

Integrating the Eritrean Youth into the Struggle for Peace and Democracy

Written by G. Ande

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Those political parties and civic organizations, who the Eritrean people can trust to responsibly struggle for peace and democracy, should make a hard and fast look at the prospect of creating a political partnership with the youth because, the future of Eritrea depends on the proactive involvement of the youth. It is not an overstatement to say that the Eritrean youth, of all other population groups, have been the hardest hit by the dictatorship in Eritrea. The harsh and prohibitive political climate in Eritrea has opened the floodgates for the exodus of the youth in unprecedented numbers. The government does not admit that it is the cause for the mass exodus of the youth. Instead it blames Diaspora Eritreans for being the culprit in this sad state of affairs for encouraging the youth to abandon their country by creating false hopes of prosperous life in the West and financing the human trafficking costs involved to smuggle in the youth into North America and Europe.

It really breaks our heart to see new arrivals of young Eritrean refugees, some of whom are still in their teen years, helplessly scouring for jobs and housing in Western capitals at a time when the host countries' economies are too weak to absorb an influx of new immigrant labor. This has become a time when these countries are finding it difficult to provide for their own people due to recession and economic meltdown. We must understand how frustrating it could be for the Eritrean refugees, who have arrived here after going through inexplicable ordeals and risk to their own lives, to find their new environment less welcoming and accommodating and far beyond their expectations. They come from distressed families and have spent thousands of dollars to pay for their way. Their anticipation of realizing the American dream has been frustrated at least for now.

Youth and labor movements have played pivotal roles in bringing about change in the Horn of Africa in the past. If we look back at our history, the student and labor movements of the late sixties and early seventies (of the last century) were very instrumental in bringing Emperor Haile Selassie down to his knees which led to his eventual dethronement by his own military and also intensifying the liberation effort of Eritrea.. The current heads of governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea are the products of the radical student movement of the past. Mr. Isayas Afeworki, knows pretty well that a youth and labor movement of the caliber of the sixties and seventies of the last century could undo his regime. As may be recalled, there was a protest by the students of Asmara University in October 2001. The government's reaction to the protest was cruel and excessive. By way of punishment the government sent the entire student body of the University to the eastern Eritrean lowlands - a hot, arid desert by the Red Sea where temperatures can reach 50C during the day. It was reported that some students have died due to heat exhaustion and dehydration. Eventually, Asmara University was closed bringing campus life and the prospect of any kind of progressive student body formations to an end.

Mr. Isayas's idea of insulating his regime from a threat by student and labor activism seems to be the regimentation of the youth and the labor force by his government's deliberate schemes of indoctrination and militarization that are being staged in the Sawa internment and training camp. At present, any Eritrean youth that is lucky enough to be admitted into an institute of higher learning has to enroll in the trade schools that the government opened to replace the Asmara University. These trade schools are managed by colonels and drill sergeants and are by default

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student body unfriendly institutions. Therefore, the intimidation and humiliation of the student and labor force in Eritrea is complete and absolute. The government has corked up the voices of dissent of the younger generation at least temporarily.

The government's sinister scheme of silencing the voices of dissent does not stop here. It has also squeezed the private business sector to near extinction. To day, Eritrean entrepreneurs and small business owners are leaving Eritrea and scouring the entire African continent for business opportunities. South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, South Africa and many more countries are experiencing an influx of Eritrean investors. It looks that it has become an open season for every body, be it student, businessman, or skilled labor to leave Eritrea and seek meaningful economic engagement and personal safety from harassment and persecution elsewhere. This is a very sad development that merits the attention of any responsible opposition group.

The opposition groups who, as mentioned above, can responsibly streamline our people's quest for democratic rule by undoing the dictatorship have a lot of willing partners that can pitch in into any opposition effort against the dictatorship. Primary among these willing partners are the youth in the Diaspora, especially the recent arrivals, who have experienced human rights abuses first hand in Eritrea. It is a pity to observe that the much hyped and talked about National Conference for Democratic Change has overlooked the importance of the youth. It is very unreal for the CDC to fudge and smudge its priorities and think that a conglomeration of ethnocentric elements, secessionists, myopic nationalist groups and radical sectarian activists will be able to lead the Eritrean people to a meaningful democratic transition. The ineptitude and shortsightedness of the EDA cannot get any worse than this.

So far, the EPDP (Eritrean Peoples Democratic Party) seems to be the only entity that seems to have the full view of what needs to be done. And it is very encouraging to see it becoming the voice of the voiceless by not being taken by the cosmetic and unreal approaches of the EDA. However, a lot remains to be seen on what the EPDP's road map for future Eritrea will be. And much of its future success will obviously depend on its ability to make an outreach to the Eritrean youth and labor force and other well meaning progressive groups to build up a strong opposition to the government. The EPDP needs to stay clear of ethnocentric, sectarian, and secessionist agenda. It should do its best not to walk the Eritrean people into a political minefield such as the one that we are seeing in Somalia and Eastern Europe. The Eritrean people have endured so much pain and suffering for centuries. This is the time when they need to gather their acts and pave the way for a peaceful and prosperous life. And the Eritrean youth and labor force will, if organized effectively, be a major and potent force to bring about change in Eritrea. The fate of Eritrea can no longer be entrusted to irresponsible elements whose primary agenda is to threaten the unity of the people.