

IS ATSE ISIAS'S BOUNDLESS ARROGANCE GAINING STEAM OR DIMINISHING?

By: Abdu Habib

sabbahar@rocketmail.com

We daily live, go to school, work, and rub shoulders with some arrogant people who think they are the smartest and show the tendency to lecture and advise, unwilling to accept advice from others, acknowledge mistakes, learn, grow and change. This is very worrisome because their I-know-it-all and “I am the best to think for the good of the people” mentality alienate all those around them, leaving them like an island man. Here the damage is double: to themselves and to the community or the society in which they live. This is simply when we talk about an ordinary citizen who is arrogant. Imagine: ***What will be the extent of the damage to the country, its people, and its relations with others outside its borders when the arrogant person is the leader of the country?*** This is the source of all calamities, be it political, social, economic, cultural or related to international relations for some countries that were unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of arrogant leaders.

Anybody will agree with Mfonobong Nsehe, the Kenyan journalist working as a contributor for Forbes, who, in his article, **“The Five Worst Leaders in Africa”**, wrote in February 2012 that “Good governance is gaining ground in Africa.” Nsehe, as a matter of fact, did not hide his concern that the progress regarding the liberalization of the political environment or democratization process is taking place at snail speed. Regardless of its slow speed, it is absolutely true that the liberalization and the democratic process is making some African leaders more accountable to their citizens and forcing them to give more respect for human rights and civil liberties. However, Nsehe indeed recognized that, “...the bad eggs still linger.” Pushing his argument one step further, I would refer to Eritrea that should be among those he called “the bad eggs”, as “the most rotten egg in Africa”, taking his choice of **The Five Worst Leaders in Africa** as incomplete because he did not consider the Eritrean ruler in his study. I will discuss, at the end of the article, in what ways these five African leaders are better than Atse Isias.

Eritrea, that has not gained anything from its independence, is one of these unfortunate countries governed by arrogant leaders. Its citizens are among those at the bottom of the ladder in everything: rule of law or good governance, social-economic development, technology, infrastructure, cordial relations with the neighbouring

countries...etc. In fact, the Eritrean people lament the days of the Dergue in terms of everything mentioned above. Accordingly, many readers would agree with me that the responsibility for all misfortunes and miseries of the country squarely lies on the 26-year decadent rule of the arrogant leader, who has deprived Eritreans from exercising their basic citizen rights and kept them in chains. This way, every Eritrean citizen living inside the country is serving a life sentence.

As an arrogant leader, Atse Isias operates under the belief that he is a self-confident leader, attributing many false things to himself, without realizing that he has crossed the dividing line. It is noteworthy that these false beliefs about himself cause severe harm to his success as a leader because leadership automatically repels arrogance. To many people, confidence and arrogance are separated by a fine line because of some similarities. However, they are two poles apart, if examined thoroughly. This will lead us to the question: ***Where do we draw the line of demarcation between the two concepts?***

Self-confidence is the trust the person has of himself, knowing his strengths and weaknesses properly and accepting them gracefully. In the case of the self-confident person, knowledge about his/her abilities and competence comes from within. Of course, as a human being, he/she would feel good when told that he/she is better at some things than others and finds gratification in that praise. Nonetheless, he/she would not be dependent upon that gratification. This is to say that he/she uses his/her talent and competence to achieve a task and succeeds because of his/her abilities, displaying his/her ability only when necessary. This way, he/she displays a pleasing personality that makes others comfortable. That is why a confident person is liked by most people and can make long lasting relationships with others.

On the contrary, the most common definition of arrogance is "offensive display of superiority or self-importance; overbearing pride". This should not be mistakenly taken as "a belief in one's ability". With respect to arrogance, the belief in the ability is rather an exaggerated version in the sense that it reflects invincibility or the feeling that he/she cannot be conquered, defeated or subdued. In particular, the ability here is used to look down upon others. Accordingly, the arrogant person always thinks he/she is right and superior, and is dependent on validation. All in all, the difference between an arrogant person and a self-confident one is not on abilities, but on ensuring a calm control over oneself. That is why an arrogant person is unbearable for others to live or work with and it becomes difficult for him/her to have long lasting relationship with others. In any case, it will be helpful for further discussion to note here that the

extreme form of arrogance is narcissism or narcissistic personality disorder, which is a more appropriate term to describe the behavior of Eritrea's dictator.

The above discussion will take us to the question: ***Why do we think that Atse Isias suffers from arrogance or narcissistic personality disorder?*** In this connection, I would use the criteria as set by the psychologists Oldham and Morris in 1991, asking the reader to check if each of the following questions I have formulated on basis of the criteria reflects the reality of Atse Isias. Meanwhile, I bet that you will find most, if not all, features listed below as perfect fit:

- Does he react to criticism with feelings of rage, shame or humiliation, even if they are not sometimes expressed? Just to remind you: ***Don't you see that the measures of revenge he took and has been taking against his comrades of arms (the G-15, the Maihabar veterans, and other critics and detractors until today) show that he meets this criterion?***
- Does he take advantage of others to achieve his own ends? Just remember his pre-independence and post-independence history on how he got rid of his comrades one by one, after using them to achieve some of his goals.
- Does he show a grandiose sense of importance by exaggerating his achievements and talents, and expecting to be noticed as "special" without appropriate merits? If you are a follower of current affairs, you would know the way Donald Trump is conducting himself in his tweets, speeches, interviews, and executive orders since he became President of the US. ***Could we draw parallels between Trump's behavior and the way Atse Isias behaves?***
- Does he believe that his imaginary problems (or the problems of the country he thinks are his) are unique and can be understood only by other special people? Just review his speeches and how public listeners are lost in the middle, unable to figure out what he is talking about.
- Is he preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power and brilliance? To instill humour in it, may I ask: ***Does his daily retreat to the infamous embankment or "Dega" in the vicinity of Asmara say something about this point?***

- Does he have unreasonable expectations of especially favourable treatment? No doubt, those who had worked with him would tell lots of anecdotes from first hand experiences.
- Does he require constant attention and admiration (fishing for compliments)?
- Does he lack empathy for others and the ability to recognize and experience how others feel? It suffices to remember how he describes the youth drowning in thousands so often in the Mediterranean Sea while fleeing the country.
- Is he preoccupied with feelings of envy and disdain for others? Those who had worked with him could write lengthy articles about this point.
- Does he hesitate to act antagonistically towards his opponents, real or perceived, going to the extent of physical liquidation?

As all criteria above are perfectly relevant to him, to me, he is an arrogant or a narcissist ruler; not a great leader as his supporters try to depict him. I do not need to waste time by showing how these arrogant/narcissist characteristics are damaging the country, its people, resources, past, present, and future. It is obvious.

Based on the detailed discussion above, we are now ready to see if Atse Isias's arrogance/narcissism is gaining steam or diminishing at the present time. Due to the fact that nothing could take place in a vacuum, we need to see the internal, regional, and international situations under which his arrogance would gain steam or diminish.

On the internal situation of the country, we can say that there is no incentive for Atse Isias to improve his relations with the governed, from whom his regime is deeply estranged. The Atse knows that his regime is going down the ditch because the struggle for justice and democracy is getting deeper every day (though in dribs and drabs). With this in mind, anyone in the right mind would imagine that the delusional Atse, who is drunk with power, may think that bowing down to the almighty Gulf dollar may save him from his people. It is not difficult to imagine that his deformed perception of reality does not allow him to foresee that the sweet-heart deal with the Gulf, which is a temporary show and not an on-going feature, will soon stop and reality will begin. Consequently, as the honey moon with the Gulf ends and it will sooner than later, he will be more isolated, financially weaker, and forced to stand on his toes, while the movement for justice and democracy will fight tooth and nail. At the same time, those civil and military servants who had been misguided and naive are defecting daily,

showing remorse for what they had done to the people, while dissent and anarchy in the army is taking an alarming direction, sending a sharp-edged message to him and his loyalists. Corruption is daily getting harsher and more disgusting, increasing the resentment of the people. Besides, his generals and the entourage are becoming greedier; a fact which has made them fight on spoils. The clear signs of the collapse of the regime have placed the decent ones among his subordinates between a proverbial rock and hard place. All these will definitely make his arrogance gain steam, in an attempt to make his grip tougher.

Assessment of the regional situation shows that the success Ethiopia is showing in all fields is becoming a big source of frustration for Atse Isias and is leaving a sour taste on his mouth. To his dismay, foreign investment, covering among others, Saudi, Moroccan and other Arab projects, is intensifying, the Renaissance Dam is near completion and will guarantee cheaper energy for development of the country and its neighbours, while industrial, agro-industrial and agricultural expansion is changing the face of the country. Moreover, educational, health and other social services, including the construction of infrastructure, are remarkably increasing by leaps and bounds. The saddest message for Atse Isias, and which he will take under his skin, is that the protests against the Ethiopian Government have died out and his Ginbot 7 Movement has failed to win the hearts and minds of the Ethiopian people, who seem to look to the movement as a mercenary group; not an opposition organization. At the same time, ESAT, which Atse Isias and the Egyptian Government are accused of financing, has turned down its voice that roared for months, telling the people that the days of the “Wayane” are surprisingly numbered (We no more hear: “Qay Card Lesatachow Naw”). Add to that, it seems that the people found ESAT emotional and controversial in terms of telling the truth (they never mention the economic and other achievements, and praise vandalism and destruction caused by protesters), as well as far from being national or all-inclusive.

Followers of current developments in the region confirm that Gulf countries are consolidating their relations with Djibouti and Somaliland, sending a message to Atse Isias that they are preparing reliable alternatives that could provide them with services and port facilities they need for the war in Yemen, conveying to him, if not explicitly, they are aware that he is not predictable and that they are watching his suspicious rapprochement with the Sisi of Egypt. The feeling that he could be left out on the cold, to make him appear as a laughing stock in front of the Ethiopians, is unbearable and devastating for the light-skinned arrogant Atse.

The government of the Sudan, that is his only ally in the region, is facing serious opposition and is getting more isolated with the return from exile of Sadiq Al Mahdi, the leader of Umma Party and the elected Prime Minister ousted by Al Bashier. Correspondingly, the escalation of the activities of the opposition is getting out of control, putting Al Bashier on a hot seat. In addition, reports have it that Al Bashier has unleashed the Janjaweed militias to chase the Eritrean youth who flee the country and head towards the Libyan border, capturing and handing them over to the government, which in its return is handing them over to the Eritrean regime. Nonetheless, the hostile activities of the Janjaweed could not thwart the flow of the determined Eritrean youth through the porous Sudanese-Libyan borders. ***Doesn't this arrangement of the Eritrean regime with its counterpart in the Sudan show how hard its credibility in front of the EU is hit by the continuation of the flow of the youth fleeing the country in greater numbers? What did the EU countries benefit from the money given to the regime to stop the flow of refugees and act as their shield?*** All these show the size of the worries of the Eritrean regime and to what extent it is losing its balance.

To complete the picture about the factors that would force Atse Isias to increase his arrogance, we need to consider the international situation too. Regarding the international factor, it is crystal clear that we are living at the age of arrogance illustrated by the behaviours, policies, rhetoric, and speeches, and executive orders of the new leader of the free world, the newly elected US President, Donald Trump. Just see where he is leading the world and to what extent he is playing a role model for corrupt African dictators, forming an international alliance of the right-wing extremists, attracting butchers of their peoples to flirt with him, and encouraging arrogant candidates of his kind to come to power in the West, where elections are fast approaching. ***What do arrogant African rulers learn from the leader of the free world who has habitual liking for yelling, cursing, bad-mouthing others, and belittling colleagues, as well as showing little tolerance for opposing viewpoints? What do they learn from the leader who says that he is "...running a war with the media."*** Consequently, observers fear that all future elections in Europe would bring governments of generals and billionaires to power. This international situation will be one of the factors, combined with the internal and regional ones discussed above, to set the stage for the arrogance/narcissism of Atse Isias to gain steam; instead of being diminished. This will give the Atse and his likes in the region "Yeheb Leb" to go ahead and be a more arrogant sword on the necks of their peoples. It will give him a ray of hope to see the UN sanctions lifted with the help of the new US administration.

Simply put, the Eritrean Atse is as happy as his equally anti-people, destructive, and arrogant friend, General Sisi of Egypt, would think that his American saviour has come and that dancing on Trump's music will enable him to weaken the struggle for justice and democracy and prolong the life of his decadent regime. Arrogance will undoubtedly increase and more devastation of Eritrea is eminent, but the more arrogance and the resulting destruction increase, the more favourable conditions for the people to rise against their oppressor will be created. In few words, we will see the darkest hour that precedes dawn in Eritrea.

If the miseries of our people are the result of the arrogance of the butcher, then the question is: ***Where does he belong in a ranked list of African leaders?*** Different researchers have come up with different ranked lists of The Ten Worst African Leaders at different times. The one which attracted me most was the list of **The Five Worst Leaders in Africa**, prepared by Journalist Mfonobong Nsehe in 2012, quoted in my introduction. I was attracted to it because it was the most recent I could find. Journalist Mfonobong Nsehe's list includes the following, though he did not say whether it was arranged in ascending or descending order. The five leaders he lists as the worst leaders in Africa are:

1. *Teodoro Obiang Mbasogo, President of Equatorial Guinea*
2. *José Eduardo dos Santos, President of Angola*
3. *Robert Mugabe, President of Zimbabwe*
4. *King Mswati III, King of Swaziland*
5. *Omar Al-Bashir, President of the Sudan*

As you could see, the list does not include Atse Isias, whom we consider to be the worst dictator in Africa. That has made the list incomplete, but the question which imposes itself is: ***In what ways is the governance in these five countries better than that of Atse Isias?*** Through the modest study I had made, I have the following to answer the question:

- All of them have constitutions, including the smallest African country Swaziland, an absolute monarchy of 17,364 Square kilometers and a population of less than two million. Swaziland has both a Senate (members appointed by the King) and a House of Assembly with 65 seats (55 of them elected by their constituencies).

- In addition to the head of the state, all have either V-President or Prime Minister.
- Except in the Monarchy of Swaziland, the people elect their heads of state, though we know that the election is not fair and just. At least they have taken a direction in which people have started participating, and that could grow with time. As Western democracy took ages to evolve, this is better than no election. We cannot develop something we have not started. Day One has to begin.
- Except the Monarchy of Swaziland, all have a multi-party system, though one party dominates. In the African reality, this is still better than one party system. Power sharing could come slowly but surely, as long as the direction is introduced.
- None of the five countries, including the Sudan and Zimbabwe, has human rights records as shocking and as dreadful as that of Eritrea of Atse Isias. The report of the Commission of Inquiry about the Human Rights in Eritrea negatively excels any of their records. I cannot imagine human rights records worst than those included in that report.
- At least, all have functioning branches of government, though the influence of the executive branch is obviously dominant. In the case of Eritrea, division of labour, even in its lowest form, does not exist. It is notoriously a one-man show.
- Saving the monarch in *Swaziland*, which is natural for a monarchy, out of the four presidents only one of them (Teodorin Obiang of Equatorial Guinea) has his first son in line to succeed his father. **Is Atse Isias different from the King of Swaziland and Teodorin Obiang of Equatorial Guinea in this regard?** We hear a lot of news about the on-going efforts focused on preparing Abraham Isias for succession, by giving him military and now political training at the hands of foreign and Eritrean experts. Though nobody could rule out the possibility of the existence of such plan of succession, it remains to be seen. In particular, if this is true, it is not surprising but extremely shocking that our people are treated like a property, or slaves, passing from the father to the son. What a shame!
- Only one of them, Teodorin Obiang of Equatorial Guinea, is accused of cannibalism (eating parts of the bodies of his political opponents). As long as Atse Isias kills his political opponents by letting them languish in jail, finally to

die, or through direct physical liquidation, one would ask: **In what way is cannibalism worse than that? Which is more painful for the victim: the murder in Isias's way or eating the body parts after killing the opponent, as the President of Equatorial Guinea is accused of?** The Arabs say: "La uelem Ashat Al Salkh Bad Zebhiha" (Peeling its skin is no more painful for the goat, after it has been slaughtered). Killing people in the way it is done in Eritrea is another form of cannibalism.

- For sure, there are less political detainees and prisoners of conscience in each country than Eritrea, and less torture and abuse of humanity too. We cannot imagine the total absence of due process of law we are familiar with in Eritrea exists in kind and degree elsewhere in the world.
- Unlike Eritrea, we have never heard about compulsory and indefinite military conscriptions in any of the five countries. Eritrea is second to none regarding such inhuman program.
- With regard to communication and media, there should be a better Internet access and less control in each of these countries than Eritrea, and the same goes to cell phone services too. As far as listening to foreign and opposition radio broadcast or watching non-Eritrean TV stations is concerned, the surveillance common in Eritrea is unheard of elsewhere in Africa.
- Isn't the unique flow of refugees from Eritrea the only of its kind in Africa?

In a nutshell, Atse Isias would have been among those (if not the first) ***The Five Worst Leaders in Africa*** Mfonobong Nsehe wrote about. ***But why did the author fail to include Atse Isias in his list?*** The author explains how he prepared the list saying:

"Late last year, I put a call through to my African followers on Twitter to nominate the worst African leaders of our times. I received over 800 responses. Based on these responses, these are the five worst African leaders of today."

I would add two reasons on top of what he had to say. As he wrote in February 2012, the Report of the Human Rights Commission of Inquiry about Eritrea was not published yet (It was published in June 2015). Accordingly, we cannot expect him to know concrete things about the human rights records in Eritrea. The second reason is based on the assumption that the over 800 responses he had received might have not included any from Eritreans. ***Who is to blame for the exclusion of Atse Isias from the***

list of the Five Worst African Leaders then? It seems that we Eritreans in the opposition, including the political organizations, websites, human rights organizations, civic organizations, independent activists and intellectuals never cast our net wider in a way that enables us to have access to all African forums, media outlets (of whom Forbes is one) and social networks African intellectuals are connected with, and use them to weaken and isolate the regime. ***Isn't this an important lesson for all of us to learn?***

Arrogance/narcissism, as a disorder of self-esteem and exaggerated self-aggrandizement, is essentially considered to be a cover-up and self-destructive because it blinds personal and business judgment. The glaring example that a political leader intoxicated with power can cause devastating effects on the country is evolving in front of the eyes of the world in the current US administration. The Eritrean experience, though it is the most horrible example of how arrogance devastates the country, the world has no chance to see and hear because everything is totally sealed from the eyes and ears of the world. Nevertheless, the world can tell from the results they clearly see (exodus of the youth itself is enough to tell volumes to the world community), connecting cause and effect. By and large, it should be emphatically said that the conventional wisdom tells that arrogant leaders have a hard time recovering from this disease and that they finally fail, no matter how smart and competent they are. ***Is Atse Isias hoping to succeed where all other arrogant leaders of the world have failed?***

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