

Eritrea Symposium 2021
Keynote Address
Strengthening the People’s Agency in Democratic Change
Amb. Andebrhan Welde Giorgis

Dear Participants of *Eritrea Symposium 2021*,

I extend you a very warm welcome.

Thank you for hailing from different corners of the world, setting aside your personal, family, and professional affairs, to participate in this Symposium at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has spread all over the world and afflicted all nations and peoples without distinction, consuming over 4.5 million human beings worldwide.

This *Eritrea Symposium 2021*, organised as a continuation of the previous three successive *Symposiums* facilitated by *Eri-Platform*, focuses on five principal themes that are of crucial significance to Eritrea and the Eritrean Diaspora at this critical juncture. This *Symposium* is designed to (1) help us identify and rise to the challenges of the moment; (2) capitalise on the opportunities that the current crisis avails; (3) explore an effective approach that can deliver a new coalescence; and (4) formulate and pursue a winning strategy to bring about change and democratic transition in our beloved home country.

At a time when our immediate neighbourhood is mired in a ferocious multifaceted internecine conflict with its adverse effects on the ever-deepening crisis in our own country, our discussion aims to (1) cultivate a common understanding with regards to the prevailing situation and the fundamental interest of our country and people; (2) develop a shared vision that heralds a better political future for our country; and (3) explore our potential contribution to accelerating autonomous change and crystallising democratic transition in Eritrea.

With these brief introductory remarks, let me move on to the main issue we are gathered here to discuss today.

Otto von Bismarck, the prominent Prussian statesman and architect of the unification of Germany, once stated that “politics is the art of the possible, the attainable – the art of the next best”. The exercise of *realpolitik* in the affairs of state has since become an adage. In the context

of our specific Eritrean situation, it is plausible to complement this adage by adding that politics is the pursuit of pragmatic action to transform *what is* into *what should be*. That is, pragmatic action designed to push existing realities on the ground towards achieving desirable objectives through constant effort to strike balance between aspirations, possibilities, and resources.

Despite the apparent need for coalescence based on a balance of our collective *aspirations, possibilities, and resources*, however, Eritrean diaspora opposition politics, afflicted by a vicious cycle of discord, recriminations, and polarisation, has degenerated into *the art of the impossible*. Many in the ‘opposition’ have lost their compass. They have turned quislings, obsessed with, and bickering over the affairs of others at the expense of those of their own country and people. Indeed, certain political groups and media outlets have exceeded the bounds of decency and responsible citizenship as Eritreans, descending into the abyss of opportunistic mercenaryism, outright treachery, and overzealous servitude.

Under the guise of opposition to the authoritarian regime, they have openly aligned themselves with, and continue to actively support and overtly lobby for, hostile foreign forces that have:

1. Long held expansionist ambitions over Eritrean territory.
2. A proven track record of aggression against and violation of the territorial integrity of the State of Eritrea.
3. Committed heinous atrocities against the people of Eritrea, including deportations and confiscation of property.
4. Constantly operated to undermine and malign Eritrean national identity, Eritrean unity, Eritrean communal harmony, Eritrean cultural values, etc.

Worse still, they continue to do so without shame or remorse.

It is quite strange to see them stooping to the extent of denying, condoning, or even justifying the horrific atrocities committed against Eritrean refugees in Tigray by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). In aligning themselves with hostile foreign forces, they have crossed the redline, exposed their utter moral bankruptcy and, consequently, further divided and polarised the Diaspora opposition.

At present, our proximate neighbourhood is mired in a deep crisis of war, strife, instability, and polarisation. The peoples of Ethiopia are suffering from a devastating civil war and its collateral damage. It is quite clear to all of us that the spill over effect of the war and strife has exerted a powerful negative impact on our people and country, including the Diaspora

opposition. To help shed light on one of the principal causes of this negative impact, I would like to cite what former British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, once said:

"I took a taxi one day to the BBC offices for an interview. When I arrived, I asked the driver to wait for me for forty minutes until I got back, but the driver apologized and said, "I can't, because I have to go home to listen to Winston Churchill's speech".

"I was amazed and delighted with the man's desire to listen to my speech! So I took out 20 pounds and gave it to the taxi driver without telling him who I was. When the driver collected the money, he said: 'I'll wait for hours until you come back sir! And let Churchill go to hell'".

The lesson is crystal clear. It shows how principles are exchanged for money; nations are sold for money; honour is sold for money; families are split for money; friends are separated for money; people are killed for money; and people are made servants and slaves for money; people betray their country and become mercenaries serving the enemy for money.

Notwithstanding all such betrayal and treachery, change is a constant in the evolution of human society. Time settles all issues that arise from time to time in due course. In the final analysis, history spares no traitors or mercenaries in its judgment. When the time comes, and all this shall certainly come to pass, there will be transitional justice to redress all the wrongs done, provide closure for the victims and ensure accountability and atonement to pave the way for national reconciliation and social harmony.

Having suffered so much for so long under the repression of a brutal autocrat, Eritrea today finds itself at a critical juncture. The end of the malevolent regime and its dysfunctional governance system is within sight and democratic transition is possible. If we get our act together, I believe that our collective engagement and action can help strengthen the agency of our people at home and abroad. We can also help catalyse autonomous change and contribute to a stable transition to a constitutional government and democratic governance.

So, let us get our act together, fully convinced that change in Eritrea is an internal Eritrean affair and that the destiny of Eritrea lies in the hands of the Eritrean people, especially the new generation of Eritreans, and nobody else. It is imperative, at this critical juncture, that Eritrean pro-democracy activists in the Diaspora play preferably a conciliatory role or otherwise adopt a balanced non-aligned stance *vis-a-vis* the internal conflict in Ethiopia. We must focus primarily on the effort to replace the dictatorial regime by a constitutional government based on the rule of law, democratic principles, and respect for human rights.

Today, we are gathered here in this *Eritrea Symposium 2021*, convened under the theme of *Strengthening the People's Agency in Democratic Change*, in pursuit of this objective. The central question of the moment is whether we are prepared to rise to the challenge and discharge our responsibility. Each of us must ask and answer the question: *Am I ready to work together with like-minded compatriots to carry the burden and accomplish the task?*

Before delving into our regular programme in detail, it seems to me important to make a few remarks on a subject that has come up recently and sowed further discord in the politics of the Eritrean Diaspora. This is the proposal to establish a “government in exile”. To start with, the proposal is not new. Externally initiated about ten years ago in a design to bring about regime change in Eritrea with the support of foreign forces, it has practically languished in total failure. However, its failure to date has been an asset rather than a liability for Eritrea and its people. This is because we have seen the objective consequences of all externally imposed change: the wretched condition afflicting the peoples of Somalia, Syria, Libya, or Afghanistan is a sufficient testimony to this reality. Thus, like the “leader” anointed by foreign forces who immersed Iraq and its people in the quagmire of an unending crisis, an Eritrean Ahmed Chalabi can only bring harm and no good to our people and country.

The proposal of a “government in exile” is, in the first place, founded on the erroneous and divisive sectarian premise that describes Eritrean society, whose reality is characterised by multinational unity and communal harmony, as composed of “two schools of thought, two cultures and two languages”. The application of such sectarian politics in Lebanon has harmed rather than benefitted the people of Lebanon who have been afflicted by constant civil war, internecine killings, and turbulence. The sad and bankrupt Lebanese reality is thus a living testimony that turning Eritrea into another Lebanon would cause similar harm and bankruptcy and bring no benefit to Eritrea and its people.

Furthermore, there are very important political issues that the proposal of a “government in exile” does not address. (1) the question of rule of law, (2) the question of the people's representation, (3) the question of regime legitimacy, (4) the question of practicality, and (5) the question of its impact on the effort to establish a constitutional government. These are among the glaring issues that the proposal of a “government in exile” does not address.

The “government” to be established in exile would lack (1) inclusive popular representation at home or in the Diaspora; (2) legitimate composition; and (3) practical applicability on the ground. In addition, instead of contributing to the crystallisation of autonomous change as a complement to the domestic democratic effort, the example of Libya and the like is sufficient

testimony that presenting itself as a substitute or a rival of the domestic democratic force would have a detrimental effect on the national struggle for the rule of law and stable democratic transition through Eritrean ownership and agency.

Now, let me return to the details of the task at hand, that is, the main reason for which we are gathered here.

The *Eritrea Symposium 2021* will focus on five thematic panels, namely:

(1) Assessing the Current Situation in Eritrea and the Region. Session 1: The Current Situation in Eritrea and the Region; and Session 2: The Emerging Geopolitical Reality.

(2) Struggling for Justice and Democracy in the Age of Falsehood and Unreality. Session 1: Information vs. Propaganda: Sifting Fact and Fiction; and Session 2: New Media, Digital Diaspora, and Political Activism.

(3) Strengthening the People's Agency in Democratic Change. Session 1: Internal Drivers of Democratic Change; and Session 2: External Catalysts of Democratic Change.

(4) Current Challenges Facing the Eritrean Diaspora Opposition. Session 1: Contending Views of Eritrea's National Interest; and Session 2: Sovereignty as a State and as a People.

(5) Coalescing to Catalyse Democratic Change. Session 1: Coalescing to Catalyse Democratic Change; and Session 2: Building a National Media Outlet.

Each panel comprises a moderator and two panellists to address each theme, followed by open discussion.

It is important to realise that the present situation in our country and region, with all its negative repercussions, has created opportunities, on the one hand, and challenges, on the other.

I hope that this *Symposium*, convened at this moment of crisis, under the theme of *Strengthening the People's Agency in Democratic Change* will avail us a free and open dialogue that (1) deepens a common understanding of the prevailing situation in our country and region; (2) cultivates a shared vision of the Eritrea of the future; and (3) concludes with an outcome that strengthens coalescence for more effective and coherent political and media work to accelerate change and crystallise democratic transition in our beloved country.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Eternal Glory to Our Martyrs!

Long Live an Independent Sovereign State of Eritrea!

God Bless Eritrea and its People!