

Frankfurt, Germany
26 October 2019

Eritrea Symposium 2019
Keynote Address
Change and Democratic Transition in Eritrea

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Dear Participants of *Eritrea Symposium 2019*,

I would like to begin by extending you a very warm welcome. I would also like to thank you wholeheartedly for coming here from far and near, from different parts of the world, to participate in this symposium by postponing your family, professional and private matters.

Convened nearly a year ago as the dust was settling following the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, or more correctly, the new friendship between Isaias and Abiy, *Eritrea Symposium 2018: The Imperative for Common Action* sought to tackle certain key issues concerning Eritrea and the diaspora. It also sought to explore an effective strategy and identify alternative means that enable us to meet the challenges we face and take advantage of the opportunities that arise in our effort to achieve our national objectives.

We are now opening *Eritrea Symposium 2019: Change and Democratic Transition* to build on the foundations laid last year at the *Eritrea Symposium 2018: The Imperative for Common Action*. *Eritrea Symposium 2019* will carry last year's discussions forward, serving as a forum allowing us to delve deeper into certain pressing issues through research and dialogue. It is intended to promote a common understanding of the present state of our country and people, cultivate a shared vision of the future of our country, and accelerate the preparations we must make in order to help catalyse change and democratic transition.

I would like to underscore a dialectical fact here. Change is a constant phenomenon in human history. Inevitably, change would come in Eritrea. Surely, the end of a malevolent regime and malgovernance is approaching. Change will happen regardless of whether we want it or not; whether we support it or oppose it. Our individual stance as activists or spectators is absolutely irrelevant to the process. What matters is our individual and/or collective engagement and action, whether we get engaged and whether what we do when we engage advances or retards the process of change. The choice is for each one of us to make. However, it seems to me extremely crucial for the success of our struggle to engage and prepare to make a constructive contribution in the process of *change and democratic transition*.

Today many of us activists in the Eritrean Diaspora engaged in political organisations, civil society associations or human rights advocacy groups are gathered here to participate in this symposium on *Change and Democratic Transition*. The central question facing us is whether we Eritrean activists are prepared to complement the effort for change and make a positive contribution to a stable democratic transition in our beloved country. We must ascertain that, in the final analysis, the destiny of Eritrea lies in the hands of the Eritrean people. And as a significant component of Eritrean society, we in the Diaspora can play a catalytic and supportive role in the processes of change and democratic transition.

The Symposium will focus on the following five main topics:

(1) State Construction: A Secular Civic State or a State of Subnational Identities?

Eritrea is the homeland (Fatherland or Motherland) of all Eritrean citizens. It belongs equally to all Eritrean citizens. As such, is the Eritrea of the future that we wish to see built a secular, civic and united State of Eritrea where every Eritrean citizen, irrespective of nationality, religion, region, tribe, gender, etc., lives in equal rights, equal freedoms and equal opportunities or a State of Eritrea organised along various sub-national identities? Which alternative offers the greater possibility to bring about equitable democratic governance, consensual national harmony, prosperity and tranquility?

The first panel will present comments and analyses on the decisive issue of State Construction that can serve as a basis for open discussion.

(2) Reviving the Eritrean Economy

All available statistical data and development indicators show that our national economy has, during the past twenty years, experienced a steady downslide to the bottom, registering substantial contraction. Mired in a quagmire of mass poverty and deprived even of basic necessities, our people have been relegated to a miserable existence of privation from extreme want. A malicious leader, a malevolent regime and rampant corruption have squandered our country's potential for economic growth and development. This adverse situation has made Eritreans victims of indignity, migration and suffering.

Otherwise, our illustrious and hardworking people, given access to proper education and gainful employment, could have deployed the acquired modern science and technology to boost their productive capacity and develop our country's adequate natural resources on land and sea and, like most of the peoples of the world, lead normal life in dignity and enjoy prosperity in their own country.

The second panel will present comments and analyses on Reviving the Eritrean Economy, the Economics of Transition and the Role of Foreign Direct Investment in Economic Development that can serve as a basis for open discussion.

(3) Change and Democratic Transition

The objective conditions for change in our country are ripe. The subjective conditions are also steadily ripening despite the brutal measures taken from time to time to suppress its development. Change would inevitably come the moment the subjective conditions ripen on par with the objective conditions. It should, however, be borne in mind that there would be difficult challenges on the way. Changing a regime and replacing it with a better one is an arduous task; especially a dysfunctional, corrupt and bankrupt regime like ours. In general, it is easier to start from scratch than to mend or rebuild a system in ruins. Even when one is able to build the best political system, establishing a functioning, accountable government is a great feat that evolves through an extremely difficult and complex process requiring considerable care and effort.

In the final analysis, the human person, whether a man or a woman, is the decisive factor; an honest, committed and just person. Changing a regime permeated by corruption and impunity at all levels from top to bottom and replacing it with an effective and efficient instrument of justice, development and prosperity requires, at a minimum, a strong core of honest, competent, committed, and united leadership. Indeed, it demands the deployment of a coherent group of leaders who work with solid internal unity, command broad popular respect and possess the strength and moral authority that emanates from absolute integrity and commitment to the public interest. Furthermore, it necessitates an accountable, responsive and transparent

governance as well as an honest, efficient and neutral civil service that operates on the basis of merit.

What is to be done then in order for change in our country to lead to a genuine democratic system that subscribes to the supremacy of the law, administers justice, promotes development, and brings about prosperity and tranquility? And what would be our role?

We look forward to the third panel to present comments and analyses on Change and Democratic Transition that would serve as a basis for open discussion.

(4) The Current State of Play in Diaspora Political Activism

Political activism in the Diaspora has done a commendable job in exposing the repressive nature of the authoritarian regime; in raising the awareness of the international community of the plight of the Eritrean people; and awakening the consciousness and engagement of many Eritrean citizens. It is undeniable, however, that the constant divisions in its ranks, splits and splintering, internal bickering, reliance on external forces, infiltration of agents and agent *provocateurs*, etc., has dented the strength of its political opposition and undermined the effectiveness of its efforts. The outcome is like a merry-go-round in circular politics.

It is no secret that the authoritarian regime has deployed an extensive network of intelligence and information in the Diaspora, just as it does at home, to sow division and discord in order to subvert opposition and derail attempts at coalescence so as to prolong its rule. It is an open secret that the regime and enemies of an independent sovereign State of Eritrea conduct a persistent and systematic smear campaign of slander, fake news, blackmail and character assassination through covert and overt acts carried out by agents infiltrated into the ranks of the opposition under the guise of “justice seekers” as well as sectarian elements of all hues and colours. The aim is to undermine Eritrean nationalism, weaken the nationalist movement and make our people lose hope of the future of Eritrea.

Nevertheless, we, as a whole, as dedicated activists and patriotic individuals should not waste time and effort responding to the deliberate attempts of the agent *provocateurs* and detractors who try to pull us back. Nor should we be deterred from our effort by their destructive campaigns. That would be not only falling into their trap, but also allowing them to succeed in slowing down or derailing our push towards progress. Instead, the nationalist movement should provide guidance on issues and developing events of national importance. Furthermore, community leaders and representatives, activists and concerned individuals should endeavour to serve as positive examples. We have a responsibility to focus on practical work to articulate a stance that defends and advocates for the interest of the people and the country; formulate a forward-looking strategic perspective; and transmit a positive and constructive message that inspires hope. We need to strengthen our effort more than ever before.

The fourth panel will present comments and analyses on The Current State of Play in Diaspora Political Activism that would serve as a basis for open discussion.

(5) Building a Common Vision for Change and Democratic Transition

One of the basic objectives of this kind of symposium is to develop common knowledge and understanding of the historical evolution, contemporary situation, and present condition of our people and country; to cultivate a shared vision about the Eritrea of the future; to explore a strategy needed to make the shared vision a reality; and to draw up a winning programme of action to engage in joint work.

The fifth and final panel will present comments and analyses on Building a Common Vision for Change and Democratic Transition that would serve as a basis for open discussion.

A panel comprising a moderator and three panelists will address each topic to be followed by open discussion.

I hope that this important symposium, convened at a decisive moment in the history of our country and the condition of our people under the theme of Change and Democratic Transition, would conclude with an outcome that helps to promote a common understanding of the situation of our country and people; cultivate a shared vision of the future of Eritrea; and articulate the kind of preparation we need make in order to accelerate change and catalyse stable democratic transition in our country.

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!