

REVIEWING OUR TWISTED PRIORITIES AND FIXING THE DEEP DIVIDE AMONG ERITREANS FIRST:

(Part I)

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“... don't skip the obvious first steps in your haste to get to the next thing. Don't overlook the basics because you're trying to get fancy.” (Gretchen Rubin, First Things First, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3IJBzSY7ew>)

It is a while since we started hearing about a movement or movements to build friendship between Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples. I have no idea that the peoples have not been in good terms since each one of the two countries went its own way (individuals might have), unless we confuse governments for peoples. On the contrary, facts tell a different story.

A conservative estimate of 200,000 Eritrean refugees live in Ethiopia and are welcomed and supported by the Ethiopian people and government, in addition to thousands who work and live there as permanent residents. Further, a good number of those deported in 1998 have returned either to claim their properties or to live there. In Diaspora, where the word “Habasha” rings as music in the ears of every Eritrean and Ethiopian citizen, Eritreans and Ethiopians live as brothers and sisters, proving to us that the end of the debate on the fate of Eritrea and the independence of the country as a result of that, have based the relations between the two peoples on mutual respect and strengthened the relations more than

they used to be in the past, confirming that spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood crosses borders and the sense of national belonging. If these are the realities on the ground: ***What is the need to spend time and energy on a problem that does not exist?*** In fact, it is the Eritreans themselves who are so fragmented and badly need reconciliation among themselves to bring the downfall of the ruling gang, that is destroying the country with all of its assets, including the human, economic, social, historical, and cultural ones, in addition to becoming a sword on the neck of every citizen, irrespective of any social distinction. That is why the title of this piece is formulated as it appears.

Within the context of the movement for friendship, as described above, we watched the segment in which some Eritreans engaged in a meeting with some Ethiopian intellectuals. Nobody would dispute that conversation is always good, but the general concern is that for Eritreans, at this particular moment, the movement constitutes twisted priorities and ill-directed energies, time, skills, and attention. However, the darkest element in the meeting consisted of extremely upsetting projections, comments, and interviews trying to drag us back to a long-settled debate of the 1940s and 1950s on possible options of federation and confederation, as a solution to Ethio-Eritrean relations. As 1940s and 1950s was the period in which the future of Eritrea hang on the balance, but now Eritrea is a sovereign state and a member of the United Nations, that segment was ludicrous and preposterous for all of us across the board.

I have never seen, even in my worst nightmare, that one day a high profile Ethiopian intellectual would suggest a reset of Ethio-Eritrean relations that way, after a thirty-year war that killed more than 150,000 from both sides and kept the poverty level of our peoples strikingly alarming. One would wonder: ***Does this approach reinforce cooperation and goodwill between the two countries? Does it serve the long-term prospect the peoples of the two countries?*** With all due respect: ***Couldn't one be tempted to assume that these intellectuals were asleep in a cave when internationally sponsored referendum ended the long-standing debate that had triggered a thirty-year war, and Eritrea became a sovereign state in 1993?*** In fact, though all Eritreans raised their eyebrows because they

know that the Eritrean people sweated and bled to achieve independence, some went too far in their speculations asking: ***Do the players have an agenda which they put to chest? Is this movement different from the historical Andenet Party agenda? Are we going to see a repeat of history?*** These have become among the looming questions because of the timing and the fact that the presentation ran in line with the on-going campaign in the social media. In particular, it is a time in which the talk about the Red Sea is on the upswing, and a renewed focus on the issue of access to the sea in the social media and Ethiopian songs raises a profound concern. When one finds the views so identical: ***Do you blame him/her for suspecting that there is a coordinated campaign and that things are not happening in a vacuum?*** We do not know if that was a coordinated effort, but I do not blame any for going that far in their speculations when he/she sees some signs pointing to that. “Yaltaretere Tamanatere”, is a wise saying. It means literally, if you are not suspicious about things, you will fall into the trap, and be a victim. To say the least, the presentation gives oxygen to the on-going campaign and could be an empowerment.

I had to resist the temptation to write about this issue, as I see many have done, but I was forced by the persisting campaign in the social media and the accompanying confusion. We have currently listened to new interviews with some Eritrean intellectuals involved in the friendship movement. Particularly, we touch high hopes among some Ethiopian brothers and sisters in Diaspora, who unrealistically misunderstood this movement as a struggle to bring Eritrea back to the Ethiopian federation or are, at least, confused by it. This is an impossible desire for many obvious reasons that deserve a sober thinking from our Ethiopian brothers and sisters. On the other hand, our silence and extraordinarily been tight-lipped has given the wrong impression that we are in a tacit consent mode. In this connection, one would ask: ***Where are those who crack our heads with their impulsive over-reactions on anything Eritrean, blowing up emergent issues that need tact and wisdom out of proportion? Are they too busy to give even a lip service or a timid statement? Or: Are we only heroes when we deal with one***

another? (“Shetarana Nabhadhedna Teray Deyu?”). Doesn’t this deserve a national response?

All emotions aside, the talk about “federation” at this particular time in the history of the country contradicts with the desire of the Eritrean people, as reflected in the armed struggle, which was impossible to succeed without the support of the people, and double-confirmed by the results of the referendum. To shoot straight, one would see the talk about “federation” now as plain subjective, too naïve, awkward, wildly inappropriate and too insensitive to the feelings of the families who had lost their loved ones, either directly in the war or in the massacres committed in Eritrean cities and towns for over 30 years by the Ethiopian army. It could also be seen as disrespect to martyrs who died for the cause in which they believed and quite disrespectful to the choice of the Eritrean people that should be respected by all, no matter one had supported Eritrean independence or otherwise. Additionally, the wounds of the thirty-year war have not yet healed, and healing time would take long. In other words, talking about “federation” now is like rubbing salt into the unhealed wounds of the Eritrean people.

One does not need to be Eritrean to know that Eritrea is a failed state, and that the citizens did not see the fruits of independence. It is a country where no citizen can open his/her mouth even to breathe, and lack of basic human rights and dignity is particularly harrowing. The unimaginably brutal gang ruling the country has dragged it back to the medieval ages, destroying everything existing more than anyone could imagine. This dark picture might have tempted some Ethiopians to think that the reaction of the desperate Eritrean people to the idea of federation with Ethiopia in this complex situation might be positive. Nevertheless, if this hypothesis is correct, it is indicative of how low in decency we have fallen.

To sum up the zero effects of the talk about “federation” in hope of reversing the sovereignty of Eritrea, I would borrow the favourite Amharic phrase of a former colleague: “Gunch Malfat Naw”. The phrase literally suggests, “Talk about the

issue until you have a serious jaw fatigue, but expect no apparent results". This is not to be mean to anybody but just to discourage being carried away by unnecessary emotions and releasing unrealistic but counterproductive thoughts that will do more harm than good to the relations of our two countries and peoples.

Let me add a little point. We need to be committed to the principle that any people has the legitimate right to determine their own fate, and once they do that, their choice should be respected, irrespective of what we think. "The will of the people is the will of God", as we always hear. Accordingly, we need to succumb to the will of the people.

With the above highlights in mind, when we reject the impossible desire, we need to focus on the possible and the imperative about the relations of the two countries: realistic thoughts that can bring peace and prosperity to our countries and peoples, not new conflicts and more poverty.

PART II of this piece will focus on the possible about the relations between our two countries, using the following two questions:

- ***How and when do we achieve a full-fledged strategic cooperation that could be promoted to the level of economic integration?***
- ***What should be the role of Eritrean and Ethiopian intellectuals, politicians, and nationalists, until we achieve that?***

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