

THE ERITREAN STATE: A VEHICLE THAT NEEDS A GOOD DRIVER TO TAKE IT TO THE RIGHT DIRECTION

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Though Atse Isias is the latest African leader publicly accused of disappearing without a word to his people, it is neither the first time we see speculations mounting over the alleged or real illness or death of the brutal dictator, nor he is the only in Africa whose supposed ailments believed to have been kept secret from the people, leaving the door open to wild speculations, as his aides and state media provided no specific information.

Regarding the possibility of illness, which could happen to any human being and theoretically cannot be ruled out, circumstantial evidence and African experience give the possibility credibility. The tight security and tension people say they currently see in the city of Asmara, the news of the withdrawal of some Western embassies of their citizens from the country and the reduction of unessential diplomatic staff, the suspicious background setting and the clear physical weakness of the monster, as observed while reading his recent speech, the secretive nature of the authoritarian regime and its habitual denial of every accusation (big or small) and the numerous observations on the scene some Eritreans tried to identify, are dots people had to connect to back up the argument concerning his serious illness. It is natural for all these combined to give rise to rumours and speculations.

As to the African experience showing examples of leaders whose health conditions have been shrouded into secrecy during this decade, leaving their countries in limbo, the list includes the following:

- Muhammadu Buhari (born on December 17, 1942), currently serving as the President of Nigeria since 2015.
- Robert Mugabe, the former Zimbabwean President (born on February 21, 1924 and died on September 6, 2019 at the age of 95), who served as the president of the country from December 31, 1987 to November 21, 2017.
- Peter Mutharika (born on July 18, 1940), serving as the President of Malawi since May 31, 2014.
- Jose Eduardo Dos Santos (born on August 28, 1942), who served as the President of Angola from September 21, 1979 to September 25, 2017.

- Abdelaziz Bouteflika (born on March 2, 1937) who served as the President of Algeria from April 27, 1999 to April 2, 2019.

Out of the five African leaders only the Malawi President admitted at a press briefing, after his return from the US, that he had been away for treatment. In the case of the Angolan President, pressure from the opposition and civil society forced the Minister of Foreign Affairs to confirm the President was in Spain receiving treatment. By contrast, in the case of Eritrea's monster, as we could see above, there are objective basis for rumours and speculations to spring up. On the flip side, reliable information is very difficult to obtain because everything is closely guarded. Further, in Eritrea, criticism of the regime or the leadership, if it is reported, is enough to make an Eritrean citizen and his family mysteriously disappear from the society. Moreover, the regime forces the people to participate in the maintenance of personality cult around the dictator. This is to say that there is no possibility for internal opposition or civil society to exist, contrary to what we saw in Angola.

Whether the news of the illness of the Atse is true or fake, to reflect more on this issue we need to ask: ***What are the implications when a leader hides his illness from the public?*** Secrets are just a part of life. For leaders, recurring health problems limit the productivity and ability to govern seriously, whereas the silence of the government and its media is nothing but an act of deceiving the public. It is for this reason that we are concerned and say Eritreans, as citizens, have every right to know about the health of their leader (though self-imposed), as well as it is legitimate to be suspicious of the disappearance of the Atse. It could also mean that a secret leader is running the country, a matter which is unfair to the people. That reflects poor public relations, signaling the lack of accountability and transparency have been displayed, and showing refusal to be open and honest to the public. ***How about the secret travel of a leader abroad for treatment?*** It shows that the leader has little faith in his own healthcare system for which he is the first to be blamed, and that he has not shown any devotion to the wellbeing of the people he claims to be leading, despite the income (in the case of Eritrea) mainly from the gold mines of Bisha (to say the least), and from the rent of Assab Port to the UAE, in addition to the port services and facility given to other foreign countries.

As a matter of fact, a politician admitting to ill health, like many do in the West, is unheard of in Africa, except in the case of the Malawi President, as indicated above. The worse is that, we have records that show even the death of African leaders could be kept secret for some time. A glaring example is the death of the

longest serving African leader, the Gabonese former President, El Hajj Omar Bongo Ondimba (1967-2009), who died of cancer in a Spanish hospital. His death was kept secret and government officials expressed anger on the reports of his death, banning the media from discussing it. The same thing could be said about the case of the former Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, whose illness was described as “minor” weeks prior to his death in a Brussels hospital in 2012. Simply put, though at this stage we can neither confirm nor emphatically deny the rumours circulating about the serious illness or the death of the Atse, we cannot rule out any of these possibilities.

To see why the Eritrean people give the Atse and his government a failing grade of “F” about their performance, imagine that the Eritrean state is the vehicle and the PFDJ government the driver (as the title of this piece is formulated). In other words, the state is the employer and the government the public servant. To illustrate the relationship between the two, let us assume that the driver always fails to drive the vehicle in the right direction, and as a result, he fails to ensure that the boss reaches his destinations safely and at the right time (this is a pattern or habitual action). ***What do you expect the boss to do except firing the driver and replacing him with another one he thinks he would be satisfied with his performance?*** In specific terms, the Eritrean state has a set of goals it looks forward to achieve and in a definite period of time. These are the goals for which our people fought a 30-year war.

The government, as the public servant, cannot tell the people who own the state, “You do not have the right to assess me”, in the same way it is illogical and senseless for a manager of a store you have hired to tell you, “I am above accountability and criticism”. According to the results of the assessment, the people will either support the government or replace it. This would take us to the question: ***When should Eritrean citizens support the PFDJ government and when should they call for its change?*** The following set the objective criteria, taking the minimum obligations expected from any government that deserves its name:

- Does the citizen for whom the Eritrean state was founded in 1991 enjoy all rights, and freedoms any human being deserves, and have equal opportunities in education, employment, healthcare, justice, physical and social security, and all other social services expected?

- Has the Eritrean citizen been given by the government the level of respect and pride he/she deserves so that he/she can criticize the leader and all branches of his government without any retribution or vengeance of any kind?

This will lead us to the question: ***Do the PFDJ supporters accept the criteria detailed above? Have they ever heard about the theory of Social Contract originated during the Age of Enlightenment in 1762 by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau?*** We are not demanding more than what the 18th century philosophers came up with. If they do not agree with these criteria or the theory of Social Contract: ***What is their problem then?***

The problem, as we see it, is that PFDJ supporters cannot see the truth or reality because illusions have masked their minds. By illusions we mean things wrongly conceived or interpreted. The most important illusion among the many is that they consecrate things (take them as sacred) they should not, elevating them above accountability, criticism, and logic. The government, the party, and the personality of the Atse are among those consecrated. For that reason, we see their minds masked by this particular illusion to the extent that they cannot see how the Atse and his government run the affairs of the state. ***What are the consequences of the masked minds?***

The most important consequence is that they accept the dictatorship and defend it, strongly believing that it should rule Eritrea forever. Their thinking capacity is so disabled that they cannot see that dictatorships bring catastrophes. We need to remind them that Europe saw the catastrophes Italian Fascism and German Nazism brought to mankind and learned a lesson, which is beneficial to the whole mankind. Even our post-independence history, though comparatively short, is full of terrible tragedies and catastrophes caused by the Atse and his dictatorship. To refresh your memory, just remember all dangerous policies followed and crimes committed by the regime since 1991 and the catastrophes they caused in all walks of life. To mention a few:

- The Mai Habar massacre

- The border war with Djibouti
- The closure of the University of Asmara
- The Badume War
- The banning of the constitution, rectified by the representatives of the people
- The arrest of G15 and the closure of private newspapers
- The introduction and the continuation of indefinite military service for no apparent reason, and the devastating educational policies simultaneously followed
- The renting of the port of Assab to the UAE and allowing the establishment of a military base there
- The peace agreements with Abiy Ahmed, making the Eritrean sovereignty vulnerable, in addition to the shameful behaviours we saw and statements we heard during his multiple visits to Ethiopia
- The participation in the war against Yemen, without the consent of the people
- Regime personalization similar to that of Sultanism, a form of authoritarian regime characterized by the extreme personal presence of the ruler in all elements of governance
- His arrogant refusal to accept medical equipment and gears donated to the people of Eritrea by a Chinese billionaire to fight Covid19, while our people are badly in need of them, facing the question of death or life

Has anybody been held accountable for any of the devastating consequences of the above-listed extremely damaging policies and dangerous crimes on the country? If it was in any other African country, let alone the West, only a single act of the above would have led to an urgent call for the resignation of the leader and his immediate impeachment. The obvious takeaway from these is that, unless the blind supporters of the regime stop the consecration of the leader, the government, and the party, they will not be able to see the truth and the reality on the ground. They have to realize that Eritrea is lagging behind in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres because of the dictatorship, which they think is above accountability, logic, and criticism.

No matter the rumours about the death of the monster are true or not, he will die one day, and there will be a vacuum to be filled. To prepare for any eventuality, as Eritreans, we need to think about three key questions:

- Does his death lead to instability and chaos?
- Does the PFDJ regime persist after his death?
- Does his death create a space for liberal changes?

As the regime in Eritrea is a personalist regime governed by a “strongman” , where political power is highly concentrated in the hands of the individual (no power-sharing mechanism), the risk of instability and chaos is very high for many reasons. Unlike institutionalized autocracy, the regime does not have institutional channels for handling succession. In other words, there is no guarantee how political transition would unfold. When Prime Minister Meles Zenawi died in August 2012, power peacefully passed to the Deputy Prime Minister, Hailmariam Desalign, according to the constitutional guidelines of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Party (EP RDP). It is interesting to raise the question: *Why was the Atse unwilling to identify a successor to his rule?* The reason could be the fear that identifying a successor might enable a competitor to establish a base of support that could be mobilized to remove him from office prematurely. He could also fear that his advance announcement of a successor could trigger the backlash of the military or political elites against his selection.

Additionally, another point worthy of mention concerning the issue of instability is that, we should not forget that there are individuals, both civilian and military, with political aspirations seeking to gain access to the spoils of the office. In this connection, it should be noted here that two questions are very important in deciding the prospects of instability, namely:

- Is the PFDJ capable of being a focal point for negotiation over the choice of a new leader who can continue to protect the interest of the party?
- Would the military and political elites fragment or tend to stand around a new successor?

As to the question whether the regime could persist after the death of the dictator, it depends on certain factors. The most important factor is the ability of the party to ensure the resilience of the regime. Unlike the EPLF, whose members joined the organization to fight and die for a patriotic cause, the PFDJ as a party in a

personalist regime, is weaker than a party (like the EPRDF) that govern in a single-party dictatorship but with institutions. The lack of institutional capacity makes it ineffective to handle the succession process, becoming vulnerable to an easy collapse before or after the succession. Just look at the membership. Candidates drawn to such a party are driven by interest, just like flies that gather on a garbage bin, not real patriotism (but a distorted one) or ideological devotion. The second reason for joining PFDJ is out of fear.

It is the policy of the PFDJ that they create idol worshipers who could never debate or ask questions, but blindly obey and consecrate leadership (Refer to my previous article: *PFDJ CONFERENCES OF SUPPRESSION OF TRUTH AND ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE OF LIES: NATION BUILDING OR NATION RUINING*, www.togoruba.org, April 18, 2020). It was for the same reason that Ethiopia's Workers Party (EWP) was vulnerable to an easy collapse when the Wayane rebels entered Addis Ababa in 1991. In few words, PFDJ does not have the depth we saw in the Syrian Baath Party when Hafez Al-Assad died in 2000, and the EPRDF when Meles Zenawi died in 2012. That is to say, lack of institutional structure, such as well-functioning political party, overwhelmingly demolishes the ability of the regime to counter any serious movement, in case it is faced by aggressive and admirably resolute segments of the population, with networks and experience that could prove useful in mobilizing protests and exerting pressure. Here we need to learn, as justice seekers, if this condition is in place, it is easy for the progressive forces outside the ruling clique to grab power. The ousted Sudanese President, Omar Hassan Al-Bashier's party (The National Congress Party) is another good example to cite, in addition to Ethiopia's Workers Party (EWP). This also mainly answers the question: *Does the death of the dictator create a space for liberal changes?*

Here we conclude that the death of the dictator would create space for change provided that Diaspora Eritreans synchronize with the forces inside the country. For that, we need to learn from the Sudanese experience which shows how the Diaspora Sudanese influenced the developments inside the country during the struggle to win political power. Essentially, it is important to note that there are two issues that deserve attention:

- As our country is geographically, ethnically and religiously diverse, it is possible that opportunistic leaders who would come to power could leverage divisions to boost their popularity. This happened in Ivory Coast in 1993. When President Felix Houphouet-Boigny who ruled Ivory Coast from 1960 to

1993 died, his death triggered the rise of Ivorian nationalism. That planted the seeds for civil war nine years later.

- It should also be remembered that at the face of the death of the dictator, the elites could elect a relatively weak successor, with the calculation to be able to control him. The pressure from the street and the Diaspora should be strong enough to exert a remarkable influence on the appointments of the successor and the cabinet ministers. A glaring example for the influence of the street and the Diaspora is, again, the Sudanese experience.

Nobody would doubt that the death of a butcher and national traitor of the size and ruthlessness of Atse Isias, when it comes, would be a great event to be celebrated by the people, his victims. However, his death would be a great mercy for him before he sleeps on the same bed he had made for his comrades and other progressive Eritreans languishing in Adi Abeto, Era Ero, and other Nazi-like concentration camps. They have not committed any crime except saying the car is going to the wrong direction. We hope his death begins a new era in which a new driver takes the vehicle to the right direction, but we will have serious concerns when he dies. This could be formulated in the form of the following question: ***Are we ready to put the Eritrean house quickly in order, by thwarting the coming of generals to power or the survival of the civilian wing of the criminal party (PFDJ) with the help of some generals, or foil any foreign intervention which could come from any direction?*** These concerns and fears have objective basis, if we want to understand things as they are; not as we want them to be.

The dictator has been burying time bombs here and there so that they would explode at the time he is bed-ridden or dies, simultaneously creating a regional environment so hostile to any change that would affect the interests of some regional powers and the expansionist aspirations of others. Illusions are by design masking the minds of the PFDJ supporters, turning them into a herd that does not know where it is heading. We have the state media that defends the regime aggressively because it is not allowed to have an independent vision. The silent majority wants change but it is not ready to pay price for that. It is incredibly short-sighted, and when you talk to them, they think you are speaking in Chinese or any other language. These are the most important concerns we need to focus on, not on rumours and half-truths that distract us from our struggle to end the rule of the PFDJ dictatorship and take the vehicle to the right direction.

This is not to argue that the death of the dictator would not lead to a change, but to show the complexity of the situation and that we will be put to the test. ***Could we***

pass the test? YES, if we put our heart and soul in it, and do the right things at the right time and with the highest level of effort. What we need is building partnerships and alliances between all sections of the population that benefit from change (all stakeholders): a sustainable unified front to face all eventualities. This demands trust, inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability.

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