

The Role of Military in Transition to Democracy

By Fesseha Nair

“Active support or acquiescence of the military is the key to any viable and sustained political transition to democracy”

Monshipouri

We have been observing the role played by the military in Tunisia and Egypt siding with the popular uprisings against the dictators and dictatorship on one side, and we just follow up the role of the military and security forces against popular uprising in Yemen, Syria and many others in the Middle East countries ruled by dictators for many decades. The role of military and security forces is essential to any analysis from dictatorship to democracy. In spite of its relevance, there is no scholarly work that clarifies the relationship between the civil society and the military. The main concern at this time for the Eritrean Pro-democracy forces is to find ways and methods to build a relationship between the public and the military. (See Professor Gene Sharps scholarly studies)

Several authors on transition to democracy (Bosnian – Herzegovina and others) pointed out that military and security forces are the greatest threats to democratization in the states ruled by dictators. In this article, I will try to discuss on the role of the military in political transition to democracy.

The role of military in democratization

Post –independence Eritrean political leaders’ strategy for state building was not associated with democratization but anti- democracy and authoritarian system of governing. Their first priority was not building constitutional government but building military and security forces to defend them from civilian uprisings or to control the citizens.

Today, the dictator in Eritrea has built an army and security forces under his control through the use of bribes, spoils of office, ethnic manipulation of appointments and promotions and security forces counterbalancing the regular forces. The dictator has established a paramilitary apparatus to control the citizens. **Under what conditions can the pro-democracy forces gain these forces on their side is the main issue for discussion.**

In case of Eritrea, today the military is severely weakened by years of political crisis and wars without known budget and no salaries. They are enforced and enslaved youth without professional training. A military in such situation favors the end to military rule. Such situation motivates them to work for successful transition to democracy, in spite of strong resistance from the security forces of the dictator. We have seen in Malawi where the army forces played a crucial role in the 1994 transition as they were protecting the people from the security forces of dictator president Banda.

We have seen recently how the military joined the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. A common denominator in all these cases was the deteriorating conditions of life of the army under authoritarian rule. Eritrean army and people are today in deep crisis under the dictatorship of one man rule. We are all suffering (military and the civilians) under the dictatorship. However, in some countries, the military leadership or the important factions of the military can oppose the political change and side on the incumbent regime. Repeated clashes have happened in Sub-Saharan African countries before, and is now happening in Libya between those who are for democracy and those supporting dictator Gaddafi.

The problem of the military of not joining the pro-democracy movement can be explained in three levels according to the studies made by Hutchful. Hutchful's first explanation was that when a national army is established as a private institution it is less professional and is difficult to distance it from the incumbent regime. His second explanation is the deep-rooted problems in the military institutions. The only grievances the military see is not the injustices but pay disputes and what they will get from the transition. The third factor, Hutchful suggests is the lack of attention to the military from pro-democracy forces.

Latest studies made by Professor Gene Sharp and many others show that gaining the army on the side of the democratic movements is one of the factors to successful transition to democracy. The Egyptian young leader of the popular uprising recommends that those who want to succeed the struggle from dictatorship to democracy must have the courage to gain the opinion of the people and create a civilized and disciplined popular uprising and convincing the national army to support the democratic transition.

The Eritrean national forces for democratic change should not alienate the Eritrean army. Alienating the army is just strengthening the dictator and creating clashes between the pro-democracy forces and the army. Another important issue in democratic transition is the question of persuading those associated with the dictator to join the transition to democracy by promising them that a democratic system in Eritrea will guarantee them freedom and prosperity in the future without any retributions.

The National Congress to be held should in its grand strategy focus on the role of the military and the people associated with the regime. When considering the role of the military in relation to democratization in Eritrea it is important to consider their situation under the dictatorship, similarly the situation of those who support the regime should be considered and be given guarantee that in a democratic Eritrea there will be no retributions but reconciliation and truth telling.