

## **We strongly condemn the ‘freezing’ of Habtom Yohannes from CIDRiE and Isayas Asfaha from EPDP**

One of the fundamental human rights of a person is the freedom to express their ideas freely, whether written or spoken, in a group or as an individual. This is a legal right of every person and nobody should tamper with it. This principle protects people from being gagged and also helps in the generation of bright and useful ideas. It might involve constructive dialogue without bias and can help to identify good ideas.

It is illegal to downgrade, insult, isolate or act in any negative way towards someone who tries to express his/her ideas, even if those ideas may seem unacceptable. It should be believed that discussion is the main mechanism of solving contradictory ideas where understanding and tolerance are very important. Otherwise, arrogance will create misunderstanding and the end result will be never ending arguments and conflicts.

It should be recalled that the Eritrean people had a brief glimpse of a free press in the 1950s. During that time people used the then existing private newspapers to criticise and advise each other. People also used to discuss national issues freely at meetings and conferences. That culture of tolerance and free expression of ideas was instrumental in keeping Eritrea united when there was a threat of partitioning it and joining the parts to neighbouring countries. The existence of a free press and tolerance enabled people to organize a united struggle against the evil external designs.

Things were different during the armed struggle. The ELF leadership did not take long to violate basic human rights of its fighters. The leadership only became interested in preserving its power, self interest and sectarian politics. This resulted in divisions and civil wars which complicated and prolonged the struggle for independence. As a consequence, the Ethiopian army got a free hand to destroy helpless villages and looting properties. Eritreans who fled their villages at that time are still languishing in refugee camps in the Sudan, waiting to return to their homes one day.

Inside the EIF and EPLF many intellectuals and honest fighters disappeared just because they voiced their concerns and opposed the leaders. For example, in 1973 a reform movement was eliminated by the EPLF for no other crime than opposing the power-hungry Isayas Afewerki. They were labelled “Menkae” and accused of destructive practices. They were illegally and unceremoniously murdered in the Sahel valleys. In a similar manner, another reform movement in the EPLF started in 1977, which was labelled “Yemin”(‘rightist’) and eliminated.

From 1977 to 1998 the rank and file of the ELF started a movement to highlight the problems within the ELF. However, the leadership was not prepared to listen and put enormous pressure on the democratic forces. The Eritrean public took notice of this criminal act which could not be denied or forgotten. Individuals responsible for this act are still alive under cover of political opposition.

In the EPLF, anyone who voiced any ideas opposing the leadership is labelled “deviant” and is ostracised. If it goes as far as threatening the power of the leadership, different means are designed to eliminate them. The fighters were very much aware of these criminal acts but they gave priority to the colonial struggle, convincing themselves that this is a necessary price to pay for the independence of Eritrea. This regrettable attitude was to end up in the current dictatorship and serious human rights violations by the Eritrean regime. The fruits of the Eritrean people’s heavy sacrifice is slavery. Even those leaders who were instrumental in the success of the struggle were not spared and as soon as they started to voice their concerns, they were made to rot in prisons like EraEro. Those who refuse to obey dictatorial orders are being frozen from their posts and the country is wasting its valuable human resources as a result.

In a country ruled by a one-man dictatorship there is no laws, no freedom of movement, no human rights, no democracy, no justice. Our people are left out from all the benefits humankind can reap from 21st century developments, such as transparency, free communication of ideas, and freedom from governmental restrictions and interference. We have no freedom to develop and lead our life the way we want it.

Our country has become a huge prison, where the people are held hostage by the PFDJ whose high ranking officials are squandering the limited resources, and even financing opposition groups in neighbouring countries.

In the struggle against the appalling situation in our country, some opposition leaders in the Eritrean political and civil organisations in diaspora are also violating the right of free speech, the right to be heard and the right to defence of some of their members. They use the same age-old tactics from the ELF/EPLF years and the ones used by the PFDJ. These acts of repeating past mistakes cannot be tolerated. It has become an incurable disease when leaders only want to listen to their own voice and give orders. Priority is given to personal interest by the opposition leaders and it is only logical that they will not allow free speech or criticism. It is sad to see a repetition of history by some opposition leaders.

To illustrate this it is enough to mention that the journalist Habtom Yohannes, key founding member and executive member of CIDRiE, has been frozen(suspended) because he aired his disagreement with the working of the organisation.

Another example is the freezing of Isayas Asfaha, an executive member of EPDP (chaired by Mr. Woldeyesus Amar), because he expressed a differing view and challenged the leadership in writing and in its meeting of 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2010. It is not difficult to imagine what could happen if this kind of leadership were to come to power in post-Isayas Afeworki Eritrea. What Eritrea needs is strong institutions based on democratic rules and just procedures; and not "strong men" who flex their muscles in the name of the Eritrean people.

They may claim that their actions are internal issues and were taken by majority decision to safeguard the interest of their organisation. The PFDJ has been using the same arguments to justify its illegal actions. All organisations that carry the terms "Democratic

Rights", "Justice", or "Peoples" in their name must live up to what they pretend to defend: the democratic rights of every member and citizen by following proper procedures to assert their decisions.

Any political or civic organisation which claims that its aim is for the public good should be owned by the public. Its existence depends on the goodwill of the public, and it cannot consider any issue internally and without consultation of that public. One may find this kind of operation only in private companies. Wider discussions are advised, and not concentration on side issues or the exaggeration of minor ones. Running from real issues is a sign of denial of mistakes. This method of finalising issues beforehand and only bringing them to be formally rubberstamped is undemocratic and unjust.

What is even sadder is the silence of the so-called advocates of democracy and human rights. They have failed to raise their voice against illegal, unjust and unfair practices which have been perpetrated by their own colleagues. Any act of injustice, regardless of where, when and by whom it is committed should be challenged. If we don't stand up against any injustice now, we will be repeating the mistakes of the armed struggle and the last 19 years of independent Eritrea. We cannot claim to be agents of democratic change but we can, sadly, be accused of complicity in the ongoing malpractices. Moreover, we will not be able to liberate the people of Eritrea from the shackles of the PFDJ only through slogans or exposing its crimes. We need to be honest with ourselves and do what is really expected from us as advocates of human and democratic rights.

Human Rights Concern - Eritrea strongly condemns the freezing of journalist Habtom Yohannes and Issayas Asfaha from their leadership position, and the movement as a whole, and calls upon members of CIDRiE and EPDP, as well as all justice-seeking people to join us in condemning this action. If not, today's bystanders will be victims of the same practice tomorrow.

Human Rights Concern –Eritrea

London, UK