

The Eritrean Atlanta & Denver Festivals of 2018

That both festivals – the first of their kind – had taken place in 2018 was no small feat. For these festivals to take place in the heels of the major peace event between Eritrea and Ethiopia, however, is a stroke of luck for the public to push both the opposition political blocks and the civil societies to rise to the occasion and deliver the goods. The public was in no mood for politics as usual. They want to see action. They want to see a strategic plan with a blueprint to boot. As sheer coincidences would have it eight Eritrean intellectuals* were there to offer some such blueprint for the taking – No condition. No interest in assuming power. Willing to incorporate any other ideas to make the document, not only as robust as possible, but also one where this road map could become a rallying cry for the mass movement that Eritreans are ready and willing to support. Simply put, these eight individuals are a think-tank who devoted their time, energy, and knowledge so majority of Eritreans can work under some common principles to achieve the direly needed change in the homeland. This observational piece will mainly focus on the produced blueprint, which is now available in three languages, namely Tigrinya, Arabic, and English. Using Denver and Atlanta as sites of contention, “a discursive space”, if you will, will provide a portrait of the dialogue that ensued.

A Discursive Space

A discursive space in the context of the subject at hand is premised on the notions of sociocultural and linguistic theory that homes-in-on recurring episodes. The face-to-face engagement calls attention to these recurring themes and tries to highlight the direction of the discourse through thematic episodes. In the case of the Denver and Atlanta festivals, a sociopolitical space can be added and the use of

the blue-print document is one episodic example that will have social, cultural, and political subtext to the mass movement where the public is driving the discourse. The civil societies and political opposition groups can become the conduit via which these people-centered mass movements are made realizable.

Engaged Public is Empowered Public

What was fascinating to this observer is the fact that the audience was not only assertive but unwilling to settle for business-as-usual or to the reversion of the status quo ante, if you will. Hence, discussions were tense, where the organized groups wishing to operate as they have been for the past 18 years while the audience wanted the organized groups to adapt the road map. The triangulation of the discourse appears to rest at the seams, where the empowered public demanded, in the case of the Atlanta festival, that two representatives of the blue-print were given extra time to answer some more questions, elaborate further on the road map. This was one shining example in what could happen when the public is empowered and engaged. The kind of dynamic discourse that the Atlanta festival proffered; the kind that could conceivably work in offering an integrative and principled strategies of resistance that majority of Eritreans can use as a launching pad to elevate the discourse and achieve the needed change through social and political justice was clearly in the offing.

The fluidity and the breathtaking speed by which the peace process between Eritrea and Ethiopia that the Eritrean public was made to observe has created this unprecedented empowering public discussion of counterpoise, counteract, pivot, and paradigmatic change of a perspective that the civil societies and the political opposition groups appear to have not been ready to embrace. This is the reason

why the blue-print (the road map) had gotten the kind of enthusiastic attention that it did.

The Blue Print and/or the Road Map

One of the key elements to staying relevant in civil and political discourse rests in the ability of those who are engaged in it to be keenly aware where the mood of the public is when major events of monumental import take place. Once aware the leaders cannot remain behind the public and expect to lead from behind. They must quickly adjust not only their tone and rhetoric but also come up with a road map that clearly shows they can lead from the front. What the eight Eritreans offered was nothing short of that. For the most part, the document they produced is the Universal Human Rights Declaration that the UN issued in 1948. As Dr. Selah Nur and Mr. Sengal Woldetensae explicated in the Atlanta Festival is that they customized it to fit to the Eritrean context by adding five principles so it can be used by any Eritrean activists who wish to advance the cause of social and political justice.

The other critical element to these eight individuals worth mentioning here is that they have no interest in assuming political or civil leadership based on the road map. In fact, they have varying interest in political organizations, in civil societies, in many other community related activities. What brought them together is the shared interest they have for Eritrea, the country, and for the good will toward the Eritrean people who continue to see an unprecedented suffering. These are accomplished individuals in their respective field of endeavors. They don't need Eritrea to survive. Eritrea, however, needs exemplary Eritrean professionals like these eight individuals who put the interest of Eritrea and its people ahead of their own interest.

Granted, many other skilled Eritreans will find some points to add here and points that can be rephrased, points to be molded, adjusted, amended in the road map. And that's precisely why I am choosing to share these documents with various social media outlets, the first of which, of course, is my home-turf, awate. The Tigrinya and Arabic translations will follow in due course, of course. In other words, attending the Atlanta Festival the weekend of August 3-5 gave me optimism, albeit guarded one, that finally Eritreans are overcoming their suspicions of one another's motives; the festival has had characteristics that any discursive space would have, namely elements of resistance, frustrations, heated arguments, layered, at times, in blunt language and at other times in nuanced ways. In the end, however, what invariably prevails tends to be what an engaged public wanted. In my estimate, the latter was exactly what occurred in Atlanta as a spectacle of contention. Sites of contention tend to be the source of where new way of looking at issues begin to emerge, and emerging they have. What needs to happen now is for these eight individuals to expand their work with an eye toward Europe, another site of contention, a site of demonstration in Geneva, which is slated to take place at the end of this month.

From a discursive space standpoint, certainly, the Atlanta festival is an extension of the Denver festival. The Europe festival can now become an extension of these two festivals. The blue print or the road map as its episodic event can tie them all to become one robust Eritrean mass movement that will ostensibly reverberate in the homeland.

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P.S. As an outsider looking in, there was one powerful subtext from the audience that I am compelled to mention that pushed the conversation onward to a positive direction. Of course, I am cognizant of the fact that a discourse of the sort I described above materializes because of give and take from all involved, but there was one constant theme, one who was intensely focused individual who pushed the discourse, namely Kibrom "Santim," forward. My hats off to him irrespective of his aggressive stance, he was not only on point on all the interventions he made in the middle of the conversation, but was also forward looking. This is my small way of saying may the likes of Kibrom speak more and more in some such public arenas.
