

ERITREA: The State of the Nation

INTRODUCTION

(1) Between December 2018 and May 2019, a diverse group of Eritrean professionals met in Nairobi, Kenya and online to evaluate developments since the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia (“ERITREAN THOUGHT LEADERS ON THE PRESENT DYNAMICS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA”). While we welcome the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace process and appreciate the Ethiopian leadership for embarking on such a bold, if long overdue, initiative, we are dismayed by the lack of progress towards normalizing governance within Eritrea and are alarmed by the rate of “peace-time” exodus, which we believe is directly related to the state of hopelessness the regime of Isaias Afwerki has engendered. Our conviction that this state of affairs will not change unless there are immediate and dramatic reforms in Eritrea is only matched by our persuasion that the regime is incapable, or unwilling, to do so. The inescapable conclusion is that the system over which Isaias Afwerki presides must go, and a mechanism for restoring popular sovereignty must begin in earnest immediately.

(2) While we welcome the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace treaty that was signed in Asmara in July 2018, the exodus out of the country has tripled. It is a phenomenon observed only in Eritrea: normally, peace treaties result in exiles returning to their home.

(3) During the first week of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border opening, almost ten thousand Eritreans registered in refugee camps in Tigray. They—including a shocking number of unaccompanied minors-- continue to arrive, at a steady pace, in already resource-strained camps. The fact that so many Eritreans were eager to leave their country once they were provided a safe route highlights Eritrea’s desperate political and economic conditions at this time.

(4) Due to the command economy pursued by the State, the severe shortage of labor due to Eritrea’s exodus, the stranglehold of parastatal businesses, and Isaias Afwerki administration’s reckless foreign policy, Eritrea’s economy has been decimated. All sectors of the economy, agrarian and pastoral, fishers, farmland and entrepreneurship, have been severely downgraded. Most Eritrean entrepreneurs have been chased out of the country and the Eritrean economy remains dismal. In this vacuum created by the Asmara administration, unregulated Ethiopian businesspersons—including taxi-drivers and retailers—have crowded out what little remained of Eritrean businesses. This development, coupled with the secretive nature and dizzying pace of the peace treaty now consummated only at the head-of-government level, has led many to question the very nature of the peace agreement.

(5) The people of Eritrea have no say over how their national resources are exploited and ambiguous statements by both Eritrean and Ethiopian leaderships are creating serious uncertainty about Eritrea’s sovereignty. In short, Eritreans, both at home and abroad, are deeply concerned about their country’s future.

(6) At the foreign policy level, the triumphalist language of President Isaias Afwerki and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed lends credence to the view that the peace agreement is not necessarily one that will benefit all Eritreans and Ethiopians, but one that is directed to creating winners and losers in the two countries: a sure recipe for perpetual strife. Moreover, the Gulf countries that Eritrea and Ethiopia have chosen to be “bosom buddies” with have a long history of abysmal human rights records.

(7) Genuine peace, harmony, security and prosperity can only be sustained by the people with their full participation in all the affairs of their respective nations. Only a reconciliatory environment will help Eritreans release their energies and harness their initiative, creativity, and power to hold their government accountable. Only a government with moral authority and political legitimacy can lead a reconciliation effort. This is the second reason we are convinced the Government of Isaias Afwerki must go: it has been at the forefront of all the factors that polarized our people and destroyed our country.

(8) This report reflects the substance and spirit of meetings we held over the last 5 months in hopes of identifying ways out of our current state of confusion. It is our hope that it will offer some direction towards peaceful and constructive change and rule of law in our country. It will describe Eritrea’s dire situation and will conclude with suggestions for Eritreans from around the world on change management with minimal risk.

CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

Eritrea- Still Dire

(9) Eritrea's one-man regime has significantly diminished Eritrea's potential for development. As Eritrean society was undergoing extreme militarization, all institutions for enfranchising citizens were being dismantled. The cumulative impact has been a serious deterioration of Eritrea's social fabric, accompanied by attendant disasters: mass exodus; breakdown of all institutions, including religious; and an education system that is not worthy of our people's potential.

(10) There are significant shortcomings around the country's development, but our discussions concluded that stagnant economic and social development, the absence of rule of law and civil society, disempowerment of our youth, and the polarization of our society have been obstacles to positive change in Eritrea.

(11) Presiding over an emaciated system, Isaias Afwerki is the main problem, and there is a clear consensus among Eritreans of all backgrounds that he must relinquish power and that his enablers change their loyalties to the people.

(12) With the 1997 constitution declared dead, a new and comparable constitution nowhere on the horizon, and a legal system in disarray due to concentration of power in the presidency, the country continues to stumble without any semblance of the rule of law. We have reason to believe that even ranking members of the security establishment are eagerly awaiting direction and clarity on the supremacy of legal documents.

(13) Indefinite National Service- and the egregious human rights violations that accompany the program- has resulted in Eritrea becoming, per capita, one of the largest refugee-producing countries in the world. Many Eritreans, including the elderly and unaccompanied minors, have taken to traumatizing irregular migration, adding newer layers of refugees on top of the unresolved and long-standing problem of unreturned refugees in Sudan (since the 1960s), Ethiopia (since the 2000s) and beyond. Shunned by the Eritrean government and its overseas missions as traitors, and without adequate international response to their cries for help, we have watched in horror as Eritrean refugees continue to suffer some of the worst human rights violations imaginable: torture, detention, rape and many others. Many survivors continue to struggle with serious Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

(14) There is no doubt that the youth and women inside the country continue to bear the heaviest brunt of the country's wars and domestic repression. They legitimately complain about the harsh treatment during National Service, and they feel hopeless about a life robbed and their prospects post-National Service. With fathers in National Service, children having absent fathers and raised only by their mothers, the social fabric is consequently tattered. As a result, we witness the demise of the family unit.

(15) For years, Eritrea's education system had enjoyed a reputation for excellent pedagogy, producing graduates who can compete at international institutions of higher learning. As it has with every institution, the Asmara regime broke the education system by exiling instructors, haphazardly closing a university, shutting down an independent student union, and terminating articulation agreements. The hopelessness of the young generation is interconnected with the broken education system. With a government that censors inquisitive minds, and without qualified teachers and proper incentives to keep students in school (to varying degrees from elementary to tertiary levels), the decayed education sector produces a large number of politically disengaged and demoralized young people with diminished interest in self-improvement and growth.

(16) Many young asylum seekers arrive in other countries under great stress in today's migration context and still manage to find a way to support their families back home while being mistreated abroad. Indeed, young Eritreans continue to inspire everyone around them, taking advantage of any opportunity to better their circumstances. We see many succeeding in ways that we could have never imagined. There are also many young people who have chosen to stay in the country and who are beginning to openly challenge the official government position. They are defying the status quo and offering solutions for the future. Eritrean resilience knows no bounds, and this is one thing the current regime has been unable to eradicate, both at home and abroad.

Eritrea-Ethiopia Relations

(17) We welcome the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the principles on which it was founded. The resulting changes in the Eritrean-Ethiopian relationship, which climaxed with the signing of the peace treaty in July 2018 and the border opening soon after in September (since closed), were received with positive anticipation. However, they wanted for transparency and have had a mixed impact on Eritreans. The Eritrean government dismissed as non-issue the border conflict with Ethiopia, an astonishing case study in misplaced priorities considering its cost: tens of thousands of our finest men and women; hundreds of thousands of our citizens dislocated; and millions held hostage for two decades.

(18) The 1998 Eritrea-Ethiopia border war was catastrophic for the peoples of both countries. However, there has been no discussion of the hundreds of thousands of people who perished or were maimed. The young people who died were not publicly memorialized or adequately acknowledged in any form. No attempt has been made to investigate the root causes of the war, nor an opportunity for the families of the victims to find closure. There has been no serious reflection nor a conclusion that, henceforth, war should be unthinkable and should never be repeated. Currently, the Eritrean government has decided to suspend its priority of demarcating the border with Ethiopia because, it claims, stabilizing Ethiopia is a higher priority. This is repeating the same mistake of 1993-1998: it was Isaias Afwerki regime's decision to ignore the Eritrea-Ethiopia border issue so as not to weaken the hand of its erstwhile allies, the TPLF, that contributed to the ignition of the war.

(19) The vindictive activities, isolation and attacking of Tigray and TPLF, and interference in Ethiopia's internal affairs can only take us backwards. We as Eritreans should reject any resumption of hostilities in any form: it is costly in lives and opportunities. While Tigray continues to be a safe haven for Eritrean asylum seekers, the Eritrean government's posturing inside Ethiopia is causing some politically and socially active Eritreans and refugee Eritreans to feel that Ethiopia is no longer safe for them. Currently, many are migrating onwards to Kenya, Uganda and beyond in a process through which many continue to endure unimaginable hardships from smugglers and corrupt police along the way. We fear that this will have huge ramifications for our people: the further the destination of exile, the less likely they are to return home.

(20) Eritreans today have no idea how their rights are being prioritized, or even considered: they are completely in the dark. The Eritrean business sector has stalled, and freedoms afforded to Ethiopians in Eritrea while Eritreans continue to live under draconian restrictions cause serious worry. Eritreans' lack of access to timely and reliable information from their government further worsened following the agreement with Ethiopia, as the government has always been tight-lipped about its deals with other countries and foreign businesses. Diaspora-based media outlets have limited ability to report accurately and timely on Eritrean developments, causing citizens to rely on Ethiopian and other foreign sources for information.

Regional and International Relations

(21) While the regime celebrates its relief from global isolation, there is no indication it has conducted any reflection on why the whole world, led by the African Union, called for its sanction. Similarly, now as it basks in favorable international treatment as a key player in the Horn of Africa, Eritrea's ruling regime has turned a blind eye to the anxiety among many Eritrean refugees about the heightened risk of deportations back to Eritrea. It's worrying that foreign policy towards the country revolves around keeping genuine asylum seekers out of Europe, as opposed to recognizing the hardships they face if returned to their home country. Even more worrying are the pushbacks to Libya and the callous attitude of Europeans when they attempt to reach European shores.

(22) There are also other geopolitical interests at play. The Gulf Cooperation Council members in general, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates specifically, have economic and security interests in the region. American diplomatic and strategic establishments have taken advantage of the fact that Eritrea's one-man leadership has no interest in the Eritrean people's human development. It is unsurprising that foreign countries' renewed interest to re-engage Eritrea has more to do with their own internal issues, be it stemming migration into Europe, co-operating with illegal refoulement of Eritreans, or geopolitical considerations, just as it is unsurprising that the monarchy in Eritrea is more interested in extending its rule than advancing the people's genuine interests. None of these newfound political developments in Eritrea are

a result of changes within Eritrea, and none of the foreign interests cooperating with Eritrean leadership are interested in the betterment of the Eritrean people.

MOVING FORWARD

(23) There must be meaningful coordination and synergy among all Eritreans seeking to reclaim their rights as citizens, assert their dignity as human beings, and restore the image of, and optimism about, our country. With the last fig leaf of “national security” and “external existential crisis” gone, there is no longer a rationale for tolerating the regime’s abuse of power. The capacity of the Eritrean dictatorship is weak, and all Eritreans should unite and act in the best interests of the country. We must overcome our divisions and make reconciliation our priority. We welcome the recent Diaspora youth driven Eritrean mobilization campaign in social media (“Yiakl”(Enough!), Reclaim Eritrea, IfIWasPresident, etc.) and the addition of satellite television like EriSAT and ATV who have managed to penetrate the information monopoly of the Isaias Afwerki administration. However, more needs to be done to connect the Diaspora movement with home-grown resistance and for the satellite television stations to improve the quality of the content and standards of reporting.

(24) Eritreans residing inside and outside Eritrea must rise up and remember the one factor that unifies us all: all Eritreans, regardless of their religious and social background have sacrificed a lot for Eritrea to call itself an independent nation. We share collective pride in our heroic past. This is why many of us have been overly tolerant of this government to begin with– the belief that the one thing we sacrificed so much for was under attack. Whether we are refugees who have spent our lives in Sudan banned from going back to our home country in 1991, or asylum seekers in Europe living in constant fear of deportation, our shared common history is our sacrifice for a free and independent Eritrea. But we must define nationalism to mean more than asserting our sovereignty: all Eritreans seek – and ought to pursue – individual dignity and human rights, and promise in our shared future guaranteed by the rule of law.

(25) The Eritrean dictatorship can no longer externalize nor put off the myriad of our internal problems. Political changes are coming- there is no denying this. The dramatic changes in the region vis-à-vis the overall state of dormancy in Eritrea has led to a growing consensus among Eritreans about how to solve the country’s problems. Eritreans in the Diaspora currently do not have the conciliatory abilities we will need to overcome our internal divisions. We must prioritize and practice compassion and generosity towards one another and resolve our differences through reconciliation, consensus building, and mutual respect.

(26) The Isaias Afwerki regime, which does not represent the values and diversity of the Eritrean people, has methodically disenfranchised and brutalized all Eritreans. The country’s leadership is an elite group of men, which reflects neither the gender, regional, religious diversity, nor the aspirations, and values of Eritreans. All groups have been violated by the State: we have all witnessed agitations against religions; torture and disappearance of people from highlands and lowlands, as well as misrecognitions of several ethnic or linguistic groups by the predatory State of Isaias Afwerki. For as long as Eritreans have been polarized and dispersed, there have been Eritrean elders, religious and political leaders, and mothers calling for national reconciliation. We salute their efforts and call on their peers to join these efforts. We all must retreat from our corners and find creative ways to achieve national reconciliation and address the people’s grievances to begin a process of national healing with a spirit of forgiveness.

(27) Marginalized groups deserve an equal opportunity to contribute to Eritrea’s future. We must prioritize engaging with marginalized groups and we must listen to the one another’s grievances with an open heart and a forgiving attitude. These engagements should be genuine, give a sense of real ownership to those impacted, and not be tokenistic. In the end, all of us must genuinely believe, and act upon the belief, that there are no first-class and second-class citizens; we must embrace the values of functional multi-cultural societies and understand that lasting peace and harmony is inconsistent with attitudes of arrogance and domination.

(28) The dedicated, bright young people who continue to choose to stay in the country and face challenges at home are uniquely positioned to lead the process of change, and the role of Eritreans outside should be to contribute to their empowerment and to help catalyze the change. We should be actively fostering their political participation and utilizing their energy and creativity for positive political change.

(29) Some of our preexisting difficulties have worsened after the rapprochement with Ethiopia. When moral clarity and leadership was needed, the Ethiopian government has remained silent around whether it would be possible to encourage similar reforms in its neighboring country. Regretfully, the Ethiopian government's rhetoric has been disingenuous (praising the Eritrean leadership and evoking imperialist Ethiopian sentiments that should have been laid to rest long ago), and, more worryingly, it has been tolerant or ambivalent about Ethiopian extremists who claim to have natural, legal, and historical claims to our waters.

(30) Nonetheless, the new Eritrea-Ethiopia relationship also presents opportunities. We need to build on what PM Abiy Ahmed has started: economic and political cooperation; develop further people-driven integration towards justice and democracy; and safeguarding the rights of our common peoples. This should go beyond Eritrea and Ethiopia and extend into our entire region to guarantee its sustainability.

(31) The solidarity between Eritrean and some members of Ethiopian civil society has grown since the rapprochement, and we hope that Eritrean personalities and organizations will continue to update and inform their Ethiopian counterparts about the Eritrean situation. It is very clear now that the well-being of the Eritrean people will not be a priority in the regional peace agenda overall, and we encourage Ethiopian activists and journalists to sensitize the Ethiopian public to Eritrea's dire situation. The Ethiopian government's bipolarism--of promoting democratic pluralism in its home country while simultaneously perpetuating a dictatorship in Eritrea-- should be challenged. The new peace also offers an opportunity for Eritrean civil society organizations to learn about effective mobilization and political participation.

(32) We have an equally shared political, cultural and social relationship with our brothers and sisters in Sudan, who are currently demanding and experiencing exciting and irreversible changes in their political system. We should be prepared to collaborate with them after their transition and learn from their experiences. In the meantime, it is essential that we support these demands for change and democratization as much as we can and take note of their empowered citizenry and calls for accountable governance. Similar collaboration should be done with civil society partners in Somalia and Djibouti, our other neighbors. There is a political change underway, and it is worth to attend to Diaspora voices.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

(33) Isaias Afwerki and the PFDJ do not have the Eritrean people's interests at heart.

(34) What we the people are doing does not rise to the moment's call. We have not mobilized or organized ourselves enough to address what we will do next. How do we want to see our rule of law and government structure designed so that it meets the needs of the Eritrean people? What kind of political structure promotes lasting peace and harmony among all Eritreans? Eritrean scholars and professionals had an admirable role providing the intellectual underpinning for the Armed Struggle; now they should guide the popular movement towards constitutional governance, one that takes into consideration our people's diversity in language, heritage, religion, and other forms of identity formation.

(35) It is imperative that Eritreans at home and abroad prepare ourselves for the day this regime falls and ensure that our transition is a peaceful and stable one. We recommend the following:

A. Eritrean military and political personnel must stand up to dictator Isaias Afwerki and call for his resignation. You must aim to peacefully remove Isaias once and for all. Regardless of their rank in the military or civilian offices, the Eritrean people will hold those who choose to support the agenda of Dictator Isaias Afwerki accountable for the state Eritrea is in. In any matter that arises, we call on you, the military personnel, to stand with the rest of the Eritrean people and to never point your guns at civilians. Eritreans around the world are watching.

B. While we salute and celebrate the resistance inside Eritrea, as the Eritrean Diaspora is coming out united under one word "Enough", we also call on Eritreans inside the country to say enough to the dictatorship and amplify its civil disobedience. All Eritreans must demand – and work towards – the establishment of a constitutional government that respects the fundamental rights of the citizens and

advances the nation's interests.

C. Eritrean legal scholars must be ready to alleviate Eritrea's rule of law predicament- particularly through the drafting and preparation of draft codes for the forthcoming Constitutional organs: (a) Rules of Parliament, (b) Judiciary, (c) Offices of Attorney General, (d) Auditor General, (e) National bank, (f) Election Commission, (g) Election law, (h) Civil Service Commission, and (i) Press law. They should also be prepared to assist with policies around police, prisons, security, defense, and civic organizations.

D. Eritrean students and professionals—lawyers, economists, professors, doctors, etc.—must organize on the basis of their specialty and prepare for the inevitable change and transition. Eritrean scholars in their respective regions must begin to be a catalyst in empowering, educating and bringing their communities together to stand against dictatorship in Eritrea.

E. Eritreans in the Diaspora must mobilize, organize and advocate, and come out peacefully in large forces against the regime in Asmara. We also strongly encourage Diaspora Eritreans to oppose any form of 2% tax income to the regime as a sign of protest.

F. Just as the Sudanese and Ethiopian Diasporas were pivotal in ending dictatorships in their respective countries, once the Eritrean people decide to rise up against the regime in Asmara to bring about an end to Isaias administration, we must pledge to do our utmost to ensure that Eritreans in the Diaspora support them wholeheartedly.

G. As with all revolutions, the Eritrean youth must lead: they must act now and make history by reigniting the torch of freedom and snatching it from the reluctant hands of those denying them.

H. Media is one of the greatest sources for institutionalizing democracy and a weapon to defeating tyrants, and that's why dictatorships devote substantial percentage of their budgets towards propaganda and censoring dissent. At present, Eritrean Diaspora media outlets are fragmented and do not complement one another- missing opportunities for synergy and multipliers. It is imperative that they sit together and discuss how to collaborate. Eritreans around the world should strive to support the Eritrean Diaspora media sources as much as possible, through financial or other resources.

I. While we salute our artists who have publicly joined the “Yiakl” movement, a lot more needs to be done. In oral societies, artists are more influential than scholars in shaping public opinion and mobilizing the people. Our artists should work together to combine their talents and resources and Eritreans must do their utmost to fund and support their work.

J. We must learn from, seek solidarity and create connections with, our counterparts in Ethiopia and Sudan. We should be seeking cross-border collaboration on all fronts: political party to political party, civil society to civil society, academic to academic, religious leader to religious leader, etc. All segments of our social structures must learn from, seek solidarity and connect with their respective Ethiopian and Sudanese counterparts.

K. European governments should also protect Eritrean human rights defenders, stop prioritizing selfish policies at the expense of the Eritrean people, and recognize Eritreans asylum seekers as the genuine refugees they are. We demand that those who purport to be regional allies reconsider their relationship with the Eritrean dictatorship.

L. We must aim to safeguard the newly restored peaceful relationship with the neighboring countries, especially Ethiopia, while demanding and working toward the expeditious demarcation of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border, and the resolution of all outstanding issues between them in accordance with acceptable standards of international law. There should be transparent and accountable communication to Eritreans and Ethiopians of all agreements entered with foreign countries and foreign companies.

M. In countries that do not have traditions of peaceful power transfer, all transitions are fragile. In the case of Eritrea, there are two complicating factors: lack of a demarcated border with Ethiopia and absence of implemented constitution. To mitigate these risks and ensure popular and international support for the change we seek, we recommend demarcation and constitutionalism:

M.1: In 27 years of Isaias Afwerki's rule, we have seen a long pattern of igniting wars whenever his power is in danger. Thus Ethiopia's insistence on immediate demarcation of the Eritrea-Ethiopia boundary would remove any subterfuge for the Isaias Afwerki regime to evade accountability by starting another war. In the interest of lasting peace with its northern neighbor, Ethiopia should push for the immediate demarcation of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border in accordance with the Algiers Agreement of 2000. Its agreement with Isaias Afwerki to defer this decision until Ethiopia is stabilized was shortsighted, and is not in the interest of either country.

M.2: As for constitutionalism, this is an area where the people have to approach the issue with wisdom, vision and a spirit of reconciliation. With respect to Eritrea's 1997 constitution, the Eritrean people are polarized. There is a large group which considers it an excellent legal document, with strong defenses for civil liberties, which also happens to have hundreds of thousands of people participate in its drafting and has been the rallying call of all attempts to bring about peaceful reform in Eritrea (ie G-15 and Operation Forto). Conversely, there is a large group of Eritreans who consider the document flawed in its exclusionary process and content (flag, land, language, unitary state), reflecting only the value system of the EPLF. Unfortunately for Eritrea, this polarization of pro- and con- largely overlaps Eritrea's Christian/Muslim and highland/lowland identity. As we stated earlier, the take-it-or-leave it approach will not do: each side must retreat from its entrenched position and meet the other halfway.

M.3: We recommend using the 1997 constitution as the transitional supreme law. This would be in the interest of peaceful power transfer and stabilization of the country because without a transitional supreme legal document that the change agents respect— both Eritrean civilians and military alike--the likelihood of strife and opportunity is greater. But it must be only a transitional document since a large segment of the population considers it badly flawed. A free people have the right to make partial or even wholesale changes to the constitution, and that can only come about in a free and stable environment following a short transitional period and a reconciliation congress inside Eritrea.

(36) Eritrea's survival and its prosperous future can only be achieved if we act towards saving our country from the hands of a dictator and work towards reconciliation, justice and political transition as soon as possible. In the end, it is only we, Eritreans collectively, who can make this happen. The change we seek is for all- regardless of their age, gender, religion, region, ethnicity or their current geographic location.

Eternal gratitude and glory to our martyrs
Happy Independence Day

May 22, 2019

For a list of the signatories, refer to the following page:

1. Andom Ghebreghiorgis, New York, New York, United States of America
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