**Voice of America (VOA) With-in the Eritrean Context**

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When listening to the Voice of America (VOA) Tigrigna one must ask why is there a need for such a program. What are the reasons that the US spends tremendous resources on broadcasters, technical experts, directors, editors and on expensive equipments to reach Eritrea? What does the US gain from broadcasting in Tigrigna into Eritrea? Why not Tigre or Bilen? How does that benefit or hurt Eritrea? What are the missions and purposes of the VOA?  These types of questions are what every Eritrean must ask when consuming information provided by outlets like Deutsche-Welle, BBC and in this case, the VOA.

The VOA is founded to distribute information and news from American perspective in pursuit of US interests. The VOA is an extension of the State Department public diplomacy efforts in pursuit of US policies and agendas regardless of how the mission statements are worded and, regardless of the values they claim to espouse.

Recently introduced bill by Rep. Ed Royce (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, co-sponsored by Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), with overwhelming support of both houses intends to change the mission statement of VOA to, “Support U.S. public diplomacy efforts.”

The bill intends to change the governance structure and the status of the “reporters” to “agents” that forward US agendas and do away with traditional reporting. The VOA has many branches like the Radio Free Europe. Under the legislation, the VOA would be reorganized into a single organization called, “The Freedom News Network.”

New information and news competition from Russia’s RT News, CCTV and others is used as a pretext to change the mission. Critiques of the bill are decrying the new approach as un-American because it changes the VOA into a propaganda outlet. It also turns the VOA journalists to propaganda agents doing-away with traditional reporting altogether.

How will these changes affect the broadcasting and approach into Eritrea?

The US State Department’s position on Eritrea and the overall US Eritrean policies have been consistently hostile. As branch of the State Department the VOA propagated US policies. Hence, whatever changes US congress makes the agenda will not change.

The question thence, if the VOA is a branch of the State Department that pursues hostile policies how will the new bill influence the Tigrigna broadcast into Eritrea? What will the Tigrigna broadcast look like in the future? How has it traditionally broadcasted into Eritrea etc…?

To get some basic understanding or perspective one needs to look at the way the VOA Tigrigna is structured, how it is funded, the message it consistently sends, the issues that it tries to tackle, the personalities-interviewed and the make-up of the hosts etc…

**The Hosts**

The VOA is made up of Tigrigna speaking “reporters” from Eritrea and Ethiopia. One can argue that it is a perfect way to ensure neutrality since there is appearance of balance. However, the issues discussed are overwhelmingly Eritrean. The focus of the VOA is Eritrea. What that means then is that the VOA accords ownership and platform of Eritrean issues to anyone even those that are avowed enemies. The new bill will give VOA cart-blanch to magnify the propaganda to the highest level possible.

**The Guests**

Who are the invited guests, what are their interests, what is the criterion used to qualify the guests etc…? These are key questions that can lead to answers into the agendas, objectives of the messages and results thought by the US. And based on information the VOA provided in the past; based on guests interviewed and, based on the history of US Eritrea relations it is rather easy to conclude what the intended objectives are.

The VOA Tigrigna is a medium that intends to disseminate US interest based news. However, the broadcasting is done by Tigrigna speaking broadcasters and the guests are almost entirely Tigrigna speaking. It is a rarity for American officials or non-naturalized nationals to interview with VOA to address Eritrea related matters. The last time that happened was when the VOA interviewed three diplomats that advocated for the warming of relations between Eritrea and US.

The daily news VOA provides is limited, nominal, not-far-reaching or extensive. The focus of the programming is talk-programs that aim to live amidst Eritrea-specific controversies. Furthermore, most of the guests that they bring have limited or no constituency in Eritrea or within Diaspora Eritrea.

Yet, the issues that these minority groups raise are presented as main issues and as if they have following. This is done to undermine Eritrea’s priorities. They do this by coupling guests that have mainstream credibility and pair them with those that have limited constituency, (sometimes Tigrayans) with negative views of Eritrea. The VOA elevates the issues The State Departments advocates through the fringe elements and gives it platform that it cannot get elsewhere.

After the programming airs reactions are encouraged and these reactions are recorded on voice mail. The VOA then selects specific comments; edits them to focus on the agendas-thought and, accords both sides equal time when aired on subsequent programming. In this arrangement the VOA controls the message while the participants relinquish control of their voices in a lopsided process that only favors the VOA.

In the Diaspora, Eritreans know how the VOA operates, its intentions and they know exactly what these fringe elements are up-to. But for those that are not aware, the messages could be misleading and lead to some misadventures as seen in parts of the world. In many countries the VOA is banned specifically for these reasons.

While in Asmara, on March of 2013, the VOA aired a program that featured a Tigrayan priest and excommunicated Eritrean ex-priest from Medhine Alem Tewahdo Church Washington DC to talk about new Eritrean refugees in the US. The VOA presented them as men of faith concerned about Eritreans. The ex-priest happens to be a staunch anti-Eritrean that runs a politically charged controversial and incendiary weekly radio program from DC.

To the listeners in Eritrea his responses could appear humanitarian and genuinely concerned about the individuals he claims to be helping. However, he was advertising; if you come here I will help you. In other words encourage youth flight. These are the kinds of subtle, subliminal and sometimes direct messages the VOA induces on the psych of Eritreans. The messages of the ex-priest are consistent with US State Department’s agenda that focuses on the Eritrean youth.

By interviewing the excommunicated priest the VOA undermined the Orthodox Church in Eritrea and disrespected Eritreans in the Diaspora that base their faith in accordance with the synod of the Orthodox Church in Eritrea. One can look at issue after issue but the methodology the VOA applies is consistent no matter the subject. It is to try to light fire wherever possible.

**Moving Forward**

In the West, the iron-dome of information has proved to be impenetrable. It is designed in a way that forwards messages based on agendas and outcomes the West desires. The notion of free-press, freedom of expression is farcical. It exists only within outlined parameters.

Eritreans have seen and experienced a lot about local and national news networks that ignored their cry for coverage when they pleaded for justice against unfair US Eritrea policies that attempted to undermine the very existence of their nation. However, when 10 anti-Eritrean elements demonstrate they are advertised as if the entire nation is demonstrating.

Fortunately, the internet is providing alternative information sources. It also appears the world is looking for additional sources of information. Unfortunately, these are state based news sources looking to do the same thing that Western news sources have done for decades.

However, the availability of competing information sources is providing alternative and diverse perspectives thus nullifying previously western-dominated news that always attempted to frame issues from their perspective.

If there is one thing Africans can learn from the new information sources like RT is to see and apply some of the methodologies that they use to combat western based propaganda; learn how to defuse it; forward their own-agendas to benefit their people, enhance and promote their images.

That means considerable resources must be dedicated into developing the infrastructures and human resources capacities in order to compete in this global war of information. It is of utmost importance for Africans to understand that and increase their efforts to combat outside sources of information that are designed to program them into perpetual enslavement.

It also means understanding and outing the indigenous-agents that these news sources use, the institutions that fund them and, deny these agents access because they are always going to work for the agendas of the foreign agents because there exists no news organization that is designed to serve on the interests of Africa.

**What is Current US Policy on Eritrea?**

Unless US change its Eritrea policy, information that the VOA disseminate into Eritrea will reflect the policy. Unfortunately, these hostilities are continuing with no end in sight. The US Africa Summit to be held on August 5-6 in Washington DC is meant to foster the future partnership between US and African nations. Self-reliant Africa is what the current administration believes that Africa needs. However, the leaders this administration invited are not capable to comprehend self-reliance let alone apply it when their budgets are entirely dependent on foreign assistance.

To the contrary the people and government of Eritrea have been saying, “Self Reliance, partnership based on respect to sovereignty and self-determination” which Washington finds unacceptable. As a result, Eritrea which should be the best ally the US could have is shunned from the summit. This is a display of unprovoked hostility towards the people and the government of Eritrea.

If partnership is what Washington seeks the people of Eritrea should have been represented. If self-reliance in Africa is what Washington’s targeted-outcome; Eritrea should have been touted as example and hope. Instead, every strategy on the books is applied to deny Eritrea her human and material resources. The VOA will always reflect the policy.

“Africa doesn’t need strongmen, it needs strong institutions…” President Barack Obama, in 2009, Ghana.

Wining and dining beggars and strongmen will not forward partnership or self reliance.

**Conclusion**

This summit is a perfect reminder of what to expect .The can-do Eritrean people must always understand the base from which information emanate and exercise tremendous caution when consuming information from any outlet be it VOA or BBC. It is a historic fact that Eritrea’s resilience and self reliance is what brought about Dimitsi-Hafash that sustained them through tough time. That is history worth nurturing at the highest of levels!

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