

HIRING AND FIRING ONE'S OWN LEADERS THROUGH ELECTIONS: THE GREATEST SOURCE OF PRIDE AND PROGRESS ERITREANS SHOULD ENVY:

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Anybody who denies the obvious reality that elections constitute a central element of liberal democracy should be either socially blind or needs to make more efforts to learn about the issue. The core question here is: ***Is it possible to ensure an orderly process of leadership succession and change, political authority, and legitimation, without having elections?*** Except for those who have vested interest to propagate that citizens have no right to choose leaders and participate in the running of the country, anybody else could not fail to realize that nothing substitutes elections in any modern society. In other words, the absence of elections or their failure means political dictatorship or personalized rule.

It is because of the awareness reflected by the facts stated above that we currently see a wave of democratic enthusiasm calling to the conscious African mind a process of competitive and multiparty elections. As a result of this wave, one big reality stands out in Africa for anybody to see: an emergence of a platform for the civil society to make a political claim that it owns the state. This does not mean that the civil society platform in all African countries is perfect. As a matter of fact, we can see even countries with poor conditions for democracy or a fragile one still benefit from participatory, competitive and legitimate elections, at least to a limited extent, no matter what weaknesses are observed in those elections.

Though we do not want to be a part of the Ethiopian national debate on the issue of the legitimacy of the elections in the State of Tigray, from the point of view of the Ethiopian constitution, a matter we leave to Ethiopians to debate on, the introductory paragraphs above reflect our general outlook on any election, including those that have occurred in the state of Tigray for the sixth time, as one of the key indicators of democratic process. Our remarks on the elections in the State of Tigray do not stem from our desire to interfere in Ethiopian affairs but are triggered by the campaign of anti-democratic forces, specially PFDJ apologists,

who try to depict the elections as useless, unproductive, and waste of time, energy and resources, the ultimate message being to the Eritrean people, as their target audience. In fact, according to Mereja Today (September 12, 2020) the widely read Ethiopian DJ put fake news on its facebook page quoting Atse Isias as mockingly saying, “We can hold Wayane-type elections every day in our country”.

The news that Atse Isias gave the above remarks about the elections in the State of Tigray may not be fake news. The remarks are consistent with the pattern of behaviours, hostility towards elections and approach of the Atse, who allegedly has been recruiting paid agents among Ethiopians to give a dreadful picture about the Wayane and whitewash Abiy Ahmed. The same source says that Eritrean diplomats in the Ethiopian capital have denied the news but another source says that one of the diplomats remarked that it was a “white lie”. Connecting all these dots, one would suspect that the news is real because it is in line with the thinking and hostility of the Eritrean brutal regime towards elections. The message could not be for the State of Tigray because the Atse and his cronies know that things there are beyond their control. The target audience should rather be the people of Eritrea because the criminal ruling gang is well-aware that our people are favourable to the idea of democracy in principle, and support the establishment of a genuine democratic system on the ruins of the PFDJ brutal regime.

As all propaganda of the PFDJ army of Facebook users, PFDJ foreign propaganda machines and foot soldiers focus these days on the elections of the State of Tigray, this is the right time to prepare our people for the future by teaching them the following:

- How voting is an important and valuable process in our modern world.
- The benefits of competitive democratic elections.
- How elections have been affected by the current coronavirus pandemic, sometimes used as a pretext by incumbent governments to prolong their rule.
- Lessons learned from those countries that went ahead with their election plans, despite the pandemic.

The first two items outlined as bullets above could be covered by the question: ***What are the negative connotations Atse Isias and his cronies try to give about elections and democracy using the current elections in the State of Tigray as an occasion?***

Among the poison the Eritrean anti-election forces try to spit was that the people of Tigray would gain nothing from the elections. Though we have raised some points to show why elections are vital in the life of any people, we need to focus on additional points unraised. Here we add the following benefits that directly tell us why the terrifying Monester Isias is against elections:

- The only means that could ensure the accountability of officials are elections. ***Have the Eritrean people any means to hold officials they did not elect accountable? Is there any provision that gives the people that right in the absence of a constitution?*** This is impossible in PFDJ Eritrea.
- Elections allow public input on the policy direction of the government. This is done through the democratic institutions that represent the people.
- As the value of democracy is not intrinsic (an end by itself) but instrumental (a means to improve the material living standard), elections give personal benefits to citizens. It is through elections that citizens put pressure on incumbents and demand concessions.
- It is during elections that a country comes under international scrutiny. This scrutiny could lead to improvements and addressing public concerns.

There is one issue enemies pick out in order to discredit elections. That is vote buying, as a negative practice attached to elections. Of course, as elections become more competitive, we could see a rise of vote buying in any society. We definitely condemn this practice because it subverts democratic development and hinders democratization efforts. However, we should not forget that vote buying has a long history even in the most-developed democracies, including the US and the United Kingdom. Some even view it as a part of the process and refer to it as “a price of democracy”. Ultimately, emerging democracies need to develop policies and laws that could minimize vote buying and on the long-run diminish it altogether.

Another issue that nobody should pass, without raising when talking about the significance of elections in our present world, is the impact of the coronavirus on the election plans of countries. The postponement of elections due to the coronavirus crisis has become a worldwide phenomenon. In fact, some sources have reported that 47 countries had decided to postpone elections, while 14 others had decided to go ahead with their election plans.

In Africa alone, seven countries had decided to postpone their elections and these are South Africa, Tunisia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Gambia, Ethiopia and Kenya. Conversely, Guinea, Cameroon, Burundi, Malawi and Mali held their elections as originally planned. This reality remarkably shows that the idea of the postponement of elections has aroused a national controversy, leaving no citizen indifferent. As the controversy has already affected many countries, including our southern neighbor, Ethiopia, in which the postponement of the parliamentary and regional state elections is causing tension and instability, adding to the existing ethnic conflicts and tension, we need to see some of the salient features of the new developments and the questions surrounding them. One would ask: ***Why do we give this issue so much attention?***

As learning the basics about the issue of elections and studying the experiences other African countries have to go through at rare and critical moments of the journey of their states would make it easier for us to integrate political and sociological expectations and choices when democratic Eritrea takes off, it would be a great loss to miss the opportunity.

The controversy of the postponement of the elections due to the COVID-19 has posed constitutional questions in many countries because if elections postponed, the incumbent governments will be extending their mandate. The problem is in countries where there are no provisions to extend the term of the officials in office. Common sense dictates that the safest way to do that would be involving all sections of the society to reach a consensus on interim arrangements. ***Did this happen in the case of our Ethiopian neighbours in the south?*** This is a question only Ethiopian stakeholders can answer.

Back to the general problem, the controversy of the postponement of elections has created two conflicting currents in Africa, according to Christopher Fomunyoh*, Senior Associate and Regional Director for Central and West Africa in National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI). He calls the two currents: Authoritarian Opportunism and Democratic Resilience. We will see below how he defines each current:

- In the case of Authoritarian Opportunism, he says leaders:

“...use the cover of the pandemic and COVID-19 to shrink political space even further... tilt the playing field for elections in a way that would favour either themselves or their preferred candidates.” (Daren Taylor, “**How COVID Is Affecting Elections in Africa**”, June 3, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/how-covid-affecting-elections-africa>).

- Regarding Democratic Resilience, he describes this current as positive, or represented by forces struggling to have the elections held as originally planned.

The resilience group argues that elections are basic and fundamental to safeguard democratic rights, especially at times when state power is concentrated in the hands of the executive branch that could exercise powerful emergency measures. Here they cite the experience of South Korea as a model for other democratic countries. According to Johns Hopkins University researchers, South Korea, whose population is 51 million, had almost 11,600 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 273 deaths when it held its parliamentary elections on April 15, 2020. Further, a VOA reporter observed that, “... voters respected social distancing in polling lines, wore masks and gloves, and used sanitizer.” Moreover, CNN reported that South Korea “...had its largest turnout in nearly three decades in giving the ruling liberal party a victory.” **Why do we see that much havoc and confusion then?**

As many other observers are skeptical that the incumbent governments could show the tendency to extend their term of service using the pandemic as an excuse, Fomunyoh did not hide his fears here. In this connection, he says:

“The strongest arm of government, as we see it now, is the executive branch, in most countries ...And so, it’s an imbalance that existed in the past but that has now been aggravated by the crisis.”

To benefit the most from his expertise on elections, it is very helpful to know: **What did Fomunyoh urge Africans whose election plans are affected by the pandemic to do?** Here he address them as follows:

- TO ALL:

Here he refers to political leaders, civil society, the media, and all progressive forces. He urges them to work collectively so that the country gets out of the crisis stronger.

- TO THE LEADERS:

He tells them to:

- Resist the temptation to silence critics.
- Go “beyond patronage network” and consult all stakeholders on important decisions, choosing accountability and transparency rather than using the pandemic as an excuse for secrecy. Nonetheless, he calls this particular piece of advice as an ideal, concluding that, “It’s a long shot. Old autocratic habits die hard.”

- TO ALL PARTIES:

He urges them to engage with all citizens, warning otherwise,

“...the electoral process could become a very hollow process, and whoever gets declared as the winner may not have the legitimacy to be able to govern.”

This will lead us to the question: ***How difficult was the task for those African countries that decided to go ahead with their election plans?*** They had to balance two things: managing the virus and utilizing their resources and material to hold a credible and safe elections. This meant a lot of things, including:

- Temperature screening and hand sanitization.
- Maintaining social distancing.
- Requiring and supplying protective gears.
- Inclusion of all potentially marginalized groups, including women.
- Transparency in keeping the public informed about possible election changes and adjustments.

As African countries do not have as much resources and material as South Korea has, the challenge should have been very serious. Nonetheless, Africans are not

conducting elections at times of public health crisis for the first time. Lessons from the Ebola disease were very important, as the guidelines they are supposed to follow now were the same during the Ebola pandemic. We would wind up this part by citing an overall remark from News and Press Release, posted on July 16, 2020. The remark reads:

“So far there is no clear evidence that holding elections contributed to a spike in the number of COVID-19 cases.”

(<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/covid-19-further-complicates-holding-free-and-fair-elections-africa>)

Other observers made similar remarks, confirming that there was nothing that justified those fears**. These are valid observations from experts on African elections, though the pandemic was a good opportunity for some leaders to exploit fears and consolidate their grip on power. Let us end it here asking: *Which side do the evidence from the elections in the State of Tigray would support?* Reports on the elections will definitely complete our picture on the issue, when they are ready for release.

No matter to what extent elections are free and fair, they have a positive impact on human freedom and democratic value, as detailed above. It is the ignorance of this fact that makes PFDJ circles mock with contempt, ridicule and derision the recent elections in the State of Tigray, though in Eritrea the three key democratic qualities are totally absent: participation, competition, and legitimacy. PFDJ is not as good-looking as it thinks.

Though the end of the cold war in 1991 was one of the conditions that made the independence of Eritrea easier and faster, its impact on the type of the established political system was totally absent. In contrast, the end of the cold war opened a new chapter for Benin and Zambia, both former one-party states, to hold multi-party elections in the same historical period. This bitter Eritrean reality was very devastating for the whole Africa that had expected Eritrea would kick off a decade of democratic gains. This way, the imposition of one party, PFDJ, its domination over the political life and the economy of the country, excluding all other organizations, that fought for decades to achieve the independence of the country, from participation in power and forcing them to remain in exile, and throwing into prison all forces that demanded change, it has deprived the Eritrean people of the

right to have a say on their own affairs, and increased the corruption, ruin and waste that had existed during the Ethiopian occupation, to a very worrisome level. Now it is almost three decades since Eritrea emerged as an independent country in the world scene, but sadly enough, it remained to be one of the African countries that are not considered “free” and “open”, governing without the consent of the people that widely question the legitimacy of the criminal ruling gang. The good news is that the support for democracy is very high among the Eritrean people, but questions that impose themselves include the following:

- ***When are our people going to start living in free and open society, participating in elections that are credible and accountable?***
- ***Does anyone imagine that the people who fought the longest and the fiercest war of liberation in Africa could relax and allow a criminal gang to rule brutally, denying them the simplest form of freedom and rule of law?***
- ***Has the regime the ability to continue controlling social development, preventing change and bringing under governmental direction all forces that are threatening to the system?***

History taught us, time and again, that the survival of a system cannot depend on the detailed management of the society or close government control over social processes. It is the result of the following:

- The system should give sensitive political response to the forces of change.
- It should adjust its structures in a flexible manner that could meet the pressures of innovations that are threatening to the system.
- There should be an open political process that could allow gradual and orderly development.

The best examples in history come from Western Europe, where peaceful progress was achieved in the way described above, avoiding violent political changes, whether coups, revolutions, and other forms of internal warfare. The following were the challenges of the time the Western democratic world faced using the methods detailed above:

- New political philosophies.
- Population increases.
- Industrial and technological innovations.

- Many other social and economic stresses.

As the brutal regime in Eritrea, which is suffering its gravest handicap, does not have the ability to do what Western Europe did in order to survive, by facing the threatening forces, it is vulnerable to any violent change at any time. Revolutions and other forms of violent collapse are not sudden catastrophes, as some may wrongly think. They are, rather, the result of a process going on for a long time to reach its climax when the regime becomes the most vulnerable. In PFDJ Eritrea, the situation has already reached that climax, and the inevitable blow is coming sooner than later. Simply put, all things considered, our people will not remain forever envying other African peoples for hiring and firing their own leaders. On the contrary, they are not far away from the world they want to join. That big reality in our people's life is coming. It is the right our people fully deserve.

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FOOTNOTES:

*Christopher Fomunyoh was also interviewed by African News on June 10, 2020, "Impact of COVID-19 on Democracy in Africa", (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmuubZ_nO8s) (interview)

** In his article "2020 Is Election Season across Africa", Franck Kuwonu remarks that "Though critics complained of health risks, there has been no indication of voting-related outbreaks." (Africa Renewal, <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2019-march-2020/africa-watch-2020-election-season-across-africa>)