

Eritrea Symposium 2022-II
Catalysing Homegrown Transition to Constitutional Governance
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Keynote Address

Dear Participants of Eritrea Symposium 2022-II,

I would like to extend you warm greetings and a very warm welcome to the second *Eritrea Symposium* this year being convened here in Brussels, Belgium.

Convened at a critical moment when our country and region are beset by intense antagonisms and Eritrean Diaspora politics is plagued by loss of compass and total disarray, the symposium bears special significance. I extend you my heartfelt thanks for coming here from Europe, Canada, and the United States of America to participate, once again within a short span of time, in this important and timely Symposium. We are gathered here to explore ways and means for effective joint action to help *Catalyse Homegrown Transition to Constitutional Governance* in our beloved home country that assures our people the exercise of their sovereignty and the enjoyment of freedom, justice, and prosperity.

We all know that the Eritrean people waged a protracted political and military struggle for self-determination. We all are also very proud of the total military victory of the valiant struggle that, following the subsequent referendum, delivered the emergence of the sovereign State of Eritrea. Yet, thirty-one years after the achievement of the hard-won independence, a life of freedom, justice, and prosperity better than that under successive colonial rule continues to elude the Eritrean people. Their human condition is even worse off in certain respects.

Having grabbed all political power, an authoritarian despot conducts the affairs of state and the business of government in an arbitrary manner, devoid of any semblance of rationality, transparency, and accountability, driving the country on a downward spiral in all spheres of national life. The present status of our country and the living conditions of our people are a living testament of this unfortunate reality.

Even though Eritrea is blessed with an admirably industrious, hardworking, and enterprising people and the endowment of ample natural resources, its economy has been on a constant decline and the livelihood of our people has steadily gone from bad to worse every year. Today, our national economy lies in a shambles. Our people are suffering from an acute shortage or total lack of basic necessities, such as foodstuffs, potable water, electricity, and housing. Access to essential public goods and services, such as healthcare, education, transport, communications, banking, etc., remain lacking or substandard. It is quite ironic, indeed a shame, that Eritreans are hard pressed to seek medical treatment for common and serious illnesses alike in Sudan or Ethiopia.

An autocrat has usurped the sovereign power of the people, setting aside the Constitution of Eritrea, drafted with broad popular participation as well as duly ratified by a Constituent Assembly, and imposed the arbitrary and capricious rule of man. The non-application of the Constitution has deprived the Eritrean people of their fundamental political, economic, social, and cultural rights. This deprivation, perpetrated via a reign of harsh oppression and brutal repression, has induced a state of extreme fear among the people.

Indeed, the prevailing situation in our country and the present condition of our people make palpable the imperative for establishing a new democratic dispensation and constitutional governance. In the heart of their hearts, most Eritreans living inside and outside the country,

irrespective of their political affiliation, agree on the urgent need for a stable transition to constitutional governance. Furthermore, it is crystal clear that change is not only imperative, but also inevitable. After all, notwithstanding the severity of repression perpetrated by the autocratic regime, the status quo is simply untenable.

The change, however, must be homegrown and free from external interference to ensure a stable transition to constitutional governance in the interest and to the benefit of the great majority of the Eritrean people at home and in the Diaspora. Hence, all patriotic pro-democracy Eritreans, regardless of their current political outlook or affiliation, have a moral responsibility to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Eritrea, on the one hand, and fight for a stable transition to constitutional governance, on the other.

There exists an indelible dialectical link between challenging the affront and threats to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State of Eritrea, on the one hand, and fighting for the establishment of constitutional governance, on the other. In this regard, there is a very critical issue that I would like to underscore here: that the establishment of constitutional governance in Eritrea is solely the business of the Eritrean people. Instituting constitutional governance should be homegrown; initiated, driven, and executed under Eritrean ownership, decision, and policy. The experience of Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya provide ample evidence that external intervention causes great harm and brings no benefit.

To make, in the name of opposition to the authoritarian regime or under the guise of hatred of Isaias, common cause with a hostile foreign force that holds an openly declared expansionist ambition over the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State of Eritrea and, practically, strives to weaken and dismember Eritrea, provide it with intelligence, become a tool of its political aim and propaganda campaign, or undertake actions hostile to the interest of the Eritrean people and the security of the Eritrean State, is tantamount to treachery chargeable as a criminal offence under the law.

On this occasion, I would like to call on those who seek to change the authoritarian regime through the interference of external forces to reassess their dangerous stance and work, instead, to strengthen the agency of the Eritrean people in the vital interest of the people and the State of Eritrea. In equal measure, I would like to call on those who have turned a blind eye to the suffering of the Eritrean people and continue to lend uncritical support to the dictatorial regime to reconsider their position and join the struggle for justice and constitutional governance in the higher interest of the Eritrean people and the State of Eritrea. In a similar vein, I would like to call on the ‘*silent majority*’ to join ranks with the struggle for justice and constitutional governance rather than remain passive spectators on an issue of decisive importance to the security of the Eritrean people and the wellbeing of the Eritrean State.

Eri-Platform has, for the past five years, worked to find common ground for joint action among Eritrean prodemocracy activists in the Diaspora, centred on the vital interests of the Eritrean people and the State of Eritrea. To this end, it has conducted a series of symposiums designed to bring together pro-democracy activist groups and individuals to engage in a constructive national dialogue, propose useful ideas, pool resources, and cooperate in support of a stable transition. As a continuation of that effort, Eri-Platform is today convening this year’s followup conference, *Eritrea Symposium 2022-II*, under the theme of *Catalysing Homegrown Transition to Constitutional Governance*.

Eritrea Symposium 2022-II has three principal objectives:

1. Build on the achievements of past symposiums to enhance coalescence and strengthen collaboration among pro-democracy Diaspora activist groups and individuals (1) in the defence of the national interest of the Eritrean people and the Eritrean State; (2) in support of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State of Eritrea; and (3) in pursuit of constitutional governance in Eritrea.

2. Provide for an informed discussion of the current situation in Eritrea and propose pragmatic plans for joint action based on a shared vision.

3. Provide a forum for networking and cooperation among pro-democracy Eritrean activists in the Diaspora.

It seems to me that the effective pursuit of the dual task of defending the national interest and crystallising constitutional governance would require the adoption of a two-tier mode of organisation, that is, organising at two levels.

(1) A broad coalition of diverse activist groups and individuals with different perspectives. The main objective of such a coalition would be to challenge all external threats and interference and safeguard the fundamental interest of the State of Eritrea. The coalition would embrace all activist groups and individuals who stand with the interest of the people of Eritrea and the State of Eritrea; defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State of Eritrea; and oppose all external interference in the internal affairs of Eritrea. We can name this coalition the *Eritrean Sovereignty Bloc* (ESB).

(2) Coalescence of a core of activist individuals with a shared perspective. The main objective of such a coalescence would be the pursuit of the right of self-determination of Eritrea as a people, the right to freely choose their government. The core coalescence would embrace activist individuals committed to (1) doing away with the authoritarian regime and bringing about a stable democratic transition in Eritrea; (2) establishing a transparent and accountable constitutional governance that ensures the rule of law, safeguards the security of the state, and ensures the stability of the society; secures the basic human rights, fundamental freedoms and social justice; and nurtures human dignity and equality; (3) building a secular civic State; (4) establishing a participatory political process; (5) revitalising the national economy and building the country's human capital; (6) consolidating the national unity and social harmony of the Eritrean people; and (7) pursuing a foreign policy of peaceful coexistence and good neighbourliness. These pillars would serve as a foundation for the core coalescence.

Under the prevailing circumstances, every patriotic pro-democracy Eritrean citizen, acting whether as an individual or as a group, has a solemn responsibility to strive to crystallise constitutional governance that ensures the rule of law, administers justice, and safeguards the basic rights and fundamental freedoms of our people. Our country has been sliding along a path of steady decline due to (1) the betrayal of the original objectives of our armed struggle and the basic aspirations of our people; (2) the arbitrary and capricious exercise of the rule of man; and (3) the squandering of our natural and human resources in all spheres of national life. We must consciously work hard to reverse the trajectory of decline.

We activists in the Diaspora have a great potential to become a part of the process and contribute, directly or indirectly, to crystallising constitutional governance in our beloved country. To contribute to the acceleration of change and the crystallisation of constitutional governance, however, we need preparedness, commitment, unity, and coalescence. Working together in coalescence, pooling our resources, and coordinating our effort would be more effective than going it alone. Indeed, our coalescence bears a greater potential to speed up and guarantee the success of our common objective.

The extent of preparedness, commitment, solidarity, and coalescence are a function of the individual decisions that each of us make. To achieve our national objective, it is essential to cultivate a strong organisation, solid unity of purpose, and firm solidarity in struggle. There is no question that the Eritrean people deserve, and should have, a government that safeguards their dignity; avails them equal rights, equal freedoms, and equal opportunities; promotes justice, prosperity, and harmony; and enables their active participation in all spheres of the political, economic, social, and cultural life of our country. Let us thus move on to help

crystallise the establishment of an accountable and transparent constitutional governance in Eritrea that guarantees the human security of every Eritrean citizen.

I wish you a successful symposium and thank you for your kind attention.

Eternal glory to our heroic martyrs!

Long live independent and sovereign State of Eritrea!

God bless Eritrea and its people!