

## Afewarki and Eritrea in Crisis

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### **Introduction:**

Since 1993, there have appeared various analyses, by Eritrean and non-Eritrean writers alike, of the causes and effects of Issayas Afewarki and his regime's crisis; and the likely impact it will have on the overwhelming majority of the population within Eritrea proper in the near future. These include descriptive summaries of events of failed 'nation building experiments'. Vivid facts are cooking like latent volcano underneath the surface. Reasons are many. But let me ask only the following leading quarries: Do highlanders and lowlanders maintain any shared aspirations to speak of? Are the dreams of lowland Afar and kunama people and that of the highlanders mutual? Do highland-lowland divisions allow passage across obstacles? Do we know and love each other at all? Or do we remain at odds ever since? In the lowlanders view, Eritrea remains a divided nation yet in the making; struggling to come out of the clouds that overshadow its mere existence as a stable nation because of the border dispute along the Badme-Tsorena lines. Yes Eritrea is yet in our minds not solidified even as much as Djibouti is in the eyes of the outer world. Communities within Eritrea have a long way, longer and harder way to go, than the idealist Eritrean highlanders have always taken for granted; and wished that the nation building process is a done deal since Afewarki assumed power. But by so thinking they readily fell flat when it comes to explaining Eritrea's own internal differences between highlanders and lowlanders; between the resentful Kunama and Afar societies on the one hand and the hard-handed Afewarki's tyrant regime on the other. A case in point worth mentioning is the recent UNSC resolution. It is a good example of a well researched resolution that not only provides a detailed exposition of major mishaps that lead the contemporary crisis within the Afewarki regime, but also an objective analysis of the events which led naturally to a coherent and cogent set of UNSC's objective resolution.

At the other end of the spectrum are always pseudo-intellectual rants mainly of Highland Eritrea origin who permanently publish on various Eritrean websites, warning the imminent danger that may result in the collapse of Issayas Afewarki and his regime's polity. Obviously as its nationhood crafting is not based on solid grounds the aftermath will obviously lead into long-anticipated anarchy and chaos. There will emanate continuous sources of problems and irritation to not only the

9-major ethnic groups within Eritrea proper; but also to the neighbouring states in the region. One thing clear for those of us confined within Eritrea proper is the naked fact that the style of age old authoritarian governance within the Afewarki regime is not only young and fragile, but also outdated and demagogic. Thus it has to be replaced instantly. Unless we are ready to carefully nurture the situation with tools that help eradicate the maladies it will remain a source of fight for our respective community rights. It is this common premise that bears closer examination since it is patently very true. So before I commence my brief discourse, it is useful to define some basic terms in the interests of clarity and also in order to set the parameters of the discussion below within the context of socio-political theory.

### **Definitions:**

The first term that needs to be defined here is "democracy", since this concept lies at the very heart of the issue under discussion. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines democracy as a: "**(a) government by the people; especially : rule of the majority; (b) government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections.**" The important point to note here is the phrase "... **usually involving periodically held free elections ...**" We know from experience that free elections are not, in and of themselves, a necessary pre-condition for a democratic system of government; although they usually comprise an important element of such a system.

The central feature of a democratic system is that, government power is vested in the people and they exercise this power either directly, or through freely chosen representatives, which act in their behalf. This central democratic governance concept was articulated and enunciated, perhaps most famously, by Abraham Lincoln of the USA in his Gettysburg Address as: "... **government of the people, by the people, for the people...**" In fact, this precise and pithy exposition of a democratic system of government has become the popular definition of democracy.

To this effect, this central point leads me to the critically important concept of "political consent", (i.e. the consent of the people to submit to the authority of government). In a democratic system, the people consent to a governmental authority because that very

authority derives from the people freely choosing their leaders through periodically held elections.

As an Afar fellow by origin, I consider my own pastoral and clan-based system as the basis of our societal make up in which direct participation by each adult male in major decisions of the clan, or sub-clan, (e.g. whether to go to war or to resolve disputes with other clans/sub-clans through dialogue and negotiation) take place. Indeed, in the socio-political structure of traditional Afar, Kunama and other pastoral society remains extremely egalitarian and democratic; each with its own inner structure of appointing wise leaders without any public election system in the Western sense of it; and without any sophisticated provision for any electoral process. Even then, we can still characterize the Afar, Kunama and other pastoral communities as democratic. We adhere to the point of customary law and order by our direct, participatory nature of the system of social and political governance in each of our pastoral society whereby important issues are openly debated in mass public meetings and the majority views prevail and become binding upon all clan/sub-clan members after all the viewpoints are thoroughly aired out and deliberately discussed. This indigenous, participatory democracy has neither formal institutions nor any formal office holders (for example the Tajura and Asaita Sultanates remain purely ceremonial with no formal powers); yet each not only works, but has thrived and commanded the allegiance of our people for centuries, if not for millennia. Indeed, in traditional, pastoral, Afar society, clan elders are not elected but chosen through an evolutionary, dynamic, almost osmotic, process whereby those clan members that are perceived by their kinsmen as wise, reflective, or visionary do decent and honourably emerge as spokesmen and socio-political leaders whose opinions and judgments are widely respected and followed. This may be viewed as a social equivalent of the Darwinian evolutionary principle of '**survival of the fittest**'; except that it may be characterized as '**emergence of the wise and honourable**'. Thus, the success of the Afar-Kunama and other pastoral people in establishing a functioning, democratic system within their respective communities by defying Afewarki's regime in the wake of a prolonged, devastating civil war against a tribally based, highland military dictatorship that had ruled for nearly two decades is not surprising.

### **Afewarki and his regime's crisis in the Context of pastoral democracy**

Needless to say, liberty is meaningless when the right to utter one's thoughts and opinion has ceased to exist. Of all rights, the right to

utter is the fear of tyrants of the likes of Issayas Afewarki. It is the right to utter which they first of all strike down since they know well that it is power. The Eritrean nation building process has been built on the experience of personalities. It has no tangible political foundations that can bring fundamental changes in the structure of the ruling system. And these days, leave alone in the lowland areas, even in the highland tracts where Afewarki and his regime have the upper hand, the political impasse on how and when to hold elections has become not only a taboo, but also Afewarki's regime has dug its dubious heels over irreconcilable political positions that grew ever more intractable. So the deteriorating political situation and the death incidences happening on those uttering their rights in the pastoral communities among the Kunama and the Afar population in particular, galvanized our people in most parts of lowland Eritrea into antagonistic action as the prospect of sustained, and possibly armed, conflict continues to loom over our horizons.

As usual, there remain protracted armed conflicts every now and then in smaller scales between Afewarki and his henchmen on the one side; and each of the lowland clans on the other side of the isle. These antagonistic symbioses continue to provide to lowlanders essential lessons the hard way. Each of the episodes and military incidents that occur painfully demonstrate to our ordinary lowlanders the social and human cost of facing Afewarki's anarchic regime. The Afewarki regime's crisis thus must be seen in the context of a highly partisan, chauvinistic, and lopsided political stance; where highlanders are better trusted and where our peoples' basic human rights as lowlanders are mismanaged at all times. These events lead our people to far worse crisis situation each time when protracted actions continue to contribute to an all out socio-economic and political subjugation.

Critically observing the public affairs, what accounts and analysis written by highlanders ignore is the role played by our lowlanders in the resolution of Afewarki and his regime's make up. Instead, these highland writers focus mainly upon the role played jointly by Afewarki and the highlander actors within the nation make-up process. They forget the fact that we too are supposed to remain equally stakeholders in the statehood arena; and have equal say on any action that affects our lives and livelihoods within Eritrea proper.

### **Afewarki and his regime in the eyes of Lowlanders**

There remain palpable and widespread public unease and anger with Afewarki and his regime's political stand, which allows the clan

situation to deteriorate. But falling back on traditional avenues of political and social intermediation, ordinary lowlanders everywhere instigated clan elders, religious leaders and their petty-business community (i.e. civil society leaders) to prevail upon the Afewarki's local political appointees to tone down their rhetoric and reach a compromise with our society.

Afewarki and his regime's political actors have a vested interest in de-railing the lowland community's traditional democratic system and plunging it into the same old anarchy and chaos that has bedevilled highland Eritrea. They are willing to foment internal conflict; armed if necessary; in order to realize their political goals; and remain holding their ascent to power for a long while indefinitely. The key actor here is, of course, Issayas Afewarki himself with his age old nihilistic mission of plunging the whole Horn Africa region back into the Middle Ages type of war mongering. The painstaking rejection of these so-called Afewarki regime's cadres by our lowland people is literally evidenced by the success of our clan authorities in thwarting repeated attempts by Afewarki and his associates to mount attacks, which is due primarily to the vigilance of our communities' security watchers in recognizing and reporting suspicious activities and persons to the clan authorities.

In addition to, and separate from Afewarki and his henchmen, there are political actors from highland Eritrea who assume that they have so much in common with lowland Eritrea when it comes to recognizing the not yet stabilized state of Eritrea. These highlanders are also equally ready to force lowlanders to abide by their dream of shaping statehood through clan warfare, in order to create sufficient havoc to overthrow the local authorities and chiefdom and instigate a seizure of power on behalf of the Afewarki regime under the pretext of re-establishing order. For instance, the conflagration of a routine dispute between by-passing highlanders and pastoral clan-men over water rights has at times caused murders of innocent civilians in furtherance of their ambitions for power.

Hence the carefully orchestrated subversion of popular complaints in local communities into armed confrontations with Afewarki's henchmen simply keep on sowing seeds of armed conflict, distancing and secession from that of Afewarki crafted nationhood. The intervention of the Kunama and the Afar clan elders, not to mention the maturity of the overwhelming majority of the concerned clans within Eritrea proper, succeeded in preventing the hitherto propping up disputes turning into ugly, armed war between clans and

Afewarki's regime. Correspondingly, the widespread public outcry against the political manoeuvrings and sedition of both Afewarki's regime and highland opposition groups against lowlanders' right to secede always, continue to force both the lowlanders and highlanders to abandon their sterile impasse and raise their political temperature to the level of no return.

### **Conclusive Remarks**

First of all, several key points outlined above need carefully weighing and taken to serious considerations. To us lowlanders, the political culture of participatory democracy is not new. It is indeed a central feature of our societal socio-political ethos, culture and tradition. This fact is perhaps not fully appreciated by highland Eritrean people; and especially by Afewarki and his regime. To them, democratic governance is a new construct among our lowland population and in our communities' political history. This hypocritical contemptible look at lowlanders explains the over-arching focus upon embracing on the making of the "New Eritrea" while at the same time ignoring our key important features in our traditionally existing democratic systems. It is important to remember the following points. During the decade commencing from 1993 until the end of 2009, Afewarki's regime has never been a representative one, where lowlanders in particular enjoyed the freely given consent of their society; not to mention their confidence. There has never been any representative democracy and elections in the whole of Eritrea proper as initially promised in 1993, let alone in lowland areas. There has never been any attempt to adapt the indigenous, Kunama-Afar clan-based, pastoral democracy to the modern institutions in Asmara. There has never been any independent judiciary and a legislature of House of Representatives in Asmara.

Secondly, the drafting of a constitution and its ratification was done by presently exiled highlander by the name Bereket Hapte Sellasie, who originally was born and brought up in Harar, Ethiopia; and had no clear knowledge or understanding of our lowlanders' culture or civility. His draft constitution has no clan-based pastoral democracy adopted in it. Thus, the making of Eritrea proper remains half baked; qualitatively more undemocratic right now than it was during the 1952-1993 federation with Ethiopia. The fact is Afewarki's regime always downgraded the clans' traditional, pastoral political system to benefit from his own archaic, nihilistic, institutional and anarchic structures. Thus, the shift from the clan-based, pastoral democracy of the pre-1993 era to the present one whereby Afewarki and his hand picked henchmen continues to affect the lowlanders negatively.

Overall, the dream for nation building is deteriorating the traditional democratic changes in terms of representation; the consent of the people to its clan authority; and finally the transparency and accessibility of lowlanders to the forthcoming 'federal system' embracing all 9-ethnic groups equally and impartially.

Thirdly, the determination of the ordinary lowlanders not to surrender the independence, stability and peace we have enjoyed for generations under our home-grown system of representative local government and a free clan-based society is going to remain the powerful foundation. It ensures our durability for ever as it has done for generations thus far. During this Afewarki' regime's crisis, our determination has been trumped. In fact, it is a fundamental cause for the machinations of both our political elders and the malevolent plots of would-be usurpers of clan-state institutions. Indeed, the timely support of our brethren inside Ethiopia and Djibouti remains the main viable and valuable stick with which to compel Afewarki and his regime either to look beyond their narrow chauvinistic self-interests and see the 'big picture'; or step down and leave our lowland communities to freely choose our respective destiny how to live and let other live in peace. This very desire for our clan and national self-determination up to and including secession for our free society is deeply ingrained in our lowland pastoralist peoples' mind. It also remains the basis of our revolt against Afewarki and his chauvinistic and partisan highlander dictatorship; and the subsequent, long war of our liberation since 1993. It is also a fundamental and enduring feature of the history and culture of pastoral societies within Eritrea proper, which has survived for centuries of, admittedly benign, Italian-British-French colonial rules. But now, the treachery of a union in the making of a nation has subverted by the calculations of chauvinist highlanders' domination; an oppressive, tribal dictatorship that declared war on its own citizens; intensifying armed, clan conflicts; motivated by an overweening lust for power; sustained efforts by a regime force to subvert the very existence of our clan-based democracy as an independent local state; including acts of terror and violence, nationalization of assets, and trade embargos; and, most recently, the inability of Afewarki's regime to look beyond its own naked war mongering banditry ambitions.

Fourthly, the recently concerted pressure exerted on Afewarki by the UNSC and the Ethiopian Government helps prepare the grounds for further struggle. Internal subversion attempts against lowlanders have thus far failed. This proves that Afewarki and his regime's

instigators as well as their highland supporters are forced to give-up on their aims by circumstantial evidence as indicated by UNSC resolution and by the worsening living conditions inside Eritrea proper.

Finally, far from being strong and cemented, Afewarki's regime and its phoney-democracy are indeed fragile and destined to doom. His regime is founded on sandy grounds without embracing the cultural fabric of lowlander pastoral societies that are nourished by the determination of our ordinary pastoral clans to enjoy our freedom and pursue our lives and livelihoods in peace. In sum the hitherto existing Afewarki's regime and his institutions, constitution and political systems require continual review and improvement; or else they are doomed to fail pretty soon. Afewarki's regime must realize the need to remain inclusive of our clan-centric pastoral system to his platform-centric focus of chauvinistic and mainly highlander-based partial system. Then and only then can we claim the rights to utter words of thoughts and opinions freely and fraternally.