

The way forward for Ethiopia and Eritrea

By Dawit Woldegiorgis | June 29, 2009

I read Neamin Zeleke's [piece](#) on Ethiomeia and other websites about his reflection and opinions on the future of Ethiopian and Eritrean relationship. I would like to compliment his very wise observation on this very important issue of our times. I believe that not relating with the Eritrean government is a misguided position. Let me explain why based on my own personal experience.

After a rigorous three-year military training in the Haile Selassie I Military Academy I spent my entire military career in Eritrea. I was there as an infantry training and operation officer in the 2nd infantry division for six years. Even after I left Eritrea to attend university, I went back to Eritrea every summer to proudly serve in the army.



In spite of decades of war in Eritrea, the palm-lined city of Italian art deco, Asmara, has been spared of the wrath of war and destruction.

I was in Eritrea during and after the federation. During the last day of the federation I was there in Asmara on security mission watching the Eritrean Assembly when they were voting. It was unanimous vote. The Eritrean elites were the first to express their joy. There was in fact a competition within the Eritrean elites to send telegrams and messages to Emperor Haile Selassie expressing their joy and congratulating him.

There were some disgruntled elements that felt excluded from the new dispensation and therefore expressed dissatisfaction for personal reasons — the loss of power and influence. I was there celebrating with the Eritreans the long awaited unity of Eritrea with the motherland. It was an unforgettable moment. There was spontaneous and almost universal rejoicing by the entire Eritrean population. Undoubtedly, the response was genuine. I have gone across the length and breadth of Eritrea and experienced the outpouring of joy over the decision to unite with Ethiopia. Throughout Eritrea, and I have been to every big and small village, there was a sense of exuberance for the few years after the union. Whatever happened after that is completely inconsistent with what the people felt at the time. It suggests that there was a serious mishandling of the federal arrangement and the union that followed. If it had been handled with caution and without haste, things might have been different today.

I was there with my troops at the door step of the police headquarters when the first dissent had its first casualty, General Tedla Ekubit, the Eritrean police commander. I was there during the most critical times in the development of the Eritrean rebel forces. I was there as troop commander when the first conflict started between the government troops and the rebel forces (then they were just bandits) because they did not have any political agenda. They were just a band of people headed by Idris Awate, a notorious shifta imprisoned by the British and then escaped to continue banditry act. He was again pardoned and was living peacefully when the newly established ELF recruited him and he went back to do what he had been doing all his life. I was there when he was captured and killed.

I was also there when in September 1956 (Eth. Cal.) our troops suffered their first causality at a place called Haikota, close to Agordat. The ELF took out peaceful soldiers on leave from a public bus and executed them. Until then Eritrea was peaceful. Even after that until the coming of the Derg and its draconian military and security polices, the EPLF did not control a single village or area in Eritrea except the rugged mountains of Nakfa. The EPLF did not enjoy any meaningful support from the

population. Despite the fact that the process of uniting Eritrea with Ethiopia was flawed with technical and strategic errors, the people of Eritrea believed sincerely and sometimes manifested in extreme ways that I have not seen anywhere else in Ethiopia. (Refer to my book *Kihdet be Dem Meret*).

As a soldier, I have been involved in military operations. We were seven young officers, the first of the kind, in those times to come to Eritrea to train the troops. We used to be called Para Commandos, airborne and special force. (After three years in the military academy, a few months airborne and a year in advanced infantry school in USA. That was a lot of military training.) All my six colleagues died in the service of the country. I am the only survivor from this pioneer group. For us the sanctity of the flag, the unity of Ethiopia was paramount. It was not questioned and dying for it was a cause to be celebrated. That is how most of the people I worked with in Eritrea and most of the soldiers I knew much later in life lived and died. They were in hundreds of thousands and all died with a smile on their face: because the cause was the flag and the unity of Ethiopia.

I came to the United States for my graduate studies and after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie I returned to Ethiopia. I was an active part of the revolution which I sincerely supported until a certain time. But throughout the times I worked under the Derg I was very close to Eritrea. I followed the situation very closely until I was finally appointed as its governor (the party's representative) for three years, 1980 to 1983.

When I was governor for three years, my task was to pacify the rebellion and stop people from supporting the EPLF. And indeed, as many who were there at the time would testify, we succeeded to the extent that the EPLF leadership later admitted to me and my colleagues that it was one of the toughest times in their war against Ethiopia. Suddenly young people stopped joining the rebels and many started deserting from the EPLF and joined their families. It was not a miracle nor was it a complicated task. The wisdom is simply treating the Eritrean community as citizens with certain inalienable rights. When we stopped arresting people at random, established the rule of law and treated people on equal terms, people stayed in the country and once again Asmara became bustling metropolitan and other major cities returned to their former status. What we proved was the eternal truth that the major cause of the rebellion was the oppression of the population by successive governments in Addis Ababa. The EPLF and the ELF grew out of the atrocities committed by the Derg and to a certain extent during the Emperor's era. It became clear to us that the reason why many joined the rebels was not because they really believed that they were not part of Ethiopia but because they were denied their right to live without fear of being persecuted, arrested and tortured and executed. At some point in the history of the Derg this happened routinely (For more detail, refer to *Red Tears*)

During my tenure as governor, I was convinced that the Eritrean situation could be reversed if we could do less of military and more of governance and rule of law. I also suggested that we recognize the EPLF and engage with it. This created an outrage. Even after I left my country I have been condemned by my closest colleagues of suggesting that Ethiopian government recognize the EPLF and engage it in dialogue. My proposal for dialogue put me in trouble with the military establishment. As the records would show, I had serious confrontations with the then military leadership over this. Key Kokeb was not about war. Key Kokeb was about multifaceted approach for the Eritrean issue. HULEGEB ZEMETCHA. It was hijacked by the military and it launched an all out war which ended disgracefully and my showdown with the military ended with me leaving Eritrea and being assigned as the Commissioner of Relief and Rehabilitation Commission.

After I left the Derg at the end of 1985, I became actively involved in the effort to overthrow the regime through the movement we had established, The Free Ethiopian Soldiers Movement. The first attempt was the failed coup of the generals. I and my colleagues did the external arrangement for the coup. During those times I went into the area controlled by the EPLF in Nakfa . We discussed the role of the EPLF and suggested to EPLF leaders to participate in a transitional government in the post Derg period. EPLF agreed that it will unilaterally implement a cease fire and participate in the transitional government to negotiate the future of Eritrea. After this attempt failed, I was again involved in another similar effort. The EPLF's position was unchanged. The EPLF was willing to participate in a transitional government of Ethiopia. And this was only a few months before TPLF marched into Addis. We were about to try once again, but the TPLF rejected the proposal and the attempt was aborted. Throughout

these activities against the Derg, my colleagues and I worked very closely with the EPLF leadership. Despite the fact that I was an ardent supporter of unity, an officer who fought them, a governor who condemned them at every available opportunity, my relationship with the EPLF leadership was cordial and constructive.

Sometimes when we talk about the heroism of our forefathers in defending the motherland, we forget that a significant number of Eritreans sacrificed their lives for the defense of our independence against colonialists. How can we talk about the heroic struggle of our ancestors without acknowledging the key role that Eritreans played? For me it is ridiculous to say, We Ethiopians, in the context of history, without including Eritreans.

When, for example, we write and talk about Ras Alula and the battles he fought and won, we must remember that the bulk of his troops were Eritreans and their sacrifice was enormous. As well documented, almost all our external wars came through the Red Sea. Eritrea had always been the frontline for almost all the wars fought against the invaders. Eritrean patriots and Tigreans were part and parcel of these wars against foreign aggressors. Eritreans have always been at the forefront of the wars fought to preserve the independence of and unity of Ethiopia. During the war of resistance against Italian invasion, thousands of Eritrean patriots fought alongside mehal ager arbegnotch. The head of the military of the Black Lion was an Eritrean Colonel Haileab. Eritrean patriots shaped the foreign and military policies and structures after liberation. The first and second foreign ministers were Eritreans. The first ambassador to the UN was an Eritrean. Eritreans played key roles in organizing and modernizing the Ethiopian Armed Forces. There were more than 20 senior Eritrean generals at some point in the Ethiopian armed forces ranging from chief of staff, ground force commanders, air force commanders and division commanders. General Aman Andom was the most prominent among these senior commanders of Eritrean origin. It must also be remembered that considerable percentages of the soldiers in the Army were Eritreans.

During the war fought between the Ethiopian troops and the EPLF/ELF, there was a special Eritrean commando force which proved to be one of the hardest and in fact most brutal of all the forces of the times. The Eritrean militia, like the most wonderful people of Kohayne, fought to the bitter end until the country was taken over by the EPLF. (Refer *Kihdet be Dem Mere*)

It is hard to understand how this center broke from the whole. Perhaps it was because the Eritreans have been exposed to many kinds of propaganda and external interests. Unlike the rest of Ethiopia which was ruled by successive kings and kingdoms, in the Eritrean coast land and at a later phase in its history, in the highlands, the Turks, the Egyptians, the Italians and the British have played some roles in shaping the minds of people. These experiences have left some imprints which influenced the growth of different kinds of political thoughts and alliances.

Throughout my stay in Eritrea as a soldier, and later as Deputy Foreign Minister and then governor of Eritrea, I have delivered many speeches on the unity of Ethiopia that Eritrea was part of Ethiopia and asking the question if Eritreans are not Ethiopians then who else is? Eritrea is Mehal Ager. It is the center of our civilization and faith, the source of our culture and literature, the place where Ethiopiwinet began. I believed in this and every Eritrean I spoke to at the time believed in this ultimate truth. For me, it was my passion. I grew up taking the unity of Ethiopia and the inviolability of its frontiers as sacred oath not to be broken or questioned. But this oath, this timeless sacred alliance between us and the spirits of our ancestors, hundreds of thousands who died defending this cause, has been brutally ravaged by a bunch of arrogant self-righteous ethno centric individuals who are at the helm of leadership to destroy this unique legacy.

It must also be understood that the cause of Eritrean independence was supported by the student movement for years. I remember I was in New York's Columbia University in early 1972-74 and I used to participate in student movement meetings. It was fashionable to talk about self determination up to and including secession. Anybody that did not support the cause of the Eritrean struggle was labeled as reactionary. I tried to explain in some meetings why our soldiers are fighting in Eritrea and why it is wrong to condemn them for protecting the unity of Ethiopia. As usual, I was labeled as a reactionary soldier who has been serving the interest of the feudal regime and my concern was dismissed. There is

some credence to the claim that the student movement unwittingly allowed itself to be used by forces that had inimical agenda to Ethiopia's interest.

When I was in the foreign office and later governor, and even when I was the Commissioner for Relief and Rehabilitation, I had meetings with the EPLF in some European countries organized by some NGOs, usually the Red Cross and Scandinavian human rights activists. The main purpose was to negotiate the opening of peace corridor in the conflict areas to provide humanitarian assistance to the civilian population trapped by the conflict. These meetings were not sanctioned by the government because it would be considered treason for anybody to have this kind of communication without the knowledge of the government. The ones that were done with government's knowledge had heavy pre-conditions. It was almost demanding the surrender of the EPLF. It therefore did not go anywhere. Ours was an effort by groups of concerned people who were trying to explore options to this endless war. When I and my colleagues met with the EPLF in very informal settings, they were and have always been very open to options besides full independence. There was no doubt in my mind then that EPLF would have accepted some sort of federation. But the Derg/WPE regime was never prepared to discuss this. I was even more certain about the position of the EPLF after my latter encounters.

After I left Ethiopia the first thing that I and my colleagues did was to establish a movement to overthrow the Derg. In this Eritrea was a key factor. I met the leadership of the EPLF and current President Isaias Afwerki several times in Europe and America and ultimately in Nakfa, through the back door into those parts of Eritrea controlled by the EPLF and meeting the leaders, the very people I have been fighting and condemning for years felt weird to me. That was the time when we were trying to coordinate the external factors with internal preparations for a coup. In an official agreement the EPLF stated that when and if the coup takes place, it will immediately cease fire and be part of the transitional government to discuss the future of Eritrea. True to their words, at the time the coup attempt was taking place, they did a unilateral cease fire and asked us if there is anything that they can do to make the coup successful. They could have taken advantage of the confusion in Eritrea when the commanders were killed and government troops were in disarray, but they did not. They were in constant touch with me and they were very disappointed by the failure of the coup.

A few years later, we tried to make another change from the inside before TPLF went too far. Again, we had discussions with EPLF and TPLF several times. We had completed preparations from the inside and what was needed was for the fighting forces to agree to implement a cease fire and be part of the transitional government. Until April 1991, two months before the TPLF entered Addis and EPLF Asmara, the EPLF supported the idea of making the change from the inside. They agreed after several meetings that they will be willing to stop fighting and participate in the transitional government and discuss the future of Eritrea. As the war continued, it became difficult to get the same kind of agreement from the TPLF. We had several meetings but eventually they sent us a long letter stating that they are heading to Addis Ababa and they asked us to be part of the EPRDF. Of course, we refused. That is when they established their own Free Ethiopian Officers Movement in order to confuse our followers in the military establishment.

The EPLF until the last days believed that the best option was to negotiate with the transitional government that would be established after a successful coup. And they know that the negotiation would not be about independence. I was aware that they were ready for some sort of federal arrangement. I was sure about that.

Besides the misguided policies of successive governments in Ethiopia, and the failure of the military to defend against the breakup of the nation, the overriding factor that eventually led to the independence of Eritrea was the policy of Woyanne. It gave away independence in a silver platter. Now, if from early on the student movement had supported the secession and made it possible for the EPLF to be a strong internationally acknowledged liberation movement, if the Derg in the name of national unity committed atrocities that alienated a big portion of the Eritrean population, and if Woyanne regime eventually gave away the independence without consulting the Ethiopian people, why should the Eritreans be blamed for it? Why should we create animosity with the Eritrean people?

We have to remember that throughout the period of war between the government troops and EPLF and

ELF, there had never been a war amongst the people. It never reached a level of civil war like in other parts of Africa. It was a war that went on for several years between the EPLF/ELF forces and government troops but never a war between the people. I am a living witness and can clearly testify that the war had never affected the relationship between the people. While the war was going on in the mountains, Amharas, Oromos, Tigres, and other ethnic groups lived together in peace, intermarried, helped each other, shared whatever they had and lived nothing less than a harmonious life. Over most Ethiopian troops in Eritrea were married to Eritreans. There are hundreds of thousands of their off springs today all over Ethiopia. Internal conflicts in Ethiopia have always been about power and not ethnicity. To my best recollection, the Tigreans in Gondar used to call themselves first Gonderes and vice versa. It is amazing that after years of war in Eritrea, the relationship between the people was never seriously damaged. It never went to a level of civil war. That is the greatness of the Ethiopian people. It demonstrates how deep our culture, our understanding and levels of tolerance have evolved over the centuries. This bonding between the people was broken by Woyanne. The Woaynne incited hate. It started sowing the seeds of ethnicity not only between the people of Eritrea and the rest of Ethiopia but amongst the Ethiopian people, too. This is indeed the saddest moment in Ethiopian history.

Eritrea is now independent. That reality cannot be reversed by force. There are two things that need to be done.

1The national security and interest of Ethiopia have been and will continue revolving around three main issues. The Nile, the Red Sea (Eritrea) and Somalia (the Ogaden). Since they are very much interrelated, they could be considered as one. I have explained this in my book *Kihdet be Dem Meret*. There is no need to do that here. In all this, Eritrea plays a vital role. Ethiopia and Eritrea have a common destiny. Whatever happens in Eritrea will affect Ethiopia and vice versa. Whoever wants to hurt Ethiopia uses Eritrea as stepping stone. Arab Chauvinism (expansionism) and Islamic Fundamentalism have always been real threats to Ethiopia, and Eritrea can possibly turn out to be the main conduit. Therefore, any responsible Ethiopian government will have to develop a policy of peaceful co-existence with Eritrea and go even further and ensure that Eritrea remains a stable, peaceful and independent ally of Ethiopia. And this can only be done through diplomacy and not confrontation.

2Whatever the policies of current governments may be, the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea are one people. We cannot and need not live apart. Our genes, our culture, language and history are identical. There are no people on earth that are closer to Ethiopians than the Eritreans and vice versa. We are destined to live together. Therefore the effort should be not to allow politics to change our historical oneness but to work towards integration. The will and conviction of people is mightier than the sword and we will beat the ethno- centricity and be once again one people. There needs to be a conscious effort by civil society groups to bring the two people together despite the politics in their respective countries.

The national interest of Ethiopia can be packed into three major issues.

1. The inviolability of state frontiers (territorial integrity)
2. The unity of the Ethiopian people
3. Freedom of its people

Our relationship with Eritrea should be based on these three fundamentals. If the Eritrean government respects the above fundamental principles and is willing to agree on policies that promote peace and development in order to create the necessary conditions for the union of the two people, then there would be no reason why Ethiopians of any group should not establish relationship with the government of Eritrea. Likewise, Ethiopians of all groups should recognize the sovereignty of Eritrea and work towards the fulfillment of our common aspirations.

After what I have done and spoken for most of my life, it has been difficult to swallow the reality that Eritrea is now an independent country. But I have to face the reality like many of us and look beyond. The reality of today and tomorrow should be on how we can advance the interests of our people in the context of this new reality. We might or might not agree with the policies of the current government in Eritrea. The relationship of the people outlasts leaders and their policies. We should therefore

strengthen the foundations of our historical relationship and be careful not to be the victims of the poisonous propaganda by Woyanne. Meles Zenawi has attempted to define what Ethiopiawinet is and what Eritreyawinet is in his own terms and based on his own interests. The truth is: there is no drawing line. His own identity and that of his trusted advisers are testimonies of this reality and truth. It is only the governments that are two. The people have been one and are one. All responsible Ethiopians and Eritreans should endeavor to uphold this truth and reinforce it by focusing on what binds us together rather than what divides us.

As a neighbor with vested interest in Eritrean affairs, Ethiopians can only take hard positions when the steps being taken by the Eritrean government violates the fundamental principles of our relationship and endangers our peace and security. The current government has emphatically stated that it will not violate these principles and, in fact, it will be willing to work toward the building of a stable Ethiopia. I believed earlier that Eritrea was trying to strengthen its economy and its standing in the region at the expense of Ethiopia. It was my impression that Eritrea wanted a weak Ethiopia that is divided and not capable of posing any threat to Eritrea. This might have been true at some point in its existence. But I believe that Eritrean government realizes now that destabilizing Ethiopia will only bound to hurt it more and will not be in the best interest of the people and the government of Eritrea. Ethiopians are already angry that Eritrea seceded, and for it to go beyond that and try to destabilize Ethiopia will evoke greater anger that could justify conflict. It is wise for Eritrea to adjust to realities and work hard for peaceful co-existence which acknowledges mutual interests. Neither side should try to destabilize the other. Eritrea and Ethiopia can prosper in a peaceful co-existence with each other. Eritrea's security can be guaranteed through a good relationship with a much stronger Ethiopia. The free movement between the two countries will further strengthen the unity of its people possibly leading to some sort of political union. Eritreans and Ethiopians can't hide from the truth. No matter what is being written and being told, we are one people with common history, common enemies, common threats and interests.

Today, the issue is Woyanne and not Eritrea. For Ethiopians as well as for Eritreans, Woyanne is a threat. Remove Woyanne and Ethiopians and Eritreans can breathe a sigh of relief and begin a new relationship based on mutual respect and working towards unifying the people. Assab is negotiable. Badme is negotiable. As President Isaias stated, "the sky is the limit." Knowing how the Eritreans are straightforward and consistent in their words and deeds, there is no reason to suspect that his statement is one of a political gimmick.

A friend of mine sent me e mail on the issue:

I did not say that we should not engage — what I said is that our assessment of Eritrea's intention should not be based on the assumption that the current leadership would like to see "a strong, united and democratic Ethiopia." Their own history has evolved to the extent that an apparent state of paranoia has set in, and by all indications of their regional engagement in the region, we cannot escape this conclusion. However, it does not; by any means suggest that we should not engage them.

Why do we believe them? We don't have to. Relationship with the Government of Eritrea for a common cause needs to be built, of course, in the framework of our fundamental interests outlined above. If they cannot translate their words into deeds, they will be the losers, too. Ethiopians sooner or later will get rid of Woyanne and will come out stronger from this tragic political impasse. I am inclined to believe Eritreans because there is simply no option at this time except peaceful coexistence. The initial problem with the Eritrean elites was recognition. It seems now that most Ethiopians have taken this bitter pill and accepted that Eritrea is an independent state.

Woyanne cooperated in the drive for the independence Eritrea. But it now wants to manipulate Eritrea and make it surrender to its will. Woyanne cannot dupe the Ethiopians by false sense of patriotism over peripheral issues like Badme. Today, the issue is the survival of Ethiopia as we have known it and as it should be. Woyanne is destroying the fabrics of the Ethiopian society by bringing back a Bantustanisation policy from the junk yards of African history, by introducing ethnic politics and dividing people along ethnic lines, slicing our land and giving it away, unleashing poverty the kind that has not been seen in our history, arresting and torturing political opponents, perpetuating a dictatorship by a few Tigrean elite people from Adwa, Axum and Shire, facilitating the spread of fundamentalism and creating

hostility with the Muslim world with whom we had a carefully crafted cordial relationship for decades. Woyanne has made Ethiopia technologically the most backward countries in the world. Certainly and unequivocally Ethiopia is in grave danger.

The history of Ethiopia has been about winners and leaders. It was so during the times of the monarchies, was so during the time of the Derg, and has been so now. Our genuine historians had to dig a lot to bring the truth out and popularize it. It has not been an easy task. Once again, Woyanne is rewriting history. Great weight must be given to the damage that will be caused on the younger generation if we allow this distortion to continue unabated. At some point, it might have served a purpose, but now that we are talking about the two people living and working together, we have to design a relationship between the people that will facilitate the truth to be told. The two people have been one and need to be one for more than one reason. With truth there will be no losers but winners. Our destinies are inextricably tied to each other. Those of us who have lived long enough know and understand the truth but the new generation is exposed to the history of denial. The truth will only make us stronger in pursuing our common interest. Emotions must subside and give way to pragmatism. We have to work very closely with our Eritrean brothers and sisters to get rid of Woyane and establish a new era of peaceful co existence, common prosperity that will lead to a reunion of our people. And this must start from the streets, the restaurants, the clubs, churches and various forums in Ethiopia, Eritrea, America, USA and Africa.

At one point, I was discussing with the leader of the EPLF, the current President of Eritrea, Isaias Afewerki. I asked him why instead of partitioning Ethiopia, he does not become the President of Ethiopia. He gave me some reason why this would not be possible but assured me "You can be certain Mr. Dawit, that if and when we get our independence, our priority will be to unite the people under some sort of federal arrangement."

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