

ATSE ISIAS'S NAME: A FACE OF FAILURE AND A BYWORD FOR MISRULE:

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It is our fundamental belief that any Eritrean citizen has the right and should have the freedom to support or oppose the government, irrespective of who he/she is. Nonetheless, experience has shown that it is sometimes very difficult to resist the temptation to react to some negative remarks made out of erroneous ideological positions and narrow political contexts; not out of particular knowledge or reasonable familiarity with the situation addressed. This is particularly important at the time we are engaged in a fierce fight against injustice; a fight that should by necessity be extended against those who wittingly or unwittingly make statements that support the injustice in one form or another. This piece will address the Pro-Isias groups in general and those who are misled and misinformed, but do not have any vested interest in the regime and in the way the Atse is running the country, in particular. Conclusively, the purpose here is to show them who the real Isias is, what he embodies in the Eritrean political history, and how he is singlehandedly destroying the country. Apparently, I hope this piece would be an eye opener for some of the Pro-Isias groups, they would benefit from it, enable them to see the danger hovering over the heads of their people, and join the justice seekers to be the megaphone of the oppressed, instead of siding with the oppressor.

Clearly, as Eritrean justice seekers struggling against injustice, it does not come as a surprise to us when we encounter negative arguments, ridicules, and cheap shots from Pro-Isias groups, whenever we try to expose the evil nature of Atse's regime and analyze the negative impact of his misrule on the people and the country. To convey our message with absolute clarity, we would first raise the over-riding question: ***Why do we expose the evil nature of Atse Isias and his ruling gang?***

When we expose the nature of Atse Isias and the evil gang he heads, our purpose is neither merely to criticize him, yet justified our criticism is, nor to vent our anger, though our anger is justifiable. It is rather to highlight the multiple contradictions prevailing in his political character and his assertion of absolute power over the Eritrean people, though he never ceases to denounce the absolute power of his colonial predecessors, with whom, it is a paradox he shares a lot (we will see what he shares at the end of the article). Accordingly, we emphatically stress here that we have reached the stage of adulthood, as a society, that enables us to be the owners of our own destiny and that we should be empowered enough to prevent any single individual from abrogating our God-given citizenship rights. To put it differently, we confirm to the Pro-Isias groups that, as citizens of an independent nation, we share equal ownership of the country with him, though his feudal arrogance and mentality prevent him from recognizing the principle that citizenship is an irreducible commodity equally shared by all citizens.

In spite of their denials, that nobody would buy, the Pro-Isias groups know that the insecure Atse has completely monopolized the political space to the exclusion of everyone, that nothing called freedoms of expression and association exist, that the private press has totally been banned without any exception and all journalists have been arrested, and tortured, with the lucky ones who could survive prison conditions, have been languishing in prison. Likewise, all his critics and opponents, including his former comrades-in-arms (G-15 and hundreds of other highly dignified and popular former freedom fighters), have also been languishing in prison without any charges and the slightest respect for human rights and rule of law, while unfortunately, some of them are believed to have died due to harsh prison conditions, the absence of medical attention, and intentional maltreatment. This is only in the political sphere. The economic, social, and diplomatic pictures are equally shocking and dark. Inevitably, one would ask the Pro-Isias groups: ***Do you, as Eritreans, accept these rampant human rights abuses, and the level of poverty and misery in which our people live? Don't you think that even if only a handful of Eritreans are dissatisfied with the rule of the***

power-drunk Atse, justice naturally demands that their dissatisfaction should be given full legitimate expression? If you accept these abuses as normal government practices: ***Don't you think that you have reduced yourselves to subjects of an oppressive state (instead of being citizens of an independent Eritrean state) who have no rights of citizens in the same way like our parents and grandparents under the colonial rules?*** In this respect, we call this state of mind "colonial mentality" or the way people (subjects) thought and behaved during the colonial period.

There are lots of things we need to whisper into the ears of Pro-Isias groups about the Ate, whom some think or are made to believe to be the very personification of the Eritrean state; a bizarre state of mind we despise as sheer ignorance, giving them the benefit of doubt. I understand that I touch a nerve by my use of the title "Atse" in reference to their "hero" but the people's traitor. However, I ask them to tell me why he should not be called "Atse" but "President" (as they want everybody to do) so that I could change, if I am convinced.

As a matter of fact, the Atse does not enjoy political legitimacy both in his own mind and in terms of the reality of Eritrean political history. He knows deep in his mind that he has no moral authority to lead the Eritrean people and that he is the least qualified for such a noble role. Have these brothers and sisters thought about the questions: ***Where are the lofty goals our martyrs had fallen for?*** Most importantly: ***Why was the country liberated?***

The ideals of the Eritrean Revolution have been relegated to the dustbin because the Atse knows that the rule of law, constitution, elections, freedoms, democratic institutions, independence of the three branches of government and free press, in the final analysis, mean accountability, transparency and probity or the quality of having strong moral principles, honesty and decency. In a nutshell, all these rights our people have been dreaming for since day one of the post-independence period radically limit his power. Instead of addressing the dreams and aspirations of the people, he has turned Eritrea into a state of an exception, where one

unelected wicked ruler gives himself the title **“President”**, rules without any constitution, parliament, V-President and independent branches of government, with the absolute medieval powers to decide who should live and who should die, who should have private property and who should be deprived of his/her assets, who should express his/her legitimate opinion and who should not, who should do what and when, eat what and when, say what and when, think what and when, dream what and when, wear what and when, drink what and when, live where, how, and for how long. Simply put, he has turned the whole country into a military camp he controls by a button, and the statesmanship into a one-man show, disgracefully not different from that of Idi Amin Dada, the Ugandan President from 1971 until he was overthrown in 1979, and the cannibal Jean-Bedal Bokassa, leader of the Central African Republic and its successor state the Central African Empire (1976-1979).

The discussions above will lead us to the question: **How does the Atse see democracy?** He thinks and bluntly states, (without any attempt to hide his ignorance), that democracy is an exclusive western or imperialist form of government. **What a laughably ridiculous view?**

If he studies the history of the people he is ruling by the gun, prison, and secret police, and other African societies in our neighbourhood, he would know that the word “Democracy” is the English word for what our ancestors practiced ages before the coming of the European colonialists to Africa. Interestingly, history tells us that democracy was a culture of universal civility common to civilizations in ancient China, ancient Mesopotamia, ancient Greece and ancient Africa, but he has never learned history of the people he is brutally oppressing. Particularly, oral traditions tell us that a council of elders was elected by each Eritrean tribe or village in the Eritrean highlands and lowlands to administer them, using the customary laws as their constitution. Moreover, these councils tried to identify the needs of the people, satisfy them as much as they could, and administered the people with their full consultation, recognizing them as their constituencies. Surprisingly, these were democratic tendencies and traditions that are by far better and more sophisticated than the primitive way the Atse uses to run the

country, and their remnants still survive to this day, though they are not recognized, actually discouraged and in some cases fought against, by the brutal regime. He utterly detests the Arab Spring, which he tarnishes in all his interviews, in an attempt to protect the country from the “virus” of political consciousness, enlightenment, or informed opinions that fight against a state’s oppression of its citizens.

To have a full picture about his hatred towards democracy, we need to see the question: ***Why does he feel more comfortable with the Gulf regimes rather than with the Western governments?*** The Gulf rulers are absolute monarchs who are equally scared from democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and they never talk about them. In fact, they unreservedly state that they are appointed by Allah and opposing the ruler is opposing Allah. Similarly, the religious establishments in their countries teach the people to directly attribute their poverty and sufferings to Allah; not to the regimes. This way, the regimes are not held accountable to whatever happens to the people, and this is a sweet music and a pat on the back (saying “Absher”) for the panicked Atse who shares a striking mental resemblance with the reactionary Gulf rulers. Nevertheless, we would not wonder if these Gulf rulers refer to the Atse, behind his back, as “the Habashi Beggar”, whenever he visits their countries to beg. All in all, one would ask the brothers and sisters: ***Which of the above makes you look to yourselves as proud Eritreans?***

There is one more fundamental point the Pro-Isias groups need to know by way of getting the truth and laying out facts before they support or oppose the Atse. We hear some apologists of dictatorial regimes argue that all dictators are not bad, adding that some dictators create some degree of economic prosperity for their people. Here they try to convince the people that painting all dictators with the same brush is an over-simplification of complex realities. They mention some examples including Pinochet of Chile (ruled 1973-1990) who put in place a new set of market-oriented structures and policies that ensured economic and social development. Essentially, these are not the results of being a dictator. In principle, as a dictator is a personification of evil, there cannot be a good dictator no matter what economic results he could achieve.

If Pinochet, a dictator, had achieved development of the country, we need to see the situation of Eritrea under the Atse, asking the question: ***Is the Eritrean economy on a strong footing or did he achieve material welfare, reduction of poverty, and economic growth that Pro-Isias groups could celebrate?*** Some dare to cite some imaginary statistics to give a picture contrary to the reality on the ground. But only the fools would believe the statistics compiled and reported to international organizations by the regime.

As citizens, we know the level of misery of our people, and we never doubt that the reports always exaggerate its growth numbers. Even though they give exaggerated reports, Eritrea is always among the few, if not the last, at the bottom of the ladder in socio-economic development. In this context, as the Atse runs counter to human nature, he is counter-productive and is the face of failure in all fields, including the economic and the social. Even the diplomacy has been going on the wrong direction, and we could see from the current regional tension, resulting from his extremely damaging blunders, what his disastrous foreign policy has devastatingly done to the country and its national interest. Instead of winning new friends for the country and reducing the number of enemies, he is just doing the opposite. In summary, though we know that he is a unique tyrannical ruler who tortures and kills his people, causes untold misery to innocent people, and has assumed a total ownership of Eritrea to the total exclusion of everybody (among hundreds of abuses and crimes he is committing daily), even if we deviate from our principle for the time being and accept the erroneous claim that there is a “good dictator”, there is nothing in the rule of the Atse that could serve him as a redeeming feature to put him in this category.

One more piece of the puzzle we need to look at is embodied in the question: ***Is Atse Isias’s mentality different from that of his colonial predecessors?*** We did see above the meaning of the term “colonial mentality” in terms of the ordinary Eritrean citizen, but in terms of the Eritrean state, it refers to the characteristics of political authoritarianism and economic exploitation. Examples of clear similarities between the ruling gang, headed by the Atse, and his colonial

predecessors show that the present Eritrean state is almost a carbon copy of the oppressive colonial state. The examples could be summed up as follows:

- His colonial predecessors used the gun, prison, and secret police to subjugate the people. Likewise, the Atse has been using the same weapons the colonial rulers had used, as tools for his personal security, to strengthen his grip on the people, and abrogate their rights as citizens so that he protects himself and his cronies from political accountability. This is to say, typically the same weapons that protected the colonial powers are doing the same dirty job now.
- Similarly, the colonial rulers were allergic to criticism by their subjects and they used press censorship as an instrument of oppression to silence Eritrean nationalists and journalists. The Atse is equally allergic to criticism by Eritreans and others, and has been muzzling freedom of expression and the press for the same reasons the colonial rulers did.
- The colonial rulers did not consult their Eritrean subjects about all actions they took, though their decisions directly affected the people. In the same way, Atse Isias has never consulted the people on any major decision he has made. The following are only few examples to show the dangerous pattern:
 - He entered into a war with Djibouti, Yemen and Ethiopia, without consulting the people.
 - Eritrea became a part of the anti-Yemen Arab Alliance by his own unilateral decision, and Eritrean sons and daughters have been fighting for the alliance without the consultation and the knowledge of their parents and the people at large.
 - He gave Assab to the UAE to build a military base and the Eritrean people heard that from foreign media, and until this today, no word has been said about this by the government to the Eritrean people.

- The Eritrean people have never been consulted on the national military service, its nature, and duration, though their sons and daughters are the conscripts affected by the program.
- The colonial powers had imposed their rules by gun and refused to withdraw until they were forced by the people in the case of Ethiopia and international circumstances in the case of the Italians and the British. In a similar manner, Atse Isias has imposed himself on the Eritrean people without their legitimate consent and is not willing to hand over power to the people. On the contrary, he is furiously struggling to stay in power, and probably making arrangements for his son to succeed him.
- Economic exploitation is another aspect where the Atse shares mentality with his colonial predecessors. Colonial powers had been only interested in the wealth of the country rather than in the welfare of the people. They robbed the resources of the country in terms of agriculture, mining, and others, sending everything back home. By the same token, the ruling gang has a strong grip on all resources of the country: agriculture, mining, trade, industry, transportation, communications, fishing, and all social services (just to mention examples), controlling the whole economy of the country through the companies of the party, without leaving any margin for the citizens to live on. ***Where does the income from all these go? Is the regime spending the money to raise the living standard of the people? Is there any transparent accounting and national budget known to the public? What percentage is repatriated to off-shore accounts and in whose name (s)?*** Your guess is as good as mine, but we know that off-shore accounts offer a level of secrecy and asset protection ordinary people could never afford. This suggests who has off-shore accounts.

We could see from the discussions above that the Atse is not a person who has shown the love for the rule of law and for what is wrong and right. To wind up this piece we would ask: ***What could be done then?*** Some Pro-Isias groups naively argue that a reform and not a regime change is necessary in Eritrea. They

forget that reform is only possible when some part that could be fixed went wrong; not when the whole house is rotten. ***Can a lick of paint save a ruined house?***

It is from this particular perspective that we need to politically empower our people and enable them to hold their leaders accountable and bring them down when they lose their political legitimacy. You cannot kick the Atse and his cronies out through the ballot box because there are elections in Eritrea. That is why justice seekers are struggling to bring a radical change from which our people would benefit and as a result of which everybody lives as a citizen in peace, harmony, political and social justice, as an equal in rights and obligations with others. As a part of the people, the Pro-Isias groups need to re-examine their position on the regime and see whether the continuation of the regime is for the good of the country. If they have a different solution (s) to suggest, every justice seeker will be ready to listen to them. But we assure them that an interesting dynamic is going on and they are expected to join the struggle to save their country and people. =====