

The Will to Overcome: Daniel Gebretensae, the Antifragile Spirit, and the Future of Eritrea

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In a recent interview, Daniel Gebretensae, the Chairman of the Organization of Eritrean Unity (OEU), articulated a principle that serves as both a psychological



anchor and a political manifesto: “ግስጋስ በቶም ተስፋ ምቁራጽ ዝኣበዩ እዩ ዝህነጹ” – **“Progress is built by those who refuse to give up.”** While these words resonate with the immediate struggles of the Eritrean Diaspora, they are deeply rooted in a profound philosophical tradition and mirrored by the lives of history’s most transformative figures. Gebretensae’s leadership does not merely advocate for political change; it embodies a visionary refusal to succumb to the inertia of despair.

Nietzsche, Antifragility, and the Will to Power

To understand the depth of Gebretensae’s statement, one must look to Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the **“Will to Power”** (*der Wille zur Macht*). For Nietzsche, this is not a crude desire to dominate others, but the fundamental driving force of all existence – the internal urge to overcome, to grow, and to manifest one’s own reality despite an oppressive environment (Nietzsche 1968, 36). Nietzsche argued that the highest form of humanity is found in the individual who creates their own values and persists when the world offers only nihilism.

This philosophy is further reinforced by the principle of “**Antifragility**,” a concept developed by Nassim Nicholas Taleb. While resilience allows one to resist shocks and stay the same, antifragility describes a system or individual that actually improves and grows stronger due to stressors, volatility, and disorder (Taleb 2012, 3). Daniel Gebretensae’s leadership recognizes that the Eritrean struggle is an antifragile one. By asserting that success belongs to those who refuse to quit, he is directing the OEU to embrace challenges as catalysts for a more robust and justice-oriented future.

The Legacy of the Unbroken: From Helen Keller to Haben Girma

History confirms that the "visionary" is distinguished from the "dreamer" solely by the quality of their persistence. Thomas Edison viewed failure as a mere diagnostic tool; upon being questioned about his thousands of unsuccessful attempts to create the lightbulb, he famously remarked that he had not failed, but had successfully identified ten thousand ways that did not work (Beals 2016, 42).

This lineage of persistence is nowhere more evident than in the lives of those who overcome profound sensory barriers. Helen Keller once observed that "character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved" (Keller 2003, 164). Today, this torch is carried by Haben Girma, the first deaf – blind graduate of Harvard Law School. As an Eritrean-American lawyer, Girma has turned what many perceived as a limitation into a platform for global advocacy. Her refusal to be sidelined by the world is a modern manifestation of the Eritrean spirit – an intellectual "**Will to Power**" that uses the law to dismantle barriers (Girma 2019, 210). Her success is a testament to what Daniel Gebretensae identifies as the essential ingredient for victory: *the refusal to give up*.

My Journey Through the Crucible: Why I Chose the OEU

The truth of Gebretensae’s philosophy is not an abstraction to me; it is the story of my life. In August 1979, as a young man in Eritrea, I was captured by Ethiopian soldiers. This fateful event led me to 12 years of incarceration in “*Alem Bekagn*” – a maximum-security prison in Addis Ababa whose name, “*Farewell to the World*,” whispered a grim prophecy of total despair.

Within those cold, unforgiving walls, I faced extreme overcrowding, malnutrition, and the relentless cold of cement floors. Yet, it was there that I learned the first lesson of Gebretensae’s doctrine: even in the direst circumstances, the seed of hope can sprout. Alongside my fellow Eritrean prisoners, we refused to give in. We established a “Secret School” – an informal branch of learning where prison cells became

clandestine classrooms. Despite having no formal materials, my intellectual hunger was unquenchable.

When I was initially denied the right to take national exams because I was dismissed as “*not an Ethiopian*,” I refused to accept this arbitrary exclusion. My persistence, and that of my peers, eventually forced a change. In 1989, I took the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESLCE) and scored an unprecedented **11 A’s** and **2 B’s** – a record that remains unbroken in the history of that country (Gebremariam 2024).

My journey from the “*hell*” of *Alem Bekagn* to earning a Ph.D. in the United States and being named “Teacher of the Year” at Virginia Tech is proof that success has nothing to do with circumstance and everything to do with choice. **It is this lifelong commitment to resilience that led me to become a member of the Organization of Eritrean Unity (OEU).** I joined this organization because its principles of sovereignty, the rule of law, and steadfastness mirror the values that allowed me to survive and flourish against all odds (OEU 2024).

Daniel Gebretensae: A Catalyst for National Salvation

Daniel Gebretensae is more than a chairman; he is a catalyst for a nationalistic awakening. Under his guidance, the OEU has emerged as a leading force characterized by its unwavering principles. At a time when political movements often waver, the OEU has remained steadfast. Gebretensae’s leadership provides a bridge between the historical sacrifices of the Eritrean people – like those of us in *Alem Bekagn* – and the modern intellectual triumphs of the Diaspora, exemplified by figures like Haben Girma.

In the OEU, we do not see challenges as endpoints; we see them as the stressors that will make our movement antifragile. Gebretensae understands that true freedom is internal, but it must be manifested through a collective, organized refusal to surrender to injustice.

Conclusion

The struggle for democratic transition in Eritrea requires a leader who understands the psychological and philosophical dimensions of resistance. Daniel Gebretensae’s philosophy – that success is the exclusive domain of those who refuse to surrender – aligns him with the great titans of history. My own life is a testament to the fact that the most crushing conditions can forge unparalleled brilliance, provided one maintains an indomitable agency - a defiant conviction that no circumstance is too dire to be overcome. As a member of the OEU, I am proud to stand with a leader who turns the “*Will to Power*” into a roadmap for a sovereign and democratic Eritrea.

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