

Never miss what Issaias Afeworki cannot do

By Hailu Kassa

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One would be forgiven for choosing to discuss the modern day Ethiopian Idol Show or our traditional local brew varieties which are more of a benefit to our ordinary people than any of the leaders we have had over the last four decades. Unlike the soothingly feel-good and entertaining effect of these stuffs regardless to the political atmosphere of a given day, our tyrants torment while they are at it and leave a devastated nation in their wake when they go down. As such they do not make for a comfortable topic of discussion. Based on their aspirations to greatness, we can put leaders into three major categories.

The truly great ones measure their own greatness by what they achieve for the people they stand to lead in terms of their wellbeing, prosperity and dignity. May be we need to look for these types elsewhere since we cannot confidently boast of having one in our modern history. Whereas the not so great ones gauge their own greatness in terms of the muscle they would be able to flex as they carelessly what befalls the people and the country. The best example for this type should be none other than our former tyrant who is busy hiding in Harare – Col. Mengistu Hailemariam. In the third category are the very rare ones in that they are akin to suicide-bombers such as the ones ruling our country for the last 24 years. These ones sit in their own special class as they seem to be determined to rule forever or go down with the entire nation if they will have to go. Though we are not sure where we will go from here, we can certainly say how we have never been blessed by good leaders so far.

The Woyanes threw us away pitting each one of us against the other as they went on the business of enriching themselves and their cronies by ‘burgling and vandalising’ the nation as they trumpet the vacuous development miracle they have materialised in our land in spite of over a million citizens going begging on the streets of our cities. We have not disappointed them as we left them to it and went on making our miserable noises against each other over the last two decades. More unfortunately though, even now as we talk of taking them on seriously, we seem to be in no better shape than we have originally started when it comes to our divisions and differences. That needs to change and change now, if any meaningful success is to be scored against the Woyane’s ethnocentric hegemony and for a better future in a truly democratic state that treats all of us equally and fairly as citizens of one nation.

Back to the main point: following the ESAT journalists’ trip to Asmara in January 2015 and their subsequent interview with President Issaias Afeworki of Eritrea (PIA) no wonder we are being entertained by a flurry of opinions given how we stand divided both as Ethiopians and as Eritreans.

While some argue in support of the move taken by Arbegnoch-G7 to struggle against the TPLF junta in alliance with the government of Eritrea, others express their scepticism by cautioning against the move or rather by disparaging it; not to mention those who openly say they are not in any of it - namely the Oromo camp though one can hardly see the wisdom that informs their choice. The cynics base their concern on the shrewd and unpredictable personality of the Eritrean strongman as the optimists seem to believe in his change of heart and his presumed realization of the need for future coexistence and cooperation between the people of Eritrea and the wider Ethiopian public.

No one can claim to hold a brief for the Eritrean president since it is him and him alone with his God who knows what he really thinks behind his public posture. But one can easily see how both the sceptics and optimists miss to see the things PIA has no control over or what he cannot do owing to circumstances beyond his control. It is natural and moral for any self-respecting human being to take on the role and responsibility of leadership to inspire and lead his/her subjects towards freedom, prosperity, peace and stability with a durable solution to conflict and hope. Besides this, the issue of legacy always remains at stake for individuals who have had the historic opportunity of rising to the position of influence on the wider public and national lives that they would hope to leave behind with their names pegged on it as a great achievement to be adored and celebrated by generations to come.

PIA had not disappointed when he took the role of leadership and shouldered it earning himself the respect and admiration of Eritreans all along for the better part of their 30 years struggle for independence which he delivered in 1991. Though issues surrounding his rein after the independence are different matters altogether as it saw Eritreans being divided in their view of him with some becoming his die-hard supporters while others are proving to be his deadly enemies. Having achieved independence the fact of peace and stability vis-à-vis the most crucial neighbour- Ethiopia - remains open to questions after one deadly war on his watch that remains technically unfinished. The war had to come and pass due to dishonest deals cut behind the back of the public between former comrades-in-arms - now the worst of foes - TPLF and Shabia - both before and after independence in the lead up to the breaking out of the war in 1998.

Here is a man who is in his late 60s fast moving out of his prime time when it comes to age. Obviously, two major factors remain beyond his control to deny him the luxury of business as usual. First and foremost, time is very much out of his control or nearly so if he really means to pass on with a legacy worth the name of a real great man he surely wishes to be. And there is no any better legacy for him, as things stand today, than leaving Eritreans in peace and stability vis-à-vis Ethiopia far from the undesirable situation of locked-horns that left Eritrean youths see no any better hope than training to carry guns or leaving their country in droves. Though one may not blame PIA for that, once things started going to wire, considering how the Ethiopian tyrants wield a massive force against tiny Eritrea

for which he has no alternative except drawing on what Eritrea can offer to hold against the by far bigger monster across the border.

Secondly, when it comes to the vast majority, what people think and do is beyond his control. If he hopes to have any control over it for a desirable end and a legacy to his name, the only means left to him is play along their will. And the will of the majority both from the Eritrean and Ethiopian side seems to be in favour of working together towards a future that can promise a durable friendliness and harmonious coexistence in any capacity with the wilfully divisive, obsessively exclusionist, arrogantly belligerent and kleptocratically expansionist TPLF out of the picture.

In his own words during his interview with the ESAT reporters, “- -that is why I say armies, military, capability, this and that without the support of any community or without the support of population, you never achieve any goal - -”. It is safe to assume that a man who says this cannot miss how any more dragging of the feet and playing dishonest and unproductive political games can eventually be counterproductive as it prolongs the suffering of the people only to gradually strain and drain his support base to render him incapable of achieving whatever goal he has set himself. Though we only hope and pray the goal cannot be anything less than what will enable the people of both countries to coexist with love and affection without the need of one brandishing gun against the other.

From his interview what stood out for attention was his unwillingness to accept responsibility or his failure to directly say, sorry, we bear our share of responsibility for what has come to pass over the last 40 years between the people of both countries. If truth is to be told all frontrunners in our political landscape starting from Derg down the road to where we stand today have their portion of responsibilities to shoulder, out of which PIA and the party he leads – Shabia - should bear the lion’s share. Yet, fixation on the past is not symptomatic of any healthy society. Provided that PIA plays a positive role with the highest standard of HONESTY expected of a statesman to see the people to the Promised Land – a future in harmonious coexistence with love and dignity. With that in place, one can easily imagine how people will turn around, including his opponents, and hail him as an icon and a real great man. So the ball rests in his court as the choice remains his to take.

With all said and done, I believe everyone would agree with him as I do when he said, “- - - in spite of the pretention of the Woyane, they represent the people of Tigray, now the situation they have created, it is a small group , corrupt group that has used the name of the Tigres and created a rift between the people of Tigray and other peoples - - -” I tend to agree with him because what we face across the board is not so much a tribal issue as it looks on the surface, rather it is a handful of unscrupulous individuals

busy enriching themselves and lining their pockets by plundering national resources as their brainwashed and misled fellow tribes' men stand guard to enable them.

Hence the need for all to join hands to correct the distortion he repeatedly raised in his interviews between the Eritrean and Ethiopian people as well as among Ethiopian communities with our eyes set on the future benefit of our harmonious coexistence for prosperity, peace and stability. Yet, the most unfortunate thing central to our ethno-centric politics manifests itself in the attitudes of some of the Tigre elites who seem to subtly advise for the TPLF to be left alone until 'nature takes its course' (which probably means until they 'collapse by themselves' without anyone needing to give them a push) simply because they have the power of the gun, in spite of the excesses and injustices they perpetrate and commit every single day.

Though Eritreans are as divided in their opinion as are Ethiopians towards the alliance between PIA's government and the Ethiopian opposition forces, one encouraging response stood out for whoever noticed. And that is the fact that Ethiopians and Eritreans seem to understand the need for embracing each other as they realize the benefit of a concerted effort with the view to the future cooperation between the people of both countries with lasting peace and stability in the horn as a favoured long term strategy. In light of this, anyone who underestimates the need for a positive change in Ethiopia should be missing the bigger picture. Ethiopia being such a massive country in the region anything within her border has the potential of reaching out farther and influencing other neighbouring countries accordingly. That could either be directly as in the war with Eritrea or by the way of an irresponsible meddling role played by her dictators to do proxy jobs under the guise of peace-keeping as in Somalia and elsewhere or in the capacity of a mediator with a predetermined vested interest in an anticipated outcome as in the case with South Sudan.

As we all know, the South Sudanese peace process has gone on-and-off at its disputed venue in Addis Ababa over the last two years without making any meaningful headway. Unfortunately, a fresh clash seems to have started as I write this article. Salva Keir has been asking for the venue to be moved to Kenya or Tanzania accusing Ethiopia, allied with Sudan, of clandestinely working on the side of the opposition leader, Dr Riak Machar. This is to be expected with a government in Ethiopia that feels perpetually insecure as it sees the need of manipulating issues of its neighbours to rebuff and ward off any potential threat from the opposition. So no wonder, Dr. Riak Machar comes handy for choice given the Nuer tribe on the Ethiopian side of the border - the same tribe constituting Machar's mass base in South Sudan. All this dirty tactic is set to change with a government in Ethiopia that has confidence in its mass base and popularity unlike TPLF that hangs on to power only by the force of the gun. This evidently attests to the benefit of a positive change in Ethiopia for the next door neighbouring countries and far beyond, enough to convince the detractors of President Issaias Afeworki's alliance with Ethiopian opposition forces.

Finally, first we were divided as ethnic groups before we found our self further polarised within our respective communities literally everywhere we look. Individuals with hard-line extreme views have held sway on our politics long enough leading us only to conflicts and failures, now it time the forces of good from all sides of the divide start pulling in the same direction wisely focusing on the greater common good without dwelling much on the past. Our politics should move out of divisive cultures that characterised it for as long as we can remember by shunning the tendency of focusing on what makes us different since that approach has not only remained unproductive but also failed miserably and evidently as it stands out for the freedom it deprives and the refugees it produces. We have gone our separate ways with a great cost, yet any failure to chart a way of getting along constructively in any capacity either as people of one nation or as friendly neighbours is even likely to be at a much higher cost.