

THE APPREHENSION ABOUT THE INTER-ERITREAN SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTIONS: HOW DO WE RECOVER FROM THIS SHEER LUNACY?

Abdu Habib

Beqaq835@yahoo.com

“Remember, when you are dead, you do not know you are dead.

It is only painful to others. The same applies when you are stupid.”

(Ricky Gervais, English comedian and writer, born: 25 June 1961)

In any society, people do and say things that cause arguments or debates, sometimes turning into a strife or discord. However, we use the word **controversy** only when the disputes or arguments, expressing strong opposing views, play out in public. Here it should be made clear that the topic of a controversy should not necessarily be very important, though the concept of importance itself is relative. It could be as simple as a film, a comedy, or a song. Another word for controversy is **polemic**, which is an aggressive (here meaning, pursuing one’s aims forcefully) attack on or refutation of the opinions or principles of another. A controversy or a polemic could be constructive or destructive. If it is designed to teach or convey instruction or information or deliver pleasure and entertainment, or make moral observations, it is called **didactic**. Conversely, if it hurts feelings, breaks hearts, or even leads to violence, it is called **vitriolic**.

As Eritreans, we should encourage arguments and controversial discussions, if they fall under the didactic category because they teach, inform and guide, while we should discourage them when they become of vitriolic nature, that could play a destructive role, weakening our unity, as justice seekers and by extension as Eritrean society, and sabotaging the struggle against the ruling gang, which has reached the head-scratching shades of Hitler’s style of rule in Nazi Germany. Though constructive discussions that qualify to be called didactic do exist in the Eritrean Diaspora social media interactions, yet not at the desired level, it is the vitriolic controversy or polemic that has become devastatingly shocking in its scale.

Many of us are so tired of seeing some Eritreans, among the justice seekers, embarrass themselves and become absolute disgrace to the Eritrean people, by normalizing being extremely rude and aggressive. The looming question here is: **How much more harm are we ready to do to our struggle against the regime, through the hate speeches our people have been following with dismay and disbelief, making them heart-broken, angry, and disgusted?** If you forgive me, I could say that we have cheapened the name “Justice Seekers”.

I hope I am not putting it in a scary context. It is rather to show that there is something fundamentally wrong in the way we communicate with one another in the social media, particularly, the Facebook. Accordingly, whenever we watch such videos, the first thing that springs to one’s mind is the question: **Do they really hear themselves when they speak?** It is

not fun to watch. Some of us are doing so much destruction to the social fabric of our society and its unity. I take no pleasure when I say that, if I see my son or daughter or any other family member talking this way about any section of the Eritrean society or individuals, I would drive him or her directly to the nearest mental hospital. To be honest, whenever we think that Eritreans cannot possibly go any lower, we find some proving us wrong.

In other words, the social media, is dividing the people, encouraging hatred, and using anger and emotions to take centre stage in Eritrean politics. Every time we see some reaching the depth of stupidity, we see them digging deeper. At the same time, we see many coming in full force to respond to them in the same degree of insanity or even worse, whereas the best of us (if these are our best, God help us) share the videos with their contacts, disseminating the hate speeches. The situation looks like a forest fire that went out of control. We pause here to ask: ***Who is driving this crazy train?*** I would leave the answer to the readers.

In a nutshell, as a result of the situation detailed above, we see the halt of progress in the struggle against the regime, and this means nothing but, our shameful failure in our primary obligation: saving our people from the beast, who is second to none. We should not sit back and watch. It hurts to the core. We need to bring sanity to the platform of the justice seekers by bringing our moral compass back to the centre. This serious concern is the reason why the title of this piece, as formulated above, signifies the gravity of the situation.

If the problem lies in the way we communicate, we need to see where we are going astray, and what skills we need to build in order to come back to our senses, correct our path, and do well in communication with one another during this struggle for justice and democracy, and after its culmination in victory, as well. Simply put, if we do not know the problem, we will not be able to fix it. As it is clear that the problem hovers around communication, this leads us to the question: ***What are the basic communication styles?*** But in order to answer this question, we need to see the question: ***Why is the understanding of the communication styles important for justice seekers?***

The justice seekers constitute a large group of adults having varying personalities, cultural and educational backgrounds, work and life experiences, capabilities, talents, intellect, challenges, traits and motivators. In this situation, it is natural for communication challenges to arise because they would use different communication styles, including those that could form barriers, leading to the delay or failure of the goal, which brought justice seekers together. For instance, identifying and knowing my own communication style, will help me predict how others will perceive my words and actions. Further, I need to understand other communication styles in addition to mine. That would help me communicate with others in a style that will lower barriers to hearing what I say, prevent controversy, and improve deliverability of my message. This way, understanding communication styles would make each justice seeker a valuable contributor. This is to say, through the understanding of communication styles, we can radically reduce the chances for communication barriers to emerge.

Communication experts recognize four types of styles. These are **Assertive**, **Aggressive**, **Passive** and **Passive-Aggressive**. However, as we are talking about communication in the social media, we will focus only on the first two, though we will touch on passivity in our conclusion because it is also causing serious damages to our struggle against the ruling gang. The following description of the Assertive communicator and the Aggressive one will help each of us identify which of the two is his/her most dominant communication style (assuming that one might use different styles at different interactions). The characteres of each the two styles could be summarized as follows:

- The assertive communicator:
 - Clearly, directly, and honestly expresses his or her opinion, needs, and feelings.
 - Firmly advocates for his/her rights and needs, without violating the rights of others (Here we underline the respect for others).
 - Seeks to preserve relationship and so knows healthy boundaries between him and her with others.
 - Delivers his or her message in a calm and controlled manner, which means the presence of self-control and emotional stability.

In other words, the assertive communicator never hesitates to say what he feels, believes and needs, and firmly defends them. But he/she does so while respecting the feelings, ideas, and needs of others. This means that he/she never engages in insults and personal attacks or shows no intention to harm others, values himself/herself as an equal to others, and has no fear to stand for himself/herself, even if others do not like that. ***What would his/her interactions in the platform of the justice seekers look like?*** He or she would do the following:

- The person can give his/her opinion freely or say what he/she feels without any reservation.
- Can ask for what he/she needs.
- Can offer ideas and suggestions.
- Can disagree without feeling guilty.
- In contrast, the aggressive communicator has the following characters:
 - He/she expresses his feelings and opinions, and advocates for his needs, as the assertive communicator.
 - What makes him/her different from the assertive communicator is that he/she violates the rights of others while doing so.
 - He/she is abusive because he/she tries to dominate, intimidate, and humiliate others in order to control them.
 - He/she is very impulsive, and acts threateningly and rudely.

In few words, the aggressive communicator generates fear and hatred in others to whom he/she feels superior. This means that his/her needs, desires, and agenda are more important

to him or her than preserving relationship with others. As a result of these characters, he/she becomes alienated from others.

From the discussions about the communication styles above, we could conclude that the aggressive communicator is like a person driving drunk, and that he or she can hurt people. That makes him or her a person who is impossible to hate. That is why we see the danger of more aggressiveness and less assertiveness is the saddest thing in the justice seekers' platform, and that we are in a moment that the principle of assertiveness is needed most. But the question remains: ***Can we reverse the situation?***

Realistically, we cannot change all aggressive communicators into assertive ones. Some would definitely remain lockstepped in their aggressive approach. To these aggressive communicators applies the saying of the the French Enlightenment philosopher, Voltaire (November 21, 1694-May 30, 1778), "It is difficult to free fools from the chains they revere. " For this reason, it is not easy to cut their umbilical cord from the aggressive approach. In fact, no wonder that the landmines some of them put on the platform of justice seekers could be intentional.

Nonetheless, though it looks that the number of aggressive communicators in the justice seekers platform is disturbingly high, we can change many, if not the majority, into wonderful human beings with good hearts, if we pursue the following approach:

- We should not take the bait and reply to them in an equally insane manner, fanning the flames. I am not saying that we should ignore them, and the problem will automatically go. We should rather speak to them with knowledge, conviction, and truth, pounding our messages without insulting, and helping them do soul searching (in fact, all of us have a lot of soul searching to do). We should remember the American actress's advice, Shirely McLaine (Born: April 24, 1934) saying: "Dwelling on the negative simply contributes to its power." We hope there are more sober, honest, principled and rational minds, who can teach them, than those who have equally lost their minds. This does not mean that all over-heated comments deserve to be replied to. We should have an open mind to realize that there are some aggressive communicators, who are just miserable, if people are not paying attention to them. They should be identified, laughed at, and ignored. It is great to see some have enough courage, conviction, and resolve to speak out when they come across destructive or over-heated statements, but In general, when we deal with aggressive communicators, it is good to remember Michelle Obama's wisdom, which says, "When they go low, we go high."

The sad thing is that some of us think that some of these unwise and emotional responders deserve a medal as heroes, though they breathe life into the controversy. I doubt if this horrible idea would help nation building. ***Isn't this is a fast lane to becoming indefinitely stateless? Who among us thinks the answer to this question is "No"?*** We hope wisdom will prevail.

- Sharing videos of hate speeches does not help our struggle because that is the best way to have them disseminated. Here we should not forget that the number of traitors among us is shocking. Some have a foot on justice seekers' land and another on Isias's land. This is to say that some of these hate speeches are intentional and the planners want to see Eritreans fighting among themselves. The more we fight among ourselves, the more Isias's laughs will be bigger. No doubt there will be some who will respond to them, but the more we circulate the videos, the more responders will come forward. ***Do we really need a great number of responders to silence them?*** It is not the number, but the quality of the responses that will silence the aggressive communicators and render them irrelevant.
- As it is always said, we sometimes need a shake-up to wake up. The real time disaster unfolding in the justice seekers' platform since the eruption of the inter-Ethiopian war in Tigray, was the shake-up that alerted us to think about the life skills of our children, and the need to insulate them against aggressiveness. We can do that by teaching them understanding tolerance, empathy, mutual respect, anger control, and the value of trust among citizens, as some of the major tools that could ensure the stability of a society. As our children unfold into adulthood, these principles will sink in. Evidently, we should not wait until we take back our state from the gang and integrate life skills and civics into our school curriculum. We can do that at home, while they are in their daily practical life and interactions with their surroundings.

As Eritreans, we had risen to the occasion when it was necessary. In fact, we were the guiding light in Africa in many ways. For a society that has many things to be proud of, it is extraordinarily stunning to see bringing Atse Isias down from his high horse becoming a very difficult job, though the struggle has entered its third decade. It is not coincidence that the propaganda machine of Adolf Isias is spreading all lies, misinformation, and mistrust, to divide the justice seekers; that part of the Eritrean society in the Diaspora, actively fighting for regime change. Equally, the propaganda machine of the Facist gang never misses the chance to exploit any controversy emerging within the justice seekers, providing it oxygen so that we exhaust our time and energy on trivial differences and side issues, diverting our attention from the most fateful issue that has far-reaching consequences and implications: the struggle for regime change. The monster is lucky that we are helping him in his agenda unknowingly. That is why we see this insanity unfolding in such unprecedented scope. The nagging question these days is: ***Is that insanity going to escalate or decline?*** The answer depends on what we do to have it under control. If we do not fight it in the way suggested above, we will wear this stain, and our victory over the regime will take longer than necessary. In the same way, if there are any who think the current situation is fine, then the concept of justice seekers is, by all odds, nothing but a second-rate farce. Before wrapping it up here, let me make my final point.

One of the disturbing reasons, that have made our struggle against the ruling gang in Eritrea lag behind, is political passivity, which is characterized by the flagrant failure to express thoughts, needs, and feelings, or by expressing them only indirectly or unclearly. This does not mean that the passive among us do not watch, look, listen to things, and have no resentments, but they let things happen, leaving their resentments remain hidden because they lack the backbone to speak out or do something about the situation. The motivational situations that underline this political passivity could be many. Among the reasons we clearly see on the ground, as laymen or people without professional or special knowledge in this particular subject, is the fear of making the “government” or its loyalists and agents angry, and so they choose to preserve the relationship. On the other hand, behaviourists suggest insecurities, lack of self-esteem, or undeveloped sense of self. Whatever the motivational situation (s) is/are, passive citizens, whether in Eritrea or elsewhere, give up their rights and defer the rights of others because of their inaction and the desire to avoid confrontation. This makes political passivity a very big weakness in the society because the consequence of doing nothing is always great. One of the Founding Fathers of the United States, Benjamin Franklin (January 17, 1706-April 17, 1790) tells passive citizens, “Make yourself a sheep and the wolves will eat you.”

The regional and the international situations are in favour of change, with the two heads of East Africa’s snake (Abiy Ahmed and Adolf Isias) have fallen into the pit of their own making, and their legs have been caught in the trap they set. The adventures of Adolf Isias look like those of the French Emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte (August 15, 1769-May 5, 1821), who invaded Europe with the intention of re-shaping it in early 19th century, to finally receive a humiliating defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in Belgium on June 18, 1815. Since then, the expression “met his Waterloo” has become common in in our world today, meaning that someone has suffered a decisive or final defeat or setback. Eritreans are keeping their fingers crossed to see which city, town or village in Tigray will be the Waterloo of East Africa’s Napoleon, Adolf Isias. We Eritreans, in and outside the country, civilians and military, should not let this opportunity slide. It is time for us, particularly the justice seekers, to pull ourselves out of the trivialities in which we have been bogged down, unify our ranks, and strike as a solidly unified hand to end the nightmare haunting our people for almost three decades.

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“BURN THE SHIPS”