



(Taken from: <http://blog.execu-search.com/what-nelson-mandela-can-teach-us-about-working-together/>)

FOR HOW LONG SHOULD THE ERITREAN OPPOSITION BE BURDENED BY THE IDEA OF DOING NOTHING?

By: Abdu Habib

sabbahar@rocketmail.com

“It always seems impossible until it’s done.”

(Nelson Mandela, July 18, 1918-December 5, 2013)

In education, we use the adjectives “TIMED” and “UNTIMED” in relation to assignments and exams we give to students as traditional tools to assess learning. As no one needs to be an educator in order to know these terms, there is no need to explain what they mean. Nonetheless, for the Eritrean opposition that lives in an idealistic world, the duty of bringing change is an “UNTIMED” assignment or open until the doomsday. Accordingly, nothing has been achieved by way of

bringing about change in Eritrea during a quarter of a century of disunited and unsynchronized anti-regime struggle, as if we were not built right to work together. It is just like a walking person who moves one of his legs, while taking time to move the other, thinking that the world will be waiting for him until he does so. This is the type of opposition we have: running out of time, out of motivation, and out of knowledge/skills, while chronic sensitivity of the political organizations towards one other has paralyzed all attempts to work together, leading to a failure to function as a coherent team.

The Baito has been in a comma for a long time, though we recently hear the good news that it will have a workshop soon, to be followed by a Conference. The Coordinating Committee formed by MEDREK, on which a lot of hope was pinned and many thought that the committee will put us in a threshold of a new era, does not seem to be in a better position than the Baito. Irrespective of all that, nobody talks about anything and as a result, there is total blackout as to what is going on in the Baito and at the Coordinating Committee formed by MEDREK. “Qesum Zem; Metshafum Zem” (Both the Bible and the pastor are silent), is the best way to describe the situation, as the Amharic phrase has it. As a matter of fact, the situation speaks for itself, heralding that the opposition is burdened by the idea of doing nothing. This brings us to the mind-boggling questions that have been troubling our people in and outside the country for decades. The insurmountable problem here is reflected by the questions: ***Is the solution to this situation inaction or action to activate things and break the ice? Is joining forces coherently and fighting together against the regime the solution or fighting each other? Couldn't we decide after a quarter of a century whether working together is a choice or a necessity for us?***

It was in the middle of this situation that the month of July witnessed public presentations about a couple of proposals for working together. To be more specific, in North America in general and Toronto, Canada, in particular, we received two delegations on July 16 and July 23 of this year, both carrying a different proposal. The first initiative was presented by Brother Kubrom Dafla and the second by the EPDP delegation headed by the president of the party, Brother

Mengistab Asmarom. Both were attended by a reasonable number of people. In fact, the proposal of the EPDP was posted in the website of the party in advance and was reported to have been sent to all organizations, while that of Ato Kubrom is expected to be posted any time, as promised.

As I attended both presentations, let me give you an insight into both meetings, with my blunt personal readings where possible. Ato Kubrom's presentation focused on the following salient features, as far as I remember from my written and mental notes:

- Why change is needed in Eritrea?
- Who are the stakeholders?
- Our strengths
- The weaknesses of the regime
- Our core strategies
 - How could we avoid power vacuum?
 - Regrouping of the forces of change
 - Non-violent civil disobedience
 - Succession plan

As part of the strategies, Ato Kubrom spoke about breaking the four support pillars of the regime, naming them as: loyalists in the army, intelligence and security apparatus, loyalists in Diaspora, and colluding foreign bodies.

I admit that my notes may be incomplete because I thought there will be a Press Release or report to be posted in the Eritrean opposition websites about the meeting by the organizers and I had to limit myself to brief notes for personal follow-up, hoping to read the 70-page draft Ato Kubrom said will be posted. Ato Kubrom winded up the presentation by asking those interested in the initiative to send e-mails (he gave an e-mail address) showing the full name and the phone

number so that they could attend a briefing and a detailed discussion via the Internet soon.

Overall, the presentation was very interesting and it seems that a lot of time, thought, and talent were spent on it, though it does not say clearly how the existing opposition political organizations will be a part of the initiative. With all respect to the incredibly dynamic Ato Kubrom, who we admire and adore because he chose to be the people's person by playing a unique role of educating and inspiring the Eritrean people inside and outside the country through his Monday Radio Erena show, in addition to organizing and guiding the youth in an extraordinary public protest and a practical legal fight against the EPDJ in the justice system of Holland, one is tempted to ask:

- ***Could an unorganized mass by itself bring change in Eritrea?***
- ***How about the political organizations that have kept the struggle kindle until now, though we know they are weak and fragmented? Is it easy to bring change in a peaceful manner without engaging them?***
- Most importantly: ***How about the armed opposition forces that have been courageously engaging the regime and protecting their targeted people against atrocities?*** These are also minorities with extensions in our neighbourhood; a matter which complicates things further. ***Are we going to tell them to lay down their arms and expect them to obey orders? Don't they, as Eritreans, have the right to be listened to and be a part of the national forces that influence the direction of developments and change in their country? Where are the compassion, the tact, the wisdom, and the thoughtfulness necessary in handling minorities so that they do not ask, "What do I have in your proposal?" Can't we learn from the history of South Sudan and the Iraqi Kurdistan?*** All these have to be soberly and meticulously studied.

In a nutshell: ***Can we jump over these realities and be successful in bringing about the desired change without causing chaos and undesirable confrontations?*** I do not know if Ato Kubrom's 70-page draft has answers to these questions. This remains to be seen.

Concerning the proposal of the EPDP, there was a pictorial and written report by Brother Haile Mengasha on www.togoruba.org on July 26, 2017 (***EPDP Chairman and Statesman in Toronto***). As the EPDP presentation was based on the proposal posted on the website of the party (<http://www.harnnet.org/>), it is easy for anyone to access. Brother Haile's report was mostly based on quotations from the speakers on the question-answer session. In any case, I cannot talk about the degree of accuracy of each quotation posted, but my question, as I had presented it, was not as simplistic and worded as it was put in the report (***"What's the difference EPDP's proposal to that of Medrek?"***). That was not the question, which in addition to other questions I read from a typed note (I prepared my questions earlier because I had read the proposal on the website) and finally submitted to Ato Mehreteab to make things easier for the discussion and for me to ensure that my message is adequately conveyed. My question word for word was:

As this initiative is not that much different in purpose from the one launched by MEDREK: Could it be considered a confirmation or "Merde" that the Coordinating Committee formed by MEDREK and in which EPDP was designated a member has failed?

Moreover, though no report could be perfect, we expect accuracy as much as possible and that no essential parts of the presentation should remain uncovered. Based on that, it is appropriate and academically honest to mention that there were other important issues that were not covered in Brother Haile's report. These included the following:

First, there were a couple of questions or remarks (it is sometimes difficult to tell which is a question and which is a remark when they duplicate) on the efforts of the EPDP and Eritrean National Salvation Front to re-merge. Here the speakers

expressed the frustration, very common among Eritreans struggling for change, that the current two political parties that had originally been one did not show enough efforts and the political will to re-merge, though their programs are the same, the social composition of their members are also almost the same, and each one of them, as many Eritreans believe, has comparatively more cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity than other political parties and organizations. I trust that many Eritreans see the integration and the stability of future Eritrean politics through the heterogeneity of these two parties, hoping to see them constitute the nucleolus of ideological parties. This does not mean that the basis on which other political organizations and parties have been organized is inappropriate. In fact, they reflect our level of socio-economic and cultural development, and that is objective in a third world country. However, though we defend diversity, we do not hide or deny that ideological basis should be the preference of many liberal Eritreans. That is what we always tell our friends in both parties, urging them to put tremendous pressure on their leaderships to take prompt measures to re-merge the two parties and also be a good example for all other Eritrean opposition parties to merge based on their commonalities. That would definitely cut on the exaggerated number of political organizations and makes working together easier, more effective, and bear quick fruits; subsequently enabling the opposition to assert itself as one of the major players in the winning of political power, the running of a successful transition, and the building of a stable, prosperous and democratic state. I believe the re-merging of the two twin parties, as demanded by some speakers, should have been an issue clearly reflected in the report.

Second, another point that I think was supposed to be reported was the fact that there were questions and remarks on the four fundamental principles EPDP proposal had suggested (The four principles are detailed in Brother Haile's report and in the website of the party). Particularly, there was one multiple question that I think should have not been missed (the judgment would be yours), and it was from me (this is not seeking credit, but I neither leave it out merely because

it was mine nor mention it without saying whose question it was). The question read as follows:

My second question is three-dimensional and concerns the four fundamental principles that you hoped would bind us all to work together:

- **Are these principles enough to bring as many contingents as possible on board, knowing that the aspirations of our people go beyond that?**
- ***Don't you think that:***
 - ***decentralization of the state (based on territorial curve-up; not ethnicity or other considerations)***
 - ***Secularism (strictly speaking, non-interference of the state on religious matters and non-interference of religions in state affairs) and***
 - ***Working languages***

also represent pillars of the aspirations of our people that could serve us as rallying points too?
- ***How are we going to campaign for these principles tomorrow, if we do not recognize them from now and rigorously educate our people on them?***

Third, Brother Haile's report misses the three major tasks "...the common umbrella or body to be formed shall primarily aspire to achieve..." Here the proposal lists the three major tasks as: joint foreign delegation, a common media centre, and an organ for mass mobilization. I do not think any Eritrean would take the significance of these tasks lightly.

In short, the EPDP proposal and that of Ato Kubrom as well, are not initiatives that could be automatically rejected or ignored, as if nothing was put on the Eritrean forum for discussion. They need to be interacted with, enriched, and perfected by discussions and public feedback. ***Does ignoring these proposals serve the best interest of the struggle? Do we need to kill proposals when we badly need to break the ice and move forward?***

It should be made clear here that I am not expressing any concern about Brother Haile's report, which like any other report, cannot be expected to be perfect. This is nothing but an attempt to complement the good work of Brother Haile, and add refinements that would hopefully give the readers a broader insight into the discussions.

Further, there was something upsetting for those of us who know personally the brothers and sisters concerned, while we are well-aware of the scope of the existing deadlock within the opposition and the extent it is prolonging the life of the brutal regime in Eritrea. We need to talk about our weaknesses in order to address them; turning the other way and remaining silent on setbacks that affect us all has not helped the objectives we claim we stand for. We have to be blunt and shoot straight, if we are determined to improve our performance and achieve our goals.

We have tried "Majamat", unnecessary courtesy, or the endless endeavour to please each other at the expense of the interest of the struggle, and we did that for a quarter of a century. The result, as we see it, has been the survival of the regime and the continuation of the pain and sufferings of our people to the extent that Eritrea became one of the well-known cemeteries of human rights and human dignity. ***Should we continue that way or try other methods? Which is more intelligent?*** It is only when we do things differently that we expect different results. I hope no hard feelings here. We are talking about the fate of a country and a people going down the ditch. There is nothing personal.

I observed that some political organizations and prominent opposition figures attended either of the two presentations in Toronto and actively participated in the discussions, refraining from attending the other. I am not sure if this was the pattern in the other North American cities, where the two proposals were presented to the public. In other words: ***Why did some want to attend only the presentation by Brother Kubrom Dafla and not the one by the EPDP delegation? By the same token, why did others prefer to attend only the EPDP presentation and not that by Brother Kubrom? Does each of the two proposals have a***

different agenda for Eritrea? Worst was that, there were some who did not bother to attend neither of the two at this critical time when talking to one another has become not an option. This may not be an isolated incident or an exclusive issue related to Toronto, but a general trend within the opposition, I believe, showing the extent to which it is still devastatingly polarized and none of the groups is ready to talk to others to end the state of inaction which is prolonging the life of the regime. ***Who is expected to take the initiative to break the ice? Foreigners or only some special Eritreans some of us have mentality designated for the task? Isn't it a source of concern for us that the issue of building a bigger tent and starting working together is still an untimed assignment for our opposition? Are there consequences on the country and our people?***

Nevertheless, by borrowing the title of this week's song (composed and performed on the occasion of the total eclipse of the sun of the century) by the American artist Bonnie Tyler, I would call this depressing turn I have detailed above, "Total Eclipse of the Heart", showing that Toronto witnessed the total eclipse of the heart in July before witnessing the total eclipse of the sun in August. It is sad that the city of Toronto has become the city of eclipses.

I do not understand why the person or the political party presenting the proposal is a hot button for some of us. It is this type of mentality that has allowed the ruling gang in Asmara to survive for so long, and made our people doubt if there is light at the end of the tunnel. Call me naïve if you want, but it is my principle that any proposal, no matter who is presenting it, should be listened to, and if possible interacted with. ***Why does it matter who threads the needle?*** Our objective should be to see to it the needle is threaded, no matter who is doing it. "Yetem Fichew; Duqetun Amchew" (Grind the grains anywhere you want; just bring the flour.) as the Amhara say.

It is a long time since the opposition and the people have spelled out the main area of the challenge, stating the problem as: putting the party in front of the country. That is where the rubber meets the road. **But when is each opposition**

party willing to put its narrow interest at the back seat and save the country? Is this obstacle insurmountable? Definitely, it is not. Many peoples in the world have crossed that type of barrier and could achieve their goals. We are not less intelligent than any other people, but we have to change our way of thinking and build common trust, as one people, in order to be able to move forward.

In fact, these two proposal, and others before them, are not contradictory, but complementary to each other. We can form a body from all (Baito, non-Baito members, independent Eritreans, civil organizations ...etc) and authorize it to take all important elements from all proposals so that we can finally have a final one which combines both national unity and identity or the general and the particular. If there is any political party or independent individual who thinks that operating as different organizations would be more effective in bringing change to Eritrea rather than working together by bringing our political, diplomatic and maybe military efforts, we say they have lost touch with reality.

What does a proposal by “X” or “Y” take from us? Looking at such initiatives with suspicion and mistrust is a lazy way of making sense of our failures and mistakes. In this connection, I frankly say that Ato Kubrom and EPDP may hear some noise similar to those made when MEDREK held the Nairobi Workshop. My advice to both is not to let such voices deter them from hearing the voices of their own successes. They have to go ahead with those willing, see the broader realities of our people, as indicated above, be genuinely flexible, and highly receptive to new ideas that come from other Eritreans. From observations, we can say that others will come on board when they find that the initiative is showing tremendous success, fearing that they will be left behind. Correspondingly, a fan of Mandela, the Hispanic Jovanka Ciales, who wrote in August 2013 an article under the title **7 Leadership Lessons Inspired By Nelson Mandela** (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jovanka-ciales/7-leadership-lessons-insp_b_3427796.html), has some useful points to make. She says that one of the lessons of leadership she has been inspired to learn from Mandela is his wisdom, **“Work With The Willing”**. She explains this wisdom as follows:

“Most of us have gotten caught up at least once in the emotional roller-coaster that is wanting to work with or help someone who has the talent, the potential or the need, even if that person is unwilling or incapable. Move on from those that

don't want to do or be where you want them to do or be. And don't carry their burden. Let them go through their journey and spend your time and energy looking for like-minded people who you can partner with."

Before winding up this piece, I would ask other opposition parties and prominent figures whose voices we have been accustomed to hear: ***What obstacles are holding you back from coming up with proposals of your own or constructively interacting with those proposals and initiatives presented by other Eritreans?*** My humble advice for them is: identify the anchors you have tied yourselves to, and show concerted efforts to free yourselves from those anchors that are keeping you play small. Doing neither this nor that does not support the claim that we are patriots or justice seekers: that is nothing but a big lie. In few words, let us put our narrow interests and destructive sensitivities towards one another at the back seat and save the country, which is fast weathering away.

=====