

ONE THING ERITREANS WISH ATSE ISIAS WOULD LEARN FROM DR. ABIYE AHMED: REMOVING HIS EAR WAX RATHER THAN FLAPPING HIS LIPS

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“In my opinion great talkers are a dime a dozen, but great listeners are a rare commodity.” (Mike Myatt, Forbes Leadership Columnist & America’s Top CEO Coach)

Eritrea has been one of the most unfortunate countries in the world, whose leaders think their people and outside listeners would be impressed by how well they speak; not by how well they listen. They fail to recognize that knowledge, wisdom, creative ideas, and solutions are gleaned from the minds of others by listening and not by talking. That is why, to them, being a leader is a license to increase the volume of the rhetoric, disregarding the merit of seeing their countries in the eyes of the people. This means to them that communication is to message or one way street; not to engage in a meaningful conversation, which requires listening. In few words, Eritrea has a leader who has never heard or unable to comprehend the wise saying, “It is impossible to stick your foot in your mouth when it is closed,” or listening protects you from saying something embarrassing, shocking or what should not be said, saving you from humiliation and the exposure of your foolishness, ignorance, arrogance, and aggressiveness.

What has inspired this piece is the observation of the writer, like any other observer, the way the new Ethiopian Prime Minister, Dr. Abiye

Ahmed, had communicated with the people during his tour to Ambo, Jigjiga, Mekalle, Gondar, Bahr Dhar and Awassa in April, and in Addis Ababa with the representatives of the people, political opponents (being the first Ethiopian Prime Minister to use the term “opponents” in place of “opposition”), and civic organizations before and after the regional tours. Unlike many Ethiopian and African leaders, who choose to dominate the conversation with rhetoric and fail to engage in proper communication that requires listening, Dr. Abiye has demonstrated that he understood the importance of surrendering the floor to the people. That is why he let the people speak about things they cared about and things that worried them, impressing every observer with his unbelievably great listening skills. In this connection, one would ask: *What did Dr. Abiye Ahmed gain from this approach as a leader?*

The active listening, which is listening in an open mind and engagement of the audience, fostering an environment of open communication, has given him the chance to know the people better and establish a meaningful bond and trustworthy relationship with them. In particular, he listened to understand; not to reply, showing the people that he was interested and cared, with sympathy, about what they were telling him. Further, he did not only listen to what the people had to say, but also how they had to say it, including facial expression, body language, actions or inactions, and most importantly, what they had not said. All these could say just as much, if not more than verbal communication. Additionally, we did not observe a single instance in which he interrupted the speaker, helping himself, as a leader, to grow and build trust.

Of course, action lies at the core of leadership, but a leader who acts without listening and understanding is doomed to fail to achieve the

desired outcomes. Simply put, the prime Minister has gained valuable insights and information, the knowledge he has gained from the people will empower him to make informed decisions that can impact the present and influence the future, the active conversation with the public has tremendously equipped him so that he will not speak out with his colleagues at party and coalition levels, at parliament, cabinet meetings, or with individual ministers without all of the facts. Add to that, the people who had appreciated being listened to and understood will return the courtesy and listen to him when he speaks. Moreover, thanking the people for their input was another aspect to be noted in the Prime Minister's communication with the people. In effect, that was a recognition that fosters goodwill more than anything else. However, from what we have observed from day one of his tenure, we are justified to envy the Ethiopian people for having a leader who believes communication that flows in both directions is connection and inspiration, not just transmission of information, hoping that Dr. Abiye Ahmed's leadership skills will grow by leaps and pounds. Let me add a remark here that all said in our attempt to answer the question related to what Dr. Abiye Ahmed has gained from listening to the people, are lost opportunities for leaders like Atse Isias who do not listen.

The attempt above also answers the question: *Why listening is the most important leadership skill? But with that, we move to the question: Is Atse Isias a good listener or is he a listener at all?*

I hope I would not sound abusive, if I say all human beings have two ears and one mouth, except Atse Isias, who has one ear and two mouths so that he speaks more and listens less. We will clearly see that below from the way he looks at public opinion and the way he deals with his ministers colleagues or experts.

It is by no means a secret that Atse Isias dislikes public opinion and his dislike is intense. He does not care whether the public supports his policy or not because he knows that he would not face any rejection or opposition. In fact, he did not need or bother about the public support for all major and controversial policies, including war, the suspension of the constitution, the initiation and the continuation of the indefinite military service, the joining of the anti-Yemen Arab alliance, and the leasing of Assab Port to a foreign country, just to mention some. For him, the public is not to be consulted or to be asked for feedback but to be informed in TV-ERI and Hadas Eretra, if at all the Atse thought it was necessary. This approach is simply described as the “Post office” model because it depicts him as a person who views himself as the sender of a message and others as receivers. In few words, his policy focuses on the sending process; not on the give-and-take of effective conversation. This imposes the question: *What are the negative consequences here?*

The approach described above has until now left him ignorant about the larger context and the reality on the ground, virtually guaranteeing his alienation from the people and his disengagement with them; the opposite of what the country needs. In addition to that, as there is no open, balanced and reciprocal sharing of perspective with the people, all his decisions are made in isolation, eventually putting him in a position where he misses the early warning signs of dysfunctional momentum, which is any consequence inhibiting the achievement of the desired objective. This explains all failures, setbacks and catastrophes the country has to face in all fields: whether political, economic, social, diplomatic or cultural. All of them are the results of his policy that creates an environment to eliminate the possibility for the presence of public opinion, supposed to come through the

participation of the people through institutions like parliament, political parties, civic organizations, free press, research centres, academic freedom in the university, religious institutions and others that, in the civilized world, participate in the running of the country by giving their feedback and advice. Even the ruling party does not seem holding conferences, regular central committee and political bureau meetings. It is only one man who gives directives through his office and there is one stage-arranged presidential interview every New Year and that is too disgusting to watch. In fact, a friend bluntly admitted that he always felt vomiting sensation (sorry for the use of these words) whenever he watched the interviews of the Atse.

Moreover, the fact that the Atse does not have an autopilot to replace him at times of emergencies is one of the many examples for the lack of concern about the country and its safety that reflects his attitude, “Ene Kamotkugn Sardo Ayebqel”. If this is the situation of public opinion in Atse Isias’s Eritrea, to have a complete picture, we need to see the question: *Is there truly the sharing of perspective with the Cabinet collectively and the ministers individually?*

His attitude towards the ideally desired feedback (not actual because everybody is tongue-tied in front of him) of the Cabinet or the individual ministers is generally the same as that towards public opinion. Specifically, he thinks that he has all answers and always knows exactly what to do. But for the sake of clarity, let us ask: *What message does this attitude convey to the Cabinet, individual ministers, and other officials of the state?*

The attitude that he has all answers about everything and knows it all conveys multiple messages that explicitly say the following:

- He is smarter than all, irrespective of the extraordinary credentials and expertise of some of the ministers and other senior officials.
- He does not want to waste his precious time seeking their ideas or he does not need their help; he is fine without it.
- What he needs from them is to put their heads down and follow his directives with commas and full-stops.

If this is his attitude and the messages it conveys, there is no give-and-take conversation in the Cabinet, with individual ministers, and outside them. He sees all his subordinates as tools to implement policies and plans in which they did not have a say, and we have never heard him recognizing the contributions of any. In few words, he does not engage himself actively to know what matters most to any of his subordinates concerning their jobs and learn from them. Instead, he gives directives, judges them, and reportedly speaks to them as if he is a Nazi officer. If this is the situation of the communication of the Atse with his subordinates, two questions stand out: *Do we expect the ministers to be enthusiastic about their work? Does that reflect a comradely empathy or compassionate attention to his subordinates?* We wish the answer to each of these questions would be “YES”, but unfortunately, the way he communicates with his subordinates and the absence of compassionate attention, as detailed above, partially accounts that the ministers are not enthusiastic about their work. Of course, they can challenge him, as many did, but they know where they will end up as many of their colleagues did.

As a matter fact, the ministers know that the single trait that characterizes all dictators is: the inability to forgive. Accordingly, they

never expect that Atse Isias would be like the Joseph of Egypt, who did not use his power, once he came to leadership, to revenge on his betraying brothers (the story of Joseph and his brothers is in both the Quran and the Bible), but who, on the contrary, offered forgiveness instead. Consequently, their best bet is to do what he tells them, while reducing their personal contact with him, as much as possible, but they always live overwhelmed by the fear of the unknown. With all these in mind, it would be appropriate to touch on the question: *Why Atse Isias does not listen to the people and to his subordinates?*

As Atse Isias is in his mid-seventies, the function of age should not be overlooked. At this age, he might stop thinking that he needs to grow, change, and learn. Therefore, unlike Dr. Abiye Ahmed, who is almost as young as the Atse's son, the Atse should not be expected to seek out new opportunities, new relationships and new conditions that would help him grow as a leader. This is to say, it would be natural for him to refuse to listen, to grow jealous of the expertise of others, and guard his reputation so strongly to the effect that he does not admit he does not know everything.

Moreover, I do not think Atse Isias woke up one day, and decided, "From today I will not be listening to anybody." Instead, it began slowly and early when he intentionally failed to build honest voices around him. By "honest voices" here we mean friends, colleagues and honest people who had his goodwill or who could dare to tell him that he was out of the line. Many of us may think criticism should only be necessary when something serious takes place. But this should have happened before he became an important figure or at the time when he would be less resistant to criticism. Instead, he was given the time to surround himself with sycophants or opportunists who flattered him

for every action he took or every word he uttered. I think this was the way the culture that could breed the authoritarian leader was built. For instance, his reaction to the criticism by G-15, or his resistance to listen, only took place after he had been irreversibly deformed. In other words, the attitude “I am the President and nobody tells me what to do,” did not emerge all of a sudden, but it took time to develop and could have been corrected at earlier stages or before it could breed a leader who failed and led the nation to utter failure; a failure on all levels and dimensions.

Before drawing to the close, one more question that needs to be raised is: *What do we learn from this foolish failure?* This is a key question because of the existing irony: the same culture that was capable of breeding the brutal dictator, Atse Isias, is deep-rooted even among the forces that currently oppose his regime. Just look at each political party or organization in the opposition, website that struggles against the regime, human rights organization, civic organization, community centre, coordinating committee of justice seekers, Paltalk room ...and say who is/are at the top. In most of the cases (I would say, “Ella Man Rahama Allah” or except those blessed with God’s mercy), I bet, you would find a ***SMALL ATSE or ALLIED ATSES WORKING TOGETHER***. This is to say, the issue is not fighting against Atse Isias only, it should be wider than that. In a nutshell, we need to cast our net wider and fight the whole hostile culture in all our organizations whether cited as examples above or not.

To come back to the question raised above, it could be said that it was partially answered here and there throughout this article, but we can emphasize some points that need to be driven home.

Leaders have to know what is going on and avoid the risk of making bad decisions. There is only one way to know what the country needs and that is by being a good listener. A leader who cannot listen and fails to take the ideas of others seriously cannot be listened to, and he ceases to create the sense of being valued. To illustrate further, Atse Isias is a good example of those leaders who refuse to listen to others, including the people and his subordinates in the state hierarchy. The result is that we see him impairing his ability to inspire loyalty, resorting to the use of violence and fear to ensure a false loyalty that does not last long. That is why we daily hear and read about defections in the army, security, and other sectors of the state. Definitely, if he pays careful attention to the ideas and feedback of the people, the ministers and other subordinates, it would be easier for him to motivate his subordinates, who would avoid doing random things they do not care about, while he gains the respect, trust, and love of the people. Most importantly, we would ask: *Is Atse Isia's attitude correctable now?* I think it is too late, as the Mexican proverb goes: "Tree which grows bent will never get straight again." Nevertheless, I bothered about writing this piece, not to see the Atse corrected, but hoping that the new generation would benefit from the mistakes so that we could build healthy leaders in the new Eritrea we are aspiring to build.

It is not enough to repeat that Eritrea has become a failed state because of the failure of Atse Isias to seek advice and feedback from the people and his subordinates, and listen when they are given, believing that he has all answers and skills. It is obvious that something serious has to be done to uproot the hostile culture, but the question remains: *Are we doing enough to prevent the coming of similar leaders to power at different levels of state and party hierarchy*

in

future

Eritrea?



RAMADAN KAREEM!

(In Advance)