

## **Hands off the Youth Movements!**

In today's materially obsessed world, it seems strange to see both the words 'altruistic and selfish' associated with the Eritrean opposition forces for democratic change altogether. Perhaps there are lessons to draw from the ongoing struggle against the PFDJ's regime where recently whilst some were demanding and calling for freedom for prisoners of conscience, rule of law and the fall of the PFDJ regime others were pleading for dialogue with the regime so that they can negotiate power sharing agreement or forming a national unity government to come to power.

Throughout this article I use 'opposition forces' as a generic term for anyone who is a member of a political opposition or a civic organisation, independent individuals, religious leaders or intellectuals who are opposing the PFDJ's regime.

When people talk about Eritrean Youth Movements these days, chances are they do not mean their list of Facebook friends (social networks), but rather their activities and involvements in the opposition movement arena. It is part of a trend that has seen lots of us making more and more 'virtual' attachments to more and more forces of opposition movements – but at the risk of making fewer meaningful, rewarding work relationships or allegiances.

In fact, personally I have found mixing with others was a big part of Youth Movement experience, and even if they come from different backgrounds, when they work together the social, language and religious barriers melt away. These days' demonstrations involving youth are taking place to demand democratic change in Eritrea and that of course threatens the regime and subsequently root out the cronies (YFPDJ) of the PFDJ. On the other hand the Eritrean Youth Movements in Diaspora are openly struggling to create their own independent, democratic movements, to by-pass and replace both the old, fake Eritrean National Union of Youth and Students (in Eritrea) and YFPDJ in Diaspora too. In Diaspora some of the movements have been founded as a new solidarity campaign for democratic change so that to organise solidarity with those already existed opposition forces. The aim was and still is for these new youth movements to be seen as alternatives and at least to get recognised (accepted) as the legitimate representatives of the Eritrean Youth in Diaspora in the long term unlike the dictatorial regime- controlled NUEYS and YFPDJ.

Unfortunately some of those above mentioned efforts being made by the Eritrean Youth in Diaspora now risk being hijacked by a few publicity-hungry opportunists whose only aim is to seek power and attention. At the same time I get the impression loyalty of some youth have always lent more towards certain other groups than the Youth Movement itself due to some pressure and influence being put on them. Some of those opportunists are members of the opposition forces who exactly know how to exploit the weaknesses of each youth and their respective movement, take advantage of them and then manipulate them based on ethnicity, religion, region or affiliations. It does not have to like this otherwise it will lead to sectarian hatred and suspicions. Everybody gets brainwashed, especially the vulnerable ones (youth) and some of those opportunist are using them as tools. What that means is, they are putting ideology before common sense. Surely politics or religion is about principles and not just power and domination. I accept there will always be divisive characters or unpopular

individuals for whom their association with the youth movements does little to deflect the disregard they attract from members of rival opposition forces, while the youth movement themselves retain their own fervent band of detractors.

Sadly in the opposition camp, we are beginning to notice a shift back to more old fashioned ideas, “The Eritrean Youth Movements can’t do anything on their own so middle age people has to intervene.” On this occasion I call on the Eritrean Youth of today that they should not put up with any interference in their affairs by anyone else regardless of his/her intentions, position and motives. For obvious reasons they have become victims of PFDJ’s regime and subsequently interference is the least thing they want. I came across a middle age member of opposition forces and asked him, “why he has to be involved in running the Youth Movement despite him being older in his age and has affiliations”. He replied, “The Youth hardly know anything, they can’t lead and run their movement properly but we have the experience.”

In recent years many youth movements have been emerging or re-emerging with a good start and wonderful set of internal regulations and constitutions at the beginning. Thus a lot of youth joined them, including ineligible middle age people. Those ineligible people’s involvement did more harm than good as their motive and the role they would play was not clear and defined from the set out although some might have had good intentions. In truth, however, there are a few of them who have been playing a positive role in providing material, advice and moral support in trying to embrace, promote, empower, and integrate the Youth Movements. Generally if we have looked at the impact of the opposition forces meddling with the youth affairs experiences and particularly influencing their decision making process at times, and there is much evidence to show that they are not making the desired progress at all. As a result we are seen time and time again some disappearing or slowing down their activities when they were initially promising and expected to flourish and expand.

I personally accept that you can’t buy experience and it’s a priceless chance to get closer to opposition forces so that youth can learn from their vast experiences. Also working together to topple the PFDJ regime based on mutual respect, common interest and shared vision can bring us with the opposition forces closer together in a way that never happened before.

Let’s be honest and admit, we have this confused mind of the Eritrean Youth at the moment who are suppose to be approached with a unity of purpose and belief in them. Fortunately they are now on to a good thing, joining the opposition force but that does not mean the opposition forces to bend to their will either. I have been in contact and/or part of some of them already and the youth movements may lack creativity, spark and leadership while they do not lack ambition. So far I have not witnessed any exemplary successful relationship being created between independent and neutral youth movement and the opposition forces. Apart from being very successful in creating youth movements, but in truth the youth have been reasonably subdued ones. The youth have been struggling after all; there was little to say. Let’s face it. Some leading youth movements even like the one that was founded and set up in South Africa by former Asmara University students their activities slowed down even though at first they set a better vision for the future and inspired many more of us to join or take similar initiative. Worse still, a few others appear to be affected too. Even though it is too early to say exactly what are the causes of those failures but I am sure there are some

interference aspects to it. Those who have been involved are in the best position to comment and would like us to hear the story from their perspective. Mean while it is not just right simply to wait and see for the youth movement to fail and do nothing. Doing nothing is not an option.

The opposition forces are seen here as part of the solution, which I called it **solution through experience** in my opinion. That's why I have drawn some recommendations to them, having already watched, observed and decided to put them forward in order to avoid potential consequences for the youth movements. First the opposition forces have to reset the pattern (strategy) for their approach and have reasonable expectations of the youth movements. What that means is they themselves should come out of age- look for a new beginning. And as the emergence of free and independent Eritrean Youth Movements in Diaspora is an event of enormous significance for the entire Eritrean people is to be welcomed by the opposition forces. I would also like to remind the opposition forces to respect the youth's internationally-recognised rights to join and form independent movements and make solidarity with them instead. Likewise the Eritrean Youth Movements should stand up for their convictions, deal with other opposition forces on their terms and start to deliver sustainable activities of their own as well. At the end of the day it's the youth movements' personal choice to lead by example and the opposition forces as well to try to strike a balance to motivate the youth and also showing restraint as well. But I am realistic that there's no short cut or quick fix to these all overnight.

In the mean time there are some questions to be asked and should get a response to though. Are the opposition forces willing to try and make amends in their approach when dealing with the youth movements? Will the opposition forces accept those who are classified as youth and are eligible to be members or join their respective movements are those only between the age of 18 and 40 years old, introducing maximum age cap? Are you ready to make an equivocal promise to the youth yet? Even if you are offered a role of an advisor within the Youth Movement, you should not take it up providing there's no conflict of interest. Also that you should not pretend that there's no divisions among you, and start to realise that you are inflicting your problems on the youth is not needed.

In conclusion I would like to appeal to all whom I referred to the opposition forces to do more to let help the Eritrean Youth Movements deal or tackle their own matters themselves and refrain from meddling with their affairs for good. It is time the opposition forces to step in to ensure that unnecessary further interventions are stopped and pay their fair share back to the youth instead of constantly watching while some of their colleagues causing damage and dismantling the youth movements in Diaspora. Please help the Eritrean Youth inspire the new generation!

I would also like to clarify that my article is not aimed at personally attacking or blaming anyone in particular. And I will continue to write articles on similar youth topics and it would be much appreciated if others could contribute some comments to highlight the issue more. I am willing and happy to exchange views, accept constructive criticism, feedbacks and also to cooperate fully with concerned bodies on the topic's findings.

My future articles will be about the Revolutionary and Evolutionary youth movements, cooperation is better than conflict, the opposition forces-Youth solution, in what direction is Eritrean being taken and so on. Unless I am busy with my commitments and my hectic life schedule, those articles I have dedicated to the Eritrean Youth will be prepared in time to be posted and circulated in media outlets. Hopefully I will also do my utmost to contribute similar articles of the same topics and contents in either Tigrigna or Arabic.

Freedom for all injustice for none!

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