

**FEAR AND CONTROL OF INFORMATION: THE TWIN PRACTICAL TOOLS OF ATSE ISIAS TO PROLONG HIS BRUTAL DICTATORSHIP**

By: Abdu Habib  
[sabbahar@rocketmail.com](mailto:sabbahar@rocketmail.com)

“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.” (Nelson Mandela: 18 July, 1918-5 December, 2013)

In their political spin and rhetoric, some Eritrean intellectuals, especially those who want us to look away from the crimes of the brutal regime, deny that the major reason that makes the majority of the Eritrean people (even many living in the West) keep silent about the crimes of the ruling gang is *FEAR*. As their direct defence of the regime has already outlived its usefulness and fell flat, since their master, Atse Isias, has stood totally naked in front of the world, thanks to his own efforts to expose himself and his sinister designs that have proven, beyond any doubt, that he has been a hole dug in the Eritrean Revolution, this is an indirect way of arguing that he is not a dictator at all. We do not waste our time on the obvious, but limit ourselves to the advice urging them to goggle for the definition of the word “DICTATORSHIP” to find, for their dismay, the descriptive picture of the Atse stands clearly in front of them. For sure, once they do so, there will be re-learning and serious search of the soul, unless they have left at the door their common sense and conscience given to them by God or the patriotic spirit they have inherited from their fathers and forefathers. Short of that, they should be less than honest.

Moreover, sadly enough, the argument that fear is not the exact factor that has made the Eritrean people keep silent sometimes comes from innocent intellectuals with no interest to support the brutal dictatorship (I would call them wasted assets to be reclaimed). These intellectuals were supposed to be on board (may be not totally by fault of their own) and participate in the opposition activities that would benefit from their professional training, skills and long-time experience. It is worth noting here, with all respect, that the argument does not fly and is nothing but a

type of defence mechanism stemming from the assumption that they are personally accused of being cowards because they did not openly say something against the regime, condemning and exposing its crimes, or participating in the Yeakl Movement. As a matter of fact, the concern is not about them personally, but about a general trend anybody, who is not socially blind, can easily see in our society inside the homeland or our Diaspora communities outside it. We know, with a small step, they will be on board, moving from rhetorical sympathy to practical solidarity with their people or from merely concerned citizens to fully engaged ones. Nonetheless, for all categories of intellectuals raised, we want them to hear from a uniquely celebrated authority of highly valid firsthand experience and extraordinary caliber on the subject of fear and dictators. This rationale makes it appropriate to move to the core issues of this piece by looking at what Prof. David M. Crane has said in his article, entitled *Fear. A Dictator's Tool* (<https://securitypolicy.syr.edu/fear-a-dictators-tool/>).

Prof. David M. Crane is the American lawyer who worked 30 years for the US federal government, served as chief prosecutor of the Special Court of Sierra Leone, appointed by the late Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Anan, (he was the prosecutor who indicted among others, the President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, travelled to Hague on September 26, 2013 to witness his 50-year sentence by the special appeal court judges), and as professor of Practice at Syracuse University College of Law, where he also started *Impunity Watch*, an online publication ([www.impunitywatch.net](http://www.impunitywatch.net)) which seeks to inform the world of human rights violations in real-time, in addition to the *Syria Accountability Project* in which he teamed up 50 of his law students to work with several international organizations and members of the Syrian opposition. Moreover, in July 2018, Prof. Crane was appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council to co-chair a three-person Commission of Inquiry into the killing of at least 140 Palestinians by the Israeli army. To make things simple, I will paraphrase what Prof. Crane says, hitting the highlights as bullets, without going to details:

- That he has investigated and persecuted dictators and their henchmen for most of his professional life.

- That he has studied their lives, personalities, their rise to power and how they governed once achieving power.
- That the one common theme in their theories of governance is fear.
- That it is easier to govern and dictate to citizens through fear.

Taking all of his credentials and contributions into account, the crystallizing questions would be:

- *Is there any Eritrean intellectual, who can enlighten us on the relations of dictators and the tool of fear, more than Prof. Crane did?*
- *Can anyone convince us that a dictator can rule without the tool of fear or if the tool of fear can exist without the rule of a dictator?*
- *Is Atse Isias an exception to whom the conclusion of Prof. Crane is irrelevant?*

We are ready to learn from anyone who has new things to teach about the issues at hand, and we believe this forum is open to all. Nevertheless, we have said enough to communicate with the Eritrean intellectuals of both categories referred to above, but: *How about the ordinary Eritrean citizens who have been cowed into silence by the regime or its foot soldiers, despite of the clearly observable severe damage that impacts all sections of the society and all aspects of life? What do we say to them?* We have to speak to them clearly and honestly. It is only when we speak out that things improve and we move forward to progress. Hiding our wounds does not help us go one inch up.

To answer the questions raised above, we need to see the question: *In what way does citizen loyalty manifest itself in present day Eritrea?* When we raise this question, our point of departure is the premise that loyalty is a very important instrument for the survival of the Atse and that any dictator has to achieve it by any means. As the regime does not generate any economic prosperity (in fact, Eritrea became poorer than it was during the Ethiopian occupation) so that it enjoys popular support, it is through repression and “reward (reward in this context needs an explanation), in addition to others including control of information, that it

keeps the people loyal. An individual citizen knows that he/she is powerless to bring about the collapse of the regime. That is why citizens signal loyalty in public but speak the truth in private, in the same way people had behaved during the Derge era.

To recognize the full implication of the fears that operate within citizens, making them loyal to the regime, one needs to see the leverage the regime has on them. The brutal regime controls the day-to-day existence of the citizens (Kebele shops, and all social services) and has the power of retribution, destruction and smear, in case they disobey. Retribution could be anything including arrests, confiscation of property, taxation, and denial of social services (schools, hospitals ...etc.), to mention a few. To the regime, manifestation of loyalty includes participation in ceremonies and rituals, government-organized meetings, and events, hanging banners of the government in their houses, offices, shops, stores and cars, and spying on other Eritreans, including neighbours, relatives, co-workers, and acquaintances. If they refuse to do all that, they should be afraid of what would happen to them. They may not receive services such as getting housing, Kebele ration coupons, land, jobs, health and school services or they could be accused of disloyalty and end up in jail. Not all Eritrean citizens show active loyalty, but some show it passively (Just like a young man forced by his father to attend the funeral of his uncle whom he used to hate), obeying the instructions of the ruling gang and accepting the prescribed rituals, thus making the game go on. As to the reward citizens expect from the regime (as mentioned above) is nothing but the guarantee to be left alone. All these show that Eritrean citizens at home are loyal to the gang out of fear, but are privately against the status quo. Simply put, our people have two types of lives at present:

- The official life in public.
- The real life in their mind and soul in confinement.

But the question here is: **Could fear be a solution?** It should be recognized that it is this fear, coupled with the control of information that enabled Atse Isias to turn into an intolerable monster. It is not without a reason that Thomas Jefferson (April 13, 1743-July 4, 1826), the Founding Father who served as the President of the United States of America from 1801-1809 said:

“When government fears the people, there is liberty. When the people fear the government, there is tyranny.”

Though it is understandable, if not justifiable, for people inside Eritrea and those carrying Eritrean passports and living in countries like Saudi Arabia, as foreign workers, to fear from the ruling gang, as detailed above, the fear of Eritreans living in Diaspora is the mystery we could not understand. The regime inside Eritrea has no leverage whatsoever on Diaspora Eritreans of the West. We know that the espionage network of the regime and its propaganda machine operate overseas too. The propaganda machine of the regime targets the Diaspora Eritreans who are not well-educated and well-informed as an easy prey because they could easily be confused and feel insecure. We are not exaggerating when we say that there are some Diaspora Eritreans who cannot watch anything outside Eri-TV that attributes positive news to the Atse and negative news to his opponents. Further, there are recruits among the refugees who engage in illegal activities taking aim at the dissidents of the regime. On the flip side, there is the rule of law in the host countries that protects everybody and there is no credible reason to fear a regime that is in another continent and has no leverage on refugees. Nonetheless, we see fear from the Eritrean regime dominates some Diaspora Eritreans, a matter which shows that they are only physically in the West.

Though we have no doubt that this group of Diaspora Eritreans are fully aware of what is going on in Eritrea and what their loved ones are going through, we want to remind them of the following facts and truth supported by an overwhelming amount of evidence:

- That dictatorship is not acceptable in today’ s civilization because it is a war against the freedoms of the people.
- That the regime is treating their loved ones in a way that could at the least be described as “below human dignity” , using the combination of terror and the manipulation of information, forcing the people to worship and obey the monster.

- That there is one individual who has established a personality cult, and runs the country like a Mafia don, using a single party, which exists in name, and an extremely corrupt military oligarchy.
- That some of their relatives are thrown into shipping containers under the boiling sun of Era Ero and left to die from heat and thirst.
- That people are thrown to jail, some mysteriously disappearing, or found killed here and there for very small reason or for no reason at all.
- That all cities, towns and villages Eritrean refugees come from, are totally emptied out from youth, turning into ghost cities, towns and villages.
- That the Mafia don has transferred Eritrea and his office, as president, into the backyard of Ethiopia.
- That the Atse may seem frightening from outside but his regime is brittle from within. Even his followers living in fear of the monster ruling them, are eager to escape.
- That he has already depleted all of the political capital and the national support he had earned during the struggle for liberation, and that his cries for patriotism and righteousness are no longer what the people want to hear.

As challenge is a fundamental necessity for people aspiring to progress and catch up with the free world, and we will remain emotionally disturbed and impotent at the face of this unpleasant situation that we are in, if we do not address it, we challenge the Diaspora Eritreans hiding behind silence, with the following questions:

- Can't some of the above bother while others encourage you to come to your senses, and reconcile with your conscience, by being the voice of the voiceless folks of yours and echoing their sentiments?
- Can't you see the moral imperative that it is too much for any society to take in and that your folks deserve better like any other human beings?

- Can you still hide behind silence during these days of fast-moving developments in Eritrea and its surroundings?
- Can't you realize that change will inevitably come, even without you, but history will haunt you forever because your silence at this critical moment would be written in permanent ink?

Before we leave it here, we can say that we neither think that the Diaspora Eritreans hiding behind silence opt to be in this position because they agree with the regime and its crimes, nor to protect it. Moreover, we know that they are not doing that because of an imaginary stability and prosperity of the country they have in mind. They are well-aware of how countries are run because they saw better systems of government and are living in open societies, where dissent is absolutely legal. They see that justice seekers have become a real thorn in the flesh of the ruling gang, changing the balance of power in and outside the country in favour of the national struggle. Nevertheless, we cannot overlook the fact that fear is in full play, though it is a bit of head scratcher. All in all, we strongly believe that fear could be controlled, if we realize that there is a patriotic obligation on us to our children and the future generations to stand up and shape Eritrea in the way it is in our minds and aspirations. This belief makes us feel optimistic that, this group of Diaspora Eritreans we are addressing, will succumb to reason, listen to their conscience, get rid of the unreasonable fear, and join the battle to save the country.

In this connection, there was an important public event about which I want to share few remarks because it is too much to ignore and it perfectly fits into the issue of Diaspora Eritreans and their silence to the crimes of the regime. As a matter of fact, it could be cited as an example in this regard. The event was the Samhar Cultural Concourse (Forum) held in the capital of Sweden, Stockholm, in February 2020.

There were four presentations in the Samhar Cultural Concourse. Those presentations were neither wrong, nor factually questionable, but none of them was formulated in a way that shows the destructive role of the regime. It is unfortunate that, not even by chance a single word condemning the destructive policies of the regime or exposing its anti-people nature and brutality crossed the

lips of anyone of the speakers. When I listened to the audio clip of the presentations, I thought the concourse was held inside Eritrea or organized by the Eritrean Embassy, if it was outside the homeland. The only activity that showed realism was some of the stanzas from a poem read by Artist Hussain Mohammed Ali, who came from London to attend the event. I never got the impression that he read the whole poem (I do not know why) in which he imagined “Massawa Crying.” I would take the poem as the redeeming feature for the drawbacks of the event in which the pattern of silence on the crimes of the regime was clear to see.

Out of the four presentations, those that struck me most were the one on the history of Samhar and another about the conditions of the historic buildings of the city of Massawa. My remarks on these two issues could be summed up as follows:

- I do not know how one can present the history of Samhar without showing that it was the history of the tragic displacement of people since 1975, after the repeated massacres in Hargigo, Embereme, and Shoub by the Derge, and the impossibility of the return of the people home from refuge (mainly Saudi Arabia and the Sudan) after independence, due to the anti-people policies of the regime and the obstacles it intentionally put to thwart that return, for reasons only known to the regime. Though Samhar was not the only region displaced and its people thwarted from return, it was the most harshly hit of all; that leading to a glaring demographic change in the region, worst than any other part of the country. We believe, that by itself would have been enough reason to make the sons and daughters of Samhar to be the vanguard of the Yeakl Movement, giving them the forum to expose the prolonged pains of their people, languishing in exile, and to see an end to that nightmare.
- As to the conditions of the historic buildings in the city of Massawa, it is true, as the architect put it, the buildings from the Ottoman period to the recent times are falling apart, though some of them have been registered by the UNESCO. He did not mention that there was remarkable negligence from the part of the regime, which was supposed to do restorations and preservation of what exists. Some buildings still riddle with bullet holes from the battles of 1990s, but the government did nothing about that for



about three decades. Here too nothing was said in the presentation. ***How about the houses owned by prominent Massawi families demolished by the government with the excuse that it has a plan to use the area for building Free Trade Zone which did not see light until now?*** By Free Trade Zone, it is meant an area, where goods are landed, stored, handled, manufactured and re-exported under specific customs regulations. These are not ordinary but centuries-old houses considered by UNESCO as a part of the Eritrean cultural heritage. In the presentation, nothing was said about these demolitions that took place arbitrarily by the government, without giving a single cent as compensation to the owners (For the implications and impact of the demolitions in Massawa, refer to my article ***BULLDOZING CIVILIAN HOUSES: A PART OF THE CONSPIRACY OF BULLDOZING THE ERITREAN DREAM***, [www.togoruba.org](http://www.togoruba.org), April 20, 2017).

Concerning both issues detailed above, one would bluntly ask: *Is leaving that part of the history of Samhar and the way the cultural heritage in Massawa and Dahlak have been dealt with unmentioned a mere coincidence or an act of cover up for the dictatorial regime?*

When I knew about the event, I was very happy and thought it would be held in conjunction with the national struggle for justice in and outside the country, to reflect the sentiments of the people of Samhar and the fierce struggle against the regime, by speaking the truth (حق كلمة) about the assigned issues and bringing everybody into a shared vision. But that did not happen, to much of our disappointment. On the contrary, the presentations kept the participants on the dark from the recent national developments or the truth, isolating the event from the activities of justice seekers in Sweden and elsewhere in the world, and denying the people of Eritrea the word of truth and solidarity they badly need and expect at this particular moment from any Eritrean gathering. Both the speakers and the organizers of the event had the opportunity to do the right thing, organizing and presenting things in a way matching with the level of dignity and heroic role of the people of Samhar. This does not mean that lessons could not be learned from these mistakes and corrections made for better future results, provided that we speak out

without any reservation as long as our views are constructive, and both of the speakers and the organizers take feedback seriously and benefit from them.

After all, the organizers and the participants of the event were the sons and daughters or the grandsons and granddaughters of thousands of heroes who left their fingerprints on the Eritrean national struggle within both national liberation organizations, the ELF and the EPLF, and even back to the Turkish period and all subsequent colonial periods. We have no doubt about their good faith, though we should not hide that we have a solid ground to suspect that they might have come under some pressure from the foot soldiers of the regime, who sleep uneasily when they hear Eritreans are getting together for whatever reason it is. As the destiny of Samhar is tied to the destiny of Eritrea, as Samharites, we are demanded by the urgency of the national struggle and its tasks to stand up against double lives described above (the official life in public and the real life in mind and soul in confinement) and fight to remove the cancer, putting our finger on the scale of the national struggle. This is what matches with the heroism and historical role of the people of Samhar we know.

Eritrea is under an old-style dictator, who publicizes his brutality in order to deter any opposition. He does not attempt to be popular but feared. The best way to confront such a bully is by confronting him fearlessly, through a collective action, whose values we know better than any other people.

If we go back to history, the Great King of Persia, Cyrus the Great, was checked at Marathon and Samlami. Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo and his hostile movement was stopped. Hitler was checked on D-Day, and the Soviet Empire finally collapsed. All these happened as a result of the collective action of the peoples of the respective countries, though those achievements used to be seen as an impossible before they happened. These examples show that Atse Isias is not too much, but a small bite, for the Eritrean people to end his brutal dictatorship and hold him accountable for his thirty-year crimes. His is a regime based on the theft of the will of the people, and there is no doubt he will end in a tragic way sooner or later. As any other dictator, he has never functioned without followers. We have enabled him to mess up with our freedom, but the good thing is that we can now disable him because we knew who he is. To do that, we have to conquer the double

lives: fear in public and courage in private. This is what has enabled the Atse. We have to fear from the people and our conscience (of course after God); not from a dictator, whose regime is ready to be sent to the dust bin of history.=====