

## **THE WAR IN TIGRAI EXPOSES THE DISMAL FAILURE OF ERITREAN JUSTICE SEEKERS TO KEEP THE EYE ON THE BALL:**

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### **A NOTE TO READERS:**

This article was posted on January 31, 2021. I wanted it to be re-posted because we see the split among Eritrean justice seekers on the issue of Tigray war widening to the extent that some seem to fail to see the line of demarcation between cooperation with TPLF and the inviolability of Eritrean sovereignty.

At critical times, when we see forces struggling for change split on an issue, which is not of their prime concern, some taking the position of supporters while others oppose the position their “opponents” have taken, incriminating and dragging each other in the mud, it is natural for both sides to fail to keep their eyes on the ball or to maintain their attention on the important theme or objective, deflecting away from it. This explains the reality we have seen prevailing among Eritrean justice seekers in the Diaspora since the eruption of the inter-Ethiopian war in Tigray.

In the middle of this inter-Eritrean split, some might have become less inclined to write about the issue at hand and give their views on what is going on, fearing that they may unintentionally provide the division with oxygen or add fuel to the fire. This hesitation could be seen as opportunism by some, and they have the right to see things the way they like, but for those who do not have the stomach to see a division on a war that is not primarily theirs, they see less risk in being silent and watching the situation closely rather than interfering in haste. Nonetheless, as of late, we see the split among Eritrean justice seekers in the Diaspora widening, as a result of some unwise, incomprehensively bizarre, and counterproductive statements coming from some leading TPLF media activists, unnecessarily angering some sections of the Eritrean society, undermining the Eritrean solidarity with the people of Tigray, and giving the oppressive Eritrean regime the chance to exploit the situation and get a breathing space. It is hard to understand the inability of the TPLF media activists to realize that such unmeasured descriptions would deprive them of supporters and sympathizers, strengthen the enemy camp, and negatively affect the results of the war, at this sad and heart-breaking moment for Tigray. Overall, as this split is taking a very dangerous direction that could undermine the struggle for justice and play at the hands of the ruling gang, it is high time to break our silence, do something to lower the temperature, urge all justice seekers to come back to focus on the objective reflected in the name “justice seekers” they honour to carry, and work

hand and glove for the people waiting for their critical role to save them from the beast. We loudly say, enough for divisions and splits, on a war that has nothing to do with our people.

It is natural to see the majority of the Eritrean justice seekers in the Diaspora support the TPLF government and party in their legitimate cause to defend their state against the aggressors, who ganged up on Tigrai and its people. However, the reason of this support may not be monolithic. To be more specific, we could put the supporters into different categories that could be summarized as follows:

- The Eritrean highlanders, both Christians and Muslims, have many things in common with the people of Tigrai, including language and culture. The significance of inter-marriage, historical ties, and geographical proximity, cannot be overlooked or underestimated. Even religious communality is a very important factor that creates a sense of belonging among peoples. Taking these factors into consideration, it is natural for the majority of Eritrean highlanders to sympathize with the people of Tigrai at times of calamities and refer to them as “their brothers”, for the same reasons Eritrean lowlanders in western Eritrea sympathize with the Sudanese tribes in the border areas and look to them as their kith and kin. Based on this reality, nobody would sound reasonable and logical enough to tell the Eritrean highlanders how to feel about the people of Tigrai, while it is dangerous to wrongly see that solidarity as the symbol of Tigrai-Tigreyn or Agazian scheme, which has no significant support among Eritrean highlands, though some of us blow its significance out of proportion. Reading things in light of conspiracy theories is not only unfair but causes a dangerous mistrust that could stand as a serious barrier against the efforts to build the modern and democratic Eritrea we aspire to have. As what I am driving at is obvious, I think only few would ask: ***What made you say this?***

We have read and heard a lot of negative motive readings about this solidarity. Solidarity based on the above-listed factors is positive, imperative, and necessary, as long as there is the firm belief that Eritrea is a sovereign state, with its own people, borders, national interests, and loyalties that collectively constitute the line of demarcation between Eritrea and Tigrai, as it is true with the Sudan, Yemen, Djibouti or Saudi Arabia. We have seen how the cancerous conspiracy theories and paranoia, as the legacies of Donald Trump, have damaged and still burning the US; God knows where that would lead the country to. This is a very important lesson for any society to learn. Here we need to keep our eyes peeled to see that unnecessarily exaggerated suspicion and fear could drive people to completely illogical conclusions. ***For how long are we ready to be the victims of an endless vicious circle fed by unnecessary political feuds every time new developments unfold in our region?***

- The second category supporting the people of Tigrai against the aggression, is made up of those who believe that the victory of the unholy alliance between the two devils, Abiy Ahmed and Atse Isias, will prolong the life of the ruling gang in Eritrea. The reason here being political, this group takes to heart the proverb: “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” However, the proverb needs some explanation so that we could protect ourselves against its twists and ambushes when we try to implement it.

This is an ancient proverb going back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. , the American architect, Gabriel Manigault (March 17, 1758-November 4, 1809) described as “the natural feeling” in his Political Creed, published in 1884 (this is the first recorded use of the current English version of the proverb). The proverb suggests two opposing parties, people or countries can and should work together against a common enemy. With this background of the proverb in mind, we would ask: ***What is the logic of this group in working with TPLF against the aggressors, namely, the ruling gang in Eritrea and its crime partner, Abiy Ahmed?***

Here is the logic. Atse Isias is the enemy of the Eritrean people. He is also the enemy of the TPLF. We do not need to go into the why, but it is enough to state that the Eritrean justice seekers in the Diaspora (the pro-TPLF group), trying to be the voice of the voiceless people they left behind at home, and the TPLF, see Atse Isias as their despised enemy. In this connection, it is helpful to make some points that could help both the pro-TPLF Eritrean justice seekers guided by this proverb, and the group engaged in a fierce but meaningless fight with them:

- Of course, some justice seekers see the TPLF as an enemy for historical reasons, unnecessary to review here. But the nagging question here is: ***Is Atse Isias now their friend? Or: Do they have a favourable opinion of him?*** This is the question those justice seekers who fight against the group that supports the TPLF in its war against Atse Isias and Abiy Ahmed, based on this proverb, have to answer. This means that this group has more enmity for the TPLF than Atse Isias, and this is enormously illogical. The historical reasons that make them dislike the TPLF is understandable, but at this particular moment, the TPLF is not an existential threat to the sovereignty of Eritrea, whereas Atse Isias remarkably is.
- Working with parties, countries, or people on a common issue does not necessarily imply friendship but cooperation. That is why some tend to re-formulate the proverb into: “The enemy of my enemy is my ally.” The word “ally” refers to a country, party or person joined with another for a common purpose. This is to say that, if one is fighting for survival, the enemy of his enemy could be his ally, even if they do not like each other all that much. In other words, as long as they have an enemy in common, they can be

allies. *Can we give concrete examples from history to see if such an alliance makes sense?*

A perfect example comes from WWII, in which the US President, Franklin Roosevelt, and the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, allied with Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union (USSR) because the Soviet Union was the enemy of Hitler (Hitler was the enemy of the US and Great Britain too). Here it should be noted that neither the US nor Great Britain was friendly with the USSR (Soviet Union) before the war, and they knew that they would be enemies after the war. In few words, a party, person, or a country can share a goal with an enemy and temporarily cooperate. But once that goal is complete, all bets could be off, unless the partners have some common bond.

Another example is the US siding with the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979 under the pretext of upholding the Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty of 1978. The concluding remark here is that, we should not fool ourselves into believing that the party, country or person we ally with, will remain our ally. This point alerts this group to see the alliance with TPLF with these objective lenses too.

- The third group of Eritrean justice seekers supporting the TPLF in this war is made up of those who condemn the invasion on Tigray, that has caused thousands of deaths, enormous destruction and ruin of infrastructure, and displacement of hundreds of thousands who turned homeless, on non-political ground. This sympathy is based on ethical and humanitarian principles, not political considerations. We guess this group could be the majority among the sympathizers with TPLF in and outside the justice seekers in Diaspora

Simply put, Eritrean justice seekers are split into two: those supporting the TPLF on different grounds detailed above, and those standing against that support. This difference of opinion is natural, but the deeply troubling cause for concern is the way they are handling their relations with each other, this leading to the widening of the gap between them to the extent that working together has become very difficult, and their laser-like focus on the war taking the lion's share from their attention, time, efforts, and energy. The cumulative effect of all these is that their struggle against the regime has become secondary in importance, and has come almost to standstill.

It is difficult to believe that the alliance of the aggressors on Tigray are unstoppable, and that Tigray has changed forever. Moreover, it is equally difficult to imagine that the

TPLF, that did not do enough to help the Eritrean opposition in its mission, when it had complete power and control in Ethiopia, with absolute and all-encompassing authority over the region, could enable Eritreans to topple the regime and bring change in Eritrea in the post-war period.

It cannot be denied that the TPLF government gave the Eritrean opposition asylum and protection in Ethiopia, as well as financial assistance. It deserves sincere thanks for that. Nevertheless, many opposition organizations describe that help, as compared to what was possible to offer, in a way that brings home the Amharic proverb: “ጡሀው ሳይደርቅ ፣ዓሣው ሳይሞት።” To be honest, the missing ingredient in the TPLF policy about Eritrea when they were in power was the political determination and firm stance to see to it that Atse Isias is gone in time. In fact, helping the opposition remove the monester was by no means difficult for the TPLF to do at that time because many opposition organizations had armed contingents, the morale and the enthusiasm of Eritreans to remove the regime was very high, and the mood of the youth in the Tigrai refugee camps to fight was very favourable. We do not want to get into the question: **Why didn't that happen?** We should not care about the reason or the intention; we have to see the impact only. But the truth of the matter is that the English proverb, “A stich in time saves nine” is perfectly applicable to this situation. ***Where do we go from here?***

This would lead us to the conclusion that we should stop seeing the possibility of change in Eritrea only in the survival of the TPLF in this war, or to see the survival of the TPLF in the war as a pre-requisite for change in Eritrea. To put it candidly, it is worrisome to tie the possibility of change in Eritrea with the survival of TPLF in the war. The frustrating question here is: ***Why do we pin our hopes on others to do our job for us when we need to depend on ourselves?***

Regime change in Eritrea did not happen when the TPLF was at the climax of its power, and very unlikely for the TPLF to help that happen when it is struggling for survival, or even, if it comes out of the war victorious. I hope I am not misunderstood, as saying, we should not support the struggle of the oppressed people of Tigrai, invaded by an alliance of oppressors, including Atse Isias, who sought to exact sadistic vengeance on TPLF because of the humiliating defeat he had to suffer during 1998-2000 Badume war, and the threat he thinks the TPLF poses to his rule, as well as to his joint anti-democratic scheme with Abiy Ahmed and his other crime partners in the region. I am just trying to explain the deadlock in which we find ourselves. ***What is the way out then?*** The only way out of this deadlock is to learn a lesson from Captain Cortez's order of 1519 to his men “Burn the ships”. Here goes the story of the Spanish explorer and conquistador, Hernando Cortez.

Cortez wanted to seize the treasure of gold, possessed by the Aztec Empire, which covered what is now central and southern Mexico, and flourished during the period of 1345-1521. He took 500 soldiers and 100 sailors who landed in eleven ships on the shores of the Yucatan. This is known in history as the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire (also known as the Conquest of Mexico: 1519-1521). The story has it that, when some of his men saw he was outnumbered by the huge and powerful empire that had existed for 600 years, they planned to seize some ships to escape. However, he immediately discovered the plot, captured the ringleaders, and ordered his men to "Burn the Ships". Some historians say that he did not burn the ships but scuttled them to eliminate a retreat (either way, the lesson will not lose its significance). He did that to ensure the commitment of his men for the mission because once the ships are burned, they had no other option but either to fight and succeed or be killed by the enemy. He was victorious because he and his men saw failure as death. Since that day, "Burn the Ships" became a strong incentive, used as a slogan to convey the message that retreat to the past is not an option. ***Why is this story relevant to the current deadlock we are in?***

As Eritreans, when we say we need to "burn the ships", we mean we have to remove the path to the previous way of depending on others to do our job for us, which we should consider as the option of retreat. In other words, we have to burn everything else we used to see as a potential crutch ("a source or means of support or assistance that is relied on heavily or excessively") because that crutch did not enable us to end the rule of the gang and build democratic Eritrea on its ashes.

A society that gets stuck at one point of its history has to take some radical measures to move forward. An interesting story related to Gaddafi of Libya in relation to the Palestinians, who lived in his country as refugees, is also motivating, though not as much as the story of Captain Cortez we raised above.

In 1980s (I do not remember the exact year), Gaddafi decided that all Palestinians living in Libya should be deported to Palestine so that they could liberate their land from Israel, and urged other Arab leaders to do the same. His rationale was that the Palestinian struggle was not advancing as desired because Palestinians, who had

spread around the Arab world, were lured by material life, making them abandon their cause, and came under the negative financial and political influence of different Arab governments, that divided them into a number of rival political organizations to sabotage the struggle. The decision was not implemented because everybody saw him as an insane leader and international pressure forced him to abandon the idea, but though the man was crazy, the idea was incredible. This is another example suggesting that, unless we leave our comfort zone, a major change cannot be achieved.

Names of brutal dictators, who did not limit themselves to abusing their own people but went beyond that and terrorized their neighbours, litter historical records. Isias is a classic example with all features we expect such type of leaders to have. This does not mean that all dictatorial regimes share the aggressive tendency so commonly attributed to Isias. He is even different from many dictators, sharing this tendency of initiating wars with neighbours, and are conflict-prone like Saddam Hussain and Idi Amin. He initiates so much more military conflicts than many others. He lost all wars he has started. No doubt until now he has survived embarrassing wartime defeats, but he did not find himself ejected from power. Let it be, but the question remains: **Could he survive this time?** Time will tell, but one thing is clear.

The war in Tigray will cost life, money, and reputation too. At the end of the war, Eritrea will be weaker in all terms. This could lead to discontent and disturbances. Here we should remember that this is the best time for justice seekers, in and outside the country, to strike.

Atse Isias is not Bashar Al Assad of Syria to survive unrest and dissent. Bashar has Russia and Iran to keep his grip by exploiting them, so that he could brutally suppress his opponents. Ethiopia cannot come to his rescue because it is a burning country now. The

international community is daily witnessing his brutality, lawlessness, thuggery, and robbery in Tigrai. The coming of the democrats to power in the US and the healthy symptoms we saw from their recent reaction to his invasion of Tigrai is an additional ray of hope. Now we have the chance, if we can take advantage of the favourable conditions. The ball is in our quarters. "Make hay while the sun shines." is what we tell to ourselves. I hope readers would find this optimism well-justified. =====

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**"BURN THE SHIPS"**