

## **From EDA to Commission to the Intellectuals, What is Next?**

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"Eritrean intellectuals, professionals, and other concerned individuals" held a seminar at the behest of the Ethiopian regime from September 6 to 10, 2011 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. First, it is proper to point that only a small number of Eritrean 'intellectuals' attended the seminar. I note this to make obvious the importance of not lumping Eritrean intellectuals together in one basket. This will help us to see clearly that the Ethiopian sponsored 'Eritrean intellectuals' seminar does not owe the support or the blessing of the vast majority of Eritrean intellectuals.

Now, the decision to hold the seminar was Ethiopian government's own. It initiated it; it set up the agenda; it covered the cost of travel and logistics; it picked the invitees. This scheme demonstrates in many ways that it is not a new one. It has been in the making for years by Ethiopian government, in a dangerous bid to shape the Eritrean opposition by slicing it into irrelevant and incapable groups and achieving its own agenda in Eritrea. <http://teleal.asmarino.com/home/44-press-release/1171-the-addis-ababa-statement-of-eritrean-intellectuals-professionals-and-other-interested-individuals>.

Understanding Meles regime's agenda on Eritrea requires a review not only of the latest seminar of the Eritrean 'intellectuals' but of the 'national conference' that occurred on August 2010. On August 2010, the Ethiopian regime took ownership and organized the so-called 'national conference' of Eritreans in Diaspora that split the Eritrean opposition in two camps. The conference was embraced by EDA, and rejected by the EPDP and the vast majority of Eritrean Diaspora on the ground that it lacked independence, representation, inclusiveness, and a framework for a successful strategy. As predicted, the conference ended up in failure, but instead of correcting the mistake, it was decided to hold another 'national congress as a face saving – with the creation of a bubble commission tasked to facilitate the planned congress.

In between August 2010 and now, the Ethiopian sponsored commission failed virtually on all of its tasks, from organizing itself to convincing the Eritrean Diaspora and to getting recognition as a legitimate body among the Eritrean Diaspora. Such a sweeping failure of the commission drove Meles regime to convene a seminar of 'Eritrean intellectuals' and salvage the project from a total collapse. Such a seminar is not only to resuscitate Ethiopia's belligerent policy on Eritrea, but also to legitimize it. But Meles regime is not salvaging anything; it is inflaming everything between the two countries.

The fact is when the Meles regime announced the seminar of 'Eritrean intellectuals', there was no change on its policy. When it kept the agenda secret, it was nothing out of the ordinary.

When it sent out its special emissary Mr. Simon Bereket to chair the meeting/seminars, it was not an advancement of collaboration but a total expansion of ownership over the Eritrean opposition. The political implication of this is obvious: that Meles regime is dangerously entrenched in its belligerent policies against Eritrea anywhere anytime within its reach and plunge Eritrea into bloodshed, and I am not sure if the seminar uncovered such policy intricacies.

I am sure many of us read the statement issued by our 'intellectuals' at the end of their seminar (see above link). One thing that intrigued me was the "intellectuals' call for democracy and freedom in Eritrea behind a man who clearly demonstrated a total disrespect for international laws and norms when he invaded Somalia in 2006 and caused the country to descend into sectarian turmoil. Don't our intellectuals see that the invasion of Somalia by Meles regime and the subsequent plight of its citizens resonate among Eritreans and worry that they might face the same destiny if Meles regime set its feet on Eritrea? Do the seminar participants really think if the PFDJ regime falls, an Ethiopian sponsored struggle will bring freedom in Eritrea? Does it take a foreign dictator to secure Eritrean people's freedom and democracy? Why are these intellectuals falling into the politics of EDA?

It is an amazing insight to see the power and persuasion modus operandi our 'intellectuals' used to describe the situation in Eritrea and why it is the right choice to embrace Meles regime's continued ownership of the struggle of the Eritrean people:

### **Eritrean People are too weak to remove the PFDJ argument**

The prevailing campaign is Eritrean people are too weak to remove the PFDJ regime. We are too weak to administer the opposition. Therefore, it is much preferable to bring a former colonial power to liberate Eritrea from the PFDJ's misrule. As much as this is antithetical to the traditional role of 'intellectual community', I am not sure where this conviction comes, but what I know is this is a proposal alien to the people of Eritrea. The truth is when did they ask Eritrean people and how did they find out. When did they put this matter to a vote?

My question is as intellectuals have they ever collectively or individually made public efforts to model a strategic solution needed to fight the PFDJ regime? What do these intellectuals know about the Eritrean people? And how much do they know? Time will tell. But the fact remains that Eritrean people did not say they are too weak to fight the PFDJ misrule; it is the Addis Ababa seminar 'intellectuals' who decided to put this in the mouth of Eritrean people. What we heard is narrating the injustices being meted on the Eritrean people in a very sensational fashion to justify Ethiopia's takeover of our affairs. Yes, Eritrean people are under tyranny and they need justice and democracy, but the Addis Ababa seminar 'intellectuals' cannot play to those longing behind Meles regime. Doing so would mean sinking into denying Eritrean people their

fundamental right to own the struggle against the PFDJ regime and by extension their sovereign right to determine how they should shape their future destiny.

Yet, the 'intellectuals' who attended the seminar entirely dismissed the great principle of empowerment, which can result only from connecting and mobilizing Eritrean people around the opposition and steering the struggle towards creating a sustainable system of democracy in our country. They do not seem to realize that empowerment and participation of Eritrean people is fundamental to any democratic discourse in our country. I admit this is an arduous task that requires skill and knowledge, but that is what intellectuals are supposed to do. In my opinion, they have not done that.

They need to ask themselves if the actions they have taken in their Addis Ababa seminar reflects the depth of their grasp on the Eritrean situation. Do they really believe their actions in Addis Ababa encourage and make Eritrean people confident about their nation's future? The answer is no. I believe our intellectuals had it all wrong. Instead of assessing the opposition flaws and ineptness that would make much easier for Eritrean people to empower themselves and rally for the cause of freedom and democracy on Eritrean terms, they added more damage to it by embracing Meles regime's prescribed policy as a cornerstone of Eritrean people's struggle. May be they forget that the defiance of foreign power has been the history of Eritrean people and nothing has changed. The fact is the struggle for democracy is in the hearts and minds of the Eritrean people. Yes, people create revolution and change. Yet, our intellectuals of the Addis Ababa seminar failed to see that, hence their endeavor is a nonstarter. The EDA leadership has tried it in the past. It did not work.

### **The Strategic Alliance**

The Eritrean intellectuals in the Addis Ababa seminar also entered into a quandary of "strategic alliance with Ethiopia", which would be hard to extricate from it if it is materialized as planned. The rationale behind this 'strategic alliance' is that both Eritrean people and Meles regime have the same enemy, interest, and goal – defeating the PFDJ regime. The underlying problem is that both sides do not have the same interest, enemy, and/or goals for the following reasons: The struggle of Eritrean people is to remove the PFDJ regime as a tyrannical system in all of its aspects and install democracy and justice. The strategic goal of Meles regime is a "regime change" in Eritrea, which is fundamentally opposed to the interest of Eritrean people. This opposite interest offers how this 'strategic alliance' is flawed to the ground, not to mention that the strategic alliance is entered between two unequal partners in which one partner does not have any leverage to advance its interest. In this case, the Eritrean intellectuals do not have the force and means as a counterweight to Meles' heavy push in the game.

After all, they have gone to the Addis Ababa seminar on Meles regime's terms. The seminar was never on terms that the intellectuals initiated and planned. From this perspective, the strategic alliance argument with Ethiopia does not hold water. More important, in delving into such an intractable strategy, our scholars and at the risk of compromising their intellectual integrity have triggered Eritrean people's anger and opposition, adding more alienation of the Eritrean people from the struggle for democracy. Such pictures will also justify the long-held legitimate suspicion of Eritrean people on Meles regime, including on the EDA leadership.

### **The Skeptics politics**

Then, the seminar statement addressed what it calls the "Eritrean skeptics" as a necessary step to appease Meles regime. The statement assumes there is a conspiracy theory among Eritreans that subscribes to the view that Ethiopia is a threat to the Eritrean independence and sovereignty. The statement tries to appeal to those Eritrean skeptics not to hold any questions or doubts on Meles regime. What our group of intellectuals missed out, or brushed off aside is that the threat of Ethiopia is real and is not based on suspicion or skepticism. For example, the prime minister of Ethiopia publicly announced back in March 2011 that its government "will work towards changing Eritrea's policy or its government." If this is not a strong link between Ethiopia's aggressive policy and skepticism of Eritreans, then what it is? The skepticism is not a pretext, as our scholars would like us to believe; it represents the actual reading of Ethiopia's policy position towards Eritrea. Therefore, for this and other reasons, the 'skeptics alert' injected into the seminar statement by our intellectuals provide no support; it is untrue, and it is misleading politics intended to downplay Ethiopia's long-held threat to Eritrea. For example, if the PFDJ regime declared regime change in Ethiopia, would our Addis Ababa seminar intellectuals accept it?

### **Ethiopia accepts border ruling**

In reading the statement, one would easily note how much our scholars are swayed by Ethiopia's various positions/policies. For example, consider the statement that says ***"Appreciated and valued the Ethiopian Government's commitment in very clear terms to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Eritrea and its emphasis that it has accepted the border ruling of 2002 in writing to the Secretary General of the UN. The Ethiopian Government is ready to demarcate the border through dialogue so that both peoples will enjoy lasting peace."*** This statement is bizarre to say the least and thoroughly uninformed at best. But, this is not the first time Meles regime has tried to distort the meaning of the court's ruling. For example, when the border ruling was handed down on April 2002, it claimed that it won all of its territories, including Badme. When things backfired, it filed "request for interpretation, correction and consultation' with the commission, with the goal of reversing the nature of the ruling. The commission rejected it based on the Algiers Agreement.

On September 2003, Prime Minister Meles wrote a letter to UN and declared the border commission's ruling as "illegal, unjust and irresponsible" and requested UN to create an alternative mechanism. This too did not fly. Finally, on November 2004, Meles regime declared it accepted the border ruling in "principle", but attached five points as a precondition to demarcating the border. This series of obstacles created by Meles regime forced the border commission in 2007 to demarcate the border virtually and end its existence. Still, Meles regime does not recognize the virtual demarcation of the border. Now, to claim Ethiopia "has accepted the border ruling in writing to the UN" is simplistic that rehashes Ethiopia's mantra established since the border ruling came into existence in April 2002. What is new? The seminar participants have yet to explain how Ethiopia reversed its long-held rejection of the border demarcation and accepted it now.

## **Conclusion**

The primary role of our "intellectuals" should have been to dig up the opposition's underlying problems, bring it to the surface, and suggest strategic solutions and opportunities. They have not done that. Instead, they entangled themselves in fruitless endeavour, compromising their role as intellectuals, which is to understand issues without misrepresenting facts or without becoming biased. By going to Addis Ababa without any agenda, they have abdicated their responsibility as 'intellectuals'. Subsequently, they ended up endorsing Ethiopia's policy. They have not produced ideas or a way forward strategy for the Eritrean struggle for democracy that should rely on the resources and power of the Eritrean people.

There is another problem with the Addis Ababa seminar. And that is the endorsement of the EDA/commission despite an overwhelming opposition by the vast majority of Eritrean Diaspora. **"Our expectations are extremely high. We are confident that the EDA, the ENCDC and the Ethiopian Government (and its people) will not disappoint us,"** the Addis Ababa seminar statement said. This is a testimony of the seminar's failure to the core in understanding how to build a national consensus among Eritreans. The fact that they support the EDA/Commission means that our 'intellectuals' have become part of the dysfunctional political body. If they choose to support and become part of EDA, it is their right. But they should not pretend about their aims behind the so-called 'intellectual' independence.