

## ***ATSE ISIAS'S ERITREA: TYPICAL OF WHAT CORRUPTION CAN DO TO A NATION***

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*“Corruption should become a sad memory of a scourge that we need to conquer and overcome.” (Felipe VI, King of Spain: June 19, 2014-the present)*

There is a phenomenon that has become the subject of alarming talk during the last couple of months in some Eritrean opposition news coverage (specifically Radio Erena and Radio Medrek), to the extent that we cannot shut our eyes to. That is the phenomenon of corruption, which has never been absent from the news headlines for decades (as a major problem since the day of independence), reflecting endless waves of scandals, but this time it is present in a very alarming frequency that deafens our ears and breaks our hearts. In particular, the unethical phenomenon of corruption has been mentioned in the news coverage in different contexts or in connection with different circumstances forming the setting, but all raising a red flag. At the same time, in all cases, the perpetrators of the illegal acts have been those in the orbit of Atse Isias. *How do you receive the news that a car belonging to the Eritrean Defence Forces smuggling youth from Asmara all the way to Khartoum after having them released from prison? What would be your reaction to the news that a senior army officer losses Nekfa 100,000.00 in a single night in a gambling session, whereas the people, including government employees, cannot eat a single decent meal a day?*

Borrowing a page from the newly-elected leader of the Free World, Atse Isias and his loyal servants will not hesitate to dismiss the news coverage as “Fake News”. Even so, we do not worry about what our adversaries say by way of denying the truth, but we whisper to their

ears that the fact remains that they stand naked in front of the world. Accordingly, to any man or woman of conscience, these are not single instances but symptoms of a phenomenon that is growing daily and eating up in the Eritrean society. In few words, these examples show the tip of the iceberg, which ranges from high-level political graft that involves millions of dollars to a low-level bribe to police officers or custom officials, or other types of fraud in which senior army officers and politicians are involved. Imagine a plane reportedly loaded with personal gold of the Atse, leaving for Doha, or 36 kilos of gold caught at Asmara airport. *What absurd is the concept of Eritrean "Presidency" that gives the office holder the right to consider the state's coffers his personal property in the same way the Solomonic Dynasty had given to Emperor Haile Sellassie?* If anybody thinks we are giving a dreadful picture about the regime, then we would ask: *Is the Corruption Perception Index which has put Eritrea among the most corrupt states in the world for years in a row politically-motivated too?* It is devastating to note that, according to the African Union, corruption costs the whole African Continent roughly \$ 150.00 billion a year. *Could Eritrean economists tell the apologists of the regime Eritrea's share out of that total cost?*

Using the introduction above as the point of departure, we will get to the basics. To begin with, we will see the concept of corruption and all inter-related issues that would help us judge if there is corruption or not in Eritrea today.

According to TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL, corruption is the "...abuse of entrusted power for a private gain." Though it does not clearly say, the definition here is referring to a crime committed by officials who could be both public and private. At the same time, the phrase "for a private gain" in the definition is referring to the gain of the official himself/herself or for somebody else. It should be added here that we learn from sources related to TRANSPARENCY

INTERNATIONAL that corruption could be classified as grand, petty and political, depending on the amount of money lost and the sector where it occurs. If so: ***How do we explain each of these types of corruption?*** To sum up what I had read from different sources on this issue:

- **Grand Corruption:** consists of actions committed at higher level of government to distort policies or the central functioning of the state in order to benefit at the expense of the public good. **Can't we assign concrete names from the situation on the ground in Eritrea to this category?** No doubt, every reader would have concrete names at the tips of his/her fingers.
- **Petty Corruption:** refers to the day-to-day abuse of power by low and mid-level public officials while they interact with ordinary citizens. The abused citizens here are often those who try to access basic goods or services in schools, hospitals, police department, and other agencies. This group of public officials constitute the bulk in terms of number, and the forms of corruption in which they get involved include bribe, embezzlement, abuse of power and free labour, just to name a few. This does not mean that all low and mid-level civil servants are corrupt.
- **Political Corruption:** is when political decision makers manipulate policies, institutions and rules of procedure in the allocation of resources and financing. The aim of the political decision makers here is to abuse their position in order to sustain power, status and wealth. This category should include the Atse and his political aides.

For the sake of clarity, in relation to the name of the organization mentioned above in the definition and the introduction, we need to answer the question: *What is TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL referred to here as a source?* It is an international non-governmental organization based in Berlin, whose non-profit purpose is to combat corruption and prevent criminal activities arising from corruption. It is legally registered in Germany as a voluntary association, serving as an umbrella organization. It publishes Global Corruption Barometer (the largest survey in the world tracking public opinion on corruption) and the annual Corruption Perceptions Index. It has individual members and more than 100 national chapters that engage in fighting corruption in their home countries. This will walk us to the questions: *What is transparency? Why do we raise the concept here when the topic is corruption?*

Transparency refers to the shedding of light on rules, processes and actions. It is through transparency that the public knows why, how and how much about an issue. On the other hand, it is through transparency that the public officials or civil servants, managers, administrators and business people ensure to the public that they are acting in a visible and understandable manner, and report on what they are doing. In a nutshell, it is through transparency that the general public holds officials accountable for what they do. *Why is transparency important then?* It is the only and the safest method through which the society guards against corruption. Add to that, transparency increases the trust of the people and the institutions on which the future of the society depends. In few words, it is transparency that defeats corruption. If this is what transparency means and this is its significance in a society, one would be tempted to ask: *Has there been transparency in Eritrea since the day of the*

*independence of the country?* If the answer is negative: *Doesn't its absence presuppose the predominance of corruption in the country?* These questions have already been answered but they are explicitly raised here to ensure that I have communicated.

The discussions above would take us to the core issue: *What are the identifiable causes of corruption in Eritrea?* In an attempt to answer this question, one would first recognize the fact that the root causes of corruption could vary from one country to another, depending on the political, social, economic and cultural circumstances. Leaving out what I thought are irrelevant causes many writers raise when it comes to African countries with whom we share little past history and sociological make-up (Factors excluded here are: negative colonial legacy, politics of the belly, clientelism, patronage nepotism, constant insecurity and conflicts), I would focus on those that clearly display the failure of the leadership from the day of the inception of the state and the malicious design of the leadership to create a state whose centre is one individual with all power concentrated in his hand. Some may disagree with my take here, but I sum up my list of causes as follows:

- **Poor Leadership:** Here the traits include: lack of communication, micromanagement, unclear expectations, intimidation, and poor people skills, expressed by lack of idea how to motivate others.
- **Omnipotent State:** Such a state has unlimited or infinite power, authority or might. To see how far we have come on this dirty road, just imagine the “equivalent” phrase “Omnipotent God”. This is what we have in Eritrea.

- **Greed and Selfishness** : Are among the traits inherent in the Eritrean state.
- **Absence of Popular Participation of The Public In Government:** There is no constitution, no parliament, no election, and no free press, but only one man ruling by executive orders that may not even have a written form; just like the Ethiopian kings of medieval times.
- **Weak Institutions of Governance:** Are characterized by corruption and fraud that rife in their very fabric.
- **Lack of Transparency and Accountability:** This is sufficiently exposed above.
- **Weak Ethical Values:** We have never heard about established principles governing virtuous behaviors in the State of Eritrea. *Is the use of vulgar words by a boss, at whatever level, to those working under him/her or the punches that could sometimes turn into a full-fledged physical fighting uncommon? How about the small bin we usually see under the desk of an official in government offices for spitting “TUMBAKH”? Do these examples show the presence of strong ethical values?*
- **Weak or Absent Judicial System:** I hope nobody, unless he/she is socially blind, would argue that Eritrea has a meaningful judicial system ( I do not imagine even a weak one).

All causes raised above have to do with the deep seated governance problem, and that explains why we see Eritrea as one of the most corrupt in Africa. From the day of independence, the leadership of Atse Isias preoccupied itself with the politics of survival, using all means, including the most scrupulous ones, to consolidate power

through a one-party state, which guaranteed the gang the security to rule. Moreover, they used their propaganda of the so called “development agenda for the nation”. Of course, nepotism, ethnicity, race, religion, region and other divisive mechanisms have become key considerations and effective cards in filling in all civil and military posts; not professional standard and true patriotism that put the interest of the country above any other consideration. That is why we see individuals in high offices use their power and influence to amass wealth at the expense of the common person. If these are the realities: *What is strange then to see a sustained bad governance, well-entrenched corruption, and impunity?*

Although there are enough indications here and there in this article, there is a question that needs to be raised: *Who is responsible for all these root causes of corruption?* I will not have a different answer than the proverb: “A fish roots from the head down.” We cannot deny that poor leadership, as fully explained with all its major traits above, has led to poor performance throughout the descendant structure. I cannot imagine that subordinates just suddenly choose to behave badly. As they receive guidance from above, they will imitate lack of ethical values, relaxation of standards, greediness, abusive behavior and all shortcomings listed above, as the root causes, they see in their bosses. That will finally flow downward to permeate the whole state structure. It is like “Monkey see monkey do” affair. This is if we give the gang leader the benefit of doubt. But the thing looks that all root causes of corruption were created by design. In a nutshell, the foundations of the state were set in the way described above as root causes, and in a well-planned manner. That includes the intentional behaviours and temperament of the gang leader, who has become the worst model for the civil and military personnel or the practitioner-in-chief of

corruption. Bearing in mind all of the above, one would ask: *What were the damaging effects of corruption on the Eritrean state?*

Although corruption in Eritrea has become a serious impediment to political, social and economic development, I will delay the discussion of political effects for the time being, and deal with its economic and social consequences. Accordingly, though it is very difficult to cover everything, I have the following points to stress, acknowledging that some of them *are briefly mentioned in the preamble of the UN Convention against Corruption as concerns*.

- Corruption has impoverished the country and alienated its people from the rulers. That is why we see mass poverty in Eritrea and very high levels of unemployment, having corrosive trust on the government.
- Though corruption is a crime by itself, it has caused other forms of crimes, including economic crimes such as money laundering, tax evasion which means reduction of government revenues, the earning of illegal income, embezzlement of public funds and serious erosions of social values that have economic impact too. As an example, *bribes have attained levels of gross and egregious theft that have never been seen at any stage of the history of our people*. Talking about citizens forced by circumstances to give a bribe, a friend who frequently visits Eritrea to see his family that had relocated from another part of the world, and is perfectly familiar with the alarming levels corruption has reached, said that he is personally against giving bribes but he asked me: *What would you do if your blind and diabetic mother (with all complications of the disease) is seriously sick and the doctor is not willing to treat her?* His comment here depicts the social



decadence in which Eritrea has been trapped due to the violation of public duty and the deviation from high moral standards our people hold dear. The sad reality we could learn from this comment is that most civil servants are shaped to believe that they are in privileged positions that give them the right to demand bribes before they render service to the public.

- Corruption has undermined effective utilization of the country's natural resources, making them vulnerable to robbery, misuse, abuse, and personal enrichment of individuals detrimental to the common good. Simply put, corruption has depleted the national wealth of the country.
- It has reduced the country's competitiveness at international level in terms of trade, currency stability, and investment.
- It has robbed the public needs from the resources that could be used for healthcare, education, infrastructure, and other social services or to import basic needs of food, medicine, machinery, technology, educational materials and equipment. *How many Eritreans are dying daily because of lack of simple medications for diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol? Does Eritrea witness high-profile projects such as dams, power plants, pipelines, ring roads, and refineries as we see in neighbouring Ethiopia?* Let us lower the bar and ask: *How many urgent infrastructure projects such as schools, hospitals, and all-weather roads did we hear about? Is the 19<sup>th</sup> century steam locomotive (train) connecting Massawa to Asmara and all the way to the west running?* Nobody can imagine that irrespective of the income from gold mines and the port of Assab as the result of services given to the Gulf countries, Asmara has neither a reliable

supply of water nor electric power. All infrastructure built by Italians are in their worst state of disrepair, unheard of during the Ethiopian rule. Just remember the interview given by Atse Isias to the local media and what he had to say about everything (exposing his own foolish failure), though nobody knows to whom he was complaining. He did not lie but all setbacks he detailed were the results of the corrupt methods and practices he personally implanted, reared, nourished and protected until now, unaware that his malice has started backfiring on him, slowly but surely to lead to his demise.

- The impact of misallocation and abuse of talent and other human resources have clearly caused an overall negative distortion on the country's development. The youth fleeing the country in thousands every month and the extremely alarming brain drain or human capital flight the country has been suffering are the result of misallocation and abuse of human resources, intimidation, and persecution of intellectuals, in addition to corrupt and half-baked policies, whose damaging effects are becoming clearer every day and will linger for ages to come.
- Environment degradation is one more thing to note as a result of the corrupt system in Eritrea. The total absence of environmental regulations has led to careless exploitation of our precious natural resources and the ravaging of the entire ecological systems. *What percentage of our forest has survived since independence? Are our wonderful species of fish and other marine life professionally protected from extinction? Is the process of seasonal breeding of marine life taken care of regularly as our uneducated fathers and forefathers used to do in their primitive ways? Are our mines*

*rationally exploited so that they last longer and do not get depleted in a short period of time?*

In short, few would disagree if I say that corruption has damaged development objectives, undermined long-term economic growth, increased poverty and has contributed to the declining position of the country in Africa. Here we are not worried only about the direct cost of corruption by way of lost revenues and funds diverted from public development goals, though we know they are extraordinarily high, but also the indirect costs of the economic distortions, inefficiencies, and unnecessary waste caused by corrupt practices. According to experts knowledgeable about the Eritrean reality, the indirect costs of corruption here will have more long-term effects because they believe are more difficult to address. Many of us would see that their fears are justifiable, and their views highly regarded.

If the discussions above were about economic and social consequences of corruption, its political effects on the country are, by necessity, more devastating because none of the two spheres (economic and social) has any independence from the political front. Particularly in Eritrea, the political muscle moves everything.

In African countries where normal state structure and formal processes exist, we can talk about the effects of corruption in undermining democracy and good governance, reducing accountability, distorting representation in policymaking, compromising the rule of law or resulting in unequal distribution of services. As there are no real legislative and judiciary branches or any formal processes or procedures, public administration, institutions, public offices or even political realm that deserves its name, there is nothing to be subverted, undermined, reduced, distorted, eroded, disregarded or compromised. Therefore, there is nothing to be fixed or improved. It is like the

Turkish toilet that you cannot fix but dismantle altogether and replace. Nevertheless, showing this truth in this discussion is very important so that one realizes that we are not talking about a state, as understood in modern history, but a jungle ruled by one lion as the only central figure (the Eritrean Abubaker Al Baqdadi) in a way not much different from the archaic ISIS or IS. This is the reality that we need to swallow with a piece of salt. Above all, our concern will only be about the new Eritrea we are going to build on the ashes of Atse Isias's Eritrea. That is why I had to go through all things that, unlike Eritrea, could be affected by corruption in a formal state. In any case, to share our views with those who did not yet lose hope on the regime, it is appropriate to raise the question: *How do we fight corruption in present Eritrea?*

We do not need to waste our time in talking about fighting corruption in present Eritrea. It is like talking about treating the symptoms (corruption) and not the disease or the root cause (the regime). The apologists of the regime, who have lost sight of the common good, would tell us that their government is fighting corruption. *How could one fight corruption when he is the one who had spread and reinforced it as his arm to prolong his life?* They have to understand that we are talking about a country where the principles of proper management of public affairs, public property, fairness, responsibility and equality before the law do not exist. Of course, this is a hard pill for them to swallow. *However*, let us give them the benefit of doubt that they may genuinely be naïve enough to think that corruption could be fought in present Eritrea. But to see if they could retreat and rethink, let us ask the following questions, though we know it is the impossible:

- *Can their government establish an independent anti-corruption agency that seeks to prevent, investigate, and prosecute corruption?*

- *Can they guarantee the operational and physical freedom for that agency?*
- *Are they ready to recognize and abide by the principles of transparency, accountability, and other standards of the anti-corruption agency?*
- *Most importantly: Can a government that is against having a constitution, proper state structure, and institutions, fulfill the above three conditions (questions) and be a reliable and honest partner?* This is a dumb thing to think.

Instead, what we need to worry about at present is the regime. To put it candidly, the only way to eliminate corruption is to eliminate the regime. Anything short of that is waste of time. This is to say that, it is after putting the regime down that we could plan to fight corruption which will be a long and complicated process that will need well-planned projects and partnership between government, civil society, and business community; all at their first step could get together to develop standards and procedures they all support. Based on that, they would proceed step-by-step and in cooperation with global partners. This shows that corruption cannot be rooted out in one big sweep and that all relevant parties should be brought on board. At the same time, we need to realize that if the necessary approach is to get all relevant parties around the negotiating table, then that would only be possible after setting up a properly-set formal state structure. At least to prepare ourselves psychologically and intellectually from now for the anti-corruption fight awaiting us in future, let us see the question: *Why the elimination of corruption is a long-time and complicated process?*

To answer the question above, we need to remember that corruption in present-day Eritrea is not only a vice but has gradually become a way of life in every sector of our society. To illustrate, corruption is

not only limited to the political circles and administration, but it has invaded all sectors including the business sector, educational institutions, health services and the judicial sector. Accordingly, it could be said that no facet of Eritrean life is untouched by it. This means that corruption has become a deep-rooted parasitic culture that reaps from other people's sweat and hard work. To reverse this complicated and deeply entrenched culture, experiences of other countries recommend the following:

- First, we need a total paradigm change in the thinking pattern of our people. Our tool here will be educating our people about the dangers of corruption, raising their awareness about their rights and obligations as citizens. In schools, at home and at communities, we need to teach our children, both theoretically and practically, that riches come through hard work and being responsible; not by stealing public money.
- Second, we should not forget that the typical low-paid employee works with or sees cash on a daily basis but he/she cannot have it. On the contrary, he/she sees the few earn a huge amount of wealth at the expense of the people. I am not trying to justify corruption, but we need to understand that, as a poorly paid civil servant, he/she could be tempted to subsidize his income through corruption. Once he/she gets a coin, his/her appetite will increase, finally becoming a prisoner of the citizen who bribed him. The solution to this problem is to ensure that he/she is fairly paid to cater for his immediate family.
- Third, along with education and the adjustment of salaries, we need to simultaneously take effective legal measures against those who abuse their powers to enrich their pockets. This needs all necessary legal and organizational arrangements, procedures, regulations and the right law enforcement agencies that would result from the round table discussions of all relevant parties we

had raised above. It is the role of the government here to create safe conditions for civil societies to carry their fight against corruption.

In summary, corruption in Eritrea is chronic and is the manifestation of the qualities of the parasitic leadership of the country and their malicious designs to rule forever (may be by establishing a line of dynasty like the Solomonic one), sucking the blood of the people, as detailed above. This being the situation, it is important to realize that it will take time before corruption goes away, after the demise of the regime that has been nourishing it for over quarter of a century. Similarly, there is no doubt that it is better for future Eritrea to fight corruption rather than depending on foreign aid. This is possible and there are many favourable conditions that would make it happen. I am optimistic that we have a huge number of honest, hardworking, sincere, and committed Eritreans who when they come to power, as servants of the people, we will ultimately see Eritrea turned into a country in which everybody aspires a good life. =====