

ONLY TALK DOES NOT BRING CHANGE: STAND UP PHYSICALLY AT NEW YORK DEMONSTRATION

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Thousands of Eritreans in North America, Europe, and other parts of the world, are giving the final touch to their travel scheduling to New York city in order to participate in the demonstration of October 27, 2016 with enthusiasm and to vocalize their voice against the crimes of humanity committed by the Eritrean regime, supporting the report of the Inquiry Commission about Eritrea and the recommendations of the Human Rights Council to the UN Security Council. About four months separate the up-coming New York demonstration from the Geneva demonstration of June 23, 2016. This temporal proximity of the two collective actions reinforces each other. Here we see the Geneva demonstration as playing a major role in mobilizing the participation of justice seekers in the New York demonstration.

It is interesting to observe that though the new generation is known for taking stands through social media rather than physically standing up for a belief, the clear majority of the protesters at the colourful demonstration of June 23, 2016 in Geneva were the youth, mostly at their twenties and thirties. This is by no means surprising. After all, the Eritrean youth were the direct victims of the inhuman, lawless, and savage practices of the Eritrean ruling junta, whose medieval savageries and brutalities had forced them to flee the country, braving all possible risks that included the shoot-to-kill brutality of the regime, drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, human trafficking, organ harvesting, horrors of the Libyan Desert and the unjustifiable and inexcusable manslaughter by the so called Islamic State...etc. *Is there a more qualified and more authentic authority to confirm to the international community the accuracy of the report of the Commission of Inquiry and the recommendations of the Human Rights Council than these young men and women?* It is expected that the New York demonstration will not show a different picture in terms of social composition of the participants, with the youth being its motive force. If we could, this way, establish that the motive force of the New York demonstration will be our youth, as usual, I would try to

extensively look into the question: *What does our youth benefit from such demonstrations?*

Though the biggest benefit such demonstrations could result in is the essential change all are struggling for, there are other benefits for the youth worthy of note. To the youth, it could be an inspiring knowledge that they are fighting for common concerns and for a better future, regardless of their ethnic, religious, cultural, and political backgrounds, in addition to gender and age. This unity among the young Eritrean citizens for one desired outcome is a great achievement underneath all social backgrounds that make each citizen unique. By working together, our youth would learn how groups function productively, why groups make better decisions than individuals, and how to work with others outside their circle of friends, including folks with different backgrounds and experiences, while these skills support them to grow, develop, and realize their full potential.

Further, I would like to emphasize one important point we need to realize. Accordingly, it could be said that relationship is power because our one-to-one connections with one another are the foundation for change. One would ask: **In what sense?** Essentially, when our youth, with all their diverse backgrounds, build relationship among themselves as a result of working together, that relationship is key in positively re-constructing our existing diverse communities (deformed by the regime's design), enabling them to be strong enough to achieve shared and significant goals.

Mind you, I am talking about skills and experiences many of the older generations of the current opposition are destructively lacking; a negative situation constituting the biggest hurdle in our collective struggle. One would foresee here, with absolute optimism, the future of Eritrea in the hands of these youth, the backbone of the society, the owners of the country, and its saviours; not the older generations whose attitudes towards one another is somewhat negative and based on stereotypes.

If you allow me to call a spade a spade, I would frankly say that no satisfactory relationship was built by the current older opposition generations (I hope, no hard feelings), and our communities were not

enabled to be strong enough to achieve shared goals (this is not strange given the disunity and fragmentation factor). To be more precise, the basis on which our opposition organizations are organized, their number in comparison with the size of our population, the similarities in the social composition of their memberships, the duplication of their programs, and the tormented relationship we see them have with one another, are glaring examples of the disunity and fragmentation. However, whether we are conscious of it or not, history is in the making, provided that we do not spoil the youth by teaching them our ethnic, religious, cultural, political, and regional prejudices that have made the achievement of our common goals devastatingly lag behind, if not impossible. ***What is the mechanism to prevent the cancer from infecting the youth?*** That is a billion dollar question all Eritreans have to address collectively.

Going to a different offshoot of my topic, let me ask the “foolish” question: ***Do such demonstrations pose risks to the Eritrean participants living in Diaspora?*** Of course, if demonstrations are organized inside Eritrea, there will be some serious risks for the participants. They could lose their jobs, be denied access to schools, fined, jailed, beaten, even killed, and much more. Yet, despite these risks and uncertainties, protests occur in countries ruled by dictatorships like Iran, Thailand ...etc. ***What is then the scenario Diaspora Eritreans could fear if they participate in anti-Eritrean government demonstrations outside Eritrea?*** The only thing I could think of is that their pictures could be taken by government agents or published online by pro-government news agencies or even opposition websites, thanks to modern technologies. But the question remains: ***Is this fear serious enough to bar Eritreans from participating in events to make their voices heard against the regime that had forced them to flee their country, leaving behind their loved ones under the mercy of government spies and its junta?*** For those who so often go home for vacation or have property in their names, this fear could be understandable yet not justifiable, but, at any rate, not every Eritrean goes to Eritrea for vacation or has a property in his/her name. ***What is the reason then?*** Maybe, our harsh past: the unreasonable fear from governments that has started evaporating, but the process is not complete yet, has turned into a chronic phobia, calling for the urgent interference of Eritrean psychiatrists.

Though I know I am interfering in the private affairs of others, folks who spend their vacations in Eritrea should know that the regime is using them as tools to prove to the world that the real image of Eritrea is not as black

and as dreadful as depicted by the report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea or the UN Special Rapporteur, Ms. Sheila B. Keetharuth (the "Agame"; a label the regime generously uses to describe anybody it hates). Correspondingly, the hard-to swallow rationalization given by these folks is that they need to see their family. In this connection, one would ask: ***Is there any Eritrean who does not have a family there?*** Though I do not doubt the good intention of many of them (save the few agents and the malicious supporters of the regime), most importantly, they should know that they are expressing solidarity with a notorious regime, which is in a dangerous bottleneck because of its horrible crimes, unconsciously sabotaging the struggle of the people for justice and democracy. No doubt, the intention is good. But we do not judge things on basis of their intentions rather than their consequences. If you kill somebody due to the careless handling of your gun, still it is a crime of murder for which you will be legally held accountable. It is appropriate here to urge folks to take this matter seriously and be able to see that the aging regime will go one day, no matter when, and that the tables will be turned upside down: the people will have the power. ***Could they see solidarity with the monster regime, even if it is not meant, as the right stand that would put them in good standing with the people?*** I think it is high time that our folks give this point a second thought.

In addition to the group of Eritreans discussed above, Eritreans who lack a shrewd resourcefulness (the ability and the means to face situations effectively) to make things happen are not small in number. Whenever some of us hear bad news about home, some simply say, "It is sad". ***Is that enough for a citizen to say in these circumstances?*** We are not hearing news about Iraq, Syria, or the Philippines. It is about our home country, where we have left behind our parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, grandfathers, grandmothers, friends, neighbor, acquaintances, and childhood memories. ***Why do we fail to realize that someone has to stand up for the people? Who will spring into an action if we as citizens fail to do so?*** I know that it is not because they do not care, but just because they fall short of action. These folks who are personally wrapped up in their singular lives have not realized the power of a collective. They should be reminded that it is a collective power that could bring change in a society. In the absence of that power, we are nothing but just individuals in a space, simply screaming without having any incentive to care. The question many Eritreans, who realize the danger of the

absence of empathy in the critical situation the country is passing through, would ask these folks is: ***Do we afford to continue this way while the regime has continued its mission of destroying everything Eritrean: people (specially the youth), assets, cultures, history, geography, economy, resources, unity of the country...?***

Whenever we had a demonstration or any public event (I am talking from the observation limited to my city, though the situation could almost be similar in many places), some folks who opt not to participate, say, “It does not matter; it will not make a big difference.” One would challenge them to stop and figure out why it does not matter. It may not matter not because the cause is not worthy but because these events need the mass support which can only come from folks with energy, ideas, commitment, and follow through. If all participate through a common mechanism or a committee formed at city-level, and attract a mass support, the demonstration or event would make a big difference. It is important to note that big results are the accumulation of small achievements. But this needs working together, which in its turn is only possible when we accept one another and see the common good, away from narrow political affiliations that are clearly tormenting our struggle. It is not amusing to say that the next time these folks roll their eyes at the New York protesters on October 27, would say, “It does not matter too much”. Nevertheless, the question they would be asked to answer would be: ***What have you done that matters? Is that your lazy-man’s chat and the controversial claim that you are more nationalist than others?***

Being aware that this activist movement of the upcoming New York protesters may have far less resources and may be far less organized than the PFDJ-established entity in Diaspora, representing the interests of the junta these youth activists are protesting against, we need to give a generous financial and moral support to the local committees where we live, in addition to advice, and immunization against the negative effects of the discouraging comments of the thoughtless forces (I mean the “Aysarhu Ayasrehu” nay-saying groups unconsciously serving the PFDJ interests) that tend to belittle, if not to undermine, any collective work, rather than participating and playing their role. This negative attitude has to be changed, if we know we have a country to save.

One outstanding condition organizers of the demonstration need to ensure it is in place is the unity of the message, indicating a single organizer (in this case the Organizing Committee). This centralization is a key factor we do not afford to overlook. It is the only condition that guarantees better coordination and swifter decision-making in response to unforeseen obstacles, in addition to being the safest valve to block any penetration by the enemy. This condition is also related to the level of discipline that protesters show. As we saw it in earlier demonstrations, there is no doubt that the organizers recognize the importance of discipline and instill its spirit across the movement, while relying on grassroots security efforts to enforce it.

To wind up things, it is sincerely hoped (I am objectively optimistic) that, during the New York demonstration, Eritreans of all different backgrounds will prove equally to both friends and foes that they possess the ability to unite, pose a threat to divisions of any sort, and work for change, putting the national interests above all other considerations. At the same time, it is expected that they will convey their message to the UN General Assembly in a solid, clear, loud, and strong voice, assuring their people, back home, that they have sons and daughters who could meticulously and candidly speak on their behalf to the international community, while confirming to the ruling junta that the day of the reckoning is not far and that they are coming back to undo and reverse what the junta has done to the country, its people, and historical unity. =====