

Setting the Scene

Importance of Establishing a Democratic Movement

Greetings; and warm welcome to you all.

Thank you for hailing here from different corners of the world, setting aside your personal affairs, to participate and make a contribution to this timely meeting of political and civil organisations as well as individual activists. On the occasion of this national gathering, it is with a sense of heavy responsibility that I proceed to present a brief statement on the *Importance of Establishing a Broad Eritrean Democratic Movement*.

As we all know, the establishment of an *independent sovereign State of Eritrea* is, on the one hand, the product of the collective struggles, sacrifices and efforts and, on the other, a great historic victory of the entire Eritrean people.

We Eritreans made huge sacrifices to bring about national independence; despite this great achievement, we have been unable to establish a democratic government that vindicates our sacrifices and fulfils our aspirations for peace, justice, development and prosperity. Having exercised the right of self-determination as a nation via a referendum, we have been unable whether to get rid of the dictatorial regime or form a government of our choice via a free national election.

The present situation in our country is the outcome of the betrayal, by the regime in power, of the fundamental objectives of the armed struggle for national liberation and the legitimate aspirations of the Eritrean people for freedom.

Today, the objective conditions in our country are ripe for change; the subjective conditions are fast catching up with them. The advent of parity between the subjective and objective conditions would herald the sunset of the tenure of the dictatorial regime.

Hence, 'What would replace the current regime? How should it be established? What kind of challenges would be faced in the process?' are some of the big questions awaiting answers. Identifying the main challenges that could confront the transition process as of now would constitute the first step towards the basic solution.

in doing our homework, we would recognise that political transition is often a difficult and complicated process. A transitional political process is a special phase or timeframe within which an *ancien* regime is replaced by a new regime. The old regime, with all its laws, institutions and practices, is done away with and a new regime is constituted in its place.

A transitional political process, thus, simultaneously embodies change and continuity. Change of the dictatorial regime; continuity of an *independent sovereign State of Eritrea*.

There would thus be a need for a preparatory period or a transitional phase to consolidate the new regime and establish, build and sufficiently strengthen functional institutions.

In most cases, political transition is a process that involves the transfer of power from a authoritarian to a democratic regime. However, it is extremely important, in view of the serious homework we must undertake, to recognise that the process of political transition could vary in content, form and outcome. Why? Because, we can, in a reality such as ours, expect three (3) possible scenarios.

1. The new regime could emerge as a continuation of the old one under a new guise.
2. The new regime could be a replica of or, God forbid, even worse than the old one.
3. The emergence of a better regime that adheres to the rule of law based on a constitution; committed to democratic principles; and respectful of the rudimentary rights of citizens and fundamental human rights.

It is essential to recognise that the popular struggle to bring about change and democratic transition in Eritrea would face several domestic and geopolitical challenges, and be prepared to effectively rise up to them.

The main domestic challenges spring from the nature of the regime.

The present regime is an autocratic dictatorship that has usurped absolute power; has neither government organs nor institutions that function properly; is an extremely predatory regime that, devising different techniques and various pretexts, exploits and squanders the assets and resources of the people.

It is a dysfunctional regime characterised by extreme corruption, running a reprehensible coupon economy, in this 21st century, that does not meet the basic needs of the people.

It is a malevolent regime that, having monopolised the natural, economic, social and cultural assets of the country, has deliberately extended and deepened the poverty of the State and the misery of the people.

It is a regime that has trampled the basic democratic, civil and human rights of the people underfoot and rules through resort to the unmitigated use of brutal force with impunity.

Besides these domestic challenges, there exist geopolitical challenges as well.

Our region, the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea Basin, possesses a significant strategic location. In general, its constituent countries have, for a long time, been immersed in constant domestic crisis and reciprocal conflict. A volatile region afflicted by wars, turbulence and instability, its peoples suffer from a state of general backwardness and extreme poverty.

The biggest task of pro-democracy Eritrean forces, in the context of these domestic and geopolitical challenges, is thus to do away with the *ancien* regime and effect democratic transition in a manner that guarantees the stability of the State of Eritrea. Basically, since nature does not allow a vacuum, we must do our homework with utmost care and prudence in order to avert the risk of a political vacuum during the transition phase.

To bring about change and an orderly transition to democratic governance, we must, first and foremost, work to guarantee the following decisive factors.

1. Continuity of an independent sovereign State of Eritrea;
2. Guarantee of the safety, stability and security of the State of Eritrea;
3. Reconstitution of the structure and composition of the Transitional Government of Eritrea;
4. Administration of transitional justice to provide closure for the victims and ensure national reconciliation;
5. Establish and strengthen functional institutions of political and economic governance embracing democratic representation of the entire Eritrean people in all their diversity, without any distinction whatsoever.

In order to make due contribution to guaranteeing these decisive factors during the process of change and transition, Eritrean pro-democracy forces in the Diaspora, in particular, must transcend fruitless bickering about the past as well as the negative politics of grievance and rivalry. Equipped with national consciousness and perseverance to this end, they must endeavour to:

1. Cultivate a shared vision and collaborative work through inclusive dialogue.
2. Crystallise democratic change through Eritrean ownership.
3. Strengthen the resistance inside the country.
4. Enhance participation to ensure the success of the process of change, democratic transition, nation building and state reconstitution.

Thus, this important meeting of the Board and political and civil organisations must assume the establishment of a National Democratic Movement to replace the authoritarian dictatorship with a democratic regime as its principal task of the moment. To achieve these objectives, it would be necessary for the democratic movement to, at a minimum, be grounded on the following fundamental principles and core values.

Since Eritrea, in all its diversity, is the common homeland of all Eritreans, endeavour to:

1. Ensure a future Eritrea in which every citizen will live under equal rights, equal obligations and equal opportunities.
2. Establish a constitutional government. A constitution is the basis of rule of law, which guarantees the fundamental rights, freedoms and equality of citizens. It serves as the

legal foundation of the State, the repository of the sovereignty of the people and the source of all legitimate authority.

3. Constitute a democratic government predicated on the inclusive representation, express consent and free choice of the people, with special protection for women and minority rights.
4. Introduce a decentralised system of administration that would enable the people to arrange their livelihood in accordance with their wishes and have a voice in the making of decisions affecting their political, economic and cultural life.
5. Formulate and implement a macroeconomic policy framework that stimulates rapid economic development to improve the livelihood of the people and generate prosperity.
6. Cultivate a new framework of regional relations based on peaceful coexistence and good neighbourly relations, focused on political cooperation and economic integration, and guarantees the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State of Eritrea.

Finally, it seems to me appropriate to conclude by quoting a stanza from the song of two popular Eritrean pro-democracy artists, namely, Abrar Osman and Ftsun Beraki, extolling the values of unity, harmony and steadfastness to realise one's dreams:

ፈትሊ ፍሒስካ ገመድ

ፍቕሪ ረረኻ ስኒት

ተስፋ ስኒቕካ ጽግዓት

ይብጻሕ'ዩ ትምኒት፡ ይብጻሕ!

Thank you for your kind attention.

Eternal Glory to Our Martyrs!