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A Covenant of Eritrean Nationalities

Introduction

In my name and on behalf of the Eritrean Congress Party, I apologize for the humiliation and oppression that has been meted out on the nationalities of Eritrea; our anger is directed, however, against the savagery that was inflicted upon the Kunama, and Nara peoples.

This paper entitled: "A Covenant of Eritrean Nationalities" is our contribution to your conference.

The Eritrean Congress Party wishes you success in your work!

1. Economic Empowerment

Land Ownership

- a) The ECP holds that land does not belong to the government, similarly,
- b) Land does not belong to the provinces
- c) Land belongs to the Adis (the historically constituted communes of Eritrea)

Consequently:

- All the lands expropriated from the Adis, notably, the Kunama lands, shall be returned to their rightful owners.
- The ECP rejects the notion that the expropriated should be compensated by the expropriators, whether the expropriating agency is the state or the individual. Compensation by expropriating agencies signifies the legitimization of expropriated lands
- Adi land shall be distributed among its inhabitants because property right is an important aspect of democracy: it represents the principle of equality
- The Afars have inalienable rights to their Adis as well as other resources of the Red Sea.

2. Democratic Empowerment

- Adi inhabitants shall be empowered by democratically elected Adi councils
- The sum total of Adis constitutes the historically evolved Awraja (county); the Kunama and Nara, for instance, do not have their own Awrajas – their counties are simply known as Gash-Setit. This state of affairs needs to be corrected.
- Adi inhabitants shall be empowered to elect Awraja Councils
- Adi inhabitants shall be empowered to elect their representatives to the National Parliament

3. Cultural Empowerment

The Kunamas, Afars, and other nationalities shall be culturally empowered in order to affirm their national identities. This means,

- They shall be empowered to use their languages as means of education, if it is their wish to follow such a policy
- They shall be empowered to use their languages in the administration of their Adis and their counties, if it is their wish to adopt such a policy.
- They shall be empowered to have a say in matters related to mass-media policy in their counties

4. Principle of Self-determination

4.1 Marxist Conceptualizations

The Marxist view of the national question was based on the interaction of the following conceptualizations: a) the dominant nation, and b) the dominated nations.

4.1a. Dominant Nation

Some European states, as in the case of Russia, and Austro-Hungary, were empires; similarly, the semi-European Turkish state was also an empire. These empires were the results of territorial expansion and annexation of nations and nationalities; and were ruled by absolute, feudal, monarchs. Despite the class gap between the nobility

and peasantry in those societies, these two classes ranged themselves against the annexed nations and nationalities, by virtue of the fact that they were historically evolved dominant nations. In this manner, the Romanovs ruled the Russia Empire; the Hapsburgs the Austro-Hungarian empire; and the Caliphs the Ottoman Empire. In the Russia Empire, the Russians were the dominant nation; in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Germans were the dominant nation; and in the Ottoman Empire, the Turks were the dominant nation. As indicated above, the socio-economic system upon which these empires were based was the feudal system. With the advent of capitalist production, urban centers became vehicles for churning class and national awareness. From the bosom of the feudal classes emerged a bourgeois class that advocated the idea of a national state; it sought to achieve this goal by assimilating the working populations of these empires in its image, via the ideology of nationalism. Industrial instruments of production and distribution also augured the birth of a working class, whose interests clashed with those of the monarchies and the emergent bourgeoisie; the working class espoused the ideology of “internationalism”, formulated by Marxist thinkers.

4.1b.Dominated Nations

The intelligentsia of the small bourgeoisie cultivated the idea of national identity and separate statehood among the peasantry and the working classes in those empires. The dominant nation was seen as a carrier of class and national oppression by virtue of the fact that it appropriated land and monopolized culture (schools and churches); the dominant nations perceived themselves as oppressed due to the fact that they were deprived of the means of livelihood, and were manipulated by state religion. The struggle of the dominated nationalities against the combined oppression of the dominant nations, in these empires, was conceptualized by Marxist theoreticians as: “The struggle between the dominant and dominated nations”. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Marxists advocated various forms of autonomy in order to keep the sovereignty and territory of the empire intact. The nations of those empires were too fully developed to be satisfied by mere autonomy: they demanded their own separate states: Hungarians, Checks, Serbs, and other nations demanded immediate independence; their claim to statehood was so strong that it triggered the First World War (marked by the assassination of the Austrian Grand Duke by a Serbian

nationalist) that saw the demise of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the emergence of a medley of independent states that replaced it.

The Ottoman Empire was partly dissolved as a result of territorial demands by Greek and Arab nationalists; Anatolia, the geographical core of present day Turkey, was preserved by a Turkish-Kurdish alliance led by Ataturk. In this scheme of things, the Turks were regarded as the dominant nation, while the Greeks, Arabs, and others saw themselves as the dominated nations.

In Russia, the Leninist formulation of “self-determination up and including secession” was qualified by a counter-proposition; namely, “that the demand for secession be sanctioned or led by the working classes.” The “internationalism” of the working classes was regarded as the anti-serum of “narrow nationalism”; in other words, the internationalism of the working classes was expected to cancel out the demand for secession: what was given by one hand was taken away by the other. The October Revolution was hatched in the major urban centers of the Russian empire, where the Great Russian revolutionaries determined the agenda of the day; once the Soviet state was established, the demands for secession were quashed as distorted fantasies of the petty-bourgeoisie.

4.2 Wilsonian Formulation of the Principle of self-determination

The Wilsonian view of self-determination was an outgrowth of the liberal concept of self-determination of the individual. The assumption was: just as the self-determination of the individual was expected to lead to the maximization of freedom, so was the self-determination of nations expected to lead to the maximization of liberty. The ideas of President Woodrow Wilson influenced the formation of the League of Nations after the First World War and the United Nations after the Second World War.

4.2a. United Nations Charter

The balance of power changed radically after the Second World War. The United States emerged as a capitalist imperial power on one side of the scale, challenged by a Russian socialist imperial power on the other side of the scale. Both these empires encouraged the decolonization of European colonies in the expectation that there would be something in it for them. The competition between these emergent super

powers facilitated the espousal of the principle of self-determination of colonial territories. It should be noted, however, that the principle of self-determination, as formulated in the UN Charter, is neither an absolute right nor granted freely; more often than not it was achieved by struggle; and in many cases by armed struggle. In fact, the newly independent countries felt so threatened by irredentist movements that the first OAU meeting of 1963 was assembled to ensure the territorial integrity of colonial boundaries. The principles of territorial integrity, and non-interference in the internal affairs of others, remain central in the Charter of the UN.

4.3 Application of the Principle of Self-determination in Eritrea

The application of the principle of self-determination in Eritrea was distorted in two stages; namely: a) the dissolution of Eritrea as a geographical entity by promoting separatist movements, and b) the aberration of the principle of self-determination by a lopsided federation. These distortions were corrected by armed liberation accompanied by a UN referendum.

4.3a. Separatist Movements

The British Military Administration (MBA) authorities attempted to dissolve Eritrea, as a geographical unit, by encouraging separatist movements to seek self-determination. It was on the basis of this strategy that the British encouraged the formation of a Tigray-Tigrinyi party that aspired to bring the Tigrinya speakers of Eritrea and Ethiopia to form a separate Tigrayan state. In the same vain, the British inspired separatist projects known as “Teqsim” movements in the Sahel and Barka regions of the Lowlands. The Teqsim movement of Barka aspired to merge with Kessela, while the one based in the Sahel aspired to merge with Port Sudan. Note that Kessela and Port Sudan constituted part of British ruled Sudan. This particular British policy was designed to bypass the application of self-determination in Eritrea, by defacing it from the map of the world; this policy failed because the Unionist party and the Islamic League agreed on the preservation of the territorial integrity of Eritrea.

4.3b. Imposed Federal Formula

The second distortion of Eritrea’s right to self-determination took place at the UN itself. The UN joined Eritrea with imperial Ethiopia in an unequal federal structure that

was designed to collapse under its own weight. The emperor put matters to a head by pursuing the ill-advised policy of forcible annexation of Eritrea into Ethiopia that provoked a renewed drive for self-determination, by the mediation of armed struggle.

4.3c. Military Victory and Referendum

Our struggle for self-determination via the mediation of a national liberation strategy belongs to the category of national liberation struggles. In the “strategy for Victory”, developed by the leadership of the ELF, we stated that the Eritrean people might win against a limited number of Ethiopian regimes but not against the Ethiopian nation. It was, therefore, important to retain the sympathy and solidarity of the Ethiopian people. The Derg countered our position by launching a variety of ‘autonomy’ solutions - including the stratagem of dividing Eritrea into Highland and Lowland political categories. The reality that self-determination is not granted under all circumstances is a well-documented genre in the literature of the anti-imperialist struggles of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the end military victory alone is not enough; it has to be legitimized by the international community. In Eritrea’s case, the acceptance of the UN-administered referendum by the EPRDF was important.

5. Ethiopian Experience

The Ethiopian experience differs from the Marxist and Wilsonian models.

5.1. Self-determination

The History of the Soviet Union shows that the Marxist application of self-determination did not lead to the establishment of separate states: it was a mere promise that was abrogated by the Bolshevik Party in the name of the working classes. The Wilsonian model that inspired the League of Nations, and is embodied in the Charter of the UN, facilitated the formation of a large number of independent states. After First World War, European empires were replaced by new states; after the Second World War; new states sprung forth from the colonized territories; similarly, the nations that were throttled by the Leninist formulation, were able to establish their own states in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire. In the Ethiopian model, the Ethiopian Constitution provides for the secession of nations without any condition. In other words, the Ethiopian constitution does not give with one hand and take away with the other. .

5.2 The Terms Biher and Bihereseb

5.2a. Biher

In the Ethiopian Constitution the term “Biher” is used as the synonym of the English term “nation” as a confirmation of the political lexicon evolved by Ethiopian revolutionaries. The interchangeability of the terms biher and nation has contributed to clarity in academic conceptualization and political analysis.

5.2b. Bihereseb

There was no readymade term for “nationality”; thus, the term “bihereseb” was coined in order to fill this particular conceptual gap. It is important to note that there is a fit between the concepts of Biher and nation, as there is congruence between the terms bihereseb and nationality.

5.3. Kilil

Kilil is a term coined to connote autonomous governance over the territory of a given Biher.

5.4. Federation

In the Ethiopian context, the term “federation” denotes the sovereignty and governance that ensues from the Kilil- based structure of the Ethiopian state.

6. The Question of identity in Eritrea

The task of discerning the evolution of the multiple Eritrean identities belongs to Eritrean historians, but the task of self-definition of national identity, and the demands that accompany them, belongs to Eritrean national groups. It is hoped that the following categories would illuminate some of the dimensions of the national identity complex.

6.1. Language Dimension

If we take language as the organizing idea of national formation, the identity set up in Eritrea would take the following form: Tigrinya speakers, Tigre speakers, Saho speakers, Afar speakers, Kunama speakers, Nara speakers, and Bilen speakers.

6.2. Kinship Dimension

Kinship, understood as a community bound together by a genetic pool is another form of categorizing identity. In the case of the Tigre and Tigrinya speakers, historians assert that they are the descendants of the Aga'az and Habeshat, who migrated from Yemen to Eritrea three millennia ago; we may, therefore, dismiss the claim of kinship relationship between the Tigre and Tigrinyi, by arguing: "it happened such a long time ago". Similarly, the matter of kinship between all the Saho speakers has not yet been established historically nor do all Saho speakers claim common kinship. The most qualified identity groups to claim kinship are perhaps the Kunama, Bilen, and the Nara.

6.3. Territorial Dimension

The geographical zone of the Tigre speakers is territorially identified as Barka, Sahel; and Semhar. The geographical zone of the Tigrinya speakers is categorized as Hamassien, Akeleguzai, and Seraye. The Saho and Tigrinya speakers share the AkeleGuzai province. The Eritrean Afars have Denkalia as their core region. The Gash is regarded as the traditional home of the Nara, while the Setit is regarded as the home of the Kunama. Bogos is seen as the abode of the Bilen.

6.4. "Tribal" Dimension

The Tigre speakers are generally categorized as Beni Amer in Barka; as Habab in Sahel; and as Mensa', Bejuk, and Maria in the middle plateau that descends to the Lowlands.

6.5. Neged

Tigrinya speakers do not fall into the tribal category; historically they organized themselves as associations of Neged. The Negeds were based on kinship and territorial dimensions, organized in units of seven: Seba'te Ingan'a, Seba'te Anseba, Seba'te Karneshim, etc.

7. The Eritrean Experience

7.1. Tigray-Tigrinyi

Eritrean Tigrinya speakers and the Tigrayans of Ethiopia belong to the Tigray-Tigrini nation. This means that the Tigrinya speakers of Eritrea alone do not constitute a full-fledged nation: they are a nationality.

7.2. Tigrinyi

Instead of referring to the Tigrinya speaking nationality in Eritrea by its language - such as “Tigrinya” or “Tigrinya speakers” – we need to call it by its proper name; namely: **TIGRINYI**. We may now refer to the Tigrinyi nationality unreservedly; among many advantages that accrue from this step is: uncluttered academic conceptualization and clarity in political analysis.

7.3. Negedeseb

We have coined the term **NEGEDESEB** due to its historical linkage with Tigrinyis: negedeseb is the equivalent of the terms “bihereseb” and “nationality”. These terms may be used interchangeably.

7.4. The Question of Dominant and Dominated Nations in Eritrea

Prior to Italian colonization there was no centrally administered Eritrean state; the tribes and negeds of Eritrea lived side by side, in a state of *laisse-faire*. The Bahre Negasis were not feudal lords nor did they own feudal lands; they governed and were governed by Highi Indaba. The Turks and the Egyptians fought against Tigrinyi; the Italians and the British regarded the Tigrinyi as their main enemy and treated them as such during their colonial rules. There remains hope that historians would enlighten us as to when and how the Tigrinyi became a historically evolved dominant nation, and which nationalities they dominated: it is essential that our political assertions are grounded on research in order to provide us with a platform of knowledge-based politics. The dictatorship that rules Eritrea today is the organization that was established during the armed struggle. The core of what emerged as the EPLF was an alliance of Tigrinyi, Semhar, Sahel, and Maria fighters, represented in the original three PLFs. This alliance has changed during the past two decades by the logic of internal struggle for power. There is no doubt that power rests in the hands of the

Tigrinyi dictator and his Tigrinyi supporters; but this does not make the Tigrinyi nationality the “dominant nation”. If the assertion that Tigrinyi nationality is the “dominant nation” of Eritrea is true, it then follows, that the strategy of the opposition forces should be directed against the Tigrinyi nationality, and not against the two decades old political structure dominated by a Tigrinyi dictator and his Tigrinyi supporters.

8. Conclusion

As things stand two values confront each other. These are:

1. The value of Eritrean independence and sovereignty that survived geographic and political defacement, and
2. The value of self-determination for the nationalities of Eritrea

In their turn these **two values** raise the following questions?

- a) Is Eritrea composed of dominant Bihers and dominated negedesebs or biheresebs? b) Is there a dominant nation in Eritrea from whom the dominated nationalities are making their demands? c) Is there a blanket solution for the demands of bihers or biheresebs of Eritrea? d) What is the solution to the confrontation of the **two values**?

I shall answer the first three questions before addressing the question regarding the confrontation of the **two values**:

8a) Pre-colonial Eritrean history attests that there existed no centrally organized dominant Tigrinyi nationality that exercised domination over the remaining nationalities of Eritrea. Colonial history attests that the Tigrinyi nationality was regarded as an enemy and was treated as such by foreign powers.

8b) Today, there is no dominant Tigrinyi nation from whom the right of self-determination may be demanded; we shall certainly not demand our national rights from the Tigrinyi-dominated political structure of Asmara: our duty is to oust this dictatorial regime. In order to actuate the principle of self-determination, all the nationalities of Eritrea need to enter into a covenant; once the principles of this covenant are agreed upon, the next step is to establish a **League of Eritrean**

Nationalities, that includes the Tigrinyi nationality, with the objective of establishing a political party based upon a political program that embraces the **Strategy Adi** and the **Eritrean Covenant of Nationalities**, that grew forth from it.

8c) Judging by the dimensions of Eritrean identity discussed above, it does not appear that there is a blanket solution to the “national Question” in Eritrea. The nationalities of Eritrea need to define themselves (in accordance to the dimensions delineated above) and present their demands.

8d) The solution to the confrontation between the **Two Values** does not lie in compromise; compromises being temporary arrangements of interest do not provide lasting solutions; what we need to consider is a fusion of principles. We depart from the assumption that all the nationalities of Eritrea respect the value of Eritrean independence and sovereignty; we also assume that the nationalities of Eritrea respect the principle of self-determination; if that is the case then both these values need to be fused into the **Kilil model**. It goes without saying that details of this model need to reflect Eritrean conditions. Let us learn from our neighbors!

In Memory of Martyrs

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