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ERITREA : WHY THE EPLF CAN'T AFFORD A DEMOCRATIC REFERENDUM ?

The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), which is currently the incumben presiding over all aspects of life in Eritrean Society and having a considerable suzerain influence on the major political occurrences in Ethiopia, has miserably failed to display a credible democratic semblance while disposing the various indertakings commensurate with its objectives. The stagemanaged forthcoming referendum also suffers from series of deficiencies in light of authenticity and genuine pursuit of acceptable lasting solutions within a formidable democratic framework worthy of appreciation.

The referendum which is expected to take place in April 1993 deserves a modest discussion concerning its drawbacks and limitations. First and foremost, the Referendum Commission empowered to monitor and preside over the entire process ins unilaterally appointed by the EPLF while at the same time the officials of the Commission are exclusively EPLF leaders. Thus it is not neutral, transparent, representative and does not acomodate divergent groups, views and interests thereby precluding participation by the major protagonists on the Eritrean question. Second, the various provisions of the EPLF "Decree on Eritrean Citizenship" of March 1992 are designed to alienate "undesirables" presumed to pose challenges with regard to the predetermined EPLF objectives. For example, Article 1 stipulates that those who are eligible to qualify as Eritreans and participate in the referendum should not be citizens of another country. If they are categorised as such (citizens of another country), they are required to officially renounce their former citizenship prior to their being recognised as Eritreans. This is primarily aimed at inducing Ethiopian citizens, that are Eritreans by birth, to forfeit their Ethiopian identity by makin apriori decision infavour of secession prior to the conducting of the referendum itself.

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ALL ETHIOPIA SOCIALIST MOVEMENT (ME'ISONE)

Article 2A of the same Decree stipulates that those eligible are the ones "who did not commit anti-people acts during the Eritrean peoples' struggle for independence". This is undoubtedly aimed at marginalising the Unionists and other forces who have struggled for the establishment of close ties with Ethiopia over the years by underling on identical and complementary affinities like common culture, ethnicity, religion, geographic proximity ... etc. Further, the qualification criteria, as presented in this provision of the Decree, is so equivocal that it is designed to lend leverage to the EPLF to interpret and define them in a manner analogous to its whims and wills thus enabling it to screen eligibles of its own choice. These, among others, suffice to affirm that the conditions laid down in the Decree fell far short of international standards as regards modes and manners of conducting a democratic referendum.

It is worthy to note that the EPLF is aware of the serious consequences emanating from such an untidy and irregular handling of the issue which could adversely affect the much anticipated realisation of peace, stability and democracy in the region. Despite repeated pleas and warnings against a possible default, the EPLF is reluctant to lend tangible credibility to the forthcoming referendum and persists in its efforts of manipulation and stage management. The 18th General Assembly of European NGOs, held in Brussels from 7 to 9 April 1992 and in whose ranks could be found staunch supporters of the EPLF, has expressed its concern on the issue in the following terms : "The future status of Eritrea poses an extremely delicate question which concerns not only Ethiopia, but far beyond that a whole series of African countries. Any serious doubt about the regularity of the referendum procedure or its results could have repercussions on the democratization and self-determination process elsewhere in Africa".

Given the fact that the attempt is bound to entail grave consequences of a devastating nature, why is the EPLF which claims the support of a sweeping majority of over 90 % among the Eritrean population, so adamant not to comply with democratic standards and procedures in conducting the referendum ?

It would be too dismissive and simplistic to merely attribute the numerous loopholes and misgivings of the intended modus-operandi of implementing the anticipated referendum to the mere arrogance and short-sightedness of the EPLF leadership. The basic and fundamental causes behind the currently prevalent unruly mode of thinking and practice of the EPLF with regard to the lust for the Sacrosanct Secession should be sought in series of closely intertwined historical, demographic and socio-political factors. These factors and variables presume to militate against the designs and articulated interests of the EPLF core-elite composed of a predominantly anti-democratic conglomerate, could be summarised as follows :

1. Notwithstanding the multi-faceted distortions of historical and empirically observable hard facts, as is the habit of the EPLF ruling clique, Eritrea has never been a homogenous polity, be it in the past or at present. There are at least eight distinct ethnic groups out of which four (the Afars, Kunumas, Tigreans and Sahos) live both in Ethiopia South of the Mereb and the Eritrean Region.

Eritrea, therefore, has never been a colony of Ethiopia as often alleged by the bankrupt EPLF thesis. unless it is argued that the Afars, Kunamas, Tigreans and Sahos in Ethiopia South of the Mereb, are accused of colonising their respective Kinsmen living in the areas presently under the jurisdiction of the EPLF (Eritrea), the assertion trying to portray Ethiopia as a coloniser can be nothing other than a loose and an unfounded myth.

Thus, the very presentation of this truth which is the anti-thesis of one of the central arguments favouring secession, renders the EPLF edifice null and void. Hence the Group's determination to silence the proponents of this view for fear of challenges to be posed in this regard.

2. The Afars, Kunumas, Tigreans and Sahos in Eritrea, which constitute more than 75 % of the entire population of the Region, rightly understand that Eritrean secession would mean separation in terms of geographic proximity to areas inhabited by their Kinsmen on the other side of the frontier. They also fear that the secession drive undoubtedly leads to the tearing apart of even families and other forms of close ties as was the case with Germans before unification and North and South Koreans today.

Furthermore, it is quite understandable that no one nationality / ethnic group in its right mind would endorse the tearing apart and balkanization of its people by facilitating its own fragmentation in two or more states. The case of the Afars, represented by a number of political organisations, all of which are unanimous in their stand against secession, is both illuminating and gratifying. These political organisations, in their bid to avert what they call further Kurdification of their people and territory, have categorically and vocally demanded for the recognition of their right to self-determination through which they hope some sort of tie with Ethiopia could be arranged to maintain their unity.

The EPLF on the other hand strongly feels that a liberalised socio-political atmosphere and the initiation of the democratic exercise could provoke a serious consideration of implications resulting from secession and the attendant outcomes emanating from it. The perceived threat that haunts the EPLF elite in this direction lends a mentality of a state of siege both to its mode of thinking and way of doing things.

3. At least 700'000 people from the Eritrean Region that have strong family and other ties in Eritrea live in the different parts of Ethiopia. These people constituting more than 20 % of the entire Eritrean population are relatively well-established in the economic and socio-cultural fabrics of life of Ethiopian society. Being cognizant of the fact that they have significant stakes to forfeit, not in terms of personal gains alone, these groups are faced with a dilemma of responding to the EPLF's alternatives - Freedom or not. On the one hand, they are not very keen to start afresh by going back to Eritrea where the opportunities for a better life and settlement are uncertain as compared to the one that they are already accustomed to through successful integration. On the other hand, it would be very difficult for them to stay as "foreigners" in a land that they rightly consider to be their country since long.

Given the recent political developments concerning the Eritrean question, the ideal solution for them appears to be the working out of some form of federal arrangement within the framework of a democratised Ethiopian entity. In light of the narrow options presented for decision, these groups are bewildered as to what alternatives could they have in such a fettered circumstance. Therefore, the suspicion that they won't even be passive supporters, let alone enthusiastically zealous militants, for the EPLF cause lures the latter to resort to manipulations, deception and threats when and where necessary. This appears to be the reason why Eritreans in the rest of Ethiopia are covertly discouraged from conducting mass meetings for deliberation on an issue so decisive for their future.

4. As a result of the ethno-centric policies of the EPLF, tens of thousands of Eritreans, whose only crime has been their entering into matrimonial relations with "non-Eritreans", have been expelled from the Region on the morrow of the EPLF take over. They live in utter destitution in some towns like Addis Abeba and Dessie, among others, determined not to be separated from their spouses and children accompanying them. These neglected groups have frequently expressed their dismay through protests and demonstrations in the meantime exposing the vindictive, malicious and irresponsible nature of the EPLF leadership. Their disaffection is equally felt and shared by their relatives that have remained back home and thus the EPLF can not consider these as part of its support base.

All the above forces, representing a sizable constituency to be reckoned with, undoubtedly favour some sort of tie like a federal arrangement with Ethiopia hoping that this could alleviate their plight and salvage them from dilemma in which they are forced to grope. The reversal of the 1980 EPLF proposal presenting such alternatives as independence, federation and

regional autonomy is one of the contributing factors to the present antagonism and confusion.

5. Owing to the absence of tolerance in accommodating differing views and entertaining diverse approaches to the resolution of the problem, the constituency of discontent working against the EPLF cause is steadily widening. The confinement of thousands of potential and actual voices of dissent in the proliferated prisons throughout Eritrea is illuminating in this regard.
6. The prevention of other Eritrean political groupings like the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) which command substantial sympathy, loyalty and support among the Eritrean population has antagonised many people in Eritrea thus contributing to the eroding of legitimacy and support for the EPLF. Besides, the hegemonic monopoly of organising, mobilising and politicising of people being the sole prerogative and exclusive domain of the EPLF, the prevalence of the politics of command in the routine practice of governance and administration .. etc among others have added fuel to the already existing skepticism and disaffection. A case in point could also be mentioned here. EPLF reluctance to endorse the U.N. request to involve and monitor the entire process leading to the envisaged referendum by relegating their role to a mere observer status depicts its uncertainty and lack of confidence in galvanising support for its predetermined objectives. Today, this has become the hall mark of the handling of affairs by the EPLF core-elite.
7. It is increasingly becoming clear that the EPLF is enmeshed in series of credibility crises triggered by lack of persistence in adhering to principles effecting sudden turns and somersaults depicting sharp discrepancies between stated goals and practice. Expectations in the direction of the realisation of democratic aspiration of society are utterly shattered since the EPLF take over due to the gradual supplanting of Mengistu's heinous dictatorship by the omnipresent and high handed administration of Issayas Afeworki and his praetorian guard.

The above factors, among others, subject the EPLF to be increasingly disposed towards resisting a genuinely authentic and democratic exercise aimed at producing a positive outcome with regard to the purpose at hand. Surprisingly, the self-styled Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) is more than desperate to witness the secession of Eritrea. To this end, it has developed a marked enthusiasm as expressed in its numerous policy pronouncements and practical undertakings. An African diplomat has summed this strange behaviour in the following words : "I have never seen a government surrender the national interests of its own country as does

the one in Ethiopia". Hence the euphemism for Mr. Meles Zenawi has become "EPLF's Ambassador to Ethiopia".

It goes without saying, therefore, that the forthcoming referendum in the mode and manner that it is designed and prepared to be implemented, can not postpone let alone solve the problem. It is rather a smokescreen and camouflage serving the interest of the anti-democratic and ruthless EPLF ruling caste in the latter's lust and greed for an omnipotent and omnipresent power. In opposing and resisting the April referendum, we are not defying the right of peoples to self-determination because this EPLF orchestrated project has nothing to do with solving the problems associated with the inalienable rights of people. On the contrary, the ill-conceived misadventure is suspending the resolution of the Eritrean problem leaving it intact and even more complicated. In the face of the aforementioned gross distortions coupled with shameful pretensions, and in the absence of a genuinely democratic and representative Ethiopian government that could shoulder the responsibility concerning such a colossal decision affecting the destiny of the country, the whole exercise is doomed to be futile.

In conclusion, as the participants of the Paris Conference (March 11-13, 1993), composed of 8 major political and national organisations affirmed, any future representative government in Ethiopia reserves the right to take a different course more in line with the interests of its peoples and the genuine exercise of the right of nationalities to self-determination.