

EPDP: Birth or Miscarriage of an Idea Four Years after Conception

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This paper provides a short critical situational analysis on what went wrong in EPDP during the last four years. The critique is followed with a description of solution proposals on what needs to be done in order to overcome the fundamental problems and bottlenecks that EPDP is currently facing. Both the critique and the suggested solutions are meant to help enrich the discussions and debates during the 2nd Congress.

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A Critical Situational Analysis

After decades of internecine conflicts and disagreements between the two major liberation era Eritrean fronts (ELF & EPLF) and their offshoots, the creation of EPDP in 2011 was meant a dream come true in terms of unity and bringing some light into the darkness of the Eritrean opposition. An idea with expected ideals of unity, justice, democracy, prosperity and social harmony was conceived. An honest self assessment and evaluation would have, however, produced tangible evidence whether or not these expectations have been achieved in the last four years after the conception. But, contrary to the expressed objectives, save to some in roads, EPDP has mainly been wracked by its own disagreements, internal conflicts, and regression ever since. EPDP Membership has been declining; EPDP policy on Ethiopia has been ineffective; formation of unity/coalition with other Eritrean forces has been dismal; EPDP's internal unity has been weakened, not strengthened, and the Party we established for a 'positive change' became a Party of 'no' where the much needed reform and change is by and large blocked or not progressed as expected. In all, analyzing the present and the past, the lack of political dynamism and innovation inside EPDP is real and inescapable. The current discussion on how and where to hold the 2nd EPDP congress is simply one phenomenon that triggered the rest of the problems – problems, which have been simmering beneath the ground in the Party for the last four years.

True, EPDP could have progressed and made change; it could have been different and a Party of change by now as it declared it would be during its formation. But it did not. True again, EPDP owns national programs and visions, but it failed to deliver results and consequently the Eritrean people could not see it as a different Party, or better than the rest of Eritrea's opposition forces. EPDP is lamped together with the rest, and defined and characterized as such because of its inability to deliver and distinguish itself. Why and what happened? This piece is a summary of the situation and highlights what went wrong as follows:

The Hubris Syndrome: The base of EPDP's lack of progress is the belief that it is doing well while it is not; the belief that silencing voices of reason is a good strategy to keep EPDP unity intact while it is not. The belief that dissension subverts democratic principles and that it must be squashed at every angle. In all, EPDP is under siege by its own hubris; EPDP seems to be obsessed with the idea of controlling, groupings, political marginalization, lack of compromising, hate and polarization. All this is crippling the Party to the core – it is the height of uninformed democratic struggle.

The EPDP Congress-Making Myth: There is a myth that EPDP's internal unity will be exposed to danger if we do not hold the next EPDP congress in two different venues during *'two different*

set of days'. The relationship between the two is flawed because holding the congress simultaneously - during the same set of days – in the two different venues would enhance the internal unity of EPDP. The reason argued for holding the congress during two separate set of days is not plausible, to say the least, and the advantage of having the congress simultaneously far outweighs all the arguments against it even if there might be minor problems. The reasons/problems given for holding the congress during two different set of days are largely invented ones. On the surface, it may seem the congress-making process is going well, but in reality it is not; it is ridden by indecision and manipulation, which at the end has culminated in unmanageable crisis.

The Myth of Majority Rule: Majority rule is earned in a democratic setting, and not in a controlled manner. Not only that but also majority rule is based on an informed, substantive and open debate in a given meeting. There is no evidence that the majority rule is being exercised in EPDP in a manner that is open and transparent. The debate that takes place in EPDP leadership (Central Council) is overwhelmingly dominated and controlled by a few while the rest of the leadership members do not exercise their right to debate and voice their opinion. This is not a majority rule, and it stands in the way of true change in the Party.

The Myth of Democratic Centralism: In democracy, politics and change evolve when dissension is legally, democratically, and consciously embraced by members of a given political entity. Dissension is democratic and must be given a space to flourish. Democratic centralism is a concept of tyranny embedded in the old communism and practiced to suppress freedom of opinion and change. EPDP needs to deprogram itself from such anti democracy concept.

The Culture of Blackmailing: The culture of blackmailing to undermine dissension is against democracy and it is a manifestation of marginalization, as well. And no political Party, opposition, or government would really become democratic unless it allows dissension. Those who raise questions to improve EPDP are being blackmailed, denigrated, and marginalized with a subtle campaign to push them out from the Party. What this means is that in EPDP some are suspects and villains, and not members of the Party. This won't help the Party a bit.

EPDP and Comfort Zone Politics: The culture of groupings in politics is practiced to deny access to those who want to voice their concerns in their Party. Such groupings emanate from the notion of requiring conformity of members, dominance, and monopoly that ignores the input and democratic participation of a given constituency. Having said that, there is a culture in EPDP that policy issues and other Party related decisions are decided based on groupings and through selected networking, and by extension such group thinking seeks to dominate everything; it thinks it has a right to do anything by whatever means necessary. This flies not only in the face of diversified ideas and freedom of democracy, but also it creates suspicion and ill informed debate/communication among Party members. This is not healthy politics and the

addiction that EPDP has with grouping needs to be eliminated if EPDP is to thrive as a national political Party.

The Myth of Internal Unity: The EPDP brand of broad, far reaching, and inclusive national force is being tarnished by the day. One need not to look far to see the problems and questions facing the Party: from having opposing positions inside the Party on fundamental issues (like that of Ethiopia) to organizing internal opposition, and to designing a strategy on how to work with the rest of the Eritrean opposition forces, and/or to finding another alternative outside the Eritrean opposition forces. In this, how EPDP leadership sets policies and decisions not only affects the internal unity and dynamics of the Party, but also impacts the linkage between the leadership and its base, as well as it is an indication the degree of decline and change of EPDP as an opposition Party (for example, recruiting new members or rallying Eritrean people inside and outside the country). In practical terms, all the above linkages are lost in EPDP. Hence, it is an illusion to believe that the internal unity of EPDP is solid and that we are under one roof. We are not.

The other main issue is that during the merger, the two Parties never framed modalities on to how to cement the process of unity between them particularly on issues relating to major policies and principles such as policy on Ethiopia, mechanism of unity with other Eritrean forces, and strategy on building internal networks/struggles, nor was a clear timetable drawn to evaluate those activities. What the merger provided was a general frameworks, most of which led to the current stalemate. As a result, the merger process consolidated the culture and political influence of the liberation era, further weakening internal Party structures and reducing democratic space within the Party.

Conflict Resolution: there is a belief that majority rule/vote/leadership decisions will end all conflicts and disagreements in EPDP. No, it won't. Unless, we consider conflict resolution in terms of addressing all the discourses and voices of Party members, we cannot have a Party whose decisions will be embraced and implemented by its base. It is not controversial that EPDP has failed to manage conflict resolution at every level and stage. The Party must understand that conflict resolution is related one to change, maintaining internal unity, allowing the input of its base, and bringing together all concepts and discourses of Party members together.

Institutional Function: there is no functional institutional mechanism in EPDP. For example, when new event pops up in EPDP, members in Saudi Arabia and Sudan will have certain information while other members in Ethiopia will have information totally different than members in other regions. In politics, this process is selective and designed to achieve manufactured and uninformed information across the Party establishment. What it does is 1) it creates suspicion; 2) it forces some members to make uninformed decision; 3) it forces others

to question the institutional channel, 4) and it nurtures grouping and polarization. Collectively, such institutional practice brings the Party to its knees.

Misunderstanding of Demographic Changes and the TPLF Regime: EPDP has failed to understand the demographic changes that took place in Eritrea since the 80s and the 90s (born 10 years before independence and/or born after independence). This demographic group accounts close to 70% of Eritrean people and it is the most decisive and influential force in the struggle for democracy, as well as to the continuity of the nation of Eritrea – the shield and sword of the country. What is important about this segment of Eritrean society is that its indifference to the plethora of conflicts that emanate from the culture of liberation era, which is still prevalent across the Eritrean opposition forces. This generation is also the first to enter the opposition for democracy and justice in post independence Eritrea.

But this generation is not without its own problem, either. It is becoming subjected to an array of political influence and engineering that devalues its nationalistic psyche and unity of its people. The major culprit for this is Ethiopia and its Eritrean collaborators who relentlessly keep waving sub nationalist flags. As a result, we have a segment of our younger generation that is growing with the belief of regionalism and sub nationalism. This is dangerous to the sovereignty and unity of Eritrea. EPDP not only has not played its role to reverse such realities, but also its complete silence in the face of such development (its fear of Ethiopia's reaction) may have encouraged these forces to flourish – all to the detriment of Eritrea. It must be underlined here that Ethiopia is balkanizing the Eritrean society and its damaging implication both on Eritrea's bedrock social diversity and political future is real. The idea that we must work with Ethiopia does not hold water and it has no political face for us Eritreans while the TPLF regime is tirelessly waging war against united and democratic opposition force in Eritrea.

In all, what is important to understand is that the generation of the revolution era is aging on the one hand, and we have also a segment of our present generation eclipsed by bitter regionalism and sub nationalism due Ethiopia's policy of balkanization on Eritrea on the other hand. All this represents a looming gap between the two generations. Hence, this prospect holds huge danger and threat to the future existence and continuity of our country, Eritrea. ***The message here is that EPDP must understand that TPLF regime is remaking Eritrea, and we must challenge it.***

Future Oriented Thinking: majority of EPDP members, including members of leadership are not future oriented. The mindset and political culture is stuck in the narrative of political beliefs and concepts formulated in the mountains of Sahel and Barka (armed struggle/field), which is no longer viable and tenable in post independence Eritrea. ***There is a need of breakthroughs that could move the thinking from "armed struggle mentality and political vindictiveness" towards future oriented politics, which should take due account of the social and political realities of***

post independence Eritrea, meaning take the best of the past, embrace the present, and focus on a sustainable future oriented political thinking/learning.

Internal Struggle: One of EPDP policy pillars is organizing and networking with internal opposition as a decisive force to remove the PFDJ regime from power. How far had EPDP gone to implement this policy? What form of political approach did EPDP use to influence the internal opposition? Who are the forces that EPDP is trying to partner with inside Eritrea? In reviewing the above questions, EPDP has not been running a viable policy to organize internal opposition against the PFDJ regime. The major problems can be summarized as follows:

- EPDP failed to understand that the oversized influence of the internal opposition comes from ex-EPLF members;
- EPDP failed to understand that by and large Eritrean people inside the country support/belong to EPLF, and that they embrace the values of EPLF;
- EPDP failed to formulate a policy of differentiation between ex-EPLF and PFDJ members; and
- EPDP is divorced from the popular dynamics inside the country that, for example, the 1997 constitution, flag, EEBC borders ruling, and other issues are uncompromising values and close to the hearts of Eritrean people and the present youth.

Hence, the creation of internal opposition in Eritrea is dependent upon the understanding that the inside partners are ex-EPLF members and that they value the current flag, the 1997 constitution, border conflict with TPLF ...etc. As long as EPDP remains unresponsive to these issues, the creation of internal opposition is very unlikely.

Ethiopia and Its Interventionist Policy: Ethiopia's interventionist policy in Eritrea's affairs has been in place ever since we gained our independence. How has Ethiopia undertaken such an interventionist policy? Among the many sinister activities of Ethiopia, the following can be mentioned:

- Through creating and organizing opposition groups based on sub nationalist and regional/tribal politics;
- Through proactively attacking and manipulating the unity of Eritrean society aimed at erasing the core of Eritrean nationalism/Eritrean psyche that held us together for centuries;
- Through manufacturing conflict between different Eritrean social groups, for example, highland vs. lowland, or Christian vs. Moslem;
- Through defining the PFDJ regime as a Christian or Tigrigna regime; and
- Through marginalizing all nationalist forces, namely EPDP and its affiliates whose visions and principles are based on united and democratic Eritrea.

It must be understood that such a stealthy interventionist policy of the TPLF regime is fuelled not only by the need for control of the Eritrean opposition forces but also by its hegemonic nature to have economic, political, and social control over Eritrea, or maybe to undermine Eritrea's sovereignty and independence. But, TPLF's involvement in the affairs of Eritrea is only gaining more enemies and hatred by the day from the Eritrean people because TPLF leaders refuse to acknowledge that they are stealing the opportunities of our people to rebel against their own government the way they want and however they want. ***The message is EPDP needs to call upon Ethiopia publicly to stop its balkanization policy on Eritrea. In the long run, TPLF's policy on Eritrea will benefit neither Ethiopia nor Eritrea.***

The Case of Our Unity: The number of Eritrean opposition forces now totals over 30 or more. There are also many other faceless and nameless groups, whose aim is to bleed Eritrea behind the political curtain of TPLF regime. So far, the history of unity among Eritrean opposition forces has been a history of failure, dismay, and dysfunction. Counting years, yes, it has been 24 years, and no unity is achieved among the Eritrean opposition forces, and the prospect for establishing a real Eritrean unity is very low or nonexistent. The fact is we should swallow that the current Eritrean opposition forces have completely failed the Eritrean people; have failed to understand the reality of the Eritrean people, fundamentally because they gave up the right to own the affairs of the opposition. It is simply existence in name.

The implication of not having national unity has a profound effect on our country for generations to come. For one, unity of Eritrean people is not something that can be limited and/or defined in terms of the Eritrean opposition forces only; it is a national affair. Unity is a cornerstone for Eritrea's independence and sovereignty; it is a hallmark upon which Eritrean people's cohesion and coexistence depends; it is a pillar for economic, social, and political development, and sustainable peace. For this reason, EPDP needs to explore other means of establishing unity, namely with forces whose visions and principles are similar to its own where the unity process cannot and won't be controlled or hijacked by the TPLF regime. We must understand the differentiation between seeking assistance (if there is or if there ever was one) from TPLF regime and owning our national affair. EPDP and its partners have historical obligation to stop the Re-parceling, Re-crafting, and Re-making of Eritrea by TPLF regime, which is an existential threat to Eritrea's unity

Solution Proposals

The 2nd Congress of EPDP is taking place at a critical juncture and under an extraordinary circumstance. A lot has been said and done to make the congress a success. The debate surrounding the issue of conducting the congress in two different venues simultaneously versus conducting it in two different venues on two separate set of days has been tenacious and exposed the underlying fundamental differences among EPDP members on many substantive

issues. Generally, two opposing views have evolved which is challenging the internal unity of the party. These different views are expected to play out during the congress which may result in the “birth or miscarriage” of the unity idea which was conceived four years ago. To help enrich the discussion and subsequently win the debate, the following solution ideas have been proposed:

A. Conduct of the Congress: Since the congress will be conducted during two different set of days, there are technical issues that cannot be resolved without undermining EPDP’s Constitution and breaking the law. These technical issues include the following, but to name a few:

- Number of CC members
- Number of nominees
- Adding new nominees by congress
- Raising new issues and how decisions are made in the congress, etc.

In all of the above issues, the Frankfurt Congress should decide and act as if it were a full-fledged congress – debate and pass decisions by 50+1 percent by those who would participate and vote in the Frankfurt congress. It should be underlined that deciding the number of CC members, number of nominees, and adding new nominees or disqualifying nominees that are submitted by the Nominating Committee is the constitutional right of the Congress and it should be abided as such at all times. When it comes to how to decide on new issues, issues not raised in the Ethiopia Congress, decisions should be made by 50+1 percent from those who would vote in the Frankfurt Congress and not from the total congress participants in both venues. It should be noted that the two groups of congress participants (in Ethiopia and in Frankfurt) are two random samples drawn from EPDP members. It is a normal and appropriate practice in scientific communities to assume that these two samples to have similar characteristics, including voting behavior. Thus, it is logical, for example, to predict that if the participants of the Ethiopia Congress were presented with new issues discussed in the Frankfurt Congress, they would vote similar to those in the Frankfurt Congress. Suppose, for instance, a new issue that was not raised in the Ethiopia Congress is raised in the Frankfurt Congress and the latter voted with a 50+1 percent “Yes”. Then, it is logical and scientifically sound to predict that the Ethiopia Congress would have voted with 50+1 percent “Yes” had the new issue been presented to it.

B. Issues that Should Be Raised and Debated in the Congress: As described in the “Situational Analysis” above, there are fundamental silent issues that divided EPDP members. It is time that EPDP members should talk about them openly and this congress is a good opportunity to do so. This should start with a thorough and honest self-assessment and evaluation of EPDP to understand the events/developments that transpired during the last four years and

culminated in the current crisis. Hence, the Congress should raise and debate on the following issues:

- **A Critical Evaluation of EPDP:** An entity that never evaluates its activities never learns from its mistakes and never grows. The 2nd Congress should critically evaluate what EPDP did and did not do during the last four years;
- **The Method of Struggle (Democratic and Nonviolent Struggle):** The congress should evaluate what EPDP did with respect to its expressed method of struggle. It seems that there are fundamental differences of opinions and views with respect to this issue among EPDP members, including at the top level. The method of struggle that EPDP has on its papers and documents has never been implemented and the reasons why it was not implemented should be figured out so that a mechanism to narrow down the gap in views could be sought out;
- **The 1997 Eritrean Constitution:** The congress should call for the implementation of the 1997 Eritrean Constitution. Calling for the implementation of the constitution should be looked at as a part and parcel of the method of struggle that EPDP has in its documents. Actually, since the core element of the nonviolent method of struggle is the internal forces, calling for the implementation of the constitution is more about EPDP's affairs than about the constitution per se. It is about EPDP's language of communication with the internal forces – the decisive force that effect change in the nonviolent struggle paradigm;
- **Creating an Alternative Narration:** One of the key problems in the opposition camp is the lack of better alternative narration to the PFDJ's. To develop this alternative narration, the voice of reason should come together or should work together. EPDP has failed so far to help create a viable alternative opposition force by bringing like minded groups or individuals with national and democratic credentials similar to its own. One of the sticky issues here is to decide with whom to work which requires a process of differentiating among the cocktails of opposition groups. Hence, as a first step, the congress should debate on developing an internal measurement or metrics that can help distinguish who constitutes a viable opposition group or entity;
- **EPDP's Policy on Ethiopia:** Ethiopia is one of our neighbor countries. But, unlike the others, Ethiopia is different – its past and present behaviors have been and are against the national interest of Eritrea. It should be noted that it is a norm in international relation that countries are guided by their instinct of national interest – no considerations for justice or fairness to the other party to any international deal. Hence, as Eritreans we should work to protect the national interest of Eritrea and its people whenever we deal with international actors. Ethiopia should not be an exception. But, there is a fundamental and substantive gap of views on the role of

Ethiopia in the Eritrean politics. The 2nd congress should seriously discuss and debate on this issue and should come up with a framework to narrow down the gap;

- **Internal Unity:** The internal unity of EPDP is at its lowest level. The process which led to the Congress deepened the disunity of EPDP as there have been many thorny issues and debates which further exacerbated the mistrust among members. Since, these issues cannot be resolved during the congress, a framework or a mechanism should be crafted to handle the issue of internal unity and to restore trust among members of EPDP. The congress could, for example, create an organ or an entity and empower it with a relevant authority to investigate and propose a course of action to handle and solve outstanding problems and issues.

C. Potential Paradigm Shifting Decisions of the Congress:

- Calling for the immediate implementation of the 1997 Eritrean Constitution;
- Naming the PFDJ Regime as the main cause for the misery of Eritrea and its people in general and for the unsafe exodus of the Eritrean Youth in particular;
- Naming Ethiopia as the Party signatory to the Algiers Agreement that refused to demarcate the Ethio-Eritrean border; and
- Naming Ethiopia as the main culprit behind the dysfunctional and fragmented Eritrean opposition camp.