

Dawn for Peace or start for new cycle of conflict

I remember a story at the start of the peak of the Eritrean independence struggle, at a rally to support the Derg regime in 1975 in Addis Ababa, an honest gentleman, from a business background questioned the demonstrators who were chanting, "Eritrea would not be sold or exchanged". After thinking carefully to their emotional slogan, he asked them, "My children, if there is a profit, why not sell or exchange Eritrea?" It is true the gentle man may not be a politician, but if the Ethiopians thought wisely, restrain from their expansionist, oppressive and aggressive policies to crush the determined freedom fighters of Eritrea, and saw the profit of a peaceful solution to the problem through negotiation, the disaster that occurred after 1975 might have been prevented, and the course of the two countries could be much better. Almost after 43 years, we are in a dangerous cross-road from a different bidder that proposes Eritrea for sell or exchange. This is not from the honest gentleman of Addis Ababa, but from the very people supposed to defend from being sold or exchanged.

Dr Abiy Ahmed and his followers at the moment are promoting new special type of politics based on the mathematical calculus of addition, to change the course of history by re-uniting Ethiopia the mother with the lost daughter Eritrea. Although I do not know how Dr Ahmed worked his calculations, I am certain for the success of their aim, they found a failed statesman, dictator Wedi Afom, who is only concerned about his personal profit. Thus, the bid received a right dealer in Dr Ahmed the young charismatic leader who dream to restore the greatness of Ethiopia to the delight of many Ethiopian chauvinists. By selling Eritrea, the dictator thinks he can get a new outlet from the hole he dug to isolate Eritrea, as means of consolidating his power and crush with no mercy anyone who oppose his tyrannical practice or those who demanded reform. Until now no explanation is given for those tens of thousands murdered or being imprisoned by the regime security forces. For Dr Ahmed, a love preacher, when whole-heartedly embracing unrepentant evil tyrant, it becomes a step to far for us for any credibility to his approach in solving the Ethio-Eritrean problem.

From the two visits (first to Asmara by Ethiopian PM and then its reciprocal by the Eritrean Dictator to Addis Ababa), many key issues became clearly exposed. Firstly, like their predecessors, the new Ethiopian rulers who rejoiced to celebrate the arrival of a vicious dictator, or their followers who were wildly dancing in their hundreds of thousands in the streets of Addis Ababa are either insensitive or careless to the pain suffered to millions of Eritreans under his rule. Secondly, the reaction shown by the Ethiopian leaders gives an impression in line with their addition philosophy, that they are only cared about how to add Eritrea into their realm. Thirdly, although ending the war and normalising relation with Ethiopia through proper diplomatic means is important, pretending as if there is no problem between the two sovereign nations is politics of deception as it dodges the reason for the death of more than 100,000 people from both sides in the 1998-2000 war ignited by the dictator. A viable peace requires a bedrock foundation not a quicksand.

For whatever reason, the Eritrean Dictator repeatedly asserted the unity of Ethiopia is more important than demarcation of the border. This is interpreted as the desire to keep Eritrea as part of Ethiopia, as border demarcation is the primary stage of national sovereignty. Without clearly demarcated border with our all neighbouring countries then we cannot say we have a free, independent and sovereign Eritrean nation. At the same time, it is important to understand that border issues are settled through negotiation between the legitimate governments of countries of interest. I never believed border issues should be settled through war. In 1998 I was one of those who opposed the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. This is not because I was Ethio-phile, but as I am a victim of the independence war, I clearly understood the dreadful outcome of a war. I consciously decided to oppose the war and avoided beating the dictator's disguised drums of war intended to annihilate the Eritrean youth. The name given to all those who oppose the war by PFDJ was traitors or mercenaries of Woyane.

We can ask the question, "Who betrayed the Eritrean nation, the ordinary citizens like me and my colleagues that never have any weight or influence to say in the decision-making process or the man at the head of the regime, so powerful to make or break the nation, who ignited the border war as pretext to consolidate his grip in power?" Yet, despite the facts before our eyes on the ground, the question of betrayal or being mercenary is not in the menu. Contrary to what needed to be done, at the moment this powerful man is claiming the war was senseless, and the borders between Ethiopia and Eritrea is meaningless. Furthermore, when the two leaders met the root cause of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict is not addressed. From what we saw, Dr Ahmed preferred to bypass the root cause of the problem as this question would derail his ambition to groom the shadowy pariah Eritrean dictator from cold. This would not fool any decent Eritrean, as the aim of all Eritreans started to converge towards finding the truth and justice to the war crime committed in the name of defending the Eritrean boarder.

The new Ethiopian leaders precisely understand the unpredictable nature of the Eritrean dictator. Without any regret and formal apology, I do not believe recently we witnessed new "road to Damascus" miracle on the Eritrean dictator. Once the former US president, Mr Obama stressed not to be fooled by appearance saying "A pig will remain a pig." Dictator Isayas that started the 1998 war is the same dictator Isayas that now pretending as peace maker. Nothing has changed. After all the misery of the families from both sides of the border who sacrificed their children for "a senseless war", the dictator's Addis Ababa arrival did not deserve such passionate wild celebration. Eritreans never forget that the war with Ethiopia in 1998 is the single biggest cause for the death and casualties that followed to our youngsters, which is also the root source for the continuous bleeding and misery of Eritrea. As there is no accountability for the crimes of war committed by him, instead the visit of being a turning point to his illegitimate rule, the dictator will be emboldened to continue in his tyrannical practice. If the only thing on the table is love and the addition formula, with no accountability to the war crimes committed or to the human right abuse in Eritrea, then we are certainly heading soon to another disaster.

Out of the many problems, I would like to mention two main sources of conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia; the question of outlet to the sea and inter-ethnic relationships. In his speech at the Millennium Hall, Addis Ababa, to the delight of those hardened nationalists, Dr Ahmed brought the issue of Asab in his calculus menu in a very ambiguous way. Based on existing international law, he knows Asab is integral part of Eritrea and never been part of Ethiopia. When Eritrea declared independence, it included also Asab, as there could not be a partial independence. Therefore, for any viable peace, the Ethiopian leader need to stop from making such provocative statements about the port of Asab, as it is the main cause of our concern at this time for our sovereignty.

On the issue of inter-ethnic relationships at the level of people, we have wonderful people living next to our border with Sudan, Djibouti and Ethiopia. We also share the same ethnic identity with all of them. The conflict with Ethiopia has ethnic elements that need proper handling. It should be clear, any solution that side lines the Tigray or the Afar people would fail. Dictator Isayas is obsessed with fall of Woyane. My message to Dr Abiy Ahmed is that any meaningful reconciliation and peace must start from Tigray and Afar not from Addis Ababa, as such action would include the main protagonists of the conflict on both side of the border. If that process includes the Tigray and Afar political organisations, then it is possible to say that, there will be a light at the end of tunnel.

In conclusion, the opening of channels of communication between the two countries such as opening embassies, declaration of the end of war, resumption of transportation and telephone lines are some of the few but big positive steps taken to normalise the relationship. However, people say "the evil is in the detail", and except plenty of rhetoric, at the moment I could not able to see any concrete substance that address the long-term concerns of the Eritrean people, particularly on the issue of Eritrean sovereignty. In addition, peace requires a partner. As a leader Dr Ahmed represents the Ethiopian interest. I am not sure only love from one side and the proposed addition slogan would solve such complex bloody cycle of conflict that existed for over half century. To solve the problem, we need to have a clear road-map that respects the territorial integrity of Eritrea. The unpredictable Eritrean regime of dictator Isayas would not be the reliable partner for peace, as he is the type of person that tears any agreement even before the ink dried. We hope peace to have chance.

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