

GENEVA DEMONSTRATION 2018: THE EMBODIMENT OF SINGLENES OF PURPOSE AND THE BIGGEST OPPORTUNITY TO PRODUCE A UNIFIED EFFECT

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Eritreans knew in the past, better than many other nationals that, if they ever wanted to resolve a major national problem, they had to work together towards their collective good. That working together is a prerequisite to success was one of the things they knew at the tips of their fingers because of their first-hand experience with the concept. As it is always said that necessity is the mother of invention, it was that kind of cohesive psychological unity and cooperation, discovered in the middle of the struggle that made the liberation of the country and its emergence as an independent state, a reality. However, since the concept of unity is not as simple as many people think, we cannot pass it with the simple definition put as, "The state or quality of being one or united into a whole." This will lead us to the question: ***What does unity mean in the Eritrean context?***

When we talk about unity some expect that everybody should think the same way and subscribe to the same views. Here they fail to understand that there can be difference of opinion and that we are not monolithic in our views, but there should be a shared national vision. This is to say that the reality of the 30-year war of liberation sufficiently proved that national unity does not solely mean that people should get along or think similarly, but there should be a unity of purpose among them and a vision that unites them: the recognition of what they are aspiring to. In other words, considering this background, one would hesitate to overstate the importance of unity to Eritreans because we are a people who have a history of pulling together. But it is logical to raise the question: ***Why was there national unity during the war of liberation and it disappeared after independence?***

There was an external enemy at the time of liberation, the Ethiopian occupation. After independence, the enemy became internal, and particularly one that led the

Eritrean people to independence. To see this in detail, the question we choose to use as a tool is: ***How did the liberator who was supposed to be the shield for the people could turn into a sword on their necks and show the tendency to compromise the hard-earned sovereignty of the country?*** This question is so complicated, and surprises could be numerous. However, we deal with the obvious components, leaving the mysterious parts for historians to sort out. Regardless of that, it is appropriate to note that the truth is not easy to discover and the real history to be written, while the suspect players are in power and alive.

It is not news that, after independence, Atse Isias fractured that national unity, putting his selfish interests and sick desires, his greed for absolute power, and anti-social governing agenda, above the interests of the country and the lofty goals of the martyrs of liberation. That way, the Atse hijacked the newly-independent State of Eritrea, imposed his rule with gun, prison network, and a bunch of inhuman and anti-people policies, enabled by the weak-spirited cronies and corrupt generals, who made up a small group of misfits and losers. As the final result, the country was turned into a failed state, with no rule of law, no constitution, no freedom of any sort, and no development, effectively running every vital aspect of life for the people and the country. To put it differently, nothing was left untouched by the destruction.

When the Atse found the wall closing in and he could no more continue in his medieval barbarous manner without serious consequences for his rule, he went one step further, colluding with Dr. Abiy Ahmed, who came up with the scheme of “Madamar”, which means in the Eritrean reality nothing but a gradual political integration of Eritrea with Ethiopia. Though the scheme of “Madamar” could be productive and timely in the Ethiopian context, for Eritrea, a sovereign state, means a total detraction from the goals of liberation for which tens of thousands of Eritrean martyrs had fallen.

Simply put, the fact that the enemy in the post-independence period was internal could divide the Eritrean people into groups. In addition to the wavering minds

sitting on the sideline, whose number could not be under-estimated and many of them are decent people who could be won in favour of regime change, we have the notorious group. This group, that has rocky relations with truth, still sees the regime as nationalist, maintaining its bunker mentality (characterized by illogical defensiveness and self-righteous intolerance to criticism), though the illegal practices or the criminal behaviours of the regime and the consequences of its disgusting dictatorial rule are obviously worse than those of the colonial powers. On the flip side, we have the truly patriotic-minded Eritreans, who see the regime for what it is or as a dead horse. Seeking further clarification, one would ask: ***What do we mean by the phrase “sees the regime for what it is”?***

Though there is nothing new I could add to the knowledge of the readers in general terms, to make the case, I would show that the phrase means the following:

- It means something that has not only ceased to be useful and relevant in terms of the goals and ideals for which our martyrs had fallen, but hostile and real threat to those goals and ideals themselves.
- Further, the phrase refers to the sickening brutality of Atse Isias’s regime, its consistent and fierce resistance against justice and democracy (nobody could be fooled by the name of his party or the PFDJ), and its designed policy of turning the whole country into extraordinary destruction and ruin. Should I add here that Eritrea has turned into “rubble and dust”, if it is not taken literally and I am accused of exaggeration?
- Moreover, it refers to the lack of fundamental human decency, as we see it in hundreds obvious and disgraceful forms.
- It is also a reference to the recent development: unduly compromising national interests and unpatriotically undermining national sovereignty. Here we need to cite some examples to make things clearer.

Aside from the most recent concessions to the Ethiopians, whose details are scarce, here concrete examples include:

- Giving Assab to the UAE and blessing that country with the free hand on Eritrean land, sea, and sky, and the license to use violence, including air raids, to prevent the local Afar population from earning their living by practicing their traditional fishing occupation.
- Joining the Gulf military alliance against Yemen, and allowing the UAE-owned Assab military base to be used by the fighter planes that are killing children and innocent people on a daily basis in Yemen.

In brief, to call the evil by its name, we are justified to describe the relations of the exceedingly brutal and savagely cruel Atse with the present-day Eritrea like a fox guarding a hen house. Of course, one would wonder: ***Why are our people silent while the reality of the country is as portrayed above?***

The displeasing fact is that our people have been silent on the brutal injustice due to the iron grip by the regime, and its policies of blackmail, divisiveness and contempt, but the Atse thought he was right in treating the people the way he believed they deserve and want. However, the hidden signs of discontent and resentment have always been there and in abundance. Subsequently, with the coming of the recent unpopular “peace” agreements of the regime with Ethiopia, that have taken the people away from the equation and started undermining the national sovereignty and compromising the Eritrean national interests, we see the long-hidden and accumulating discontent and resentment coming to the surface, while growing qualitatively and remarkably. This development, constituting the hour of darkness and pain for the Eritrean people, has made the truly patriotic-minded Eritreans, or the justice seekers in and outside the country, stand up as an impervious dam against anything that could touch the sovereignty of the country.

It is in the context of the detailed environment above that the Geneva marchers are ready to speak loudly, with honesty, integrity, practicality, and poise to the world community, the brutal regime, its cronies and misled supporters, the Ethiopian politicians, media outlets and intellectuals, the Eritrean people and

Eritreans who claim to be struggling for regime change but are not joining or supporting the Geneva Demonstration of August 31st, 2018 or not giving it enough support, due to their short-sightedness and narrow political views we assume, as long as they do not tell us why.

With the above-detailed presentation in mind, we would need to see the significance of the Geneva Demonstration 2018 and the multiple messages we think it would convey to different concerned circles.

Demonstration or protest is a civilized and democratic way of fighting against the dictatorship, and an effective tool to become the voice of the voiceless in Eritrea. I am cautiously optimistic to say that the voice of a formidable force, as big as expected and the wide diversity it will represent, would not totally be ignored by the world community, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, and the concerned Eritreans. After all, the would-be marchers are victims of the brutality of the regime and they should be listened to, if the parties to be addressed are fair, open-minded, and unbiased. All concerned parties (circles) to be addressed will go under a big test in the watch of the world. Of course, those who had decided not to listen will not, but those to whom human rights mean a lot would do, whereas some will put a big question mark on the regime for further research and follow up.

Most importantly, our people inside the country want to hear from us, and our voice would boost their morale, while the regime would know that it would have a bumpy road to go. Moreover, it would be an exciting experience for the participant Eritreans to stand up for their views and be true to Eritrea, while a possibility of more coordinated and organized work could emerge from such events. Add to that, a successful demonstration could also lead to other successful events, bringing many forces on board, including brothers and sisters of solidarity from other nations (friends of Eritrea), and keeping the fight on until the end. Of course, it is needless to say that the event would teach the supporters of the regime important lessons on true patriotism, though it would not force them to think.

In a nutshell, experience shows that such events are impactful in increasing the isolation of such North-Korea-type regimes, exerting lots of political, economic and diplomatic pressures on them. Accordingly, though I do not want to sound cynical, I could say that the regime is at present as weak as the wing of the butterfly, but it needs some force to shake it. In a couple of words, it is living on borrowed time. This brings me to my question: ***What messages should we convey to the different concerned circles on this occasion?*** The remaining part of this piece will focus on this question. Please bear with me.

Though what messages would be conveyed by the demonstration remains to be seen, as Eritreans who think on similar lines, it is appropriate to raise some of our root concerns and convey them to the concerned circles as messages too. However, our messages here may not be well-received by some but we try to follow our conscience and be an open book for the common good. To that end, we summarize our messages as follows:

- **The International Community:**

We really get sick whenever we observe the West and the US that care very little about principles and democratic values, speak about human rights, while directly and indirectly supporting dictators like Atse Isias and terrorist organizations for their own benefits. As we always do, we urge them to take the issue of human rights seriously, punish the regimes that have notorious records of violation and stop giving them any help. As a matter of fact, it is no more a secret that the financial assistance these regimes receive from the West is not going to help the people in one way or another, but is used to build more prisoners and buy security technologies and weapons to consolidate their grip on the people. If this is the reality, stopping the money means stopping the regimes from expanding their prison networks, and stopping the sale of security technologies and weapons means less violence and surveillance on the people and their struggle for freedom, justice and democracy. The same thing could be said about mining companies that have joint ventures with such regimes that use the income for the suppression and oppression of the people and depositing a part of the income in their off-shore accounts. In few words, this is to demand the democracies to be true to the democratic and moral values they claim to cherish.

- **The Brutal Regime, its Cronies and Supporters:**

The only thing Eritreans would urge Atse Isias to do is to be sensitive to the wishes of the Eritrean people, and do the honourable thing: voluntarily handing over power to the people. It is time for him to retire and rest, and by doing so, save himself from the inevitable humiliation other dictators had to face. It is a matter of time, and it will come.

As to his cronies and supporters, their Eritrean brothers and sisters have lots to whisper to their ears. The most important questions with which they want them to challenge themselves include:

- Do they really need to pledge blind loyalty to the Atse or to the country?
- Didn't what the Atse had said about Ethio-Eritrean relations and the agreements we learn he had signed beg to the large issue of trust?
- Shouldn't they say "enough" to the Atse when they see him going too far?
- Is this what their party is all about?
- Don't they fear accountability on the day of the reckoning? Do they really think that day will never come, as thousands did before them?

Though we know that our concerns and messages to them will not dislodge them from being his supporters, we openly tell them that the highest form of loyalty is when they tell the Atse, "No, this is not good for the country". At the same time, we tell them that if they still trust the Atse after what he has done with the Ethiopians, they will have a very difficult mountain to climb. Moreover, as his current close allies are the reactionary Gulf countries (not Scandinavian countries that protect human rights), justice seekers would wonder that his supporters still think something good for the country would come out of that relationship. At the same time, it is important to observe here, after some of my recent discussions with some supporters of the regime about the "peace" agreements between the Atse and Ethiopia, I found it amazing how they twist everything so that it sounds so good and

thoroughly true. In this connection, I ask them: ***Do all of your denials, twists, and excuses change what the entire Eritrean people know?***

- ***Ethiopians and Dr. Abiy Ahmed:***

I have written enough in my previous article (“***BETTING ON SELF-IMPOSED OUTLAW WHILE DISREGARDING THE OWNERS OF THE COUNTRY: A LOSING BET AND A SHORTSIGHTED GAMBLE***”, www.togoruba.org, August 3, 2018) about the Ethio-Eritrean “peace” agreements. What I write here will be complementary to my messages in that previous piece.

Many Eritreans believe, for Ethiopians it was the wrong readings of the expected Eritrean public reaction that made them go that far with Atse Isias. They add that Ethiopians thought they will achieve what they wanted in a very short period of time and with the Eritrean public support. This was a total miscalculation. I hope after all reactions followed and civic debate listened to and read about, it is hoped that they would slow down and re-assess their rush to:

- Learn that it was better to get it right instead of fast.
- Realize that it is not easy to work with a partner having different principles and interests.
- Understand that they laid the red carpet for the butcher to continue his brutality on the Eritrean people, losing the good will of the people because of their suffocating hypocrisy and intellectual dishonesty, and as a result putting themselves on the wrong side of history.

Though they have heard and read a lot about Atse Isias, we warn them again and again that they are dealing with a loose cannon, whom they will neither be able to predict nor to control, with the high likelihood to cause unexpected damage. It may be difficult for them to see this during the honey moon.

Nonetheless, it is high time for the Ethiopians and Dr. Abiy Ahmed to listen to the justice seekers who will participate in the Geneva Demonstration,

take them as their right partners (not Atse Isias), and decide what both sides could accomplish together, hoping to see the correction of the course.

Though I do not remember who said it, there is a quote which says, “When you dance with the devil, the devil will change you; you cannot change him”. This should be equivalent to the Amharic proverb:

"ጥፋ ያለፈ ዱቀት ከንፋስ ይጠጋል". This is to say that they have to be very cautious.

- Non-supporters of the Geneva Demonstration 2018:

We observe that some Eritreans have kept themselves aloof from the preparations for the Geneva Demonstration, though they consider themselves a part of the justice seekers. It is a great disgrace if justice seekers look to each other as adversaries to the extent that some get committed to do anything they could so that others will not have any accomplishment at all. I do not have words to describe how shocking it is. But we tell them honestly that skepticism is negative whereas constructive criticism is better. To shoot straight, it is the duty of all of us to improve the efforts of the Geneva committee but not to destroy, oppose, or stay away from them. To open their eyes further, we ask them:

- Why is this vagueness and hesitancy?
- Understanding the magnitude of the destruction the regime is causing to the country: Is there a more important issue than working together?
- Which is more important: Who organized the event or its significance for the struggle?
- Did they lose their moral authority only in the period between the preparation and the execution of the Geneva Demonstration (August 31st) to gain it on September 1st or on the day next to the demonstration?

- What does that tell about their claim that they stand against injustice?

The purpose of raising this issue is not to expose any group/groups or individuals but to see to it that all of us come together and hold hands as a people. It should be emphasized here that our job is to move forward to defeat the ruling gang; not to look into mistakes committed. We have a country to rescue before it is too late, and our conscience does not allow us to stay aside from this landmark event for one reason or another.

As our people stood together through thick and thin during the thirty-year war of liberation, we have to do the same when our sovereignty is threatened, our people are in the worst misery known to mankind or the most degrading human situation, and our country in total ruins and the worst state of disrepair. The good news is that we see a stronger desire to work together than that of last year, but we still hope to see that reaching a reliable level. It is always said that success in anything takes hard work and perseverance. But there is another factor which is always overlooked. That is the mental and the emotional strength. We hope for that to grow and be in its best form.

It is my honest opinion that the preparations for the Geneva Demonstration this year, in which many devoted Eritreans have participated, was inspiring. That makes us incredibly proud of the brothers and sisters who have played remarkable roles in the coordination efforts, outreach, and using their artistic skills and other creative capabilities to make it a success. In this regard, we urge Radio Assena and Radio Erena to continue to be our heroes, while urging other websites and media outlets to show their people, with concrete action, that they are a part of the national effort. I am tempted to say this because I did not read any editorial or commentary, watch interviews related to the event, or reflections on the landmark event, in one form or another, in some prominent websites, as if these websites are in Jupiter. No sign in these websites that there is an important national demonstration coming. ***Is this expectation out of place and unfair?***

When we praise the efforts of some brothers and sister, it does not mean the preparations were perfect. We do that because we see the cup half-full; not half-

empty. If we join them, there will be less weaknesses and mistakes, while staying aside as observers and talk about weakness and mistakes does not move us one inch forward and has never done until now. This is the right attitude we should always have. In brief, let us see the donut; not its hole, as it is said in North America. We should always bear in mind that we were a proud people because of our commitment, unity and perseverance. We hope someday we will be again. But as the world is keenly watching the unfolding situation at home and tomorrow in Geneva, we have to play it right and in the best of our ability and discipline.

To wrap it here, I would say it is nice to be with the Geneva marchers in spirit but better to be with them in practice or action. That is why I use my keyboard to contribute this humble article. We ask God for wisdom and strength!=====