

Self-Reliance Envisioned by Eritrea

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As a prelude to the paramount topic of Eritrean self-reliance, I would like to share observations and anecdotes. Recently, I was at the airport and while I was waiting to board my plane, I observed a boy trying hard to tow a luggage which exceeded his own weight. When his parents tried to unburden him by taking the luggage away, he fought tooth and nail to get his way. His mantra was “I will haul it myself!” When I saw the child’s forceful reaction, I pondered about self-reliance. The scene also reminded me of a true story about a child who later became a freedom fighter and a martyr. On one occasion, the child and his father loaded some items on a donkey and embarked on a trip to a neighboring village. Before they reached their destination, the donkey decided to hunker down and refused to move. Intense prodding failed to elicit the donkey’s cooperation. Observing the recalcitrance of the donkey, the son said: “Forget it! We can carry it ourselves! Don’t *ass-u-me* we are physically challenged”. “ጠን ኣብሎ፡ ባዕልና ንስኩም፡ ሓንካሳትዶ ቁራያት ኔርና ኢሎምኻ?”

These anecdotes allude to Eritrea’s doctrine of self-reliance. During the armed struggle for national independence, there were countries, organizations and envoys that initially supported the Eritrean struggle. However, they rushed to withdraw their support and left EPLF hung and dry. When this happened, EPLF did not abandon the cause or fold its tent. It relied on the ingenuity of the freedom fighters and the resourcefulness of the Eritrean people.

The same principle of self-reliance that paved the way to Eritrea’s national independence prevails today as well. Eritrea will not latch on to the bosom of foreign aid leading to nowhere or perpetual dependency. Eritrea will disembark from the cradle of spoon-feeding and fend for itself. Eritrea will plant its feet on solid ground and carry its own weight. Eritrea will stride ahead and blaze its own path to economic development. To borrow Kerry E. Wagner’s expression, Eritrea is “not worried about burning bridges, because it is building its own.” Eritrea will not succumb to the imperiousness, bossiness of malevolent donors but untether itself, flap its own wings of self-reliance through hard work, diligence and perseverance. (ከንድዚ ከርንዲትደሎ፡ ሸቂልካ ምብላዕ እንከሎ?)

To borrow Waldo Emerson’s imagery, self-reliance is comparable to the voyage of “a ship sailing against the wind”. Making headway requires zigzagging till the end of the journey is reached. Success requires flexibility and tenacity. What makes Eritrea’s pursuit of self-reliance arduous and tortuous is the hostility of inimical forces that do not leave Eritrea to its own devices. They are bent on planting hurdles at every step of the way.

The first hurdle is an attempt to scuttle Eritrea’s sovereignty and reverse its independence. At the behest and instigation of the United States, Ethiopia declared war against Eritrea. It deported Eritrean citizens and expropriated their properties. Caring for the deportees

was a burden on Eritrea. Ethiopia followed scorched earth policy by wantonly destroying and ransacking properties and factories inside Eritrea. It occupied swaths of Eritrean territories displacing the inhabitants and depriving them of their arable lands.

The second hurdle is the imposition of sanctions without justifiable cause [Resolution 1907 (2009) and Resolution 2023 (2011)]. The arms embargo was designed to shift the military balance in favor of Ethiopia. While Ethiopia was allowed to acquire and stockpile military arsenal, Eritrea was handcuffed and condemned to be a sitting duck. The sanctions were not without economic repercussions either. The intent is to portray Eritrea as a realm of instability not conducive for foreign investment. Besides, the United States continues to aggressively discourage and dissuade foreign investors from establishing economic ties or launch joint projects with Eritrea. Ethiopia lobbied to implement an economic chokehold by criminalizing and precluding remittances and 2% development contribution by Diaspora Eritreans.

The third hurdle is the indictment of Eritrea of human rights violation. This ploy is devised to erode Eritrean sovereignty and justify intervention. The Libyan phenomenon is a lesson to learn from and to counter sinister plans of the sort.

The fourth hurdle is the encouragement of Ethiopia by the United States to defy the rule of law. Ethiopia rejected the final and binding decision [delivered on April 13, 2002] of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission. It continues to occupy sovereign Eritrean territory. This act of intransigence promotes a no peace, no war situation. With the uncertainty of impending aggression or belligerence on the part of Ethiopia, Eritrea is forced to delay or postpone the return of enlisted men to civilian life.

The fifth hurdle is the enticement of Eritrean youth to flee in droves and to deprive Eritrea of its human resource. The youth risk being victims of human traffickers and drowning in open seas. They languish in European cities without employment and educational opportunities. They are disillusioned to find the “promised land” to be barren and desolate.

Before Ethiopia threw a monkey wrench in the gearbox, Eritrea was making headway developing its economy. In fact, Eritrea was touted as one of the fast growing economies. Eritrea is now rising again by its bootstraps. It has registered appreciable success in education, health, transportation, environment, and water and food security. It has met 6 of the Millennium Development Goals, namely, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases and ensuring environmental sustainability. Eritrea’s development is a work in progress. Eritrea is blessed not only with the abundance of precious metals and minerals but also with the industriousness and ingenuity of its people. Eritrea’s natural resources are not put on the auction block to be exploited by the highest bidder. It is incontrovertible that Eritrea has not fully met the needs of its people. But a bright future is most certain. Those that belittle Eritrea’s progress by comparing it with the advanced countries need to consult the history books. The United States, the wealthiest country in the world, had its dire moments. The situation of the 1930’s comes to mind. “Brother can you spare a dime?”; “Can you give my dad a job?”; “I built railroads, bridges and high-rises – now I stand in line for bread”; “I visit soup kitchen to survive”; etc. Eritrea’s bright future is around the corner. But belt-tightening in the interim period is a must. (አላጊብና እንዲና መርፍእን ፈትልን፡ ተቐኒትና እንዲና ሓቦን ኒሕን፡ ከኸውንዩ ግድንዩ ከኸውን።)

Eritrea strives to be self-reliant not only in the economic sense but also in the political sense. Because it is free from economic dependency, it has the liberty to pursue its non-aligned policy. Ethiopia and Kenya have gambled with their freedom. When the United States looks for satellite governments and surrogate armies in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia and Kenya fit the bill. The economic and military aids they receive have a price tag: forfeiture of political independence. As Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso stated “He who feeds you, controls you.” If these countries had exercised a modicum of political independence, intervention in Somalia and the carnage that ensued would have been impossible. Eritrea is punished on account of its non-aligned policy and refusal to play subservient role. However, this is a price Eritrea is willing to pay!!

Awet Nhafash!