

Eritrea - Reality Defied by Autocracy without Borders

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Background:

For those of us who originate from rural Eritrea (pastoralist and peasant communities alike) it is utterly disappointing to observe negative or indifference reactions exhibited by Eritrean Tigrinya highlanders who fail to understand our devastating plights within rural Eritrea. On our part considering highland opposition website editors like Awate and Asmerino as the voice of the opposition groups to Afewarki and his PFDJ-ruling junta, we tried to negotiate with them in good faith, but each time they force us to a condition where hell will break loose soon. Even when we come with our olive branches in good will gesture, Awate and Asmerino repeatedly refused to publish our articles of serious concerns. With an odd mix of xenophobia, contempt and supremacy, they denied us access not to reach Eritrean opposition groups with our opinions. Generally Eritrean Tigrinya highlanders evade from linking with and creating understanding between them and us; still they continue to look at peasants and pastoralists as their 2nd class citizens whose cases they bully, shovel and shelve as secondary matters. Indeed PFDJ, Awate and Asmerino Team are nothing but two faces of the same Eritrean Tigrinya highlander supremacists' coin; where the latter two provide their indirect bare-foot soldier servitude to the former. But, at the end of the day, this will not do any good for Eritrea's future stability. So in what follows I write in plain language pointing out the reality on the ground.

Reality defied clouded by contempt:

Regardless of belligerent, bossy, denial, and headstrong empty pride manifested by Afewarki and his PFDJ-ruling junta and Eritrean highlanders who cling on to the status quo; by claiming that nothing political is happening on the ground in rural Eritrea; it was proved last month alone that our heroic pastoralist brothers and sisters had skirmishes against Afewarki's PFDJ-junta in different fronts with full determination and vigour. To this effect, suffice to cite the following 2- major events:

- 1) On December 29, Mr. Qernelios Osman, the leader of the Democratic Movement for the liberation of Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK), told AFP that the Security Council's sanctions on Afewarki are a "good opportunity for the opposition" and that his forces are "inside Eritrea and will hit selected targets and institutions."
- 2) On January 1st, 2010 two Eritrean rebel groups, the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization (RSADO) and the Eritrean National Salvation Front (ENSF) conducted "lightning strikes" in two major PFDJ-junta reconnaissance stations by obliterating PFDJ's Division-39 (at Senafe) and Division-13 (at Tserona) where heavy casualties were inflicted specifically at Agulae, Gunaguna, Mes'hal Akera and Kermed fronts; by killing over 50 PFDJ-soldiers, destroying 2-camps, leaving 38-injured and confiscating 11-Kalashnikovs (AK-47), 7-hand-grenades, and other infantry gears.

So the struggle is relentlessly on the move; and it will continue so until we, the group representing rural communities, strike a common deal with Eritrean Tigrinya highlanders to the points where: (a) our basic rights are kept in tact; (b) we have a say on whatever is affecting our livelihoods and lives; (c) our cultural and social ethos are left for peasants and pastoralists to determine; (d) our women are no longer snatched by Afewarki and his PFDJ-ruling junta officers to become concubines in towns against their will. And for as long as we are pushed aside, we will fight with full force causing a tsunami-like affects in Afewarki's unresolved fiefdom.

Caught in nostalgic clock-stop syndromes:

Behind the facade that Afewarki and his ruling Junta would always like to portray as "equitable prosperity, Warsai-Yikealo, Asmara's beauty and cleanliness, and patriotic pride, they omit speaking about Eritrea's dark side where a human tragedy of grand proportion is in the making. In fact, what had started arrogantly and erroneously since the hay days of the 1960s with the revolution as "sacrifice undertaken for the sake of moulding Eritrea as a fiefdom" Afewarki's tyrannical rule has reached its depths of despair where the rural population is asked to carry the brunt of the burden by continuing its sacrifice to save Afewarki and his empty supremacist arrogance. Ever since the 1960s, all that Afewarki and his ruling junta know proficiently well is nothing but forceful militaristic bravado. As a result, the rural poor are held tightly to a point where they are mercilessly exhausted by hard labour; and they are impoverished, famished, internally-displaced, and forced to go on refuge into neighbouring countries. The perverse logic of these paranoia sacrifices set no limit to Afewarki's consistent demands for human force; nor do they set borders to his interference in neighbouring countries' affairs. In the name of "national security and unity" Afewarki and his PFDJ-ruling junta control all media, the politics, and the economy by posting tens of thousands of people to labour

camps. Simply said, Afewarki barricades himself into a defensive bunker from which he surveys a world of conspiracy theories and "special interests" plotting against him; and clings on to his guerrilla rebel ideology and habits; which enforce his tyrannical values with its ill-conceived land expropriation, market monopolization, indefinite Sawa national service and pervert policy against external power. When all is said and done, under his grandiose mantra of "self-reliance" (or its *media* variation, "bitsifrina"), Afewarki and his PFDJ-ruling junta are taking the Eritrean fiefdom in a high speed down the drain. Following his venerable and long-standing banditry tradition of arrogance, blunder, denial, and pride, Afewarki is unwilling to admit the presence of public resentment against his "self-reliance" utopia held firmly with an odd mix of xenophobia and Eritrean highland Tigrinya supremacy.

An Autocrat without Borders:

Tyrant Afewarki, Shaabia and PFDJ-junta are nothing but arrogant paranoids determined never to admit even a single mistake they committed within the last half a century. On the contrary, they finger point and put the blame on external forces beyond Eritrea. In fact, Afewarki uses specters of security threats to justify his authoritarianism. Out of sheer Eritrean highland "ghedli" culture of arrogance, blunder, contempt, denial, and empty-pride Afewarki blames others everywhere else for all the problems cropping up within his fiefdom; but never on his power-mongering political machinery circle. As always, Afewarki's priorities are: buying all kinds of military gadgets; fighting left and right without borders; financiering all kinds of militant groups coming from the region; engaging his PFDJ-junta in clandestine piracy and banditry operations; setting secretive pacts and deals with regimes opposed to the Western world; and continuing with his utopia policy backed by his banditry tricks funnelling deaths and destruction. Yes, Afewarki is tirelessly experimenting with his wasteful white elephant projects within his fiefdom and camouflages his banditry acts with lame excuses usually bundled with musically orchestrated annual celebrations of "martyrdom". By squeezing out the youth group from villages, he tasks them with Sawa where they ultimately become cannon fodders of his persisting military operations. Playing on Eritrean Tigrinya highlanders' sentiments and psychic, Afewarki knows perfectly well how to get away with his age-old "Eritrea's sovereignty and territorial integrity" mantra. It is with these tricks and traps he bargains excuses from the Eritrean Diaspora; and even milks their hard earned currency into his treasury. Whereas Issayas Afewarki presides over his subjects with unapologetic and repressive ruling mantras; whereas his top secretive and hermit like PFDJ-junta remains loyal to Afewarki's "self-reliant" utopia; whereas Afewarki persistently fights left and right without borders; Eritrea still undergoes through its unfinished fiefdom formation exercises.

Overall, obsessed with autocratic control of every resource within his fiefdom, Afewarki remains an iron-handed ruler, whose secrecy of "self-reliance" utopia is to maintain his central power by imposing a 4-pronged policy as indicated below:

- a) **Finger pointing on CIA& external forces:** Afewarki has made it customary to accuse CIA and the Western world of supporting and funding Eritrean opposition groups; a ploy to siphon-off the badly needed hard currency to Shaabia's standing coffers.
- b) **Land policy:** Afewarki and his ruling junta have grabbed prime farmlands; by depriving peasants and pastoralists their most productive farmlands and livestock products; and relegating them into smaller and infertile plots and to ownership of fewer livestock herds.
- c) **Market policy:** Afewarki has made farm and livestock products inaccessible to sellers and buyers.
- d) **National service policy:** Afewarki has gutted villages across Eritrea out of their productive labour forces and conscripted these into Sawa-garrisons.

Plainly speaking, Issayas Afewarki's "self-reliance" policy is directed at centrally controlling over: (1) CIA and Western aggressions, (2) land, (3) market mechanisms, and (4) labour. Hence, Afewarki has mounted his wide-spread tentacles on his slave-labour (Warsai-Yikealo projects) where every morning every waking person is asking why the hell he or she has to toil and suffer so much at the mercy of Afewarki; the tyrant without borders; the master who must be obeyed by all and any means. Fixated at moulding Eritrea as a totalitarian fiefdom, Afewarki expropriates the communal resources of the rural poor. The reason is simple. If they are permitted to maintain their livelihoods as usual, then "Afewarki's key task of nation crafting would be badly affected; and his pompous "honour and pride" would equally be ruined. So instead, the rural poor are coerced to suffer to the point of death in order to ensure Afewarki's personal pride and his fiefdom crafting project in tact. And to Afewarki, this entire episode can be curbed up by his attendance of the regular annual "martyrdom" memorial ceremonies for the fallen. So Afewarki continues to strike left and right without borders with his Shaabia military operations yet in preparation for more martyrdom offers; and what we are witnessing is keeping the status quo of decades of banditry exercises led by Afewarki and Shaabia both internally within Eritrea

and externally in the internal affairs of neighbouring countries. Internally his dubious acts are stretching from rampant land expropriation to all kinds of monopolization; and from Sawa militarization. For a paranoid Shaabia banditry group, roaming around without borders, the only language it understands is waging war everywhere; and stretching its tentacles for a totalitarian control everywhere. For this autocratic tradition, Afewarki has three recurring themes: Firstly, Shaabia and the PFDJ-ruling junta have the appetite for extending their tentacles and tapping whatever hard currency comes into Eritrea. Secondly, they hold on to their irrational fear that empowering peasants and pastoralists will dethrone Afewarki from his tyrannical leadership role. Thirdly, amidst the periodic political and economic crisis taking place, Afewarki projects all problems as caused by CIA and external forces; and accuses them of funding Eritrean opposition groups to disturb the reconstruction of his fiefdom. Thus Afewarki never admits to gulp down his Eritrean highland Tigrinya empty pride. On the contrary, to him, it is Eritrean rural communities who have to carry the burden of their abject poverty on the one hand; and suffering quietly to defend Afewarki's arrogance that is ever widening without borders. As if the metaphor: "In the country of the blind one eyed man is a king!" befits Afewarki's tyrannical profile, the rural poor continue endlessly to "sacrifice" perverted through decades of brainwashing for "ghedli" to save Afewarki and his highland Tigrinya kin on power by paying final and irrevocable price with their lives.

Snatching resources from the voiceless

Since 1993, Afewarki's first goals have been snatching the meagre farm and livestock products by force from peasants and pastoralists and ensure his survival on power. To this day, every measure taken since the advent of Afewarki's stringent market rules, criminalization of private food transactions and confiscation of peasants' food "surplus", increase in curtailments of movement, and killings at border crossings is explained as responding to PFDJ-junta's and Asmara urban-dwellers' needs. Peasants are forced to sell their so called "surplus" food products and livestock herds to the junta at very low prices. Indeed PFDJ-junta is looting villagers' *k'offos* under a gun point to feed the half-starving Sawa-garrison subjects. It is common place for Afewarki's tyrannical rule to confiscate farm products and livestock herds intended to reach urban markets; criminalizing the selling of most staple grains in markets; limiting the amount of food supply peasants could keep for their own consumption; decreasing the amount of rations provided by the PFDJ-ruling junta to consumers in Asmara; and drastically cutting the food amount it provides to the military camps and prisons. Sporadically, towns and villages are emptied of their youth groups, with hundreds of thousands seized and put into "Sawa-garrisons" for compulsory military service. Several labour concentration camps are proliferating everywhere. Tens of thousands of political prisoners are indoctrinated, tortured and worked-out to death. The lucky ones are fleeing in all direction to escape Afewarki's forced call-up into Sawa. But without any reference to the rural poor' welfare, Afewarki propagates his age old "territorial integrity, economic and political independence" utopia. As if primary matters about the Afar, Kunama, Saho, Beja and Bilen communities are secondary to his rule, Afewarki prepares peasants and pastoralists for his intense, frantic, and wild totalitarian war-mongering missions. And where areas are prioritized, he does so according to their "worth" to his political survival. When it comes to food rationing, his priority groups are: PFDJ-junta, Sawa-garrisons, and Asmara city dwellers. These 3 groups are at the top of his list because Afewarki knows well he can't antagonize these three groups for the following obvious reasons. (1) PFDJ members are firmly embedded within Afewarki's ruling junta framework. (2) Although too dangerously armed for his safety, Sawa-garrisons are vital for Afewarki's power defence. (3) Since dwellers within Asmara are closely watched by global surveillance Afewarki's easy way out is to resort to rural peasants and pastoralists who are the silent majority carrying the brunt of burdens in Eritrea. But, from pastoralist and peasant perspectives, we consider Tyrant Afewarki, Shaabia and his PFDJ-ruling junta as a 3-tyered totalitarian, militaristic and banditry machinery breeding and imposing the inconceivable utopia on our rural communities. And for this, the Afar, Kunama, Saho, Beja and Bilen are paying dearly with their lives in sacrifice for Afewarki's autocracy without borders; and for his quest to cling on power and maintain his self-aggrandizement.

Silently toiling rural poor

Tampering with Afewarki's Eritrean highland Tigrinya led pet projects is considered as stepping on his toes. On the reverse, the silent majority of the rural poor must quietly accept the norms set for them by tyrant Afewarki, who must be obeyed at all costs. Hence, the PFDJ-ruling junta continues to milk human and natural resources without the consent of the rural majority; and forcibly takes away these resources to urban centres. In a strange reversal of priorities, instead of asking himself what Afewarki can do to his ill-conceived fiefdom, he continues to ask the troubled silent majority of peasants and pastoralists what they can do for him to preserve his fiefdom at his own hour of burning needs. Thus the rural poor continue to pay the price for Afewarki's endless blunder and empty pride by their

sacrifice. In turn, Afewarki, who loves watching the annually held dance of admiration for the fallen martyrs, continues to engage in his customary troubles that know no borders. After all, for Afewarki and his PFDJ-ruling junta, what matters is not resolving the crisis faced by the rural poor inside Eritrea; but how he and his henchmen preside on power and continue creating a series of havoc without borders at the cost of the rural poor sacrificing itself in the name of ironic martyrdom. Indeed, in his quest for power, Afewarki imposes the urban dwellers' consumption needs on the rural poor by directly: (1) Deploying each conceivable means and measures to ensure his authoritarian power intact. Thus far, he has imposed a food market control system on the rural poor as regular suppliers. (2) Accepting Afewarki's "self-reliance" policy and entertain it by acclaiming him as: "Our heroic leader who must be obeyed by any and all means".

So only Afewarki, who presides over a fiefdom without borders; and only he who acts without any legal or moral limits, continues to conduct such ill-conceived rules unto his own rural folk; by drying up all the farm-food and livestock products in villages and towns. This Afewarki plan is clear: if most of the farm and livestock supplies pass through PFDJ-ruling Junta's own apparatus (such as *diquan rit'i*, the coupon/ration-system, the military, "cash for work", Highdef-owned companies, etc), then, in the process of redistributing food and livestock rations to urban consumers Afewarki makes sure that these commodities are to serve his political survival; and gives directives as to whom to reward and whom to punish; and who to selectively let survive as consumers and who to hold on to servitude position to produce regular supplies to urban dwellers and to his subjects at Sawa-garrisons.

Fate of "ghedli" and fiefdom forming

For decades now, pastoralists and rural peasants remain brainwashed by force to internalize Afewarki's complicated "sacrifice" propaganda ploy. Plainly speaking, the rural poor are silently suffering while the "Highdefites" of highland origin both at home and in Diaspora are cheering autocrat Afewarki simply to save his pride as a kin; and to help his "self reliance" mantra. Some Diaspora highlanders in the opposition camp have even started especially preaching about peaceful opposition to the tyrant by disjointedly mumbling some mysterious ways of bringing change within Eritrea. But let them face the truth. At the end of the day, Afewarki's ghedli and fiefdom crafting dreams and rural peoples' sacrifice paid to this dearly project in the name of "martyrdom" is degenerating into a personal identity crisis. The salvage cry where Afewarki-Shaabia and the PFDJ-ruling junta jointly claim as having so much stakes invested on Eritrean protracted fiefdom formation fight thus far. And to them, to let this project go loose can become a mortal threat on their individual identity and on the idea they have nursed and nurtured for so many decades so long. So they seem to have come to a decision to do anything and everything; even if it costs huge sacrifices of lives from the population inside Eritrea. In particular, the Eritrean Tigrinya highlanders' unanswered love affair with "ghedli"; and their likely scenario to rescue Afewarki-Shaabia and the PFDJ-ruling junta without harm simply forces them to stick to their nostalgic past. But this nostalgia is nothing short of killing peasants and pastoralists for the benefit of highlanders; and to keep Eritrean fiefdom formation process alive.

Concluding remarks

Sensitive issues dealing with "ghedli" and Eritrean nation forming are deterring most Diaspora Eritrean Tigrinya highlanders from taking meaningful steps towards any equivocal merger with those of us advocating for peasants and pastoralists; and from forcefully fighting against Afewarki-Shaabia and his PFDJ-ruling junta. In spite of their hostility towards Afewarki's tyrannical rule, most Eritrean highlanders still continue to fail predicting the consequences of Afewarki's actions against Eritrean peasants and pastoralists. Amidst Afewarki's nation crafting exercise, what highlanders forget is that, if the gaps between Eritrean Tigrinya highlanders on the one side and peasants and pastoralists on the other widen, then we will all be losing everything we have at hand. And starting everything from the scratch would mean going through new scenarios whose results cannot be predicted of hand. So everything that is worth salvaging from hereon must focus on finishing off Afewarki's tyrannical rule; by any and all means necessary. Otherwise, it can become too late for highlanders who are caught-up in reclaiming the legacy of "ghedli" and focusing on finishing-up the nation crafting exercise; while we the organized peasant and pastoralist groups resort to pulling the rug under their feet for keeping us as their 2nd class citizens. Let them be reminded the fact that all initial movements in Eritrea started in lowland areas and with our good will. For these efforts, our peasant and pastoral population should have benefited from the 1993 change but in vain. So in the face of all the prime problems pointed above, let them know that we are settled on fighting against those who snatched our rights for self-determination.