

## **THE FRANKFORT WORKSHOP COULD BE THE ONLY CANDLE IN THE ERITREAN DARKNESS:**

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“The saddest part of the human race is we're obsessed with this idea of 'us and them,' which is really a no-win situation, whether it's racial, cultural, religious or political.” (David John Matthews: a South African-born American singer-songwriter, musician and actor; born January 9, 1967)

Without any monotonous introduction about the political, economic, and social crisis Eritrea has been experiencing for the last two decades and the dangers hovering over the country, in case the regime collapses all of a sudden, I tend to go to my topic right away.

The Bayto has existed for enough time, but nothing has been achieved yet. It is not only unable to expand amid the justice seekers, but it is almost unraveling, sinking itself in a bottomless quagmire. If no one could see this, then he/she should be blind or unwilling to see the very dire future for Eritrea. What makes one think, after all these years, that the Bayto is ever going to work together as a team, expand to include others, and penetrate into the country, preparing the people to rise up and lead the transition with others? The longer we do nothing, the more our future tasks will be compounded and more precious sacrifices would inevitably be paid. We should just remember the proverb, “A stitch in time saves nine.” We have already been late, but late is better than never: we could still prevent some possible tragedies from taking place.

Most definitely, realizing that the cost of inaction to face all possible dangers is going to be massive, we were supposed to have an urgent salvation plan. But the question remains: How could Eritreans think of putting together a salvation plan when they are terribly divided among themselves and no one umbrella capable of bringing all forces together has evolved yet? The answer, I trust, as others would do, is to try untried ways to create the desired umbrella under which a political dialogue among Eritrean groups could be possible. Of course, standing folded-handed, though knowing we are sure that we would finally be caught bare-footed when the regime that is in comma collapses, is not a solution at all. At the same time, we need to answer the question: Which is more important: the tasks that need to be achieved or the achiever whatever name he takes? I think we need to see the holding of the Frankfort Workshop from these perspectives.

Many would agree with me that the workshop constitutes a different approach that should be given chance and critical support (in the sense of analyzing the merits and faults) to prove itself. We have read about many workshops, but in all cases, the participants constituted homogenous groups.

However, it seems that this workshop has moved the inter-Eritrean political debate from the level of hermetic conversations between like-minded circles, whose conferences have never gone beyond monologues, to dialogues between different contingents (we hope all contingents would eventually come on board), and we hope it would come out with resolutions on which all agree, putting areas of conflict aside.

Another question that needs to be addressed is: How did Eritreans react to the workshop? The reply is a combination of silence, under-reaction, and over-reaction. Under-reaction usually reflects insufficient enthusiasm, force, or emphasis. In predicting the future, it seems that some Eritreans got anchored by salient past events, consequently under-reacting towards the workshop. On the other hand, others over-reacted by showing some unnecessary or inappropriate force or negatively emotional display. Although the reasons in both types of reactions are understandable, we need to cross those barriers, looking at the common good and hoping that our fears and feelings of insecurity would not come true. Nevertheless, I would worry more about silence than about under-reaction and over-reaction.

In theory, we cannot deny anybody the right to remain silent and the ability to avoid self-incrimination. In fact, we value the right of silence. Nonetheless, when the silence is toward a major event that could have seriously positive or negative impact on the destiny or wellbeing of a country, then it needs to be taken seriously and addressed. I am particularly worried about the silence of some Eritrean opposition media outlets known to be among the most outspoken, politically savvy, militant, and have a natural flair for connecting with activities and functions related to the struggle against the monster regime, with moderators reputed for their effective political articulation. Whatever reasons they have, their silence was shocking and surprising for most people I usually discuss current Eritrean developments with. I thought the public should have been informed about it by these prominent opposition websites, even as a news item, no matter one agrees with the idea of holding the workshop or not, or having reservation on the social composition of the invited organizations or the issues listed as items of the agenda or doubts about its purpose or the motive of the host institute, its independence or neutrality or the alleged circles behind the attempt. All questions and reservations that could possibly be raised do not make the workshop a minor event that should be ignored altogether. I would expect, given the potential of our activists, more reactions with in-depth treatment and analysis that could construct, advise and even warn from repeating past mistakes. But the thing is that the workshop that reflected a reasonable degree of diversity that could serve as a nucleolus to be built on, did not seem to have registered on the political radar of some of our most prominent websites. This is to say that remaining unperturbed and unresponsive in the face of a major event (no matter whether it is positive or negative) raises many questions amidst Eritreans because it is not the rule across the board, and our people expect feedback, analysis, and possibly guidance, to support or oppose, from those they consider to be among the most enlightened, outspoken, and linked to the people's cause.

It would not be an exaggeration to argue that silence is as active as verbal reaction and sometimes more eloquent than words. I think they should have the moral courage to say this is right and that is wrong, suggesting corrections and areas that need improvement. Even if they have some reservations for one reason or another, is silence the right reaction considering the weight of the event or the urgency of the matter? This stony silence has been taken by some as loudly saying, “If I am not in it, I have to disagree with it tacitly”.

As long as the dialogue eventually accommodates all, there is nothing wrong in starting as a small group to be expanded and take its final shape with time. To any objective Eritrean, there is no political party or civil society organization, among the invited, that should have not been included. All are a part of the social fabric of the Eritrean society and its cultural riches.

I agree with some critics who have pointed out that the principles the workshop agreed on are things to be included, among other refinements and additions to come in the future constitution, after their approval by the people. In other words, this means that most of these principles could not be implemented at present by these groups or others, for that matter. Nevertheless, we should not miss the point that these principles could serve to bring all forces together and enable them to work in harmony, while at the same time serving as the ground on which they would cooperate in future to shape the constitution and ensure a peaceful and smooth transition. What is wrong in that then?

We should not look at the dialogue as if it is a wrestling or pre-boxing announcement. At the same time, we should not waste our time on conspiracy theories and political paranoia that reflect a lack of faith in each other, while the lives of millions of our people are at stake. It is high time that we do something in unison to save the country, realizing that the exodus of the Eritrean youth to Europe has created serious worries, mounting pressure, and favourable mood that we could exploit to get support and help in our struggle against the regime and our efforts for a peaceful and smooth transition. We need to HIT THE NAIL WHEN IT IS HOT. We have been conspiracy-obsessed for a long time but nothing came out of all that. Consequently, let us change that mentality, make the right choices, and take responsibility for the choices we make. This is at the heart of the matter.

In politics, it is not possible for any side to win everything or lose everything. There should be a fine balance according to which every political party or organization of civil society, ethnic, religious, linguistic or cultural group should be flexible enough to bend and compromise so that all ensure the salvation of the country. The salvation plan needs wise men and women who could put the interests of the nation above all other considerations. To that end, a political dialogue is very imperative, and it should accommodate all, keep some achievements for each side, and it should be based on the recognition of the right of the existence of all Eritreans. If we do not see things this way, our situation would be fitting well into the Amharic saying, “Yefukeker Beit Sayezaga Yadral.”

The workshop could be the only candle in the Eritrean darkness, and we should not put it off. Discouraging it through dead silence or over-reaction will cost the country and its people dearly in the

years to come. As Eritreans we need a pause with the self and see how far we are from action and how far we sound to be remote from the realities in the country. It is only a collective action by those with ELF and EPLF backgrounds, coupled with those non-affiliated ones, that could take the struggle forward, save the country, and put it on the right track; not the divisive idea of “us” and “them” David John Mathews had warned us against. We are waiting patiently to hear about ground-breaking resolutions that could let all progressive forces to work together and bring the miseries and tragedies of our people to an end. That is impossible without harmony and brotherhood. We will only win as a team and lose as a team too. If any pessimist goes as far as saying nothing good comes from a change in which former EPLF cadres would play a role, I would tell him or her that with any new government in Eritrea, at least I would no longer have to worry about my kids going to Adi Abeto jail for playing soccer on a basketball court. At the same time, any new government in Eritrea would be easier to change and with fewer sacrifices, if it is not the right government people struggled for.