

Sheikh Hamid Turki: Fomenting Religious Differences for What End, for Whose Benefit?

**By
Ibrahim Mohammed Ali**

(The article below was written as response to Sheikh Hamid Turki's article of 28 July 2009 by Ibrahim Mohammed Ali before the latter was hospitalized in Damascus, Syria, for a successful cardiac operation that he underwent on 18 August 2009. Ibrahim is a veteran leader in the prolonged Eritrean struggle for national liberation and democratic governance. He remains a key figure in the Eritrean People's Party that was founded in August 2008.)



The heroic Eritrean people, who paid dearly in the 30-year struggle for national liberation, are today passing very difficult times squeezed in between two harmful conditions created by two actors.

The main actor in causing suffering and a sad situation in Eritrea is the oppressive one-man regime that imposed itself on the nation for the last two decades. The dictatorial regime has not only denied the Eritrean people their very basic human rights but also subjected them to the most brutal repression.

The other actors and partners of the dictatorial regime in causing and prolonging the suffering of our people and creating unhealthy situation are certain opposition groups bent at disrupting the internal unity and social setup of this diverse but one nation by forging their fragmented groupings and promoting division based on religion, language and ethnicity. The ruling regime and some of those in the opposition who are damaging national unity may, on the surface, appear to look different, although in reality they are two faces of the same coin. Both of them inflict huge damage to the country and its people even though there may be only slight difference in the degree of damage they cause.

The illegitimate and anti-democratic regime in Eritrea uses the presence of the religious and ethnic groups and their projects as a pretext to present itself as the guarantor of national unity and stability and thus prolong its stay in power and cover up its illegitimacy and excessive abuse of human rights that include endless imprisonments, torture, disappearances and physical liquidations.



Ibrahim Mohammed Ali (left) Chairing the Eritrean national alliance in 2001. He is flanked by Sheik Hamid Turki.

On the other hand, those forces that promote religious and ethnic alignments take as pretext the anti-national and anti-human rights actions of the absolutist regime and utilize religion for political ends. In this way - wittingly or unwittingly - they are serving the interests of the dictatorial regime by sowing seeds of disharmony in all segments of the society and by sharpening differences among national forces in the opposition. At this stage, it suffices to mention the article of 28 July 2009 that Sheikh Hamid Turki, a leading figure in the Islamic Jihad movement, authored and posted in the websites. In his article, Sheik Turki called the Eritrean People's Party (EPP) and the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP) - two mainstream actors in the current struggle for change and democracy in Eritrea - as an emerging bloc and presented his subject conclusions that can be summarized under three points.

According to him, this bloc "belongs" to and "represents" the Christian religion, culture and Tigrinia ethnic group and described Muslims in the parties as their "supporters". According to the writer, this bloc aims to impose political hegemony by strengthening itself and dominating other organizations Thirdly, Sheik Turki opined that this bloc aspires to take as its own the legacies of the EPLF and inherit power from the regime.

Naturally, Sheikh Turki and others have the right to state their views without any constraint as long as those views are presented objectively and with honesty without being carried away by biased personal feelings and unfiltered convictions. Sheikh Turki himself rejected in the introduction of his writing the dangers of reverting to the practice of basing one's judgment on wrong conclusions out of personal feelings and individual convictions, and he said such wrong conclusions repeatedly plunged the Eritrean political arena into internecine conflicts

and divisions. But when he started to describe the EDP and the EPP, Sheikh Hamid Turki took the liberty of contradicting himself.

The most surprising and dishonest part of his writing resorted to labeling other organizations of being religion-oriented. It is surprisingly shameful because Sheikh Hamid Turki is by his own choice leading a religion-based Jihad movement. I am not name-calling but stating established facts of what his movement acts on and stands for openly as a religious organization. As to EPP and EDP, these are organizations whose political programs and information outlets in no way say they are exclusively for Eritreans of a given religion or ethnicity. In the contrary, both parties possess national platforms that accommodate Eritrean Muslims and Christians. The bloc formed by these two parties (now heading towards unity) does not know itself as a bloc representing one religion or ethnicity. One can only state that it was a figment of Sheikh Turki's imagination and confusing personal and subjective judgment to label the said parties in the way Sheikh Turki characterizes them.

It is thus our right and duty to ask him from where he derived his slanted logic and conclusion. Is this the opinion of all Muslims or an odd conclusion of certain groups springing from religious biases? Does Sheikh Turki find it sufficient to describe the two parties to be "religious" because of the names of individual elements like Woldesus Ammar and Mesfin Hagos in their leaderships? If it is so, what interpretations could one give to the presence of leadership elements like Mohammed Nur Ahmed and Ismail Nada in those parties? Since Sheikh Turki could not deny that the bloc of the two parties is composed of Christians and Muslims, couldn't it be more correct to describe the grouping as a national bloc? Taking this logic, we wish to confirm to Sheikh Turki that whether it replaces the regime in power or not, the bloc formed by EDP and EPP will never fall into confessional abyss. I also take the liberty of informing all concerned that there are two solid and objective reasons why the EDP-EPP bloc will not fall into religion-based politics. The first reason is based on a guiding principle governing the two parties which are opposed to domination of Eritrean politics by a Muslim or Christian ideology. Both parties stand for a secular, democratic and constitutional state that accommodates a multi-party system of governance – and not a caretaker government backed by theocratic structures. The second reason is that this national bloc composed of Muslims and Christians will not be expected to serve the interests of only one religious or ethnic side as long as it maintains its platform on national principles and ideals. However, the insinuations by Sheikh Turki are not unexpected or surprising because we know that these allegations come from someone who rigidly sticks to the idea of dividing Eritreans on religious basis. He believes that we are of different identities and cannot live under one entity and possess and common political system. Sheikh Hamid Turki's judgment also springs from the campaigns directed against the ongoing unity process between the EDP and EPP. Likewise, his labeling of Muslims in those parties as "sheer supporters" of Christians and ethnic Tigrinians, without even taking note of their convictions and values and their right to choose without the guidance of caretaker patrons like himself, is a disdainful categorization. This language and logic can only come from someone like Sheikh Turki who lives in the dream world of taking himself to be the "patron-educator". I say, our good Sheikh: you practice what you at other times condemn.

In this manner, Sheikh Turki's diehard practice of religious differentiations serve no good purpose other than adversely affecting the relations of the confessional segments in our society. Obviously, there cannot be an Eritrean entity without harmony and peaceful co-existence of its religious segments.

Before coming to a conclusion of my writing, I take the liberty of posing a few direct questions to Sheikh Hamid Turki. For instance, I ask you Sheikh Turki if you welcome the establishment of organizations that have religious character like yours? And don't you believe that allowing religious mobilizations in a country with multi-religious beliefs would foment religious conflicts? What is the benefit that Eritrea in general and Eritrean Muslims in particular can obtain by fueling religious rivalries and tensions? Don't you think we can learn a lesson from the consequences of religious fundamentalism and the use of religion for political ends that caused havoc to the peoples of Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and other Islamic and non-Islamic societies? If the present and future generations of Eritrean Muslims are opposed to a system that marginalizes them, don't you see that it is appropriate for them to struggle against such a system in close harmony and unity with other compatriots under national organizations? If the objective is to correct mistakes, it is not appropriate to organize oneself on religious mobilization and religious message to remove an oppressive regime that you accuse to be based on religion; it would be interpreted that you are working to replace that religious entity by your own religious structure. This would mean the current oppressive system will be replaced by an oppressive Islamic system. In such a situation, the Christians would declare their own Jihad to get rid of Islamic oppression – a vicious cycle of conflicts.

In conclusion, I wish to remind Sheikh Turki and others that, due to health reasons, I have not been that involved in the political tasks of the ELF-RC and its successor EPP for the last five years. As such, the contents of this article are my personal views and have nothing to do with the party. They emanate from my sincere concern for Eritrean national unity, and my deep convictions in the truism that in today's world, it is impossible to build states based on one religion or one ethnic belonging. Our epoch is one that allows the formation of states that accommodate diverse religious and cultural identities.

Finally, I wish that Sheikh Turki uses his writing skills not in fomenting hatred, conflict and fragmentation, but work towards promoting reconciliation, mutual respect, acceptance and tolerance. I also wish to remind readers that I am mindful of the bitterness caused to our people by the excessive abuses meted out against our people by the Isayas regime.