

Politics by Activists

At the end of the National Conference for Democratic Change (NCDC), some participants gave us a glowing assessment of the conference. A casual observer can discover only one participant who complained in public about the way the NCDC was conducted (Togoruba.org, “2010 Eritrean National Conference for Democratic Change” Amare G/Mariam).

For Eritrean people who are tired of bad news, good news can only be a welcome change – almost a relief. Although much can be learned from failure and adversity, in reality, only success can breed more success.

However, it would also be missed opportunity if we simply clap the success of NCDC without asking the hard questions. Nation-building isn't about niceties and politeness but about asking the tough questions and ensuring that critical issues are thoroughly debated. The days when the elitists believed that the public should be shielded from these tough questions and instead either should be cajoled, coerced or fooled is over. We remain very poor at creating trust amongst ourselves because of poor judgement, lack of experience, unrealistic expectations and inability to see the big picture.

Two weeks after the end of NCDC, for an event that is supposed to be the very “foundation” of the next “transitional” government, the opposition propaganda machine seems to be missing in action. For three hundred thirty ‘enthusiastic’ participants, there are no bursts of discussions on the public forum (esp. in cyber-space where the vast majority Eritreans get their political feed). Assenna.com has done a valiant effort to become a true field correspondent. But this is an individual effort than an organizational effort.

A casual observation would show that the opposition camp is generally losing the propaganda war despite the valiant efforts of such websites as asmarino, awate and assenna because the political camp remains at a loss. It has no common message, and even less creativity to carry it out. The PFDJ regime takes its propaganda very seriously and pours every resource into it. In reality, PFDJ has taken the political battle to the opposition turf in Diaspora than what it should have been - taking the political battle to PFDJ inside Eritrea. Between PFDJ's effective propaganda and the incompetence of the political opposition, Eritreans in Diaspora have chosen to straddle somewhere between apathy and “no other choice” lip-service supporters of the regime. Even those who strongly oppose the regime have chosen to express their displeasure privately by refusing to participate in the regime's never-ending schemes to collect money than through active opposition.

Enthusiasm and goodwill are good starting point. However, one is left with the nagging feeling that the NCDC participants' enthusiasm is based more on NO ONE throwing physical punches at each other than thoroughly debating issues. *In the end, we are told that everybody agreed on key issues, such as official language, that nearly everyone had agreed on for the last sixty years.* One guesses that every political group wants to validate the established political stands. Indeed, socio-political issues are dynamic and must be revisited once in a while. However, validation should be made based on *thorough and direct* research of the very group living in their natural habitat and affected by those issues. In other words, research can't be done by remote control.

As important as goodwill is, it is never a substitute for agreeing and promulgating organizations rules, modifying these rules as needed and sticking to these rules. Complainants should first tell us which

organizational rules were breached, and what they did to address their grievances. Instead, we are simply told endless stories around their grievances without giving context. Goodwill is good, but specific rules are even more important. The best time to create most rules is when we still have goodwill, not when goodwill is broken.

*Unfortunately many political activists express their views based on emotional reactions rather than political astuteness. It is a reflection of our lack of political experience. For instance, I have not heard or read any critical and thorough discussion on the July 4-8/2009 study adopted by the EDA leadership and the NCDC communiqué soon after the end of the NCDC conference. We are so overwhelmed by the atmosphere of the conference we forgot to ask the hard questions. **One feels almost like a spoiler to ask the hard questions.** But unfortunately, it is only through tough and persistent questions that we create democracy.*

Before the NCDC conference, we were told that the conference didn't have an agenda. Yet, the NCDC communiqué and the July 4-8/2009 EDA's positional paper are nearly identical in that NCDC entrenches federalism, right of secession and transitional government wholly composed of Diaspora political activists and politicians into its agenda. In this writer's view, nothing in politics is a coincidence and NCDC did have a hidden agenda being advanced in a very shrewd manner by selecting participants with certain views, selecting discussion topics with certain tones, mixing workshop participants in certain manner to assure certain outcome, and finally by massaging workshop recommendations because workshop participants don't have full picture of the outcome of all the other workshops.

Politics by Activism

The question is, who should decide the political fate of a country? Most of us would be quick to correctly say that the people should decide. The debate isn't in what we all agree is the basic principle of the people deciding, but how do we get the people to decide, esp. where diverse groups exist.

The *elitists* would say they know what is good for the people, and thus the entire exercise of allowing the public to participate is just showmanship. They have read a couple of books on similar histories and have superficial understanding of current politics. The elitists consider themselves as an embodiment of eternal wisdom. We all suffer from this disease to certain extent. Elitism is not confined to one group of people and is the same across all ethno-religious groups. Elitism is a human nature!

Activists are different from the elitists in more subtle way. What drives activists is their passion towards a certain issue. They pursue to address their particular burning issues to the exclusion of every other issue. Throughout history, revolutionary changes, such as communism and religious changes, sparked by reaction to existing oppression have only brought more misery and destruction than addressing original grievances. Activists can be civic societies or certain types political parties. For instance, if members of a political party aren't elected by the public *and* advocate for specific issues to the exclusion of many other national issues, then it has more characteristics in common with political activism than with workings of political party. How each group names itself, i.e. as civic society or as political party, is secondary to the true nature of the group. It is defined more by its characteristics.

We all get lost in the mechanics of decision-making, execution and conflict resolution than in the principles due to inexperience. *We all know what we DON'T want, but are at a loss to agree on how to attain what we want.* All good men and women sitting together with all the best intentions begin to

develop suspicions simply because they lack a thorough understanding of managing complex relationships. That is where the challenge lies!

Political landscape defined and managed by elitists and activists never work. They are poor at managing complex relationships required for political manoeuvring or governing a nation. One suffers from egotistical behaviour and the other suffers experience. Decision-making should only be given to those who are bound legally or risk losing their livelihood or career reputation if they make reckless decisions. Decision-making isn't given to those who are passionate about certain issues, lest we perpetuate reckless decisions. The question is always, 'what is your personal stake in this?' It is not unlike a lender's question when asking an investor, 'what is your stake in this? How much are you risking of your own money? Or, are you playing with other people's money?'

In seeking to choose our political leaders, we need to seek out those stakeholders who have shown some experience, or at least an effort, towards managing complex relationships. For instance, in seeking out political representatives for any local region within Eritrea, we seek out community leaders because we believe that if these leaders have been chosen by the constituents then these leaders are qualified to speak on behalf of those people. A community leader is always accountable to a diverse group of people, not necessarily ethnically or religiously but also ideologically or in addressing various issues. *Leaders of elitist and interest groups and group of activists organized as political groups tend to coalesce around like-minded people that make them unsuitable to address complex relationships and issues. They aren't community leader, rather they are leaders of like-minded people, which doesn't make them leaders at all.*

Therefore the first question then is, what is the make-up of the NCDC and now the National Commission for Democratic Change ('Commission'). Is it made up of community leaders, elitists or activists? The answer is probably too obvious! Unfortunately, we have no community leaders that have established diverse Eritrean communities with wide participation in Diaspora. We have substituted the more challenging task of building inclusive communities in Diaspora for the more passionate politics of the homeland. Unfortunately, the very skills acquired in establishing and managing Diaspora communities through community leadership would have been the very same skills needed to build the future Eritrea.

*As important as activists are in the political health of a nation and in bringing about change, they are also very poor substitute for giving them the political lead. In my view, in absence of true community leaders, political groups with diverse membership, such as EPDP and ENSF, should be the only leaders for change. Anyone who believes in *one* Eritrea, which most people do, must necessarily agree that those political groups that attempt to internalize complex/diverse relationships into their organizational fabric are the only ones best positioned to address the immediate challenges in post-PFDJ Eritrea.*

Funny Opposition Math

Some may say that EDA is about managing complex relationships. In reality, even the most ardent supporters of EDA admit serious weakness in its leadership and organization. It has nothing concrete to show in its some five or ten years of life. If success is defined by absence of open verbal conflicts among the various political groups, then we have defined success at a very low level, which in turn is a reflection of our very low expectations. Managing complex relationships is about proactively working together for common goals, and isn't about being in the same room with no results to show. As such EDA has failed to manage a complex relationship.

EDA is at a cross-road. An umbrella organization built on the agreed principles of decision-making based anonymous consent and minimum common political platform has been turned into “10 opposition parties vs. 1 party”, “substantial consent” and federal arrangement with rights to secede as central themes.

For clarity, political parties and individuals who espouse federal system or even secession have the absolute right to be heard and propagate their views, as long as they pursue their goals through peaceful means. We debate them out of disagreement and not out of spite.

A close observer will notice that there is a sneaky politics going on behind the curtains and one has the obligation to bring it to the fore of our debates. The proponents of Ethiopian-style federal arrangement with rights to secede within EDA are trying to use organizational [i.e. EDA's] procedures to achieve their ultimate goal of establishing a federal state with rights to secede. EDA shouldn't be allowed to violate its founding principles to use its 'organizational procedures' built on funny opposition math to advance a one-sided agenda. The proper forum for addressing fundamental shifts in Eritrean political landscape should be left to the true stakeholders only – the Eritrean people, after a thorough debate only. The complaint of the proponents of NCDC is that one political group, EPDP, has refused to fall for the hidden agenda. EPDP is told that it is a minority and must abide by the modified principles of “substantial” consensus to advance other political group’s ultimate agenda.

This writer doesn't fault the proponents of the ‘federal system’ with/without rights of secession to try and advance their agenda. Of course, their efforts weaken the campaign against the regime by weakening EDA and creating an alternative ‘commission’ stacked in favour of one-side agenda, but they probably figure this is their best opportunity to advance their agenda. Although EPDP has been cautiously slow to counter the sustained campaign against it by the ‘federalist/secession’ group out of fear of scaring the general opposition public, it should take a more vigorous stand and reassert its leadership within the opposition camp. Such groups as ENSF should be forced to clarify their position on their political platform and then made to explain and to reconcile their political platform within the current EDA/NCDC trend.

What brings us together is our shared belief in rule-of-law and democracy,, not the political platforms!

Herein lies the funny opposition math! Majority and minority are defined by the proliferation of political parties and not by their size. *Suddenly, political mergers are considered fools games* because one becomes even more minority, i.e. less voting rights and more irrelevant! One must be scratching one's head to figure out opposition math! In attempting to forge together super-alliance years ago, the very same advocates who told us that because it was difficult to gauge the size of organizations that (a) it was better to include every political organization meeting minimum requirements (b) be based on anonymous consent and (c) of putting forward only minimum political platform. Instead, today, goalposts keep shifting in mid-play.

Only the naïve would think that the recent NCDC and the subsequent “COMMISSION” is representative of the two competing political models for future Eritrea. In reality NCDC was stacked in favour of one view to the exclusion of the other. Although many well-meaning advocates of “decentralized system of government” participated at the NCDC, but the numbers were carefully stacked to favour those with ‘federal/secession’ system of government. I ask my readers to carefully read the July 4-8/2009 document adopted by EDA leadership and the recent NCDC communiqué.

The campaign against EPDP itself is well-orchestrated to either make EPDP accept the ‘federal system’ as foregone conclusion as propagated by the ‘stacked’ majority opposition or, failing that, to weaken or break it up to become less effective as one united force.

There is no majority and minority in the opposition. In reality there should only be one opposition camp that struggles to change the current regime and bring about democracy in Eritrea. Whether the future Eritrea is to be governed by decentralized system of government or federal system is to be decided by the people of Eritrea - NOT by “super-smart” opposition activists who think they can manipulate an initially well-intentioned supra-organization into bidding their ultimate political agenda.

We should give EDA-PCNC a limited time to prove us wrong that the NCDC and the subsequent Commission isn’t stacked in favour of their agenda. Who were the some 330-delegates, their political affiliations, even if civic associations then political tendencies, and what were the criteria for selecting the discussion papers? Which discussion papers were rejected and why? Transparency begins today and the opposition camp isn’t exempted from it.

Undue Preoccupation

There is undue preoccupation with whether Eritrea should follow ‘decentralized system of government’ or ‘federal system with or without rights to secede’ as competing political systems.

The competition between these two models isn’t in their ultimate goal, which is to provide the best socio-economic life with security, i.e. internal and external, for its citizens, but on how to best deliver (method & capacity) and which is best able to deliver (assurance) that goal. In other words, we are debating the mechanisms needed to achieve our goals than the basic principles.

By redefining what we are trying to achieve, which is to create the best mechanism for achieving our ultimate aim, the question is really how good we are at addressing and resolving issues. If we are good in managing EDA, i.e. sticking to its founding principles, in staying focused on our commonly agreed priorities, formulating plans of actions and seeing through its implementation and periodically evaluating its performance, in resolving internal conflicts and finally in its capacity to refine its own organizational rules based on lessons learned, *only then would it become academic whether Eritrea follows decentralized or federal system.* If you are good at what you do today, you will always be good under any circumstances. If we are poor in managing organizations, we will always face challenges – regardless of the system-of-government ‘decentralized’ or ‘federal’ – thus perpetuating conflicts in one form or another. The only thing that changes in the conflict is the setting.

Instead, we should preoccupy ourselves with the little things we can do today but can make difference today. We have a tendency to ignore the little critical things today for fear that it would develop into conflict. But this is naiveté! In reality, we leave problems for another day, while failing to learn the small lessons today. Instead, let us learn to make each other accountable, develop more sophisticated organizational rules and stick them (e.g. conflict resolution) and, in general, raising our political sophistication and standards.

In the past, we had theorized so much on politics that one is bound to learn that there is no easy solutions to challenges. We said that Somalia is best positioned as political entity in Africa because it is really one-people, one-religion and one-language. Are we ever proven wrong! We said Eritrea

would like this, Zimbabwe like that, Kenya like this; and one can name any other nation. THERE IS NO PATTERN, except one pattern – we keep being proven wrong!

The same fate awaits EDA! It tries to cover its poor performance by unloading its burden on enthusiastic activists who are like freshmen in University. Nation-building isn't about an architect, i.e. an activist, designing a constitution or system-of-government on a drafting table in an isolated office. At the risk of boring my reader through repetition, rather it is about managing complex human relationships and about creating an effective organization. Anything less will only be *deja-vu!* Activists can't substitute or lead the opposition *political camp*. *In fact, by blurring the line between the critical roles played by activists and political parties, we politicize the entire socio-political spectrum at our own risk.*

Debates Waiting For Another Day

After many debates, we are told there should be two official languages and that land belongs to the local people. Sounds good, why not!

Let us suppose we have a federal system, one may ask,

1. Right of Movement -- Does every Eritrean have the choice of living anywhere in Eritrea? Does one have the right to transplant one's whole village anywhere in Eritrea if one's village people wish it so?
2. Right of Education – Does every Eritrean have the right to learn their languages anywhere in Eritrea?
3. Right of Religion – Does every Eritrean have the right to practice their religions anywhere in Eritrea?
4. Right of Way of Life – Does every Eritrean have the right to enjoy one's life without cultural, traditional or religious restrictions, but with respect?
5. Right to work – Does every Eritrean have the right to work anywhere in Eritrea, open business, factory, commercial farm and lead his/her life?
6. Right to wealth – Does every Eritrean have the right to share in the wealth of the entire nation?

And many more!!! I guess this is where Mr. Fisseha Nair's 'democratic principles' and NOT democracy comes in, or is it, 'the principles of basic rights' as opposed to 'absolute rights'. Somehow one feels one is being sucked into the 'grey zone' where goalposts keep shifting. When we shift away from absolute principles then we have begun the road towards slippery roads.

For sake of discussion, after having agreed that land belongs to the people and restitutions to be made, our new post-PFDJ government has a dilemma. It may take five to ten years to negotiate with stakeholders (landholders), formulate new land policy, sell the new policy back to the stakeholders and make new laws by a government chosen by the people. In these five to ten years, the economy comes to dead stop because construction can't begin and factories can't be built without a clear land policy. Opposition groups' assumption here is that the general public would wait with no work and no source of income for five to ten years until our wise political leaders, who don't face the same issues of livelihood, to decide their perfect solution for the country. Herein lies convenient thinking that afflicts opposition political platforms that don't address issues in thorough manner.

As the old saying goes, 'the road towards PIA-style dictatorship is paved with good intentions!'

Post-PFDJ Eritrea

All of the above discussion is really academic designed to provoke further discussion. In reality, post-PFDJ Eritrea's transitional government and National Conference will necessarily be stacked by leaders and people from within the country. There is no recent history of any exiled politicians forming government-in-exile coming back to rule a nation, even temporarily. Many have tried but have remained just that – in exile even after changes.

If the opposition thinks that PFDJ is weak because of recent sanctions, then they must tell us why such regimes as Cuba, Burma, Zimbabwe, Iran and North Korea remain as deeply entrenched as ever. If sanctions and active Diaspora can bring down a government, Cuba's Castro would have been gone long time ago. Without active internal opposition, we just await Mother Nature to do its job what man can't.

We can only mobilize internal forces when we wage effective propaganda at including domestic forces. Why not tell ordinary Eritrean on the street what to expect in new Eritrea? Why not tell those with vested interested what their roles are? *Why not say, we will form a committee of 120 people running the transition government, including 15 people from Diaspora opposition, 15 from the army, 15 from civil service, 15 community leaders, 15 from youth. 15 from political prisoners, 15 elders and 15 women (with fair representation of all groups).*

Ethiopia's Federal System

Some within the opposition believe that Ethiopia's support is genuine, while others are simply resigned to the fact we need some support, and while still others view it as a strategic alliance.

PM Meles (PMMZ) is a shrewd politician who has vested interest in creating a federal system with the rights of ethnic groups to secede in Eritrea. PMMZ interest is especially keen on the Kunama region and even better still is the Afar region. PMMZ's long term bet is to create an Afar region that is either part of Tigray or an Afar nation subservient to it in order to secure an outlet to the sea through Afar and even through Tio, which is closer to Tigray. PMMZ is doing what is best for his country, and no one can fault him for that.

The federal system that NCDC is trying emulate in Ethiopia is illusionary. The economic power of Ethiopia is totally controlled by Woyane. The army, police and intelligence apparatus is owned and operated by Woyane. The various regions are given just enough powers and incentives to keep them within EPRDF's fold but not enough to have their own political muscle, let alone secede. Woyane knows that any more regions ceding from Ethiopia would put it in conflict with the Amhara group, and, moreover, doesn't serve its own economic agenda.

Thus, we have a federal system that is dictated by the Woyane machine and with little true rights to secede.

The Politics of Midiskal

The recent expulsion of two individuals from EPDP and CDRiE has raised some concerns. Mr. Fisseha Nair has even tried to score a couple points in his quest for his pet project called NCDC. Nothing wrong with Mr. Nair's efforts as politics isn't, after all, about niceties. If he is trying to score points along the way, why not?

But some have expressed genuine concerns. It would be amiss if we don't discuss the mechanics of politics in democratic system as issues arise.

While *nations* should be governed by the strictest rules of the constitution, transparency, accountability and rules-of-law, *organizations* are governed by their own organizational rules which may not be as transparent and open as the overall system. *The whole concept lies on one's right to join an entity. One doesn't have any choice about joining a nation because you are born into it, thus the highest standards demand that democratic principles apply unequivocally.*

In contrast, a member has a choice to join and abandon an organization based on one's own wishes. Similarly an organization can dump you. In contrast, nation can't, or rather shouldn't dump you! Thus two different rules apply.

Terminated members have the right to campaign and attract members in order to form their own political group. Normally, one expects new/spli organization complaining about the old organization to create higher standards in pursuing its goals. In reality, mother nature does its own bidding and reduces the new organization into making the same "mistakes" as the old organization. Hence comes more new organizations, later acting like the old organizations. It almost parallels nature's birth-life-death cycle.

In complaining about their expulsions, no one has told us which sections of their bylaws were breached. In addition, this writer believes that leadership, esp. leaders, should have some leniency in executing certain decisions for sake of party unity, aligning and implementation of organizational goals. Leaders are elected for their judgment as it is for upholding organizational laws. It would be destructive to second guess leaders at every turn from the backbench.

We can examine every democratic system in the West, and we can see that party leaders have a lot of unwritten clout. They can demote, expel, for you to write apologies, and much more! No political party system can survive with rebellious members.

Midiskal works in dictatorships only! No one can get 'midiskal'ed' in Diaspora.

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