

Deepening National Dialogue in Eritrea?

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I hope the year 2012 will be the year of deepening of national dialogue among the Eritrean opposition groups- those who convened a congress for democratic change and those who did not participate in this congress. The need of the Eritrean people is a national dialogue that should provide an inclusive platform for democratic change in Eritrea- an agenda for short and long term development in Eritrea. One of the crucial parts of the national dialogues is the evaluation of the needs in terms of democratic change articulating the main agenda at this time and address the needs of our people suffering under the brutal dictatorship. In this article, I will try to examine the following issues:

- What lessons have we learned in the past 12 years of struggle for democratization in Eritrea?
- How should national dialogue be structured? Who should participate and what should be the agenda in order to be more effective and functional?
- What options, in the sense of instruments are available for facilitating national dialogue in the Eritrea opposition context?

1. What lessons have we learned in the past 12 years of struggle for democratization in Eritrea?

The Eritrean opposition political organizations alliance building from 1999 up to now were all failures. They only produced conflicts and mistrusts resulting in increasing political organizations without no vision but personal ambitions to come to power. The national conference held in 2010 in Addis did not involve all opposition groups. It was not able to bring common understanding. It failed to develop a consensus on the inescapable need for fundamental political changes on the basis of the true Eritrean aspirations. The conference came out with the formation of a commission to prepare a national congress for democratic change. The commission that was assigned to prepare congress lacked the skills and knowledge of organizing a congress for democratic change. The commission missed their assignment and involved in power politics. If we compare our organizing of national conferences and the West African experiences like that of Benin, Burkino Faso and many others ours in fact lacks all the skills and facilities therefore it only circulates in vicious circle without no tangible results that can convince our people. We lack the methodology and instruments based on all inclusive and participatory approaches. The national congress for democratic change held in Hawasa – Ethiopia year 2011 even has not come out with the results that the Eritrean people expected. It was a congress of competing for power not for democratic changes that our people aspire. It has come out with the establishing of the so called national assembly for democratic change. The term assembly is used more when the representatives were elected by votes by their constituents. I prefer this establishment to be called a council of resistance instead of being called assembly. A leadership appointed by quotas can not be called an assembly but a council of resistance and consultation. The congress for democratic change did not contribute to the harmony of the Eritrean opposition. It did not provide an opportunity to assess the speed for democratic change.

It did not help identify the priority areas for the struggle against the dictatorship and articulate adequate cooperation programmes and enabled the evaluation of the main challenges and opportunities facing the forces for democratic change.

2. How should national dialogue be structured? Who should participate and what should be the agenda in order to be more effective and functional?

The Eritrean opposition is still divided and could not be able to propose a methodological framework trying to provide **guidelines on how to organize national dialogues**. How to ensure inclusivity of all stakeholders in a divided polity like that of ours should be given priority. We lack how to forge consensus and establish priorities aimed to strengthen the democratic process in our country need tolerance and skills.

I propose that the Eritrean National Assembly for democratic change established after the Hawasa congress elaborate the need and define how national dialogue with those not participated be facilitated and assisted in the context of the Eritrean opposition for democratic change. Such dialogues can be instrumental in strengthening the democratic transition and can give a structure and mechanism for **joint assessment of both performance and needs**.

Regarding the participation- it should be an inclusive and participatory including the entire spectrum of the actors involved in the democratic transition. The national dialogue between the Eritrean National Assembly and those who are outside this organization have the crucial role to play in this dialogue. A democratic decision making process undertakes under consultations before reaching decisions. Let all the members of the Eritrean National Assembly start consultations with those organizations who did not participate in the Hawasa Congress. A specific effort is required to identify the issues of conflict or the actors that are both legitimate and representative with whom consultations and dialogue for democratic change should be conducted. Residents of each country must take the responsibility for developing **relevant agenda** and constructive proposals for bringing together the forces for democratic change. They must establish appropriate mechanisms to transmit the views and concerns to the dialogue forums. This local consultations and meetings can be helpful to utilize the already existing networks in some regions for strengthening the democratic process. Resident countries can be approached for facilitating this democratic process in Eritrea. International partnership in democratic change in Eritrea can also be approached for democracy assistance.

In structuring a national dialogue one must identify the challenges and evaluate the available resources. It should specify its actors and participants and objectives. It must prospect its results and implementation. A national dialogue lacking structure in all its components is doomed to fail. There are three key functions to be fulfilled in convening a dialogue. The analysis function provides the comprehensive analysis of the problems and opportunities for democratic transition. A dialogue helps us to diagnose the problems and opportunities for strengthening the democratic process. We need dialogue functioning that provides us a platform for exchange of experience and lessons learned and forum for building consensus on the challenges and opportunities for democratic change. We need regional and international brokerage function providing us concrete support measures for democratic change. Therefore I propose that in this year of 2012 we must structure our broad national dialogue on three groups:

- 1. The dialogue group composed of the Eritrean National Assembly and those organizations who did not participate in the Hawasa -Congress. The dialogue group must be sufficiently representative and have legitimacy and leverage to make the dialogue meaningful and sustainable. The dialogue group should be carefully selected based on their professionalism, reputation and willingness to enter into a genuine dialogue.**
- 2. The expert group. It must be composed of international and national experts with undisputed credentials and reputation. This expert group provides the national participants with comparative experiences and lessons learned in other countries from dictatorship to democracy.**
- 3. The support group: it can be composed of international and regional community involved and committed to democratic process in Eritrea. This group structure its support in assisting the process of democratization in Eritrea. Their role is to observe and facilitate the process without dictating the genuine and sustainable agenda of the democratic change.**

The Eritrean national conferences and congresses of the past were not based on a functioning structures and work groups before they were convened. They were convened without good preparation and expertise.

- 4. What options, in the sense of instruments are available for facilitating national dialogue in the Eritrea opposition context?**

The Eritrean opposition still need national dialogues. Democratization is process that takes a long time and generations and cannot be achieved in short time. The Eritrean process of democratization is still in initial stage with many complex problems. There is a potential for democratic change it is therefore important to locate this potential and explore the available options of instruments facilitating the national dialogues in the Eritrean opposition. The forces that united during the past conferences and congresses and at last established the national assembly for democratic change and those forces who did not participate in this process but struggle for democratic change must initiate a dialogue. This dialogue must be based on a model that is relevant to our peoples concerns and taking into account the universal values of democracy in Eritrea. The expert group I have mentioned above must start the initiative to approach these two groups. The initiative taker must take all possible options/ choices for developing the dialogue process. The initiative to engage must be shared by all. It must be meaningful and inclusive and participatory to get legitimacy. It must ensure that the dialogue fulfils the objectives of the Eritrean people. It must formulate an objective analysis of the struggle from dictatorship to democracy. It must formulate a comprehensive agenda fro democratic change. It must facilitate dialogue through the use of external friends and supporters. It must reinforce the democratic network of the diaspora with home. It must institutionalise the dialogue at several levels. The national dialogue must start in all levels fro example in each resident countries by disseminating information on national dialogue at the grassroots level. I think we have today the capacity to come together and learned lessons from the past failures. Let us promise that the year 2012 will be the year for national dialogue and consensus building.