

# The role of Eritrean advocacy (political) civic society in the struggle to replace the authoritarian system with a democratic polity-

## Eritrean Global Solidarity –EGS



EGS is honored to participate in this truly historic gathering of Eritrean political and civic actors to collectively and collaboratively brain storm the challenge faced by our people and young state.

There is no other choice but to exercising our national duty in this kind of deliberative win–win joint effort. Our dire national circumstance demands it. Going it alone has not done us any good. It is imperative that we all grasp the level of urgency that underpins the very reason for us being here. Our effort, at the minimum, must match the urgency.

EGS attends this meeting in a collaborative spirit – with an underlining commitment to learn, to be enlightened, to share and to break silos and walls. We come to dialogue. Neither a leader nor a follower, a mere concerned stakeholder positively interested in making marginal contribution to the construction of an actionable plan on how to jointly dissolve the suffocating tyrannical system and facilitate the construction of a transition process by ALL stakeholders to democratize Eritrea.

EGS gives priority to building and maintaining respectful and productive relationship with all Eritrean political and social activists who are standing up to protect and advance the fundamental rights and interests of our people.

This historic conference offers us a precious opportunity to interact with kindred spirits and enrich and reinforce our commitment to build sustainable relationships in order to make a difference. This meeting will definitely help us grow and transform as an independent civic organization.

Now to the subject we want to share with you:

- Is there a role for civic activist organizations in the struggle against authoritarians? The key phrase is “activist”.
- Are civic activist organizations to be relegated to mere complaint archivists?
- What is the difference between the so-called “mass organizations” and independent civic organizations?
- How does conducting the struggle in Diaspora or exile affect the relationship between political and civic activist organizations?
- Is the relationship between political and civic activist organizations during the struggle against authoritarian systems (pre-transition) adversarial by definition?
- Can political and civic activist organizations work collaboratively in coalitions and umbrellas? What are the parameters?

We are not here to argue the rights of Eritrean civic association, in all forms, to exist. It is a given from our perspective. Our right to organize is not negotiable. The diaspora space is equally occupied by the growing Eritrean media, political organizations and civic formations. How we will relate to each other in a post transition Eritrea under the rule of law is a different issue that should be deferred to time and conditions. How we manage the third space –civic space- in free Eritrea is a much bigger national issue.

The central challenge is how we must relate, work together and make a difference, under diaspora conditions, in our effort to help bring a democratic Eritrea. It is all about creating democratic relationship that will have meaningful impact on our primary agenda.

Defining our respective roles and mutually design the format for our working relationship, making genuine commitment to implement the agreed upon contract-plan is the key to moving forward. The essence of this conference, from EGS' perspective, is to facilitate a process that will get us there.

Let us address the questions we have raised:

- Is there a role for civic activist organizations in the struggle against authoritarians? The key phrase is “activist”.

Definitely yes: activists are the core engines of change. Without action, plans and lofty ideas are frozen dead letters. Civic activists have more latitude and flexibility to press for the peoples agenda since they don't have the **burden** of contending for political power.

Are civic activist organizations to be relegated to a mere complaint archivist?

No. activist civic societies are not complaint archivist even though registering in an institutionalized manner the damage done to the people is part of their responsibility and task. Their role is more strategic in the deeper sense than that of political organizations with specific political programs. Protecting the constitution, the rule of law, basic rights of the citizen is not affiliated to specific political programs: It transcendences specific ideological, political and social agenda.

- What is the difference between the so-called “mass organizations” and independent civic organizations?

Mass organizations are instruments of political control and manipulation both by right and left organizations. They do not serve, defend and advance their constituents interest independently. Independent civic organizations are accountable to the law of the land and their members only. They should not be secretly controlled or managed by political

organizations. They can be influenced and can influence the political and social discourses of the contending political organizations and the nation but they cannot be surrogates- that are secretly controlled and manipulated by the government or the opposition.

- How does conducting the struggle in Diaspora or exile affect the relationship between political and civic activist organizations?

Theoretically it should not. Since both are making effort to impact on the national politics away from the control of the authoritarian system they have more latitude to freely interact and express their perspectives. The challenge manifests when an effort is made to craft a working relationship in a context of building a broader umbrella against the authoritarian system. There is some lingering leftist residual culture that assumes civic organizations should subscribe to the political actor's (organizations) decisions and play a muted subsidiary role.

Crafting the agenda for the transition is all stakeholders' responsibility. To relegate this task to political actors only will be suicidal. The present agenda, leaving all its trappings and fanfare aside, it boils down to simply agreeing on the central idea that Isaias' regime must be removed and a transitional process must be implemented by the joint agreement of the stakeholders at home and in the diaspora.

Why should political parties get a special privilege and position in managing the collaborative transitional agenda crafted by all stakeholders? The umbrella organizations designed to facilitate collaborative effort cannot and should not be used as a pre-positioning and leveraging instrument for the post Isaias democratically administered elections. The commitment to work together and build a genuine trust that could help us expedite a transition to democracy is the only relevant concrete agenda at this critical time. To assume, leave alone to contemplate, that this cardinal national task is the sole proclivity and domain of political organizations is entertaining deliberate political naiveté.

- Is the relationship between political and civic activist organizations during the struggle against authoritarian systems (pre-transition) adversarial by definition?

By definition it is not adversarial. Cumulated political arrogance from the years of the armed struggle has left negative marks. Challenging and reversing this negative entrenched trend is not an easy task. The regime in power excels in this culture: Top down- no alternative voices. The leopard cannot change its spots. Political organizations that are persecuted in absentia, denied the right to be present inside Eritrea and existing in exile under the protection of democratic governments have to be short sighted and even a bit afraid when they take civic activist association or organizations as adversaries and contenders. When you run a country, by the grace of the vote of the people you will have political power for a prescribed period to administer and manage the affairs of the nation. Managing a collaborative anti- authoritarian umbrella is not running a country. ‘We dictate-you decorate’ is not the posture of future democratic leadership. Removing the tyrant, crafting and executing a transition agenda is a shared national responsibility by all stakeholders. Are Civic societies stakeholders in this shred national responsibility? Yes, definitely yes! When confronted with this kind of ill-advised adversarial posture the relationship between civic and political organizations become adversarial.

‘Wait until we get to Asmara to have your say and to be legally sanctioned to exist’ is not a democratic tendency. Civic activist organizations cannot be deterred or derailed by this kind of thinking. If political organizations were to resolve Eritrea’s political jigsaw puzzle, they would have done it long time ago. The record is transparent- hegemony at all cost has been the overriding mantra and strategy. The reason is now becoming more vivid: inclusive style-work and the desire to pull together ALL diverse Stakeholders has never been the most dominate Eritrean political culture. If you start by pushing away and minimizing the contribution of activist civic

societies what group will be marginalized next? We cannot construct democracy on this kind of foundation.

- Can political and civic activist organizations work collaboratively in coalitions and umbrellas? What are the parameters?

The simple and straightforward answer is yes they can and more importantly they should do synergic work to save the people and the State of Eritrea.

We are here today in a respectful way to understand past mistakes and ask what is that we need to do in order to pull together and address our collective national responsibility in a transformative and collaborative manner.

It will help if we are cognizant of the fact many organizations both civic and political are not sharing this spirited meeting today. We have to assume that they are here in spirit. The conversation we are sharing will resound beyond these walls. In that sense we have to resoundingly affirm that all stakeholders will come together and expand the dialogue as we progress forward by expanding the dialogue.

Previous experiences have shown our shortcomings in coalition and umbrella formations. In general there are “five stages of coalition development” (1), namely, Pre-formation, formation, implementation, maintenance and institutionalization. We somehow manage the first two out of the “5 stages” reasonably well:

We fumble very frequently, when it comes to the implementation, maintenance and institutionalization.

We need to jointly barnstorm about this critical shortcoming openly and honestly. Suffice to say that without developing the skill sets and the talents that can help us reach the later three critical stages our umbrella development, no matter how gallantly articulated, the result will be the continuation of the state of paralysis that is permeating our struggle.

What are the parameters that will help us pull together to make meaningful contributions:

Coalition development is both an organizational issue as well an intricate art. Political will or desire alone will not make it happen. We need a vast focused training program on coalition development that takes the **4 “C”s** (2) into account: **Conditions, Commitment, Contribution and Compliance-**

Under what conditions are our coalition built?

What is the level of commitment by all actors to the set process and agenda?

What specific contribution- skill sets- are the stakeholders bringing to the coalition?

The most sensitive and the unavoidable question: what is the competence level of the leadership and the staff assigned to help implement the officer’s responsibility? Do we have the right people at the right office to manage and deliver the coalition’s mission? If not how do we address some of the skill deficit that comes as a result of a fair democratic leadership election? What mechanism is needed to reconcile (bridge) the democratic process and the desire to match the right skill to the agenda implementation?

We ask these questions not for intellectualization but with the hope that some **process** will be engineered to seriously address the questions in the context of the task ahead of us.

EGS knows its limitation as a civic activist organization. It has no illusion about political power. It will join hands with all political and civil organization to do its share to:

- ✓ “To help in the formation, structuring and consolidation of the necessary organizational mechanism to bring all stakeholders under one broad-based umbrella
- ✓ Outline a pragmatic roadmap to democratic transition

- ✓ The installation of a democratically elected government by the people of Eritrea as the result of the transition.
- ✓ Post-election EGS in collaboration with all civic organizations and hopefully with the support of the political organizations will work twice as hard to institutionalize civic principles and organizations as an integral part of the Eritrean polity.

EGS sincerely thank EFND, the organizers of this conference. We appreciate their commitment and dedication. We also thank all sister organizations that have enriched this conference in words and deeds, by making the sacrifice to be present.

We appeal to sister organizations that did not make it to this meeting to join the process and enrich it by their presence moving forward.

Thank you,

Eritrean Global Solidarity –EGS

October 24, 2014

1. Coalitionsworks.com –Coalitions start-up tools
2. (Adapted from Mizrahi, T. and Rosenthal, B. (1986). Social change coalitions: toward a synthesis of theory and practice. Unpublished Paper-  
[http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/ecco/coalition\\_project/c.htm](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/ecco/coalition_project/c.htm), some ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF COALITION DEVELOPMENT-THE FOUR "C"s,