, then the significance of Assab must be given eminent and immediate solutions. In the manner it finds itself now, Assab doesn’t do any good to Eritrea or to Ethiopia; except remaining as a potential time bomb between the two sisterly people; no matter how long this particular matter may be suspended by some delaying mechanisms by either regimes holding power. In fact, the solution is simple. It has to be understandable that the Afewarki regime in Eritrea is sitting in the port that belongs to Ethiopia, and there will be no peace while occupying Assab belonging to Ethiopia.
- 3rdly, as if proving the saying: “A man with one watch knows what time it is; but a man with 2-watches is never sure”, PFDJ regime’s is still fighting for “territorial integrity” within Eritrea proper; while at the same time preaching self-determination up to secession of nationalities elsewhere within Ethiopia. But a person living in a house made of glass does not throw stones on others’ glass windows. Hence PFDJ regime’s proxy-war tactics must be halted as it never resolves any of the socio-economic dynamics we are challenged with at the moment or in the long run. So let me say this to Issayas Afewarki and his PFDJ regime. Don’t look where you fall, but where you slipped. Likewise, while seeking revenge, dig 2-graves; one for yourself. Otherwise dwindle the empty pride; face the naked reality; break out differences; and build bridges with neighboring states. These are the likely options that resolve conflicts and feasibly work for all parties to live in peace. These are the alternatives that can reduce Eritrea’s militaristic stand, halt the Eritrean youth mass-exodus for fear of punishments or getting held under *Sawa* servitude indefinitely. These are the sole choices that help the new nation reach its eventual maturity.