OUR PRISONERS VS THEIR TORMENTORS: WHO FORGIVES WHO?

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"I am asking for forgiveness from all the people who were offended, affected, hurt or humiliated by my actions or those of my superiors in compliance with orders, or those of my subordinates." (Manuel Noriega, Panama ex-dictator, 1983 to 1989).

Whenever we hear that a leader of a country pardoned some prisoners on the occasion of a new year or on Independence Day, many of us express our dismay, with a deeply-seated feeling of resentment, that Eritrea is an exception. We notice this expression of dismay among individuals, families, communities, and even the opposition media. A good case in point was a news item of Radio Erena on December 15, 2016 broadcast in which it was indicated that the Tanzanian President, John Magufuli, pardoned 5,678 prisoners on the occasion of the 55th anniversary of the country's independence, citing other examples that included Kenya, Cuba and Thailand, and expressing dismay that this has never happened during the 26 years of rule of the Eritrean Government.

That pattern seems to reflect the general feeling among our people, and it is absolutely understandable. No doubt this dismay stems from our genuine wishes for our family members, friends, neighbours, acquaintances or citizens in general, languishing in jail for no crime committed but simply because of their political stand against the policies of one of the most repressive regimes that orchestrates the highest level of violence against its own people. The compassion our people have for our political prisoners and the strong solidarity expressed every now and then with them unfailingly warm our hearts.

In fact, the expression of such dismay is a positive step in challenging the ruling gang, and it shows that we are united in our commitment to combat injustice. Nevertheless, it needs to be clear that when the Tanzanian Government or others cited as examples talk about forgiveness of prisoners, they are categorically talking about citizens who have been legally charged with a sin, an offense or failure that deserves punishment or restitution. A key distinction between these governments and that of Eritrea (though it is more of a gang than a government), we need to remember, is that they are elected governments with some functioning institutions, though they may not be perfect at this stage. But In the case of Eritrea, we have a host of questions to raise, including: Are there modern institutions, including government or state in the real meaning of the word? unfortunate that what we have in Eritrea is uncrowned EMPEROR who alone decides what everybody should do, think, talk, even eat, drink, dream and wear, as if he owns the entire country. The assignment of ministers is for nothing but to camouflage the one-man show. I am sorry to be so blunt as to say, whenever he orders his toothless ministers, whom he considers his errand boys, to "Jump", they simply ask "How high?" There is no critical thinking that state positions, whether high or low, constitute nothing but a division of labour or the feeling that, as citizens, it is their right to be appointed as ministers, as it is their national obligation to serve their people. In other words, assignment to higher positions should not be taken as a favour from anyone. Further, any observer may ask: Is there any sign of civilization or statesmanship? Let me lower the bar and rephrase the question into: Does Eritrea have an adult leader or are we dealing with an infantile throwback from the stone ages? We cannot help but view Isias as a gang leader who goes too far to harass anyone who disagrees with him or with any member of his gang, even on marginal issues, or counter their individual or group interest, presenting that person as the enemy of the state, while retaliation being the driving motive. In few words, all Eritreans who value self-expression, freedom and the right to be who they choose to be are the targets of the attacks by the

gang leader and his group. This is the Eritrea we are dealing with. Yet the picture about how things are run in Eritrea is clear from these blunt descriptions, one would not overlook the question: What does the Eritrean gang say about the political prisoners in the country?

Whenever foreign journalists and foreign state officials ask about some prisoners they had been well-informed about, speaking in such a canned manner, prominent gang officials usually deny altogether that there are political prisoners in Eritrea, with nothing intelligent to say. But recently, one of them surprised us, to the amusement of all listeners, by telling an international news media that the political prisoners are "pending criminal charges", blurring the difference between charges and convictions. To me, he should get the Oscar Award for the best comedy of the year. I do not need legal training to know that charges and convictions are totally different. It is a layman's knowledge that only convictions count against a person, while "pending criminal charges" is not a conviction.

According to the two contradictory versions heard, the Eritrean gang officials, who have given some statements about the political prisoners, have exposed the falseness or hollowness of their claims in an absolutely disgraceful manner, earning themselves the scorn, wrath, outrage and ridicule of the Eritrean people and the international listeners alike. To put it simply, the nonsense the regime endlessly repeats whenever talking about political prisoners in Eritrea has grown old (has been repeated for a quarter of a century by now) and falls short of being funny, witty and creative. Undoubtedly, it has proved to be redundant, boring, and unoriginal.

The attempt above was to show that forgiveness or pardon of prisoners we hear about in other parts of the world has no relevance for us to realistically wish that it should happen in Eritrea too. We have to realize that Eritrea is a different planet by itself and what happens in this world could not be expected to happen there, and so we need to

reframe the formulation of the issue. Accordingly, the most relevant concept in the Eritrean case is not "pardon" or "forgiveness" of political prisoners but their unconditional release or the demand that they should be charged and have their day at the court. These should be the only two formulations of the issue that fit because none of the prisoners had committed any crime or sin, or knows what he/she did, or has been charged. In other words, there cannot be pardon without a sin; so the question being: Pardon for what? As long as they have not been charged and have not been at the court, they should be unconditionally released. But, as we had established above, the victims are the ones who have the sole right whether to pardon their tormentors or not; not vice-versa. This will lead us to the second feature of the topic: Why should or should not the victims or the Eritrean people pardon their tormentors?

As the rule of a dictator has the first day, it definitely has the last day too. To that effect, before looking into the question above, it is helpful to see some of the damaging experiences other dictators or scum of history had to encounter at the end of the day. Avoiding complex cases, I will quickly go through some of the simple encounters (simple in the sense that human monsters deserve more than what we have witnessed) from the history of some of the world dictators so that nobody would rule out the possibility that what Isias and his gang members would face could be predicted within the scope of these scenarios.

Manuel Noriega of Panama, whose appeal to the people for forgiveness you had read above, had to cease resisting the US invasion which overthrew him in 1989, though he was known as a stubborn strongman, like our dictator. To see how these "strongmen" turn into frightened rabbits when caught by the people, just goggle the photo of Noriega while he was asking the people for forgiveness. The photo tells a lot about "strongmen".

After the US military invasion and the end of his rule, Noriega was taken to the US and convicted of drug trafficking and racketeering in 1992, serving his time until 2010. He was then extradited to France, but was finally convicted in absentia in Panama, where he returned in 2011. He is now serving a 60-year sentence for crimes that included murder, embezzlement, corruption and others connected to his military rule, though he is 81 years of age. His appeal was to have imprisonment replaced by house arrest on medical ground. However, though the public reaction was somewhat mixed, the majority of his former victims decided his fate.

Another dictator, whose end should teach a lesson to our dictator, if at all he learns, is Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines. Marcos's rule ended as a result of a popular unrest led by a former prisoner who returned from a long exile to offer the people a new face of hope. The dictator, who had stolen billions from the Philippine economy, was sent to exile in Hawaii in February 1986 and was indicted for racketeering charges, but he died in 1989. The desire of his family to have him buried in the cemetery of the heroes became a big issue because people who had lost their loved ones and his former victims had to have the final say on his fate. As a result of that, his body was kept in a glass casket in his home province from 1993 to 2016 when they were allowed to bury it in the cemetery of the heroes against a payment from the wealth he had robbed from the people. In this connection, it is remarkable to articulate that seeking forgiveness of the people, his daughter appealed as follows:

"I hope you set aside your grievances. All of us have anger and bitterness in our hearts, but we should set that aside because, as the pope said, 'when we forgive, you will be free and happy'."

On the other hand, a citizen of the country dismissing the daughter's appeal said the following:

"It's unfair that they are asking people to forgive and forget without them making a formal acknowledgement of the crimes of the Marcoses to the people."

With these public reactions in mind, Do we label the people of the Philippines as heartless for treating their tormentor that way? Imagine, your loved ones were illegally arrested and detained, tortured, raped, or your parent, brother, sister, son or daughter summarily executed. Do you forgive him? Many of them still talk about 75, 000 Martial Law victims and billions robbed from the country by Marcos.

Considering African experience, we could see that of all the dictators discussed here, the crimes and nature of Idi Amin of Uganda are the closest to Dictator Isias. Both lack a human heart, in addition to their anti-social behaviors, conceit, and disregard to human life and dignity that characterize them as psychopaths. Idi Amin died in exile because the people opposed his return home. The majority of citizens felt that his return would be disrespect to the people of Uganda. I do not have a reason to disagree with the will of the people, which many of us consider to be the will of God.

To return to the original question whether Isias and his gang members deserve forgiveness by the Eritrean people, who are their real victims without any exception, we need to have clarity about what these criminals did to the people. Their crimes are meticulously complied in the report presented by the Human Rights Commission of Inquiry about Eritrea to the UN Human Rights Council. Accordingly, any Eritrean who has read that report, except the PFDJ herds and some naïve Eritreans, would inevitably ask off-hand: Why should we offer

them dignity with which they never treated their victims? I think any fair-minded person would not disagree with that.

Though our people have to decide in future when the right time comes, we do not have any ground to believe that their feelings will be different from the feelings of other oppressed peoples we could try to recapitulate above. All humans experience the same range of human emotions towards their oppressors. That is why we do not expect our people to have different feelings and emotions from those we saw in Panama, the Philippines, Uganda or Libya, though they could be expressed in different languages. Hence, What is the human take on forgiving oppressors and tormentors?

One would say that forgiveness will be a slap in the face for those who have lost their loved ones. Another would argue that our leaders should never be above the law and that it is only punishment that deters crimes. Here it could be added that only punishment would tell the new generations that nobody should be above the law. In this regard, it is not realistic to expect Eritrean victims to forget and forgive their tormentors easily. Let alone the complicated cases of tens have lost their of thousands who loved ones to summary executions, drowning incidents in disappearances, Mediterranean or the Red Sea, or different tragedies in the Libyan Desert or the Sahara Desert, the grieving and healing process abused, tortured, or raped former prisoners, together with their families, have to go through is very hard and painstakingly slow more than many of us could imagine. Here we are talking about a complicated and multifaceted process that could neither be artificially accelerated nor skipped. To see clearly the difficulties involved, one should ask: Could any person who has not experienced such tragedies appreciate how these people crawl their way out of the pit? It should not be forgotten that these people have suffered some life altering and devastating events and we cannot expect them to be the same persons they once were and act the same way they once did.

In a different note, it is worthy to mention that the secretive nature of our people, the absence of mental health facilities that could give support to the survivors and their families, and our chronic fear from the government that forces us to turn our backs to these survivors, in addition to our willing reluctance to give moral and emotional support, could complicate the healing process and make it slower than it should be. For survivors of prison tragedies and those who had lost their loves ones, forgiving is the worst thing they would think of even if our Muslim and Christian religions support forgiveness and preach that it helps the victims to move forward, instead of becoming fixated on the hurt. True, for some forgiving could help them free themselves and consequently acts as a catalyst for healing. However, all of us know people who forgave their tormentors because of some pressure from friends, relatives or religious leaders, but later felt that they had betrayed their true emotions and fell into deeper depression. This confirms that forgiveness was not healing for them because it did not come from within. As a consequence, these people should not be taken as bad. As a matter of fact, they are honest about their true feelings and we should consider honesty in feeling as the best policy.

Some argue that we need to forgive and forget so that we go forward, but for others, the way forward is to urge criminals to confess and publicly apologize after brought to justice. This is the only way that could minimize bitterness and break the potential of revenge and counter-revenge. In short, while justice should be tampered with forgiveness, forgiveness should not take the place of justice. To me, it is unthinkable to let a dictator and his gang members die in peace. The question which torments me most is: Did the people they have killed die peacefully? In a nutshell, as they gave no mercy, they should expect none in return. To sum it up, I think it is unrealistic to expect Eritrean victims or the people to forgive their tormentors easily and to let bygones be bygones.

Though our people could not speak out because they have been ruled with an iron grip and fear, they know that Eritrea is an abject failure and that the human rights situation is extremely degrading. Depicting it otherwise is either delusional thinking or an outright lie. In such critical situation, where the power of the ruling gang is fast weakening and the country is going down the ditch, the issue of how to deal with the tormentors of the people in future, among many other issues, should deserve our attention and research from now. As there are no easy fixes for complicated problems, the purpose of this article is to raise questions and arouse interest in the issue so that others would pick up from there and do a more refined and professional research. Furthermore, it gives a chance to anybody who has the heart to learn, to look at the examples cited from world history. In my final note, I think forgiveness is irrelevant and unrealistic when offenders are without a conscience or are real psychopaths. Though we know for sure that the rule of the gang will end sooner or later, we do not know whether the dictator will be lucky enough to have the chance to read a similar appeal for forgiveness to the people like Noriega, turning into a frightened Eritrean rabbit, or he would be denied to be buried in the cemetery of the heroes like Marcos, or he would die in exile after been denied a return home like Idi Amin, or he would be devastatingly humiliated by his victims like Kaddafi. Anyway, the way his tragic end will unfold is very difficult, even for the most pessimist person, to predict. ======