

BETTING ON SELF-IMPOSED OUTLAW WHILE DISREGARDING THE OWNERS OF THE COUNTRY: A LOSING BET AND A SHORTSIGHTED GAMBLE

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“የጅብ ችኩል ቀንድ ይነካል” (An Amharic proverb)

As Eritreans who craved peace for a long time, we jumped with joy when Atse Isias unexpectedly surprised us by taking a friendly overture at Ethiopia, which he used to consider an enemy, accepting the peace initiative of the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Dr. Abiy Ahmed. That was the emotional side, but we have serious suspicion that he did that for the wrong reason.

Atse Isias has never believed in peace. His past and present confirm that everything he does is either to keep his crown or to settle an old score with an actual or perceived foe. Moreover, no objective fact taker would believe that the head of the murderous regime for which regional stability is not an important objective, had accepted the initiative because of his concern about the stability of Ethiopia. Anybody who believes that claim should have a partial or a subjective understanding about Atse Isias, who has neither been in peace with himself nor with his own people since the first day of the independence of the country. On the flip side, no person with a sound mind would think that Dr. Abiy Ahmed’s peace initiative was a mere political posturing or made for publicity.

There is a serious problem Ethiopia has been facing as a landlocked country since the independence of Eritrea, and the Prime Minister is determined to fix it. Nevertheless, the problem is that Dr. Abiy Ahmed did not choose the right partner in Eritrea. In my humble opinion, what Dr. Abiy Ahmed needed was a partner who believes in similar principles and values, not one who believes in temporary benefits, and has contempt for democracy and human rights. Instead, we see him betting on a self-imposed outlaw and one of Africa's longest-serving heartless butcher, on whom the sky is darkening because he is in a bottleneck due to his horrible crimes that include the death and the misery of hundreds of thousands of people. Nobody would wonder here why getting out of isolation had been an important objective for the Atse when Dr. Abiy Ahmed came with a helping hand to save him. Simply put, that choice made by Dr. Abiy Ahmed has made Atse Isias the only dictator exempted from the normal scrutiny, and the Atse thinks now he is pretty untouchable. It is sad to observe that Dr. Abiy Ahmed did that disregarding the owners of the country: the Eritrean people. To be honest, I have a hard time squaring that, and so I ask: *Does Dr. Abiy Ahmed really want justice and democracy for all peoples of the region as he gives the impression or for Ethiopians only?*

The bitter reality in front of us is that a regime that should be confronted and eradicated like cancer because it enslaves its citizens, is befriended and made stronger, instead. That is a massive blind spot, which our people have found to be not only extremely upsetting but defying logic and common sense too. Against this backdrop, we will try to show why betting on Atse Isias is a losing bet, at the end of the day, and a shortsighted gamble for Dr. Abiy Ahmed and his Ethiopian team.

As no concerned Eritrean has not read or monitored the details about the achievements of Dr. Abiy Ahmed during his first hundred days, there is no need to list the achievements. In fact, we are honoured to see an African leader taking those measures that show he is for the people; not for the officialdom. Nevertheless, after watching the flow of events during the last few weeks, it is hard to avoid feeling profoundly stunned at the signing of Dr. Abiy multiple agreements to co-exist peacefully with the butcher, who has no mandate and is acting single-handedly, as if Eritrea is his private property. So profoundly stunned, one cannot avoid raising a host of teasing questions among which are the following:

- Can a brutal dictatorship in Eritrea or a slavery system, to be more precise, and an emerging democracy in Ethiopia co-exist?
- For Dr. Abiy Ahmed, is it only in Ethiopia that the opinions of the citizens on major national issues should matter? How about in Eritrea? Shouldn't the voice of the people be heard?
- Can't Dr. Abiy Ahmed and his government see one of the world's inhuman regimes escaping scrutiny and accountability through them? Why do they take such a dangerous historical responsibility on which history will be merciless one day?
- Was it really difficult for Dr. Abiy Ahmed to know that he is dealing with a monster who has crippled Eritrea, a country with no individual and political freedoms but a single person in power regulating the country by pressing a button?
- If "power to the people" is a guiding principle for Ethiopians: Why should it be different when it comes to Eritrea? Why do Dr. Abiy Ahmed and his team indirectly deny the Eritrean

people that right, by allying themselves with the dictator who is against all rights of the people?

- Aren't Dr. Abiy Ahmed and the Ethiopian Government bestowing legitimacy on the evaporating ruling gang while ignoring the emerging new forces (the justice seekers) who will replace the fast-collapsing regime?
- Would such agreements with a butcher who does not have any mandate from the people be valid and binding on future Eritrean government that would come after the downfall of the ruling gang any time?
- Why is the rush if the objective is to have permanent peace and build economic cooperation that could be promoted to economic integration? Wasn't it wiser for Ethiopians to remember their own proverb which teaches the wisdom: “ሲሮጡ የታጠቁት ሲሮጡ ይፈታል”?
- Doesn't the rush give credence to the suspicion that Eritrea of the 1960s is coming back and that all moves look like the first phase of the dissolution of the Federation through a gradual process?
- Doesn't this rush cost the Ethiopians politically and economically in the near future and on the long-run?
- If Ethiopians are against dictatorships in the region and in the world at large: Does the peace process embolden the ruling gang in Eritrea or speed up its downfall?

- Isn't it arrogance from the part of the Ethiopian politicians and some Ethiopian opposition media outlets to give a lavish praise to Atse Isias, as if they know a soft human side in him that the Eritrean people failed to identify during the Atse's 27-year rule and decades of the war of liberation?
- Is there anything Atse Isias has promised to give to Ethiopia which the newly emerging forces, that would come to power one day (as Dr. Abiy and his group did), would not?
- Could Dr. Abiy Ahmed imagine that the interests of the Eritrean people could at all be represented by a person the people have never elected or given a mandate? How does this square with his reality as an elected Prime Minister and his firm belief in elections?
- Are Ethiopians really maintaining neutrality in Isias's war against the Eritrean people when they engage in this ugly drama? Is neutrality enough for that matter when humanity is at the verge of extinction in Eritrea? Where is the religious faith of Dr. Abiy Ahmed from this tragedy?
- Is Dr. Abiy Ahmed dreaming that Atse Isias will change from dictatorship to democracy, and liberalize the country?
- Were the wounds of our people fully respected by Ethiopians, including Dr. Abiy Ahmed?

Through the questions above, I have tried to raise the basic points neither for spin nor to pour cold water on the high hopes aroused by the wisdom and honesty of Dr. Abiy Ahmed for his country and people, nor to give a dreadful picture about Ethiopia and Ethiopians. It

is to express our legitimate pricy concerns and let Dr. Abiy Ahmed, the leader of a neighboring country (not our leader as Atse Isias had designated him to be) know that his policy of “Madamar” is a sugar-coated poison that we automatically reject because it goes counter to our national interests and the goals for which we had fought for over three decades and had paid treasures in the form of martyrs, hoping that Dr. Abiy Ahmed, for whom we have the highest regard, would have the appetite to listen to the side of the Eritrean people. But: ***Does this mean that we are against peace?***

We are for peace, permanent peace that has popular dynamics behind it; not the one hidden from the public eye. Here we mean peace, whose details discussed and worked out with the representatives of the people, the owners of the country; not designed by a butcher who rules by the gun, has no mandate from the people and acts unilaterally on issues of war and peace, that are the sole prerogative of the people in Ethiopia and everywhere in the world. As we see it, and time will tell, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, whom many of us took for a principled democrat, a stout freedom and human rights fighter, and a consistent visionary leader has disregarded the human tragedy in Eritrea just to snatch concessions from Eritrea’s butcher in the name of peace, in return strengthening his hands, and prolonging the pains and the sufferings of the Eritrean people. This is not peace but the first phase of the re-annexation of Eritrea through love rhetoric, the slogan of “Madamar”, which we see as the policy of “killing by kissing” and the use of Atse Isias as the Trojan Horse. ***Why are the agreements and all details kept secret from the people if the intention is noble?*** Forgive me for looking to this with a skeptical eye.

It was the lack of transparency from both sides, especially Atse Isias, their explicit statements that sent disturbing messages, and suspicious behaviours, that gave rise to these wild speculations and such negative readings. Only thieves hide their moves until time tells what they exactly did. This is lack of humanity, adventurism, the revival of the expansionist ambition of imperial Ethiopia in a new dress (the same wine in a different bottle) and a plot of the time; all done in the name of peace. Since what is going on is flat out dangerous, no wise person would believe all this drama will pass without any repercussions for both sides. But the question that could be raised loudly is: *Why should we at this particular time marked by the rise of the “wise” Dr. Abiy Ahmed to power lose our ability to accept each other, as sovereign states, when cooperation and understanding have become more imperative and easier than ever before?* The Ethiopian ambition has always existed since the day of the independence of Eritrea but the irony is that this time, with the coming of Dr. Abiy Ahmed to power, it was raised to a new level. The bitter thing to know is: *Who is driving that?*

We hoped and thought that the emergence of Dr. Abiy Ahmed, as a dynamic national leader, will bring the powerful and the well-stocked minds of the region together to speed up the downfall of the dictators and set the region in an effective and smooth democratization process. The question is: *What made us expect that much from Dr. Abiy Ahmed?* His approach to governance was totally different from what we had seen in Africa. This has been clear from the principles and ethical values reflected in his speeches, lectures, and teachings. The same principles and ethical values have been gracefully implemented through the practical measures he took during in favour of social and political justice during his first hundred days. All these made us

conclude that he believes, “What is good for Ethiopia is equally good for Eritrea and other countries of the region”.

Using that impression as the point of departure, we thought he will act more actively at regional level to spread and defend the principles and ethical values he had spoken about and implemented in his country. Unfortunately, we were shamefully wrong: what has happened was the opposite when it comes to Eritrea. This imposes the question: *Did the Gulf rice (Butcher Sisy’s misnomer for Gulf money) contain him, fearing his principles and ethical values that are similar to those of Arab Spring would be a regional threat?* We do not know, but it is a fair assumption, given the role the Saudi and the Emirate money has played and still playing in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Libya, and strangely enough to influence Western elections. If their money crosses the Atlantic Ocean to influence US presidential elections: *What is the problem to contain Abiy Ahmed, given the importance of Ethiopia in Africa, its proximity to the Red Sea, which they dream to turn into their own lake, and the financial difficulties Ethiopia is currently facing?* This may also partially answer the question: *Who is driving that?*

But there is one fact we cannot deny. The coming of Dr. Abiy Ahmed to power by itself has opened the eyes of the peoples of the region and we are justified to theoretically believe that when Ethiopia catches cold, Eritrea will sneeze, and others will follow. If the social unrest by the “Quero” of Oromia and the “Fano” of the Amhara region have done that much to bring change, the Eritrean youth can do more, better, more effectively, and with no vandalism and violence because its small size makes it easier to organize, guide, and control so that things will not slide to unwanted violence and destruction. Now the

inspiration is there, and the flow of people and goods from Ethiopia, as a result of the open border, means the flow of ideas and experiences too. However: ***Can the Atse stop the influence coming across the border or from the south and manage to keep his throne safe?***

If the recent Ethiopian alliance with Atse Isias was for hidden motives related to enter-Ethiopian contradictions, as Eritreans, we distaste the act of allowing a foreign force to join the internal fight, as unpleasant and unacceptable, and we never hesitate to tell that it could be dangerous for the unity of Ethiopia. Atse Isias will eventually divide the Ethiopians, changing his alliance from one group to another and setting one group against another, until the country falls apart and totally disintegrates. Mark my words. But if the objective is to create favourable conditions for our two countries to grow together, we had warned and we warn again that it is impossible to achieve that when the butcher is in power in Eritrea. Read my previous article: ***REVEIEWING OUR TWISTED PRIORITIES AND FIXING THE DEEP DIVIDE AMONG ERITREANS FIRST***, Part II (www.togoruba.org, June 7, 2018). This paragraph also, in part, answers the question: ***Should Dictator Isias be trusted by the Ethiopians?***

Atse Isias has a pattern of building relations and raising the hopes of his partners high with lots of promises and pretensions that sound too good to be true, to finally switch to a different reality and abandon his partners or even blackmail or stab them at the back, once the honeymoon finishes. Dr. Abiy Ahmed and his government are putting trust on a person who has operated like a snake with all his allies. They are advised to study the first-hand experiences of others, specially the Wayane, the Qataris, the Sudanese, the Iranians, the Libyans, the

Yemenis and others. Anybody could accuse me of bias and pessimism, but I trust, it would be more realistic to expect the present state of affairs to be the calm before the storm of regional instability. In few words, no matter what Ethiopians do for Atse Isias, he will remain a latent threat to regional stability. We say this not because of extraordinary foresight, but because we recognize the simple fact that dictators cannot and should not be trusted. The history of world dictators consistently confirms that with concrete evidence.

Another basic question that needs to be raised here is: *Why is the settlement of the border conflict a top priority for the Eritrean people in their relations with Ethiopia?* The issue of ending the border dispute, which was supposedly to be negotiated as the central issue of the peace initiative, was unfortunately shrouded into ambiguity by the statements of the Atse and Dr. Abiy Ahmed for reasons that seem mysterious to the foreign observer, but very obvious for the Eritrean people. As it has been known to everybody, the border conflict was the excuse for all tragedies caused by the Atse. Ending the border conflict and delimiting the border, specifically means for Eritreans, focusing on the real issue: the removal of the ruling gang. That is the hard truth because the border conflict was the excuse for putting the constitution of the country on the shelf, the introduction and the continuation of the indefinite military service for about 20 years, the languishing of thousands of critics in prison without any rule of law and charges, the absence of any development whatsoever, the sufferings of different types of injustices by the people, and the abnormality of the life of our people in all walks of life, to mention a few. In few words, the ending of the border dispute pulls the carpet from underneath the dictator, who will be hit by the reality: no more excuses for anything because the no-war no-peace situation with

Ethiopia has ended. Nonetheless, the most embarrassing thing about the border issue is the Ethiopian position, which became the blue print of that of the butcher, who wants the issue to remain obscure and finally forgotten. I do not want to comment on the motive behind that from the Ethiopian side (the Eritrean side is obvious) but ask the question: *Are principles, ethical values, decency, civility and respect of the feelings of others, dying in Ethiopians?*

This will lead us to the question: *How do what the Ethiopian politicians are doing affect the future relations between the two countries after the downfall of this ruling gang?* Atse Isias was not elected and has no mandate from the Eritrean people to make decisions on issues related to the fate of the people and the country. Accordingly, the Eritrean people should not be expected to accept decisions or agreements on which they had never been consulted and that do not reflect the will of the people. On the other hand, the Ethiopian drama and the ulterior motives behind it, that have devalued trust in Ethiopia, will create a lot of uncertainty on how to deal with our neighbour in future, while undermining the possibility for long-term agreements and the ability of Ethiopia to lead peace efforts in the region. In a nutshell, betting on a dictator, while disregarding the people, is a primary recipe for regional instability. True, Eritrea, as a country, should not be an island because its prosperity and the ability to survive as a nation will depend on partners, but these partners should be the type we are happy to cooperate with; not the ones who stood with the butcher at the time our people needed understanding, solidarity, and support from an emerging democratic system we hoped to be our ally in future so that both countries form the nucleus to bring about democratic changes in the region. In this connection, to

urge the Ethiopian leaders to see things for what they are, one would ask them the following key questions:

- *Do you think the best way to guarantee permanent Ethiopian interests is through agreements with the dictator, who is everything Dr. Abiy Ahmed has talked against since his first day, instead of building alliance with the emerging forces (justice seekers) struggling to end the dictatorship and bring about a democratic change similar to yours?*
- *Do you really have a good sleep after carrying out such a dangerous plot of enabling the monster to continue his massacre and the campaign of uprooting the people from their country?*

We are not against the normalization of relations between Ethiopia and the Eritrean regime, though its human rights violations are so encompassing and severe to the extent that it could be said that it is running Eritrea as a concentration camp. But it was our sincere wish that Dr. Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian Prime Minister, would sympathize and show solidarity with the Eritrean people, in the way our people define the terms “sympathy” and “solidarity”.

In the West, we see the countries rhetorically endorse universal values of human rights and freedom up and until the moment that these values conflict with their own broad strategic interests. *Are we seeing this in Dr. Abiy Ahmed's Ethiopia today?* The answer is a positive one because we see that happening. As long as the Atse cooperates with Ethiopia by surrendering Eritrean national interests concerning the port of Assab and others, it does not matter to them how he treats the Eritrean people. At the same time, with regard to the rapprochement that took place between the two countries, we are shocked and

devastated to observe things sliding in the direction that benefits only one side: the Ethiopian side. On the contrary, Eritrea, whose people and its national interests are not represented in the negotiations at all, has to give everything to receive nothing. This reality is clearly visible for the naked eye; nobody needs a microscope to see it.

With regard to the situations detailed above, we tell Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed that Eritrea is not only land and sea but human beings too (the owners of the land and sea), with gallant history, ideals, dreams, aspirations, and pride. To that effect, if the principles and ethics he preaches do not matter for him when it comes to Eritrea, with all respect, we remind him of the moral responsibility on him not to do anything that harms or undermines the struggle of the Eritrean people for freedom, justice, and democracy. Though I am a big fan of Dr. Abiy Ahmed, as we have enough statues (leaders) to be worshipped in our region, it is appropriate to advise our Ethiopian brothers and sisters not to produce one more to worship.

As to the Eritrean nationalists, no matter they oppose or support the regime in Eritrea (a division negated by the current reality: the danger hovering over the sovereignty of the country), they should be urged to realize the dangers of the slogan of “Madamar”, dangerously creeping toward Eritrea, a sophisticated plot to undermine the sovereignty of the country through love rhetoric and in which Atse Isias is a key player. Though I could sound hypothetical, I would assume that no supporter of the regime would dare these days to disagree that the Atse has not achieved even one single thing in 27 years from what Dr. Abiy Ahmed has achieved in 100 days. Based on that assumption and taking into consideration the new reality the Atse is trying to sell about the insignificance of the border and the oneness of the Ethiopian

and Eritrean peoples, in addition to his delegation of power in governing Eritrea to Dr. Abiy Ahmed, I would ask the supporters of the Atse: *What is your justification to continue supporting him?*

As a final remark, I would urge some of the voices (other than the foot soldiers of the regime) we have heard supporting the slogan of “Madamar” but asking Dr. Abiy Ahmed for some narrow and opportunistic demands related to their region, to wise up and stand with their Eritrean brothers and sisters with whom they share the same fate. This is to say that nobody should try to benefit at the expense of the national interest; Eritrea will be for all and we will grow together. Before leaving it here, I have a question to share with readers: *What should be done to put brakes on the dangerous agenda of Atse Isias?*

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