

Message of Solidarity

Thank you, Mr Chairman,

Fellow Compatriots,

Invited Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and, indeed, a distinct privilege for me to have this opportunity to convey the warm solidarity of the Forum for National Dialogue (FND) to the 2nd Congress of the *Eritrean Afar State in Exile* (EASE).

The central theme of the congress is *Restoring Eritrean Afar Self-Rule and Federal Eritrea*. I will try to put this essential theme in the context of the closely interlinked general struggle for self-determination as a people, democratic governance, rule of law and respect for human rights in our home country, Eritrea.

Let me start with a brief sketch of (1) the nature of the regime; (2) the internal situation; (3) the struggle to replace the rule of man by the rule of law; and (4) the need for common action guided by a shared vision.

1. Nature of the Regime

1.1 Historical Legacy

The protracted armed struggle of the Eritrean people was waged as much for national liberation as for basic political, economic and social transformation. In investing their youth in the armed struggle, Eritrea's freedom fighters were inspired by the progressive ideals of liberty, equality and justice. As a people, we fought for freedom, democracy, justice and prosperity. Ironically, we ended up with the polar opposites. Why? What went wrong?

1.2 Agency of Liberation Turned into a Tool of Oppression

The EPLF, which built an effective military machine to wage and win the war against all odds, morphed into the PFDJ three years after the historic victory of the armed struggle and turned into an instrument of repression. The EPLF thus failed to transform itself from a politico-military organisation waging a war of national liberation into a functional political movement running the affairs of state.

1.3 Failure to Build a Constitutional Government

A hitherto progressive national liberation movement has atrophied. Once secure at the helm of power, its leadership betrayed the original objectives of the movement and became the new guardian of the privileges and inequities of the status quo. A liberation movement that seized power through the force of arms failed to establish an inclusive, participatory and accountable government.

1.4 A Brutal Dictatorship

The effort to establish a constitutional government committed to the rule of law, democratic principles and respect for human rights was aborted, depriving the State of a legal basis and the people of sovereignty. There is no freedom of expression, freedom of assembly or freedom of association. In the absence of a representative parliament duly constituted on the basis of universal suffrage, an independent judiciary or a functional cabinet of ministers, the president wields absolute power and rules the country without any legal or institutional restraint.

2. The Internal Situation

Eritrea today is ruled by a brutal dictatorship. For a quarter century now, our people have been denied the right to constitute a government of their choice and to live in peace, freedom, dignity and justice. Under tight regimentation, Eritrean society endures ruthless repression and the privations of a coupon economy, which has failed to deliver even the most basic needs of the people.

The youth endure open-ended active national service; Eritreans from the age of 18 to 70s are forced to bear arms and fight in the regime's unending wars. The unbearable condition created by severe political repression and pervasive state control, aggravated by mass unemployment and economic hardship, has pushed the youth to flee the country in droves at tremendous risk to their lives.

Some use human traffickers; others march on foot. Many die from sunstroke in the Sahara trek to North Africa, drown in the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea in transit to Europe or the Arabian Peninsula, or perish from organ harvest in the Sinai. Remember the tragedy in Lampedusa!

The substitution of the rule of law by the rule of man has allowed the arbitrary detention of senior officials and army officers for advocating democratic reform, of journalists for covering dissenting opinion, and of elders for counselling dialogue and reconciliation. As mentioned earlier, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of association are absent; autonomous political and civic organisations are banned; independent opinion is suppressed and dissent is equated with treason.

Political repression and the crackdown on the private press closed the political space. The state owns the domestic media and controls the message, banishes diversity and criminalises dissent. Strict control and censorship have enabled dictatorship. The closure of the political, economic and social space and centralisation of every aspect of national life, combined, have alienated the people, degraded the human condition and isolated the regime.

3. The Struggle to Replace the Rule of Man by the Rule of Law

What does 'rule of law' mean? The UN defines it as "*a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards.*" Justice Tom Bingham, *Rule of Law* (2010)

Under the rule of law, as distinct from the rule of man, all people and institutions are subject to and accountable to law that is fairly applied and enforced. In a political system that adheres to the supremacy of the rule of law, the law is paramount over the acts of the government and the people. In a dictatorial form of government like ours,

governance and the rules of conduct are set and altered at the discretion of a single person, or a select group of persons.

The Eritrean people aspire for and have an inalienable right to liberty, dignity and justice. And they are determined to secure them, making change inevitable. Despite the lack of freedom of expression, assembly or association that has made organized peaceful opposition at home impossible, absolute repression has provoked growing organised resistance inside and outside the country.

4. Common Action Guided by a Shared Vision

Banned and suppressed inside, political opposition has boomed in exile. Let me firmly state here that every Eritrean, as an individual or a group, has the right, indeed, the duty to resist the dictatorship as he/she deems fit. But, we need to overcome the current fragmentation and bring the multiple political, civic and media groups into common action based on a shared vision. Then, and only then, would we be able to create the synergy necessary to bring about democratic governance, rule of law and respect for human rights in our country!

The Ad-Hoc Contact Organ (AHCO) set up in Nairobi I is preparing for Nairobi II to chart ways and means to accelerate democratic transition and institute the rule of law. Parallel effort is underway to build a political bridge linking the open external opposition and the covert internal resistance to muster the critical mass necessary to crystallise an Eritrean owned and people centred democratic change from within.

Establishing a decentralised system of governance within a united State of Eritrea would allow the people to exercise real self-determination and create the necessary condition to manage their affairs at different layers of government, directly or through their duly elected representatives. With the advent of a constitutional order, the political and economic hegemony of the central government would come to an end. In its place, there would be a clear division of authority between the central government and the decentralised administrative units that reposes sovereign power in the people.

The main areas of mandate and delimitation of powers of the central government, on the one hand, and the general framework, extent of authority and geographic form of the system of decentralised administrative units, on the other, would be legally defined by a national representative body duly constituted on the basis of universal suffrage. The framework, content and form decentralised governance must be clearly designed to create the conditions to enable the people to determine their communal affairs and manage their livelihood in their interests. Furthermore, a decentralised system of government would allow the people to have a voice, directly or through their elected representatives, on important national issues and developments that impact their livelihood and wellbeing.

In this regard, there is one basic factor that we should always bear in mind. And this is, that only a united effort would guarantee success in the democratic struggle to bring about the political transformation of our country. Then and only then would it be possible to ensure a united State of Eritrea with the requisite decentralised system of administration to enable the exercise of real self-determination for the people at all levels of government and make living in equality possible.

Eritrean society is multicultural, multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-religious. The unity, progress and prosperity of the Eritrean people are predicated on ensuring

mutual respect and harmonious coexistence in diversity. I hope that this 2nd Congress would contribute to the advent of a new Eritrea based on constitutional governance and democratic principles that guarantee the absolute equality of all Eritreans in every sphere of national life.

Victory to your 2nd Congress!

Eternal glory to our martyrs!

Thank you for your kind attention.