

A QUICK NOTE FOR THE READERS:

This article was originally posted on www.togoruba.org and www.jeberti.com on November 20, 2017, in response to some PFDJ misleading statements about secularism and the role of the “secular” government in the school system. All that was meant to justify the PFDJ interference in the affairs of community-funded schools, specially Diae Al Islam School and Indamariam School, in Asmara. Now we see the on-going recent Ethiopian Muslim students’ protests have triggered the same controversy, and that have given rise to some debates among the Eritrean Diaspora. I think, the re-posting of this article would help by informing our communities on the issues.

SECULARISM 101 FOR THE PFDJ CHIEF AND APOLOGISTS:

By: *Abdu Habib*

Beqaq835@yahoo.com

“If I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate. I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. The state would look after your secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern!”
(Mahatma Gandhi, October 2, 1869-January 30, 1948)

As Clown Alamin Mohammed Saied, the PFDJ non-chief chief, never ceases to amuse us, this time he did remarkably with his little and distorted knowledge about secularism, and the deep roots of religion in the Eritrean society; topics that are too vast and too complex for his limited intellect. Here I am referring to a part of his statement in the Riyadh public gathering of November 9-11, 2017 in which he boasted that his government, which he had described as “secular”, will not allow religious schools to be established and the picture of Saint Mary and verses from the Quran to be displayed in public places, declaring a war on religion. This part of the statement (it is beyond the scope of this piece to respond to everything crap he said) was of a particularly uninformed nature, offensive, and largely laughable for any government or party official with a sound mind to openly make. Many Eritreans, including those related to him, asked with a heavy heart: **“Doesn’t he consider the long-time risks of his statement?”** In fact, nobody should expect the clown to speak something honourable. After all, he does not

understand what it means to be a good Muslim or a good Christian for the country because he has never been one.

Simply put, such direct interference of the state in matters of faith is inadvisable, morally repugnant, and could boomerang, but not unexpected from PFDJ government, the primary source of all Eritrea's ills. Many readings would go into the questions: **Why was the statement made from Saudi Arabia and at the time the new Crown Prince wages a very controversial campaign against the religious establishment in the country? Was that a coincidence or Eritrea has become a part of the regional war against religion?** Whatever the reality is, the statement has received very sharp and unsparing criticism from Eritrean Muslims and Christians, alike, in the social media and other media outlets.

In principle, anybody has the right to be a believer, non-believer, or an atheist, and nobody has to take that against him or her. Nonetheless, Eritrean Muslims have a painful experience with Clown Alamin Mohamed Saied's loose tongue, who never knew, like his master, that there are obligations for being an Eritrean citizen and that these obligations include respect for one's fellow citizens and their religious beliefs. That way, he has been a thorn on the side of the Eritrean Muslims. Now he added the Christian faith in his attack because that is the only type of equality he and his master know, unifying all believers and justice advocates against the regime that lives in critical conditions nobody would envy it for. In this connection, some say that Clown Alamian, whom they describe as the dusted book remembered and picked up after more than a decade from the shelf because he is only wanted for a particular nasty mission, is nothing but a robot directed by his master, Atse Isias, to say for him what the master does not dare to say himself. This is best described by the Tigre proverb which says: "Adde Gulul Arwe Tsubat Ebba "(Literarily meaning: ***Use the fool's hand to catch the snake***).

It is interesting to note here that it was the English ophthalmologist (a specialist in medical and surgical eye disease), Austin O'Malley (1858-1932), who said: "We use religion like a trolley-car--we ride on it only while it is going our way." (<https://english.newstracklive.com/news/we-use-religion-like-a-trolley-car-austin-o-malley-9289-1.html>). The coming of Donald Trump to power, as the leader of the free world, has added credibility to this saying to a large extent. This is the picture we get when watching the mysterious political drama going on in many parts of the world. We do not need to go too far, seeking for proof. We just need to look at the situation in the Gulf region to which we are tied by geographical proximity, and directly affected by all developments there.

Of course, as neighbours of the Gulf, we stand firm and tall for openness, moderation, modernity, and reforms in the region. At the same time, we believe

that we would benefit from all these measures, but the concern is the intention, the timing, speed, lack of transparency and public participation, the absence of consistency, and wisdom, in carrying out those radical plans. “Great things are not done by impulse but by a series of small things brought together.” as Vincent Van Gogh, the 19th century great Dutch painter had advised. All in all, the articles of David Hearst, the Editor-in-Chief of Middle East Eye, are extraordinarily enlightening on how religion is pressed to serve politics (Visit: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/saudis-prince-chaos-205606563>).

Coming back to the core issues at hand, though the regime has its own particular reasons, we need to ask: *Can we see the timing of the current war on religion in Eritrea and the statement of Clown Alamin Mohammed Saeid outside the regional circus we had referred to above?* In any case, nobody denies that anti-religious attitude and mindset has grown into a basic strategy of the PFDJ since the early days of its formation, but the current regional and international environments have provided the PFDJ with the right opportunity to use the anti-religious trend for political ends, at the time the regime is badly staggering. These small PFDJ minds may think, if hostility towards religious establishment could bring Mohammed Bin Salman to power, and gives the UAE the license to be the Sparta of the region, as some Arab intellectuals tend to describe it, it could save the regime from the total collapse hovering over its head. It could give the PFDJ regime a breathing space temporarily, but to think that it works for them on the long run, is a mere wishful thinking. They just need to read history.

As indicated above, in his statement of November 11, 2017 in Riyadh, Clown Alamin said that his government will not allow the establishment of religious schools because it is a “secular government”. I will address these issues through the following questions:

- ***Is what we have in Eritrea qualified to be called “government”?***
- ***Is the “Eritrean Government”, (if at all what exists deserves that name), qualified enough to be called “secular government” as the clown had described it?***
- ***Does secularism prohibit the establishment of religious schools?***
- ***Why religion is important in Eritrea, as elsewhere?***

- ***Should religion have place in Eritrean politics in future?***
- ***How should we protect religious freedom in future Eritrea?***

To begin with, if we look into the definition of the word “government”, we will not stop by saying, “It is a supreme authority of a state or a nation”, without mentioning that it represents the people in making, interpreting, and enforcing laws (For details, refer to <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/openstax-americangovernment/chapter/what-is-government/>). For a body to represent the whole society, it needs authorization of those it claims to represent. ***Does the ruling gang in Eritrea have any public authorization?*** The only feasible mechanism to give authorization is through the conduct of elections. In the absence of peoples’ representation, based on elections (both general and presidential), we cannot speak about a legitimate ruling body or government. In other words, if the duty of the government is to regulate the relationships among members of the society and between the society and outsiders, and make decisions to meet goals and maintain order, keeping the society run smoothly, securely, and peacefully: ***Are these tasks possible in the absence of a constitution (the basic law that serves as the source for all laws), public institutions (particularly parliament that makes laws), and functioning cabinet (independent ministries including the judiciary branch that interprets laws?*** Put differently, when Clown Alamin uses the phrase “our government”: ***Is he aware that the concept of “government” includes all of the above components?*** In short, being a force possessing the power to impose its rule through guns, prisons, and army, does not make it a legitimate government but a gang of illegal vagabonds that belongs only to the jungle.

When Clown Alamin said that his “government is secular”: ***Does he know that a secular government is a democratic form of government in which the citizens are encouraged to discuss, evaluate, and debate public policies?*** This makes a secular government a functioning democracy in which the people participate through their elected representatives in a formal parliament or assembly (the legislative branch of the government), in addition to an independent judiciary branch, and an independent press. Accordingly, here I want to help him out by listing the major functions secularism performs so that he could answer my question: ***To what extent is the current Eritrea closer to the requirements of a secular government?*** My list of the major functions of secularism includes the following:

- ***Separation of Religion from State:***

This principle ensures that the state does not interfere in the affairs of religions, and religions do not interfere in state affairs. This function, in addition to some other related issues, was dealt with in detail in my articles (***A SECULAR ERITREAN STATE, PART I & PART II***, www.

Togoruba.org, February 5 & February 12, 2016). The articles could be accessed from the archives of the website.

- **Protection of both believers and non-believers:**

This means that a secular state protects freedom of religious belief and practice for all its citizens. Likewise, the secular state protects the right of non-believers too. In other words, the secular state balances the right of individuals to freedom of religion by the right to be free from religion. Moreover, when we say that the secular state protects the right of individuals to be religious or non-religious, it does so by making sure that the belief of one group or individual does not impinge on the rights and freedoms of others. ***How does this function match up with Clown Alamin's "secular government"?***

- **When we talk about secularism we are talking about democracy and fairness:**

In a secular state, all citizens are equal before the law. This means that no religious or political affiliation gives any citizen an advantage or a disadvantage: all believers and non-believers, without exception, are citizens with the same rights and obligations. The secular state usually has equality laws that protect women and religious minorities from any discrimination. To remind Alamin, we ask: ***How have the Pentecostal Christians been treated in Eritrea? How girls are treated by the military officials in Sawa and elsewhere in the country?***

- **Secularism ensures equal access to public services:**

Just to drive this point home, we ask: ***Do hospitals, schools, police services, and "Kebele" shops equally accessible to all citizens in Eritrea? Are they run in a neutral way that gives services to any citizen? Who gets services in these facilities and who is denied? In other words: Who is a first class citizen and who is a second class citizen in PFDJ's Eritrea?***

- **Secularism is not atheism:**

Atheism is the absence of belief in God. Atheists could have interest in supporting secularism, but if we take secularism for its own merit, we identify the following clear positions:

- It does not challenge the provision or tenet of any religion or belief.
- It does not impose atheism on any citizen.

These two basic features of secularism are clear indications that Clown Alamin was supposed to describe his government as "atheist"; not "secular". The two are two poles apart. Here, again, we ask: ***Does his description show ignorance or the intention to mislead?***

- **Secularism protects free speech and expression:**

- Religious people have the right to express their beliefs publicly or in public places (we see preachers in parks, squares, and at the entrances of subways in Western cities). Their right to preach is well-protected.
- At the same time, those who question or oppose those beliefs have the same right of expressing their views.

To wind up the discussion on the major functions of secularism, one would finally ask Clown Alamin: **Can you tell us which of the above functions describe your “secular government”?**

If this is secularism as we see it practiced by the West, we would ask: **How does a secular state treat the school system or religious schools?** I will walk the reader through the French school system. I choose France because secularism (la laïcité) is its invention, it is the first secular state, and the strictest form of secularism in the world exists in France.

It is not a common knowledge that all schools in France are not state-owned or public schools. In fact, to think that all schools in France are public schools is a real misconception very widely spread among many people. If so: **What does the French school system look like then?**

In France, over 80% of the students go to state-owned or public schools, while the remaining 20% go to private schools. To the surprise of many, by far higher number of students goes to private schools in France than in the U.K. and the USA. Additionally, about 90% of the French private schools are Catholic schools (For statistics and information on French schools, refer to: <https://about-france.com/primary-secondary-schools.htm>). This will lead us to the question: **In what way (s) are public schools and private or religious schools similar, and in what way (s) different in France?**

The principle of secularism (la laïcité as called in French) is more strictly implemented in public schools. **What does this mean?** This means, in theory, religion has no place in public schools (watch the phrase “in theory”). In other words, there are no formal religious instructions in public schools. However, I have some bad news or “Merde” for the clueless PFDJ operatives:

- It should be made clear here that giving religious instructions, and teaching about religion for the sake of creating awareness among the followers of different religions, are not the same. This is to say that we recently see a growing demand in French public schools to teach religious awareness, with the purpose of creating greater understanding between the students of different religions. This has become necessary due to the presence of French citizens of Muslim faith, as a minority community within the French society. The teachers

here are given special training so that the lessons would not turn into religious instructions. We have the same thing in many democracies, including the USA and Canada too.

- Again, PFDJ operatives would be shocked here to learn that religious instructions in French public schools are not totally banned. What are banned are the formal religious instructions or instructions during the regular school hours, and as a part of the school curriculum. Accordingly, religious instructions take place after formal school hours in French Public schools, only for those students, who want it, and wish to remain behind after school hours. This is the legal French position on religious instructions.
- Public school students can freely share their faith with other students, can pray over lunch, and can have religious clubs, if their high schools permit non-curricular clubs. Students can also read the Bible or the Quran in the library or during study hours.
- My last blow is: ***Do the PFDJ operatives faint, if I tell them that school chaplains (aumoniers, in French), clergymen or Sheiks are officially appointed by the local educational offices in public schools to run the religious instructions after school hours?***

With regard to Catholic schools, the following should be pointed out to help some misled followers of the PFDJ to be sober enough, and see that what their government is doing to religious schools is absurd and senseless, in addition of taking the country to a dangerous direction:

- The curriculum of Catholic and other religious schools includes religious instructions.
- Catholic and other religious schools hire their own teachers, without any government interference.
- In addition to religious instructions, like all other private schools, Catholic and other religious schools have the choice to follow the public school curriculum (No imposition). If they choose to do that, they sign a contract (**écoles sous contrat**) with the state school system. According to this contract, the government pays the salaries of the teachers. As a

result of that, private/ religious schools in France charge a very low or symbolic fee; a matter that made them accessible or affordable to all sectors of the society.

If this is the way religion and religious instructions (religious schools) are seen and handled by secular democracies of the West, contrary to the hostile and anti-people PFDJ and the ruling gang policies, we need to show the significance of religion in our society and the relevance of religious instructions to our life. As our needs for religion cannot be different from other human beings, I will formulate my general arguments as follows:

- One of the advantages of religion is that it gives mental peace at the face of the uncertainties of life, insecurities, and dangers. It is religion which consoles and encourages us to face our life and our problems at the time of crisis. I wonder: ***Is there anything that gives Clown Alamin and his likes an emotional support when they are seriously sick, helpless, or hit by misfortune, releasing them from sorrow, frustration, and fear or making their loss meaningful?*** I do not know if the answer is a bottle of “Araki”. But for us, Muslims and Christians, there is some unseen power which we think moves mysteriously to help us: that is why we say “Ya Allah” or “Ballekha Aqlelo”. That feeling gives us mental peace and power to survive.
- Furthermore, religion is also a source of social values like truth, honesty, patience, non-violence, love, charity, benevolence, and discipline, to mention some. We are not saying that it is the only source of these social values, but a major one. There is no doubt that these social values make a person law-abiding, self-less and a good citizen. Again, we are not saying that non-believers are not good citizens. Within this context, one would be tempted to ask Clown Alamin: ***Is there enough police force in Eritrea to guard life and property at present?*** To illustrate, it needs to be realized that it is religion that is keeping the poor from murdering the rich and taking their property, especially at this time when only few make their two ends meet, thanks to PFDJ and its ruling gang.
- Social solidarity and spirit of brotherhood are tremendously promoted by the integration religion creates as a force in human society. The cementing factors here include: common belief, common sentiment, common worship or participation in common rituals, among other things.
- The fact that religion promotes welfare is observable in any society, including the West. We see many religious organizations engaging in a lot of welfare activities: spreading education, opening charitable institutions like hospitals, clinics, rest houses or shelters, feeding centres, orphanage, senior homes, building roads and bridges, providing affordable

housing, teaching trades, electrifying villages, introducing running water and digging wells, to mention a few. They do that as a result of the influence of religious beliefs and to help the poor. It was because of social blindness, deficit of confidence, and the total absence of seasoned leadership, that the PFDJ government expelled foreign charity organizations from the country, under the pretext that they were foreign agents. Governments fear exposure only when they know that what they are doing is unacceptable by the international community.

- Our life would be totally empty, if we do not have something to believe in. We need to believe that we have a reason for what we do, and that there is a reason for life. ***Whose day is more eventful: a citizen who goes to mosque or church or an idle person for whom a day is monotonous and like a year? Which of them will have a more relaxed mind and is in more harmony with himself or herself?*** It is religion that provides that condition for us. Many things could be said, but these are examples.

If religion is so important in our society, as a part of the Third World: ***Should religion have place in Eritrean politics?*** Here we need to see that political decisions are an expression of the values of the society. ***In what sense is this true?*** Our society got its values from faith. As any society: ***Where did the laws prohibiting murder, theft, betrayal of marriages, as well as those protecting safety, and environment, come from?*** All of these reflect moral judgment or have their roots in specific religious teachings for many of us, but they are shared broadly across religious and secular lines. That is why religious people and religious beliefs have always played a significant role in our revolution or politics and culture. In fact, religious beliefs and religious people have been at the forefront of our struggle since its first day. As a result of that, it will be unavoidable that religion and politics will mix to some extent (this has nothing to do with the principle of separation of religion and state). But the question is: ***How do they mix?*** They could mix in ways that would promote the common good of our people. They could also mix to divide the society and that is what the PFDJ and its ruling gang are doing. If we take the positive scenario, we would say that religious institutions should cooperate with the government in programs supporting the common good, as we see it in the West. In the West, religious organizations are vital partners with governments, in providing services in areas such as disaster relief, feeding the hungry, and housing the homeless. The whole purpose of such partnership between government and religious agencies is to allow the society benefit from these organizations' energy, financial capabilities, and expertise.

Before concluding this piece, we need to see the question: ***How should we protect religious freedom in future Eritrea?*** It should be suggested here that basically the following three

principles should work together to protect religious freedom and the thriving diverse landscape of our society:

- A person's standing as a citizen, member of a community, or the right to run as a candidate for a position in government, should not depend on faith. It means that there should not be a religious test for public office and for the participation in the political process. This should be firmly rooted in our future constitution.
- Our future constitution should also guarantee the free exercise of religion for all citizens, without any interference.
- Government institutions must show neither official approval nor disapproval of any religion, or favour one religion over another.

In few words, secularism, as detailed above, is the best solution for a society that has a diverse of religious communities. It is the guarantee to live together fairly and peacefully. I would have been among the first to support PFDJ, had it been a secular government. It cannot wear a secular gown to mislead and attack religion. However, it should be made clear to the PFDJ that it is impossible for them to take away religion from the Eritrean society, and turn human beings into robots. To end it up here, I would say, Clown Alamin and his likes are free to bring up their children the way they like. Nobody criticizes their choice. Nonetheless, they should not tell me how to raise my children. =====