

AL-DIAA ISLAMIC SCHOOL STUDENT DEMONSTRATION: THE BEGINNING OF RADICAL PATTERNS OF STRUGGLE

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“Revolutions, like bankruptcies, come gradually, and then suddenly. One day, somebody sets himself on fire, then thousands of people are in the streets, and before you know it, the country is burning. And then there’s no time for us to get to the airport and … fly to New Zealand. That’s the way it always happens.” (Joseph E. Stiglitz, Special Report)

Amid the scale of the Eritrean national disaster growing daily, Al-Diaa Islamic School student demonstration of September 31, 2017 unfolded as a turning point in the national political struggle. Social media networks, paltalk rooms, and What ‘s Up messages were quicker in spreading the news than the opposition media, with the speech of the elderly Sheik Musa Mohammed Nur going viral. The Sheik is an Akriya community leader and president of the Islamic school, who has a score of credit and of whom all Eritreans of all faiths immediately have become incredibly proud. As soon as the social media stormed us with the news, two things came into everybody’s mind. The first was the feeling that it was a day we cannot underestimate; a day heralding that winter and its dark days are coming for the medieval politics of the ruling gang. The second was the question: **Is the country behind Al-Diaa Islamic School students?** This question was immediately answered when we knew about the pouring verbal support from across the country and outside it. Nevertheless, the implicit part of the question remained seeking an answer due to the difficulty of communication with the different parts of the country, coupled with the state propaganda channeled through its foot soldiers in and outside the country. The implicit part of the

question to which finally everybody got an answer was: ***Was the verbal support for Al-Diaa Islamic School students a show or there was real sincerity behind it?*** Again, it was finally confirmed, to the dismay of the supporters of the regime and in blow to their efforts to amplify religious tensions that all faith communities of the country (both Christian and Muslim) were with the Islamic school students, both in spirit and practice. That is why we have demonstrations spreading like an epidemic disease inside and outside the country, confirming that the agenda of the Eritrean people is the same: to dismantle the brutal dictatorship and build a democratic state on its ruins. Here, as always, our people sent a clear message to the regime and its supporters, which they found harsh and demoralizing. The message says, “Our ties and bonds are unbreakable, and our agenda is the same”, showing a stronger desire to work together and the determination to raise that to a reliable level. ***What a blow!***

When we heard the headlines of the news of the demonstration, all of us had to look for more information, using the different networks that connect us to the world around us. To interpret the news, some of us who felt that the event might reflect a turning point in the process of the altering of the society by the forces of history, did not see a better enlightening source to resort to than Malcolm Gladwell’s bestseller of 2000, *The Tipping Point*. Here one would ask: ***What is the relevance of Gladwell’s concept of “tipping point” to this event?*** Gladwell’s theory about tipping points is derived from the study of the spread of viruses and other diseases (epidemiology) but he translates that into social phenomena that act as social epidemics in the way they spread. The way this Eritrean civil unrest and its influence are spreading within the country and outside, where Eritreans live, follows the analogy of social epidemics or even wild fires. But as to the concept of a tipping point, one has to see the analogy of water changing into ice. From our high school science lessons we remember that water changes into ice when it reaches 32 degrees Fahrenheit, which means no ice will be formed above 32 degrees. Specifically, 32 degrees is the tipping point for water. ***Did the level of injustice our people have been suffering reach the tipping point to the effect that we saw student demonstration in the streets of Asmara?*** That is why we emphatically assert that the speech of Sheik Musa and the demonstration in the

streets of Asmara constitute a departure from the previous patterns of struggle that did not go beyond the feeling of discontent within oneself, falling short of expressing that discontent explicitly. Accordingly, they represent transformative events that irreversibly transformed and radicalized the political environment, affecting the political outlook and the emotional energies of the people. These are among the reasons, not all reasons that show the significance and impact of the demonstration in the political future of the country. This will lead us to the question: ***What are the other reasons that would make Al-Diaa Islamic School student demonstration significant and impactful in the political future of the country?*** The reasons could be summed up as follows:

- It tested the strength of the regime, showing that it is beatable or ultimately conquerable, any time it faces a well-coordinated civil unrest. In other words, it showed that Eritrea is not immune to the forces that started Arab Spring, or the French and Russian revolutions.
- It also tested whether Eritrean Defense Forces would stand with the people or the regime at the face of a serious mass civil unrest. The demonstrators, and through them the whole justice seekers, have received enough signals of assurances that their brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters in the Eritrean Defense Forces will turn their guns against the regime when things get thicker. This had happened in many African countries, including our neighbours. Consequently, we have no reason to believe that the mass of the members of the Eritrean Defense Forces are less nationalist than their African counterparts or they are blind loyalists to the Atse. Another part of the equation is that both former fighters and conscripts are equally oppressed like their people to the extent that they are justice seekers too. But how they would react will depend on how we handle them when we face the regime in a mass civil unrest: ***Do we antagonize, win or neutralize them?*** We have to show them that the people are for them, as they are for the people.

- Further, the events proved that the civil servants are a part of the society that will benefit from change. Except few notorious government officials, the bulk will cooperate with any serious civil unrest; they cannot do nothing at the critical time and circumstances.
- The events also proved that the ties and bonds among the people, with all diverse religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, are unbreakable. Through the feedback received, the events assured that all Eritreans have their hearts in the right place and are ready to come on board, except the few. As the resilience of the Islamic school students, their parents, and supporters in the city of Asmara was inspiring for all, the solidarity we hear and read about until today in and outside the country is incredible and the compassion is overwhelming. The solidarity demonstrations in Sweden, Australia, and others we have the chance to watch in YouTube were the source of great pride of being an Eritrean. We are expecting more demonstrations this week too. All in all, this is a tremendously encouraging development.
- The events conveyed a good message to the opposition outside the country, which tacitly says many things we leave for them to soberly sit, brainstorm, and decipher. However, we are tempted to ask: ***Is there a margin for the opposition to learn from those messages?*** I hope many readers would share my optimistic take on this.
- As there were no negative reactions from our immediate neighbours, as governments and peoples, the events proved that there was no interference in favour of the regime. Nonetheless, the smear campaign and fabrications of the regime and its supporters outside have it that Qatar is behind the events in the Islamic school. This could be an indication that the regime could get support from its conservative Gulf allies (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, in addition to Egypt) who never miss any

chance to associate Qatar with the Muslim Brothers, whom they hate because they fear for their chairs. Muslim Brothers advocate elections and are against the dynasty method of rule in the Gulf. This makes it understandable why the regime and its supporters try to associate Muslim schools with Qatar and terrorism. In particular, this is the only thing the brutal regime can sell in a world, where some world leaders give dictators a license to do what they want, as long as they could cover that with the claim that they are fighting Islamic terrorism.

Correspondingly, let me say few things about Islamic schools in Eritrea because we see a lot of semantics going here. At the same time, it is in Al-Diaa Islamic School that the resistance to government policies started. To begin with, religious schools, both Muslim and Christian, are not new in Eritrea. We had Islamic schools in Asmara, Massawa, Keren, Ghinda and many other major towns, in addition to many Christian schools that spread throughout the country. In any case, I know more about Islamic schools than about their Christian counterparts.

In fact, many of the Islamic schools have been closed down one by one by the regime, after arresting their teaching staff, alleging them of being Jihadists, without any change and due process of law, like all other Eritrean prisoners. This is to say that we have by far less number of Islamic schools in the post-independence period than the pre-independence period because of these hostile government policies. This is regarding the number of Islamic schools during pre-independence period and after independence. The second difference is how these religious schools have been handled and treated by the Eritrean regime, as compared to the Ethiopian Government during the pre-independence period. The Ethiopian Ministry of Education and its educational office in Eritrea did not directly interfere in the way the schools ran their institutions, as is the case since the day of independence. It was done almost through a remote control and in a much disguised manner, when they suspected political activities in the schools. In normal situations, I remember that the role of the government was only limited to seeing to it that they integrate the history of the country and the working language (Amharic) into their curriculum.

In few words, if this is the way the Ethiopian Government had handled and treated religious schools, we are justified to expect the ruling gang to treat and handle Eritrean religious schools, be it Muslim, Catholic or orthodox, not less than that. After all, the regime in Eritrea considers the Ethiopian Government an occupier. Here I do not hide that I wonder: ***What harm does a student wearing a head scarf or a cross do to the security of the country? Aren't head scarf and cross the religious symbols our society cherish? Why does the ruling gang want our youth to be non-religious?***

We see daily the social decadence in the current Western societies because they have discouraged the church *and* they could *not* replace it with something that teaches ethical values and morality these societies used to cherish. By doing so, they have created materialist societies that do not know what is decent and indecent, a situation depicting the total erosion of human values that existed for centuries, blurring the boundaries between human beings and animals. ***Is this the type of undignified society the ruling gang plans to create in Eritrea?***

All of the above presentation would lead us to the question: ***How do we interpret what the regime has done to Al-Diaa Islamic School?*** This question is very important because we hear some overacting before knowing many facts: too many conspiracy theories. As the position of the regime supporters has no ambiguity and so needs no clarification, we would ask those who naïvely overact, falling into the trap of the regime, and make the issue a Muslim-Christian contradiction: ***Whose agenda are you furthering?***

Of course, the government policy towards the Islamic school should be condemned as undignified and anti-people act, but to put the record straight, the school was not singled out and attacked because it was a Muslim school. It has been reported that the Catholic and Endamariam schools have been treated in an identical manner as the Islamic school. We take the report at its face value, without asking for photos and recorded voices to prove it because we know how foolish, disruptive, and irresponsible the ruling gang is. The only difference is that Al-Diaa Islamic

School resisted, whereas the other two did not. We do not cry over spilt milk now; they would learn from each other and join hands in future. In this connection, we also need to remember: ***How brutally and illegally have the Patriarch, His Holiness Abune Antonios, and the Eritrean Orthodox Church been handled and treated by the ruling gang?*** Put simply, these examples show that we have to understand that the Atse and his gang have allergies to ethics and morality, and they want chaos and confusion in the whole society in order for them to survive. In few words, Islam is not a factor in this dispute but religion in general is.

It was heartwarming and gives us chills to hear that there are decent civil servants in the Ministry of Education who opposed the government interference in religious schools. As these courageous educators are not the enablers of the regime in its policy against religious schools, there will be no room for them in the ministry, and they will remain marginalized. Indeed, it is great that this fact did not go unnoticed, in addition to the good news that the gang could not erode nationalism in the ministry: there are burning-hearted educators towards the regime in the ministry.

From the discussions above, we can conclude that the students of Al-Diaa Islamic School have set the national struggle for justice and democracy on a different path, by introducing more radical patterns of political struggle that will bring the tipping point faster. Here we are talking about the point in which all series of small changes or incidents will become significant enough to cause a larger or more important change or revolution. As a matter of fact, this shows that the school, its students, and staff have entered history through a wider gate. On the other hand, we urge them to assume good intent from their partners in the other religious schools, who are on the same boat, and to be together in order to make the struggle better, stronger, and more effective. But with regard to the whole religious communities in general, we need to indicate that there is special burden on them to see the broader national picture, pull their resources together, join the other forces of history in the fight against the regime for what it is, and accomplish together all aspirations of the people, among which freedom of religion is one. Accordingly, at this critical time, working together is not an option because the regime is really staggering; it simply needs little wind to

push it. Ask me why I feel so, and I would ask you in response: ***How do you want me to arrange my reasons: in alphabetical order or according to significance?***

As things in Eritrea are moving towards the tipping point, which is fast approaching, I want to wind up this piece by asking the question: ***Could the brutal dictator, Atse Isias, and his gang, be able to predict a revolution and have time to go to the airport and escape to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia or Egypt?*** Joseph E. Stiglitz, whose quote introduces this piece, indirectly answers this question, while addressing American business communities that have created tremendous inequalities within the American society. He had the following to say, but I hope the ruling gang will pay attention to his words and know what final fate to expect:

“Here’s what I say to you: You’re living in a dream world. What everyone wants to believe is that when things reach a tipping point and go from being merely crappy for the masses to dangerous and socially destabilizing, that we’re somehow going to know about that shift ahead of time. Any student of history knows that’s not the way it happens.” =====