

New or Recycled?

Mahmud Saleh

Thursday, June 07, 2018

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's executive committee has finally and officially accepted the Algiers accord and said it is committed to fully implementing it. The EPRDF executive committee's statement said that it has accepted and is committed to "fully implement the Algiers agreement and decisions of the Eritrea–Ethiopia Boundary Commission to restore peace and stability."



But is this new? It is new if you think incrementally; it is not new if you take the large picture into account. And here is why;

1. The EEBC gave 125-page long verdict on 13 April 2002, and it was the Foreign Minister of Ethiopia, Sium Mesfun who ignited a country-wide celebration claiming that Badme, the flash-point village, and its contested environs were awarded to Ethiopia. Thus he claimed "Ethiopia is satisfied with the decision. We hope that the decision will once and for all seal any attempt by military adventurers to change boundaries by forceful mean[...]. It is a victory of law over the rule of the jungle." [2]

You think that was it. No. It took few days to sink in the minds of Ethiopian leaders that Badme was awarded to Eritrea. They reversed gears.

First, they hired experts to find cracks in the ruling, which did not work as the verdict was water-tight. Then they indicated they were going to reject it because it was not "fair and just." And finally, after their futile attempts to reverse the verdict using legal loopholes, they came up with a "Five Points" plan, a plan that was void of any point, let alone five.

In the years since, their charlatans, including some Eritreans, have worked hard to frustrate attempts made to persuade Ethiopia to abide by an agreement it had signed. So in this sense, it is not new, remember Sium Mesfun's initial elation. Now, do we have any concrete reassurance that this is, in fact, a new policy, a reverse of a reverse? I would wait and see.

But if you see it incrementally yes it is new. Ethiopia had initially accepted it with fanfare and urged the world to compel Eritrea to accept it. Then, it said it was unfair and unjust and threatened it would pull out of the agreement. Then, it said it accepted it "in principle" and proposed the infamous "five points plan." Now, it is saying it has accepted it. With the current climate in Ethiopia, where TPLF dominance is slipping rapidly, there is hope. In that sense we can take it as a new proposal.

2. Ethiopia has a bad track record when it comes to keeping promises. Remember, Ras Alula deceitful promise to Ras Weldenkiel? How about Haile Selassie's broken promise? Add: TPLF's recent history of accepting EEBC ruling, and then reversing, and then

modifying and qualifying its acceptance, and now accepting it!! TPLF's decision to make Eritrea as a sacrificial lamb to consolidate its grip on Ethiopia, and its insatiable appetite to grab sovereign Eritrean lands including our port of Assab, makes us not to believe what we hear until we see it on the ground.

But there is hope----

The current PM knows he came to power through popular support. And if there is anything TPLF will regret, it is that its destructive policies on Eritrea and its people have made Eritreans reconfigure their relationship with other ethnic groups of Ethiopia. While Eritreans have no bad wishes for the people of Tigray, they will have a hard time forgiving the elites of TPLF. Eritreans, instead, have spread and rewired their relations with the people of Oromo, Amara and other ethnic groups who had also been the recipients of the destructive policies of TPLF. The base of power has shifted, and with it, there is hope that Ethiopia's current PM will continue his bold initiatives. As a man who had fought on that cursed war, he knows the cost of war, on its economic and psychosocial aspects. But we will watch for the tanks of Ethiopia to roll back from the plains of Badme and other Eritrean-ruled territories. Therefore, the ball is still in the Ethiopian court.

3. **Eritrea has a a reliable track records:** Eritrea had honored its obligation even when verdicts were not fair and just. For instance, in its clashes with Yemen, Eritrea accepted the verdict of the court, in spite of it being so unjust. Also, in the case of EEBC, Eritrea accepted the ruling regardless of the loss of chunks of land it had believed belonged to it.

But a verdict is a verdict and Eritrea accepted it as per the spirit and the letter of the verdict. Not only that but it has been calling on Ethiopia and the international community to resolve the situation according to to the agreement Ethiopia had signed. So, when you have two parties, one who has had a clean track record and one a checkered one, you better watch for the one that has been untrustworthy.

4. Why so much emphasis on praising Ethiopia? It is amazing how some Eritreans have tried to frame the news. Instead of putting things in their proper context and call Ethiopia to show us action, they have been congratulating it for taking a "bold" initiative. I have not seen as much congratulations going to the people of Eritrea who have withstood unimaginable isolation and pressure. It is shameful. Some samples:
5. awate.com wrote

"Ethiopia reiterates its acceptance of the boundary ruling." [3]

Look at the carefully chosen heading. The choice of a news-heading is important because it sets the tone, and gives the reader a summary of the detail. By choosing the word "reiterates" Awate.com is trying to convey the message that Ethiopia had in the past accepted the boundary ruling, but it did not get a partner. The cue is clear; it is saying Eritrea was the one frustrating the implementation of the EEBC ruling.

My criticism to Awate.com becomes more clear when you consider the following;

On April 24, 2018, awate.com wrote an editorial under " Eritrea; Ethiopia's Achilles heel- will PM Ahmed succeed in bringing peace?" Awate wrote that editorial after the newly appointed PM of Ethiopia indicated he would work to bring peace to the two countries.

Now, look at the heading "Will PM Ahmed succeed in bringing peace?" The heading implies previous Ethiopian PMs tried but did not succeed, and asks "will he succeed" this time? Now, the intention of the editors is clear. They are trying to persuade readers that Ethiopia has been trying to bring peace but it did not get a partner. This gets crystal clear when you go a few paragraphs down the article.

After having showered the new PM with niceties, as it often does, the editorial goes:

“For years this website has advanced the view that the un-demarcated borders cannot be a reason to keep life in a never-ending standstill because many countries in the region also have un-demarcated, or highly contested border issues. But that has not prevented any of them from having normal relationships with each other. One example is the Egyptian-Sudanese border dispute over the Halaib region, a dispute that has not prevented Sudan and Egypt from having normal relations where people travel and trade freely.”[4]

Look how the editorial trivialize the issue by comparing it to the border dispute between Sudan and Egypt? The dispute between Sudan and Egypt is of low level nature and is in its initial phase in terms of its legal process. The Ethio-Eritrean conflict consumed around 100, 000 lives and the border is still heavily militarized; both countries are technically in a state of war. How does this comparison square? I don't know. But it does not look good.

1. Petros Tesfagiorgis also penned an article calling “Eritreans must support the move...” and largely leaned on praising PM Abiy of Ethiopia.

One must ask: and when did we stop calling for peace? Why is the burden on Eritreans instead of calling on Ethiopia to walk the walk, as Tesfanews, and Ambassador Andebrhan Woldegiorgis have succinctly put it? [5,6] Why so much blame-shifting? Call the damn spade a spade.

1. Asmarino.com's editorial was even blatant in its distortion. It stated that Eritrea's Information Minister, yemane G/Meskel, had in the past said that the ball was in the Ethiopian court. Its Tigrigna editorial read: “ The new EPRDF Executive Committee's statement returned the ball into the Eritrean courre, and appears to be an answer to Eritrean demands.[7]

This is to remind ourselves that while the news is good we have to push Ethiopia to take the right action. No polishing needed. Both peoples have suffered of the inaction or action Ethiopia has taken in regard to this matter, and we should set the record straight. Eritrea has been on the right side of history as far as the Algiers Agreement is concerned, and it has been the victim of Ethiopia's belligerent position and the acquiescence of the international community.

It is good, but not good for Aigaforum and Tigraionline

The EPRDF EC decision could serve a breakthrough, and I welcome it with the usual reservation and guardedness that all victims display. If the Ethiopian government means what it is saying, it is indeed good for the region and particularly for the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia. It should not have waited this long and, this time too, it should not be another diplomatic stint. The region deserves some kind of semblance. Some though are not happy.

As soon as the news broke out, the internet has been on fire. Aigaforum.com and Tigraionline.com, both TPLF mouthpieces, went all red. In the past, both websites, did not only declare the Algiers Accord as "null and void" but pressured the TPLF-controlled-Ethiopian government to take military action against Eritrea.

This time too they are exhibiting signs of severe convulsions. These websites and other anti-Eritrea Tigray elites have played a destructive role in delaying the process; they did everything to present themselves as being the makers and shakers of the process. They even resorted to as far as reversing Eritrea's independence or pushing for measures aimed at grabbing strategic sovereign Eritrean territories such as the port of Assab.

Come now, and they have already hinted they would do everything to offset any chance of hope. What they fail to grasp is the situation in Ethiopia has been changing fast, and their three-decades domination of Ethiopian politics is shrinking to their proper size, more quickly than they could handle.

The TPLF represents 6% of the Ethiopian people, i.e., if we assume it has the support of the whole of Tigray province; it has enjoyed a total monopoly over economic, security and military assets of Ethiopians. Its fatal characteristics was greed, which blinded it to Ethiopianize itself (the failure to move from a one-ethnic organization to a government, a political etho, and an army that represented the diversity of Ethiopia). All vital assets including top military ranks were held by Tigrians.

After three decades of such an oppressive rule, honorable members of the coalition TPLF controls had to raise to assert their people's calls. They summoned the courage, and they have the support of their people. So, it appears, telling TPLF bosses to play by the book would not be that difficult.

So far, PM Ahmed's bold initiatives are commendable, The mother of all tests though is awaiting him. Is he going to persuade or compel anti-Eritrea TPLF elements to fully implement the EEBC ruling or he will experience a resistance he could not overcome? Time will tell. But if he proceeds with the implementation of the EEBC ruling (as declared in his EC comunique), he will surely be remembered as the man of courage. He will find a welcoming crowd in Asmara. Eritreans will renew their goodwill towards Ethiopia, and the future will be bright.

So, what is to be done?

1. PM Abiy of Ethiopia will have to accept the virtual demarcation and sign it off. UN cartographic unit had finished its job. You have a copy of the virtually demarcated map; it is recognized by the UN as final and binding.
2. Withdraw your troops from Eritrean territories and let the damn pillars be placed where the late PM Meles Zenawi and his inept successor Desalegn Hailemariam refused to let them be placed.
3. Once you do either or a combination of the two, then you can place call on Eritrea and tell the president the ball has been kicked into Eritrea's court.

It is not about Badme; it is about the rule of law

Some Ethiopians and Eritreans believe that “handing Badme to Issaias would reward him.” This is a wrong characterization. First, the issue is not about Badme; it is about honoring an agreement. It is about respecting the sovereignty of a neighbor country. It is about trust.

When seen in its comprehensive sense, Ethiopia refusal of an agreement that should have been concluded in 2002 has cost Eritrea economically, socially, and politically, perhaps, more than what the struggle for its liberation had demanded. But as the maxim goes: better late than never.

The start of any bilateral relations should be anchored on legally binding treaties. Sensational overtones are not going to sway Eritreans. “We are one people,” did not save us from killing each other.

Therefore the steps to be followed would hopefully look something like this:

1. Finalize the Algiers Agreement according to the EEBC ruling.
2. Start immediate bilateral negotiations; Eritrea is not required to make any concessions.
3. Trust building measures such as closing the camps of oppositions in both countries and toning down hostile propaganda against each other.
4. A Cooling period that would enjoy low level attempts of opening borders and commerce to resume.
5. Ethiopia is welcome to use our ports, we need its money; Ethiopians are welcome to enjoy the Red Sea Coast for their holidays and investments; Ethiopia opens the same opportunities for Eritreans.
6. Second phase can move to more strategic relations (may take years) such as mutual security and defense pacts, joint ventures in strategic assets, freedom of movement of people to cross borders without visas, educational and technological exchanges, etc.

7. Creating a coordinating body that ensures misunderstandings and emerging conflicts are resolved properly with the aim that future generations will never experience stupid and ugly wars.
8. All the above proposals are based on mutual respect

I hope this time Ethiopia means what it is saying. I also hope the peaceful people of Eritrea and Ethiopia finally get a respite from wars and conflicts. The failure to Finalize the Algiers Agreement has been a stumbling block for regional cooperation. And the blame rests squarely on Ethiopia. Those who are praising Ethiopia lavishly, I would kindly ask you to remember the Eritrean people who have been the primary victims of Ethiopia's renegeing. Eritrea's steadfastness and endurance and the lost opportunities due to Ethiopia's "regime change" should be the one highlighted. Ethiopia could have taken this same position in 2002 and both countries would have enjoyed the fruits of cooperation.

Selam to both peoples.

Related Readings

1. http://www.waltainfo.com/news/editors_pick/detail?cid=40241
2. <http://www.eritrea.be/old/eritrea-ethiopia-boundary.htm>
3. <http://awate.com/ethiopia-reiterates-acceptance-boundary-ruling/>
4. <http://awate.com/eritrea-ethiopias-achilles-heel-will-pm-abyi-ahmed-succeed-bringing-peace/>
5. <https://www.tesfanews.net/ethiopia-decides-fully-implement-algiers-eebc-border-ruling-with-eritrea/>
6. <https://eri-platform.org/events/new-hope-peace-eritrea-ethiopia/>
7. <http://asmarino.com/articles/articles-video/5072-2018-06-06-02-26-46>

Contact me at sheideli95@gmail.com