

DECLARING WAR ON THE TYRANNY OF MISTRUST: THE ONLY WAY TO SHORTEN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST ERITREA'S RULING GANG

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“When the water starts boiling it is foolish to turn off the heat.”

(Nelson Mandela: July 18, 1918-December 5, 2015)

I am tempted to introduce this piece by presenting a paradox. On the one hand, the majority of Eritreans have an intense love for their country, having successfully fought the longest war for national independence in modern history, which everybody was so optimistic to see it open the door wide for the opportunity to be a model African country. On the other hand, there is an equally large body of evidence showing that we Eritreans are in the grip of a new kind of tyranny other than the tyranny of the ruling gang that oppresses people in the ugliest manner known in history. That is the tyranny of mistrust (lack of trust and confidence on one another), which sits on a throne in our minds, just as cruel as Atse Isias and his gang, dividing us among ourselves and shoving aside the notion of common purpose. This will lead us to the central question: ***How is this tyranny of mistrust operating to undermine our struggle and prolong the life of the dictatorship in Eritrea turning the Eritrean dream into an Eritrean nightmare?***

As mistrust is about human bonds, its root causes, forms of manifestation, effects and the way it should be defeated would be surprisingly similar in all human societies, without denying the role the peculiarities in each society would play. This is precisely to suggest that

the question raised above could, by and large, be answered through a general discussion about the different aspects of mistrust.

Though the issue of the root causes of mistrust is a hard nut to crack, due to too much complexity involved, we are justified to say, to a large extent, these root causes could go back to the history of the country, one dimension of which is the process of socio-economic development. Regardless of the fact that socio-economic development is consistently uneven in nature, the disparity among different administrative regions, linguistic, religious and ethnic groups of countries under a colonial rule (s) would be expected to be more glaring and wider. It happens to be so by colonial design or due to the intentional colonial policies of divide and rule, in addition to the fact that colonial policies would be dictated by the national interests and the administrative requirements of the colonial power; not the needs of the colony or standard ethical values. These policies would reflect the absence of socio-economic justice, as characterized by the predominance of favouritism, cronyism, nepotism and corruption; all interfering with fairness. Put another way, in any colonial rule, fairness as the most important principle of justice, in both retribution and distribution, could not exist in the way Aristotle defined more than 2000 years ago saying: "Equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally."

Further, as African experiences confirm, this disparity could also be compounded or realistically addressed, as the case may be, depending on the nature of the consecutive governments of the post-independence era. If the post-independence governments were dictatorial regimes, whose legacies (like that of the ruling gang in

Eritrea) are known for displacement, erasure of superstructure (destroying traditional power structures, roles, rituals, and norms) and the ruin of the economy of the country, they would follow the same colonial policies of divide and rule, undermining the common good of the country and using favouritism, cronyism, nepotism and corruption, as the tools to tighten their grip and prolong their rule. In other words, due to the lack of fair and healthy competition, some administrative regions, linguistic, religious, and ethnic groups would be more advantaged in socio-economic development, specifically in terms of infrastructure, education, attention to issues of culture, job opportunities, distribution of wealth and power, than the neglected ones lagging behind (the disadvantaged ones). Naturally, the disadvantaged communities would develop the feeling that they had been taken advantage of, though the advantaged may not be the ones to be blamed for the disparity created but rather the governance. This is hugely important to grasp.

Another dimension of history that could be a root cause for mistrust is the political history of the country in which certain relationships (particularly negative trends) could develop between different regions, ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. It is important to note here that some tend to blame religion, though religion never divides a society but federates it instead. In a nutshell, the claim that religion divides a society is appallingly misleading. Nevertheless, religion could be used as a political tool to advance a political agenda. Moreover, contrary to what many tend to believe, we need to be mindful that history shows shared faith, in rare cases, has been a guarantee of fidelity.

As to the forms in which mistrust could manifest itself, we can enumerate the following:

- Fear and unjustified feeling of hyper sensitivity, which in an extreme case turns into paranoia.
- People who see each other with mistrust, usually over-attribute lack of trustworthiness to others (judgmental biases).
- The inclination to interpret the actions, thoughts, motives and behaviours of others in a disproportional self-referential manner, showing the belief, “We are the targets of the thoughts and actions of others”.
- Exaggerated perception of conspiracy. As a matter of fact, conspiracy theories find a fertile ground in mistrust.

To wind up the issue of how mistrust manifests itself, the question I choose to formulate, expecting everybody to answer it honestly to himself/herself, is: **Do we see many, if not most, of the interactions and exchanges among Diaspora Eritreans we hear, watch and read, after each important opposition event (conference, meeting, demonstration, committee election, presentation of recommendations, statement, initiative, live facebook presentation ...etc) outside these forms of manifestation?** It is this honesty that would enable us acknowledge our disabilities and responsibilities, subsequently leading us to the right solution, of greatest importance to the success of the struggle with which we proudly identify ourselves.

In a broader context, when we talk about the effects of mistrust in a society, we are talking about the absence of effective communication and effective social ties that leads to confusion and isolation. That is why some call mistrust “a social acid”. Accordingly, the net result of

mistrust is that the society would be locked into backwardness and underdevelopment. At least to my limited knowledge, the classic work of Edward C. Banfield (**The Moral Basis of a Backward Society**) is highly remarkable in showing the effects of mistrust. Banfield describes the problems challenging the democratic process of a small southern Italian village called Montegrano in 1950s. He depicts the inhabitants of the village as “chronically and cripplingly suspicious of everybody outside their immediate nuclear family.” This is an extreme case in degree, but as we have the problem of mistrust in kind, there is a lot to learn from this invaluable experience so that we could defeat that menace at an early stage.

We can proudly say that, unlike the West, our Eritrean society is solidly built on mutual trust, but the concern here is that our collective work as justice seekers in Diaspora has been badly affected by mistrust, though not totally paralyzed. Instead of feeling enough the pain of the people and work together full heartedly, we are on each other’s throat, though all justice seekers stand on the opposite side of the spectrum with the brutal regime. To be more specific, whenever a major opposition event takes place, as mentioned above, some fold-handed observers or arm-chair critics lash, belittle, or cast doubt on the motives of the event or initiative, with the aim of settling some scores with the prominent figures in the movement. We are not against criticism, as long as it is constructive, but it is better to come forward, join the group, and contribute in changing the weaknesses into strengths. After all, we do not run short of fighters (every Eritrean claims to be a fighter) but of wise men and women who could bring people together and help

them work in harmony for a common goal. This is the task of the time, not too much talk and politicking.

The bizarre episodes we are referring to are getting more frequent and more devastating daily, taking the form of facebook comments or live verbal condemnations and allegations that are either disgustingly abusive or unsubstantiated, giving one the impression that paranoia is full-fledged at work. On the flip side, some of the live presentations are highly enlightening, while others express grievances that are rightfully genuine, putting the finger on our disability to handle opposing political views or they genuinely show the absence of inclusiveness based on religious, ethnic or regional backgrounds. However, if we take the issue of inclusiveness, which is the most frequent complaint, the pressing question remains: **Could the issue of inclusiveness be settled by building bridges through calm and orderly interactions or through further polarizing statements and allegations?**

No doubt, the intention could be good, but the method may not achieve what has been desired for, if the reaction takes the form or shows the contents of an attack or even reflect an abusive nature. This is to say that the language and method should be measured enough so that the receiving end would not be engaged on back and forth exchanges of insults and attacks. At the same time, the language and method should not leave cracks that could be exploited by the adversaries. The saddest of all is when such unnecessary attacks come from prominent figures we believe they know consequences better than others and their dedication to the struggle has been tested for decades. When that happens, the surprise is like a heart attack.

Besides, whenever we encounter an interaction of this kind, the mind boggling question remains to be: ***Was the purpose of the communication an honest desire to correct a weakness or the individual wanted a fig leaf to attack and insult others?***

If the problem of inclusiveness turns to be that much alarming, we have to realize that rights are not given but earned, and the best way to secure our rights is by participating equally like others. If I believe that Muslims were not sufficiently represented in a newly formed committee in my city or town, the most productive measure I have to take is, not to leave the matter to the committee leaders, but take the initiative to form a nucleus group of like-minded Eritreans from the Muslim community so that the group could organize a well-coordinated campaign, knocking at doors, making telephone calls, using What's Up groups and other effective methods. This way, a greater number of Muslims will attend future meetings and elect those who represent them, influencing the direction of things and ensuring their input. This is what changes the situation in the way we want it to be; not blame game at the time the country is decomposing in our eyes and is at the mercy of a rotten human being .

By way of summarizing of the whole discussion, we can say that, instead of having constructive and cooperative relationship, we have become each other's greatest nightmare, failing to recognize what is at stake and see the consequences on the struggle against the regime. Consequently, the YEAKL CAMPAIGN, which has shocked the regime to its core and forced it to slow down flirting with Dr. Abiy, is not moving in the same momentum it had collected by the beginning of the year.

That is why the quotation of Nelson Mandela, as it appears at the top of the first page, is relevant and timely. The take out here is that, in order to defeat the tyranny of mistrust, which is bringing out the worst in us and hardening our hearts in the face of multiple national tragedies, taking new measures has become necessary. This takes us to the concluding question: **Could mistrust be defeated? If so, how?**

To begin with, mistrust is not new in our Eritrean political life. It existed since 1940s, but our Fathers who signed the Bait Georghis Accord broke free from the bonds of its tyranny, setting the foundation that bound us together, as a people and nation. That makes it appropriate to call them our Founding Fathers, and by using this name, we are not stealing from others. In fact, the name Founding Fathers is not a monopoly of any country, as each nation can have its own Founding Fathers.

To push the above argument further, one would ask: ***Do we see it wise to throw away the guarantees of the great force that made us Eritreans?*** If the answer is “NO”, then we need to discover the spirit of our Founding Fathers anew and declare war on mistrust, following these steps of dialogue that we can safely assume they had followed:

- Put the issue on the table for discussion.
- Listen to understand and learn; not to attack.
- Learn to forgive and admit your own mistakes.
- Make a deal that proves worthiness.

I wish I could see a survey that would give us sense as to what percentage of the Eritrean justice seekers are unable to remember who we are and what it has taken to come this far. Some may take our

history as a collection of names and dates one needs to memorize; not a set of stories to be absorbed and enjoyed. Let me add here, these stories have real relevance and meaning to our lives today at the time we debate issues like language, land, flag, constitution... name it. We do not deny that there were dilemmas and conflicts in our history, but we should not forget that they provided much of the excitement and dynamism of that history as well.

If we have full grasp and understanding of the way our people had confronted their problems and we have the wisdom and the decency to make the best use of our traditions and values to tackle our current problems, we will definitely have a better chance of being able to control our own destinies.

Our views on how to proceed in our struggle, as reflected in our writings, may not seem right to some, but at least we have the readiness to participate and not be passive bystanders in the ongoing drama that is a part of the history of Eritrea. I chose to formulate the conclusion of this piece this way, primarily, to remind the readers that the problems we are encountering at this phase of our struggle stem from one missing ingredient: civic education. As a concluding remark, it should be emphasized that civic education is the only tool that will help members of a society cultivate the virtues, knowledge, and the skills necessary to carry out their important role as citizens.

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