

Washington, D.C., USA
25 January 2020

Eritrea Symposium 2020
Keynote Address
Challenges of Change and Transition in Eritrea

Amb. Andebrhan Welde Giorgis

Dear Participants,

I would like to begin by extending you all a very warm welcome. Many of you have travelled from far and near, setting aside your personal, family and professional affairs, to participate in this Symposium. Thank you for your time and effort. I would also like to thank Daniel and Solomon for their hard work in the preparation of this Symposium and outreach to the participants, moderators and panellists.

This Symposium comes on the heels of *Eritrea Symposium 2019*. As the start of a new year and a new decade, let us set out to make 2020 the herald of a new dawn of hope, change and transition for our people and country.

At the time of our *de facto* independence in 1991, we had expected the year 2020, while uncertain and far away, to witness the realisation of the noble objectives of our hard and long armed struggle for liberation: a struggle waged for democracy, justice and prosperity. We could not imagine at that time that our people, after all the sacrifices, would succumb to the brutal rule of a regime preoccupied solely with staying in power. Eritrea today is a specimen of a broken society, a society broken by the decisions and actions of a predatory dictatorship that has betrayed our people and martyrs who fought for a better Eritrea.

We must strive to restore the noble ideals of our struggle for freedom. I hope that *Eritrea Symposium 2020* will move our conversation forward, from a mindset of '*what* are the main challenges facing the process of *change and democratic transition*, to one of *how* we can prepare to meet these challenges and make a constructive contribution when the time comes'.

This Symposium comprises seven panels:

1. Principal Actors and Stakeholders in Change and Transition

The regime in Asmera has imposed its rule over decades through a network of multiple layers of monitoring and mechanisms of tight population control enforced by *gross, systematic and widespread violations* of human rights. This is made worse by wrong policies, erratic actions and malgovernance. The mismanagement of the economy and national resources has caused chronic shortages of basic goods and essential services, with the people dependent on daily rations for subsistence. An appalling reality forced on the Eritrean people in this second decade of the 21st Century.

Identifying the principal actors and stakeholders, their respective roles and interests in change and transition is key to ensuring preparedness. Awareness, preparation and planning are essential to ensuring a positive contribution during transition. Of course, there is a lot of uncertainty and many unknowns in a time of change and transition, especially in a difficult and complex situation like ours. The window of opportunity is narrow and the situation precarious, requiring advance preparations, commitment and action for when the time comes. As concerned Eritreans, we must prepare as best we can.

Panel 1 will identify the *Principal Actors and Stakeholders in Change and Transition*.

2. Catalysing Internal Change

The authoritarian regime has turned Eritrea into an earthly inferno. Cruel repression, indefinite detention, enforced disappearance and torture have become the lamentable fate of tens of thousands of citizens. Our people have been denied the right to normal life in their own country and the freedom to constitute a government of their choice for far too long. Other tens of thousands of Eritreans, mostly the youth, have voted the only way they can, with their feet, making horrific journeys that put their very survival at stake.

Getting rid of a profoundly rotten, corrupt and bankrupt dictatorship and making a successful transition to a democratic system of government pose extremely difficult challenges. Indeed, it will not be easy to build a democratic government that adheres to the rule of law, safeguards the dignity of the people, embodies their will, pursues their aspirations and promotes their wellbeing.

Many participants in this Symposium have been the prime advocates of a homegrown change, owned, guided and driven by Eritreans. To their credit, ‘change from within’ has become mainstream in the Eritrean political discourse, as it should. Let me salute these ‘movers and shakers’ of the evolving national conversation. Today, the objective conditions for change in our country are ripe. The subjective conditions are also ripening in defiant resistance to ruthless suppression. The alignment of the objective and subjective conditions will catalyse change and crystallise democratic transition. *Eritrea Symposium 2019* explored the principal drivers of change and transition. I hope that *Eritrea Symposium 2020*, in turn, will carry the conversation forward and identify efforts and steps needed to support the home-based national movement for change and democratic transition.

Panel 2 will present *Catalysing Internal Change*

3. Establishing a Constitutional Government

Upon ratification on the 23rd of May 1997, the Constitution of Eritrea became ‘*the fundamental law of our Sovereign and Independent State of Eritrea*’. In the opinion of several prominent constitutional lawyers and legal scholars, the Constitution has been legally in force and its provisions have a lawfully binding effect ever since the day of its ratification, irrespective of the status of its formal application. The Constitution is the legal foundation and the supreme law of the State of Eritrea. Hence, a legitimate government, even during a transitional period, must be based on the Constitution, recognise the supremacy of the law, operationalise the rule of law, and administer justice in the service of the Eritrean people.

The immediate implementation of the Constitution at the onset of the transition will be crucial. It would be essential to avoid a legal vacuum, establish legitimate authority, lay the foundation for an accelerated process of nation building and state construction, and establish checks and balances among the executive, legislative and judiciary organs of government. Beyond the transition, a duly constituted national representative organ, the Parliament or National Assembly of Eritrea, can change, amend or replace the Constitution as it deems fit. Nobody else has or can usurp that right.

Panel 3 will present *Establishing a Constitutional Government*.

4. State of Play: Eritrea and Regional Geopolitics

Eritrea occupies a highly strategic location at the nexus of the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Its coastline straddles one of the world’s busiest maritime trade routes. The Red Sea Basin is also the centre of considerable international naval activity, with the major regional and

world powers maintaining bases on or close to its shores. States on both flanks of the Red Sea are directly or indirectly affected by ongoing bloody or cold wars in the region. The resultant conflict matrix, and its complex regional, interstate, intrastate and internecine features, draws in the active involvement of external actors who seek to project power in the pursuit of competing national strategic, economic and commercial interests.

I can, for instance, cite three elements of this complex conflict matrix that affect Eritrea today and in the immediate future.

First, the **Shia-Sunni divide**. This centuries-old conflict fuels bitter Saudi Iranian rivalry, today being played out in the bloody and devastating war in Yemen. This rivalry sucks in States on both sides of the Red Sea and involves competing global powers in a constantly shifting mix of local, regional and international alignment of forces.

Second, the **Horn of Africa**. This region comprises weak, fragile, impoverished and inherently unstable states, with a long history of wars and strife unfolding in a setting of changing local, regional and global alliances. Violent interstate, intrastate and interethnic conflicts continue to aggravate the vulnerability and drive the displacement of large populations.

Third, the **Nile River Basin**. The principal conflict system in this region pits the upper and lower riparian states with rival interests attracting the involvement of the Red Sea littoral States as well as those of distant regional and global powers.

We need to follow up and factor in events and developments within and around this conflict matrix in order to continuously assess their ramifications on Eritrea and identify Eritrea's national interest. It would be absolutely essential to determine Eritrea's strategy, formulate its policy and define its role in the region in a manner that secures national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Institutionalised state to state relations and a well thought out foreign policy must seek to promote bilateral and regional cooperation in the political, economic, commercial, security and environmental spheres in the service of reciprocal and collective interests.

Panel 4 will present the *State of Play: Eritrea and Regional Geopolitics*.

5. Unity in Diversity versus Identity Politics

Eritrea is blessed with a multi-national, multilingual, multireligious and multicultural society. This diversity represents a valuable asset that embodies great richness woven in a magnificent mosaic of a harmonious society of citizens living together in a shared homeland with equal rights, equal freedoms and equal opportunities. A truly democratic Eritrea will empower the people, allow them real self-determination and active political participation in the making of policy and decisions at the local, regional and national levels. Only such a State would be able to construct a civil and modern society united in diversity, living in harmony and at peace with itself and its neighbours.

Yet, enemies of our people, both foreign and domestic, past and present, have used this diversity as a political instrument to partition and destroy Eritrea. At critical moments in Eritrea's modern history, they have tried to portray Eritrea's diversity as a liability and used it to 'divide and rule' our people, dominate our country and plunder our resources. Initially instigated to facilitate the British partition plan in the 1940s, this plot, to a certain extent, helps explain the fragmentation of Eritrean political activism and some of the highly polarised sectarian discourse in today's social media in the Diaspora. Lamentably, some groups, unable to free their mindset from this divisive colonial legacy, continue to replicate the same destructive politics that has generated a vicious circle.

We have, in our previous Symposia, discussed the divisive features and devastating effects of certain brands of identity politics. We have also deliberated on the imperative for a secular

civic State of Eritrea. Today, we will have an opportunity to delve deeper into the subject matter and compare and contrast the two approaches to nation building and state construction. We will explore together which one of the two options would best serve the interests of our future as a people and a country: (1) a united civic State devolving significant power to the people in the framework of decentralised administrative structures or (2) a fragmented State based on identity politics with all its sectarian underpinnings.

Panel 5 will present *Unity in Diversity versus Identity Politics*.

6. Transitional Justice and National Reconciliation

The scale and magnitude of the gross abuses and systematic violations of the fundamental rights of the Eritrean people perpetrated over many decades are simply staggering. The use of force has, in the modern history of Eritrea, evolved as a default mode in settling political discord. Whether during the political struggle for independence in the 1940s, the armed struggle for national liberation or post-independence, the Eritrean people, including political and military leaders, freedom fighters and prominent citizens, have been victims of arbitrary detention, extrajudicial execution, torture or enforced disappearance.

During the British Military Administration (1941-52), imperial Ethiopia used the Unionist Party (**ማሕበር ኣንድነት**) and its supporters as an instrument in pursuit of the *Union Project* to terrorise and assassinate prominent leaders of the Eritrean independence movement. During the armed struggle for national liberation, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) eliminated the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), assassinated and executed dissident freedom fighters, ignited a civil war to ‘liquidate the counter-revolution’ in the name of uniting the revolution under the leadership of a single organisation. The Eritrean People’s Liberation Forces/Front (EPLF) assassinated and executed dissident freedom fighters in the name of guarding the revolution. Post-independence, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) regime has perpetrated gross, systematic and widespread violations of human rights in the name of national security. The endgame of all these measures is self-preservation.

This historical reality of victimisation has caused varying degrees of trauma across generations of Eritreans. There is a need to heal the harmful wounds of this trauma through a process of restorative justice that provides: (1) closure for the victims of the crimes, violations and abuses; (2) atonement or penalty for the crimes, violations and abuses perpetrated; and (3) national reconciliation and social harmony and peace in a new democratic Eritrea committed to inclusive development and prosperity.

The process of restorative justice must begin with the immediate implementation of the Constitution of Eritrea, the establishment of an independent judiciary and the release of all political prisoners and detainees, jailed journalists, prisoners of conscience and ordinary citizens imprisoned without due process. Confronting our past with courage and engaging in genuine national dialogue will help consolidate our communal bonds and enable harmonious coexistence based on a common understanding and a shared vision of a new Eritrea.

Eritrea Symposium 2018 has initiated discussion and highlighted the need for continuous research and public debate on the crucial issue of Transitional Justice and National Reconciliation with regards to the Eritrean experience. The primary aim is to help (1) repair the damage caused by the abuses and violations; (2) find closure for the victims of the crimes; (3) administer justice; (4) encourage acknowledgement of responsibility; (5) adopt and implement measures to guarantee non-recurrence in the future.

Panel 6 will *Transitional Justice and National Reconciliation* to advance the dialogue.

7. Eritrea Vision 2030

When Eritrea rose from the ashes of war and destruction three decades ago, we believed that we were entering a new era of peace, democracy, development and prosperity. We had a vision, prepared a blueprint, and set out to transform our war-ravaged backward economy into a growing, technologically advanced and internationally competitive modern economy within two decades. There was a high potential to develop a vibrant export-oriented manufacturing industry; a modern irrigation-based agriculture; a lucrative fisheries and marine resources project; and an efficient services sector. The pursuit of rapid socioeconomic transformation was predicated on capitalising on Eritrea's (1) strategic location; (2) hardworking, industrious and enterprising people; and (3) endowment of natural resources under the guidance of a prudent macroeconomic policy framework.

Alas, a predatory regime squandered the golden opportunity to develop and prosper Eritrea. Worse still, it has set Eritrea back several decades. As a result, all available statistical data and development indicators show that Eritrea's economy has suffered a steady decline to the bottom and the Eritrean people relegated to a state of extreme poverty. Reversing this reality requires political change and a new economic policy. Basically, it requires the transformation of political and economic governance; the organisation, structure and management of the political, economic, financial and judicial institutions; the roles of the public and private sectors; and the nexus between the forces and the relations of production.

Eritrea Symposium 2019 started the discussion on reviving the Eritrean economy and highlighted the need to take ownership of our situation, seize our destiny and build a new Eritrea. It generated the idea of an *Eritrea Vision 2030* as a framework for comprehensive socioeconomic development starting with the transition. *Eritrea Symposium 2020* will debate *Eritrea Vision 2030* and advance the conversation.

Panel 7 will present *Eritrea Vision 2030* to help sum up and conclude our Symposium with a firmer foundation for a common understanding and a shared vision of the Future Eritrea.

I hope our dialogue in this Symposium will deepen our understanding, expand our knowledge, enrich our shared vision, strengthen our solidarity and advance our preparation to meet the challenges of change and transition.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Eternal Glory to Our Martyrs!

Long Live an Independent Sovereign State of Eritrea!

God Bless Eritrea and the Eritrean People!