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The Eritrean – Eritrean Dialogue Challenges and Perspectives
Workshop

Paper:

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Challenges and Perspectives

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Preface:

The term dialogue is an inclusive term that means among other meanings: argument and discussion; dialogue is meant to exchange talks and discourse between two sides, but not necessarily to have something that indicates dispute between those sides.

The Eritrean – Eritrean Dialogue during the Political and Military Struggle

The term dialogue had been circulating in the Eritrean arena throughout the various phases of the political struggle as well as the war of liberation. Some worth mentioning dialogue models during the early phases of the Eritrean struggle were the attempts of the Islamic League and the Unionist Party on coming up with an alternative platform for the national independence,

which was adopted by the Islamic League and the Federal Unification with Ethiopia, which was adopted by the Unionist Party. The alternative platform was to put Eritrea under British trusteeship; however, the two parties did not agree on this idea.

Moreover, some discussions took place among the Eritrean Liberation Front, Popular Liberation Forces and the Eritrean Popular Liberation Front during the 1970s after waging vicious civil war among themselves in which each side tried to impose control on the ground following the exclusion of the others.

It is known that the bilateral dialogues between the two main factions of the time (the Eritrean Liberation Front and the Eritrean Popular Liberation Front) were based on the concept of the unity of progressive forces; an indication to the fact that both fronts were adopting Marxism under the leadership of the Eritrean Labor Party (ELF) and the People's Party (EPLF). These dialogues did not bear any positive outcome, despite attempts by the regime of Nimayri to sponsor and encourage them, because they were a sort of tactics that lacked credibility of the interlocutors.

The Eritrean arena witnessed afterwards dialogues, which were sponsored by the Arab League, such as the dialogues among the Eritrean Liberation Front; the Eritrean Popular Liberation Front, Eritrean Liberation Front-Revolutionary Committee and the Eritrean Liberation Front – Popular Liberation Forces. These dialogues brought about an agreement known as Tunisia Accord; however this accord did not see the light especially as it coincided with fierce battles that were going on between the ELF and EPLF. These battles ended with military defeat of ELF which was divided into several factions that were named ELF.

Following the failure of the Tunisia Accord; the ELF factions under the leadership of Abdullah Idris, ELF the Revolutionary Committee under the leadership of Abdulgadir Jailani and ELF the Popular Liberation Forces under the leadership of Osman Saleh Sabe engaged in dialogues under the sponsorship of Saudi Arabia and Sudan. These dialogues led to the emergence of what was known as the Eritrean Liberation Front - the United Organization. However, that experience relapsed because of differences led to its split into two parties under the Eritrean Liberation Front - the National Council under the leadership of Abdullah Idris and the Eritrean Liberation Front - the United Organization under the leadership of Osman Saleh Sabe.

And then the Eritrean Liberation Front of Abdullah Idris divided into two parts; the one under the leadership of Abdullah Idris and the other under the leadership of Abdulgadir Jailani, while the United Organization remained united under the leadership of Osman Saleh Sabe.

Post Independence Dialogue:

After the departure of the Ethiopian occupation forces in 1991 from Eritrea; and based on the belief that liberation has been achieved through the contributions of all national forces during the years of armed struggle; four Eritrean opposition organizations: the ELF, ELF the National Council , ELF the United Organization, the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement issued a memorandum of political declaration. The memorandum called on the EPLF to overcome differences that existed during the period of armed struggle among the Eritrean factions and to head towards comprehensive national reconciliation that would bring about formation of an interim government of national unity pending appropriate conditions for the establishment of constitutional government that emerge from a democratic practice and that would reflect the will of the Eritrean people. (It is worth noting that the ELF- the Revolutionary Council boycotted the meetings of the four organizations that had issued the memo opposing the participation of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement in the meeting). However, the EPLF did not respond to the call and announced that it did not recognize the existence of other political organizations in the Eritrean arena. On the martyrs' day, on June 20, 1992; the Eritrean President announced his refusal to recognize others and asked the leadership of the organizations to enter individually to the country. Based on this principle; the ruling EPLF went on the road to devote its totalitarian regime that shackled all forms of fundamental freedoms.

Dialogue at the Opposition Level:

In the context of strengthening the efforts of the Eritrean opposition factions to resist the dictatorship regime; the Eritrean opposition arena has witnessed a series of dialogues that resulted in the establishment of the following combinations at different stages: -

1. The Eritrean Alliance in 1996; and it was an alliance in the form of the United National Front since its constituent organizations

- maintained their autonomy. It had brought together ELF the National Council, the ELF and the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement.
2. The assembly of the Eritrean national forces in 1999, and it brought together the three organizations that formed the above mentioned Eritrean Alliance, in addition to other organizations and a national figure who is Mr. Mohammad Saeed Brahtu. In 2002 the assembly developed and was named the Eritrean National Alliance. The Democratic Organization of Red Sea Afar and the Eritrean Cooperation Parties joined the Alliance.
 3. In 2004 the organizations of ELF the Revolutionary Council, the Eritrean Democratic Party, the Eritrean Popular Movement joined the Alliance and again the name was changed to the Eritrean Democratic Alliance. In February 2007 the Alliance split into two blocks; but each bloc holding the same name.

Unification Experiences:

The Eritrean opposition arena has witnessed two experiences of unification which based on similarity of programs and political premises. These experiences represented in the integration between ELF and the ELF the National Council in 2000 and the unification that has merged the National Congress, the Eritrean Popular Movement and the Eritrean Revolutionary Democratic Front under the name of the National Salvation Front.

Dialogue between the Government and the Opposition:

There has been no dialogue between the opposition and the government as a result of the government's attitude of refusing to recognize the existence of Eritrean opposition. The Eritrean State confronted efforts of Eritrea's friends with categorical rejection for any attempt to persuade it by the importance of dialogue with its opponents, while opposition factions affirmed firm positions to enter into serious dialogue with the government under the sponsorship of mediators acceptable to both sides in order to find a peaceful settlement to the political crisis in Eritrea.

Despite the slogan of dialogue among the political forces has been there for more than half a century; however, the issue of national unity in Eritrea is still facing major challenges, especially after the experience of a dictatorial regime which has deepened the crisis of trust between the components of the Eritrean people. The political forces should engage in a political dialogue

that addresses critical issues such as religion, identity, democratic transformation and mechanisms of governance which would ensure peaceful coexistence among the components of the Eritrean people.

The Eritrean – Eritrean dialogue, Multiple Molds and Poor Results

Despite multiplicity of templates of national dialogue which are known through historical experiences of humanity, it is difficult to define the appropriate mold that fit the Eritrean case at this time. The difficulty to figure out a suitable mold is driven by some significant observations, which we will try to mention some of them:-

- The expected parties of the dialogue at this stage in its most formations – organizational or political – are an extension of an earlier stage which is the stage of the revolution, whereby the EPLF as a school and as an organization represents key party in the expected dialogue, as well as the ELF through its historical experience and political school represents another political party, noting some new directions here and there without undermining the basic hypothesis.
- There were dialogues among these components as factions and political schools, but these dialogues have not been, so far, subjected to systematic and objective evaluation, and this remains a very significant issue for building up pillars for upcoming dialogue.
- Despite the unity of purpose and motivation during the period of armed struggle, which was liberation of the country and expulsion of the colonizer, and the agreement on the principal means; and that was the means of armed struggle until victory and liberation of the country; however, the dialogue did not meet the desired objectives at any of its historical stages. There is a fact that can not be denied in some of these stages: the presence of progress and theoretical breakthroughs; and it is a point not in favor of dialogue at this stage following the divergence in goals and multiplicity of means.
- Assuming that the government is one side and the opposition is another side at this stage with the non-existence of any tangible experiences in this regard, the government certainly is not a single entity as well as the opposition. Hence the dialogue among the components of each camp is not a motivating experience. A note worth mentioning here is the presence of dialogue in the opposition camp. However, it is not up-to- the historical experience and the challenges ahead. Meanwhile, we find a great deal of atrophy in the

- experience of dialogue within the government, and all the attempts had not only a disappointing ends but also tragic in its several phases.
- Dialogue over historical experiences results from the feeling of the parties the pressure of a problem and the need to overcome it; a thing which has not been achieved yet, although there were varying degrees between the two blocs on one hand, and the components of each bloc separately on the other hand.

Prospective of the Eritrean – Eritrean Dialogue

The above mentioned observations are general introductions which would help us in trying to understand the future of the Eritrean-Eritrean dialogue, particularly in its principal dimension – dialogue between the government and the opposition. Certainly this dialogue is, so far, hypothetical dialogue; and this hypothesis stems from the need of everyone for dialogue with the existence of deeply-rooted crisis in the Eritrean political arena. All the Eritrean political powers realize this fact, but they differ in its causes, at the same time, these powers shortens the problem in a way that could help them avoid responsibility, and afterwards justify non- initiating to open a page of real handling which starts with dialogue. The Eritrean government assumes that the problem is an international avidities–Ethiopian and American- at this stage, and that the opposition is not more than one of the tools used by these international powers, while the opposition believes that the problem lies in the regime and its composition as well as defective vision, and that the problem is resolved with the demise of the regime. These assumptions are not void of some truth, but they are not the whole truth. Thus the appropriate approach, in our estimation, is recognizing the crisis and identifying its factual causes. For example the government must recognize that there is deep internal crisis which resulted by its policies. This is because the government is originally one of the revolution factions that did not recognize other and also did not entertain the idea of seeking any constitutional legitimacy, especially after the last Eritrean –Ethiopian war (1998 -2000).

The opposition also must recognize that there are international and regional avidities, and that it must not be instruments for others. These keys, undoubtedly, hold numerous intertwined details upon which significant attitudes and commitments are built. Negotiating is a complicated process which depends on persuasion on the one hand and pressure on the other. Pressure can practiced only through

certain factors represented in the availability of adequate information to the interlocutor and possession of hidden cards to bring out in the right time, but the most important thing in the process of dialogue and negotiation is the capability to present concessions and alternatives. The success of dialogue depends on the magnitude of concessions that could be made by the parties; however, concessions always come as a result of weakness or awareness of the problem. Hence the parties always seek to improve their negotiating positions by imposing some facts on the ground and principles in the conscience.

In this regard; the expected sides of dialogue in Eritrea – the government and the opposition - have the elements of success of the dialogue, as both sides have strengths and weaknesses, and this is very important issue because this forms a kind of balance.

Strengths of the Government:

- A. The government enjoys the international recognition, and it has diplomatic representation and external relations at the world level.
- B. The government controls the force on the ground, the army and security in addition to the civil service.
- C. The government possesses more powerful and organized media than the opposition.
- D. The government exists on the ground of the country while the effectiveness of the opposition is outside the battlefield.

Weaknesses of the Government

- A. Non-existence of constitutional legitimacy to prop up the government and the absence of law and justice constituents.
- B. Deteriorated economic and security situation.
- C. Direct regional threat and indirect international threat.
- D. Great hatred by all sectors of the people.
- E. Non-existence of qualified cadre in all government utilities, including senior and constitutional positions.
- F. Non-existence of strategic planning in addition to centralization of the state at the disposal of the president, an issue which makes the others either people of interest or scared, but not convinced.
- G. Political, financial and moral corruption that has beaten all sectors of country.

Strengths of the Opposition

The most important points of strength of the opposition is playing on the weaknesses of the government and criticizing these weaknesses and in presenting theoretical alternatives without holding political or moral responsibility for provision of the alternatives as long as it is outside the government. The opposition also could bring up concepts of democracy, human rights and good governance that have been internationally acceptable.

Weaknesses of the Opposition

- A. Continuing differences among factions of the opposition, which bears in some of its features the historical differences.
- B. Weakness of the opposition on the ground and being centralized in abroad.
- C. Absence of international relations except only in very limited context.
- D. Weakness of the mobilization and organizational mechanisms of the opposition to deal with the people.
- E. Lack of planning in its performance and meager information about its opponent for its presence outside the country.
- F. Great shortage leadership and the lack of popular charismatic leaders.

The Eritrean – Eritrean Dialogue, Living Notion but Absent Action

The two would be dialoguing parties have points of strength and weakness to hold a dialogue; however the supposed dialogue has never taken place yet. Among the various factors that hindered the occurrence of such a dialogue, the following factors would be worth mentioning.

- A. The decision-making mentality of the country, the EPLF, has been known over the course of its history for an exclusionary approach. The results of the referendum for independence which demonstrated an Eritrean consensus was a historical opportunity for national reconciliation, and so did the Eritrean-Ethiopian war in 1998 along other opportunities the EPLF downplayed.
- B. Weakness of the opposition in all aspects: politics, military, media, diplomacy, and organization. It has never posed a day a threat to the government; and hence the opposition, according to the government's

- assumptions, has never caused a practical pressure which necessitated neither conducting a dialogue nor offering concessions.
- C. The Eritrean-Ethiopian war provided the regime an opportunity for finding justifications for continuation, and for suspending the constitution. Besides, the repercussion of the last war with Ethiopia made the regime to get ride of potential influential figures from within the EPLF.
 - D. Lack of strategic visions for the active regional actors; and hence following a reactionary approach while dealing with either the Eritrean government or the opposition.
 - E. Eritrea has never become a priority in international interests. If the case were the other way round, the international powers would search for factors of stability of the state through imposing compromises and offering concessions.

Opportunities for dialogue and its success

There are still opportunities of conducting an Eritrean – Eritrean dialogue as long as the political problem exists; and the possibilities for the success of such dialogue on the theoretical level are also very high. However on the practical level initiating a dialogue is beyond a fantasy putting aside its chances of success. Perhaps this is the puzzling point in the Eritrean problem.

The success of any dialogue relies on intersecting opportunities and antagonism for either party. These could be the expected agenda of either party-the government and the opposition- on the round table.

Agenda of the opposition

The opposition is expected to project, following the procedural term achieved by initiating a dialogue. This procedural term is recognition of the government and the presence of a mediator acceptable to both parties: -

- A. Releasing of prisoners and lifting of grievances through agreed upon mechanisms.
- B. Transferring to a democratic system and conducting of internationally monitored fair elections.
- C. There should be a transitional government (of national unity) and transitional constitution to arrange for this.

- D. Balanced development programme that embodies an affirmative approach for the most affected regions.
- E. Repatriation of refugees to their areas along with their integration into the society in coordination with the international community.

Agenda of the government

The government is expected to bring up, in the negotiations, the following points:

- A. Recognition of the significant role played by the EPLF in the liberation of the country and its administration and protection of the sovereignty of the country as well as resources.
- B. A clear-cut stance of the opposition regarding the verdict of border demarcation as well as concerning the Ethiopian position on this issue.
- C. Maintaining the existing institutions and working through them; and hence opening a new page without signaling judiciary trials or prosecutions.
- D. There might be demands to keep the president as a head of the transitional government.

A careful reading for the thorough projected agenda could apparently tell the possibility of striking an agreement. Despite a discrepancy in form that appears between the articles of the agendas, however they are not divergent to a degree they could be described as parallels and impossible to intersect. For instance, fear from external greed and regional interventions are shared obsessions between the opposition and the government as well as the position concerning the border demarcation decision between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the necessity to be committed it. This makes clear that the problem lies in initiating a dialogue; and hence looking for conducting a dialogue has become an end at this time without seeking the assumptions of its success or not. The procedural stipulations remain the appropriate approach; and this approach is not for the interest of either party but for the interests of dialogue. These stipulations are reciprocal recognition and an appropriate mediator.

Summary:

The Eritrean-Eritrean dialogues, with Eritrean will, is unexpected due to factors that have been discussed in details. These factors include

psychological, historical and political factors in addition to reciprocal mistrust. It seems apparently clear that the dialogue could succeed provided it is held on an appropriate forum despite the intersection in the projected agendas. Platforms and mediators should usually meet the appropriate conditions including an ability to influence the dialoguing parties and to have interests in the success of the dialogue. Therefore, this paper, in conclusion, proposes that the Sudan, for instance, with Arab support (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) is the suitable platform for conducting the dialogue between the two sides.

Incidents have drawn the Sudanese - Eritrean relations not only towards more rapprochements, but also towards coming up with common positions regarding decisive issues; a matter which necessitates finding inclusive solutions that transcend the territorial border of each country. Thus each of the two countries is concerned, at this time, about the stability of the other for their own interest. This is what Eritrea is trying to implement through its mediations in issues of Eastern Sudan and Darfur. Likewise, the Sudan is called for to search for the factors of stability in Eritrea; and that would be a political solution for the problem of Eritrea. Ethiopia also possesses significant keys for stability of Eritrea and formation of its future because of the geopolitical weight it enjoys. Moreover, Sudan could also contribute in defusing the tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia owing to its balanced relations with both countries while maintaining, in a balanced manner, the interests of the two countries on one side and the interests of the Eritrean government and opposition on the other. Sudan could also reduce, depending on the mutual trust between the two countries, the Ethiopian fears regarding this dialogue.

According to the existing facts, the political stability in Eritrea is in need of something greater than reconciliation between the regime and the opposition, even if that reconciliation is the most important element. Because of the weakness that the opposition is suffering; some people might think that this opposition is not qualified, at this time, to engage in such a dialogue. However, no matter how weak is the Eritrean opposition in the government's point of view; this opposition has just demands and even if it suffers several internal factors related to its historical and political make up in addition to external factors; mostly the United States of America's desire of the continuation of the regime since there is no alternative; and so that to avoid the collapse the state like what has happened in Somalia, an issue which increases fears against the spread of terrorism. Consequently, there is

a suitable opportunity for Sudan to make use of its relations with these powers to take a decision to launch more effective and influential step, and that is a national Eritrean-Eritrean dialogue.

Conclusion

In conclusion we would like to remind the honorable audience that this paper was prepared for hypothetical project which has not yet appeared, at the same time, the non-existence of objective reasons for not conducting this dialogue, despite existence of the collective interest in such a dialogue and its success. Therefore, seeking other causes and factors, which are not necessarily logical, becomes an issue which deserves exerting efforts; perhaps from that angle the non-existent fact can be figured out.