

The Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) is going to convene its congress in the near future. Therefore we are publishing our article "Some Thoughts on the Projected National Conference" in order to pave a way for discussion and new ideas that can enrich the coming EDA congress.

## **Some Thoughts on the Projected National Conference**

### **1. Introduction**

Throughout the history of our revolution, whenever a crisis that threatened the struggle for liberation broke out, the Eritrean people unfurled the flag of national congress or conference. The present demand for a national conference is in step with established tradition. The national devastation caused by internal dictatorship and external wars ushered the slogans of reconciliation and national salvation to the forefront: these two popular demands represent the locus of national debate among Eritrean political communities in the diaspora. The concept of reconciliation was inspired by the urgent need of resolving the standing contradictions among the different organisations - the aim was to reconcile the disparate opposition forces so that the days of the dictatorship might be shortened speedily. Reconciliation was also presented as a vehicle of healing the political and cultural wounds caused by interminable internal conflicts. There also surfaced the notion that reconciliation was indivisible - the articulators of this quaint dialectical finesse advocated the theses that reconciliation between the dictatorship and the opposition ought to take precedence over the struggle to dislodge the dictatorial system. The demand for reconciliation was put to rest by the emergence of an upgraded Charter and Organisational Structure at the Fifth Regular Meeting of the ENA. Nevertheless, great national efforts, such as the task of dislocating the dictatorship, can hardly be expected to be achieved by reconciliation alone – important ingredients, such as a unified opposition force, and a viable financial support system, are also essential.

As the dictatorship intensified the destruction of the bonds of society and nation, the demand for national salvation replaced that of reconciliation; be that as it may, the dictatorship remains in power oblivious to the Eritrean debate about reconciliation and national salvation. From this perspective, the national conference needs to be perceived not only as an instrument for bringing down the dictatorial regime; but more importantly, it needs to be envisaged as a drawing-board where the steps that lead to the empowerment of the people are designed. The clarion call of the national conference - raised by the Eritrean people, the ENA, and supported by civil societies - was endorsed at the 18<sup>th</sup> Eritrean Youth Festival in Kessel. The ENA, together with other opponents of the regime, accepts the challenge of translating this crucial demand of our people into reality.

## **2. What are the Principles that need to be Considered?**

Let us start with what the conference ought not to be. The conference cannot be modelled on the congresses of the past that were organised for the mobilisation of our people for national liberation - by means of protracted war. That task has been achieved: Eritrea is already an independent sovereign country. Judging from the Eritrean national debate, the aspiration for a national conference encompasses two central dimensions: the first of these - the principle that the dictatorship should be dislodged - is agreed upon by the entire opposition camp, and does not require further elaboration. The second principle - that of the empowerment of the people - occupies centre stage in the Eritrean national debate, and is expected to lock the collective attention of the participants of the national conference.

The empowerment of the people cannot be achieved without a multi-party democracy based on a constitution. The Eritrean people have the right to establish a democratic system, and elect democratic governments of their choice, by the exercise of their power to vote. In other words, the central space of the Eritrean national debate is occupied by the struggle for multi-party democracy. In a society such as ours - that has gone through violent intra-organisational conflicts - the principle of reconciliation should be weaved into our democratic system, and not treated separately; likewise, national salvation is not a once and for all phenomenon but rather the end result of a national effort - elaborated within the framework of a democratic and constitutional system. Put briefly, these two vibrant demands of the Eritrean people need not be treated outside the confines of the Eritrean political context.

What is the strategic relationship between the empowerment of the Eritrean people and the projected national conference? This strategic relationship may be described as a road map with a difference. The distinction lies in the fact that the Eritrean road map shall depend more on national effort and less on external facilitation; in other words, the Eritrean road map shall be designed at the Eritrean national conference, by Eritreans, for Eritreans. The first task of the conference is to elaborate the ways and means of removing the dictatorship by forging a political platform acceptable to the entire opposition; a related task is to put together a structure that is capable of implementing the goals of the opposition forces. The second task of the conference, however, is to tackle the difficult objective of designing a blueprint suited to the post-dictatorship Eritrea. In this regard, it is necessary to point out that it is not within the sphere of competence of the projected national conference to draft the constitution of Eritrea. The national conference may, however, discuss the following principles and steps:

### **The Provisional Government**

A provisional government that includes all the opposition forces - immediately after the downfall of the PFDJ - needs to be established in order to fill the leadership gap during the interim period.

### **The Transitional Government**

A transitional government that includes all the opposition forces needs to be formed - in order to agree on a constitution and formulate party and electoral laws.

### **3. What are the Organisational Models that Need to be Considered?**

In this contribution, we shall consider some models for public debate; doubtlessly, other models shall emerge as the debate unfolds. Better still, the inventive Eritrean mind shall not fail to refine useful combinations of the models presented here:

#### **The Eritrean National Alliance**

The ENA is a home-base to multiple political organisations. At the Fifth Regular Meeting, this umbrella organisation was upgraded at the charter and organisational levels. The preservation of the unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of our nation that has been achieved by decades of heroic struggle, is the standing pillar of the Eritrean National Alliance. At the charter level central principles regarding religious equality, the rights of nationalities, and the principle of decentralisation were defined clearly. The acceptance of Tigrinya and Arabic as official languages, and the acceptance of the right of Eritrean nationalities to use and develop their languages was also a significant step. Another principle of the charter that may be of importance to the national conference is the credo that rules that govern the transfer of power need to be based on the democratic principles of political plurality, and majority rule.

At the organisational structure level the ENA established two complementary leadership centres; namely, the supreme leadership, and the executive secretariat. The supreme leadership is composed of representatives of sister organisations. The executive secretariat is composed of single representatives delegated by their organisations. Members of the executive secretariat are required to be fulltime professionals on behalf of the Alliance. The rotating leadership was replaced by a stable structure, while the period of office was increased to two years.

From the above description it is possible to understand that the ENA model has the characteristics of **a united front of autonomous organisations, and a united democratic front bound by a democratic charter, and a united organisational structure** – represented by a fulltime leadership.

#### **Broad National Front**

This model may be traced to the Chinese war of resistance against Japanese occupation during the Second World War. The nationalists, led by Chiang Kai Check, and the communists, led by Mao Dze Dung, forged a broad front in order to terminate Japanese occupation. There was a tacit understanding between these irreconcilable enemies that each would go for the jugular of the other in a war of annihilation - once the task of removing the common Japanese enemy was accomplished.

This model is suited for aligning two or more antagonistic organisations for the purpose of knocking out a common enemy. The minimum objective of eliminating the enemy may be achieved; however, civil war, coup d'état, or brutish war lordism may also result from such an arrangement.

## **The United National Front**

This model is a variant of the wide or broad national front, where two or more liberation organisations agree to pull their resources together against a common enemy - without the need of exploring common post-war arrangements. On the home front, this type of agreement was entered into between the EPLF and the ELF, in 1978. This experiment ended in a civil war that ultimately led to the demise of the ELF. This model provides the opportunity of access to each other's constituencies, and permits the units of the united front to siphon legitimacy from each other. This model is preferred by political realists who argue that the Eritrean political scenery is dominated by the ELF and EPLF schools, and that an arrangement between these organisations should be the main objective of the national conference. The proponents of this point of view may argue that civil societies and independents are, covertly or overtly, supporters of one or the other political school.

## **The National Assembly**

This model was proposed for the purpose of bringing the multiplicity of Eritrean organisations under one legislative and political roof; it provides the framework for removing the dictatorship; and paves the way to the transitional stages. All delegates, of organisations and the Eritrean people, have the right to be represented in the national assembly: the main task of this legislative body is to strive for a new legitimacy at the national and international planes. This model also encourages the replacement of the illegitimate ideology of the PFDJ by democratic legitimacy, and the establishment of relations with the parliaments of the world - in order to convey the true image of a peaceful, democratic, anti-terrorist Eritrea. Out of the inclusive base that the national assembly provides, various forms of leadership structures may be constructed. One of these is the government in exile model.

To summarise, the advantages of the national assembly model are as follows:

- The legislative constituency provides an alternative legitimacy to the illegitimacy of the dictatorship – in a situation where the rule of law has been usurped by the dictator.
- The national assembly model is suited to the present configuration of international politics by opening doors to all democratic parliaments and the UN.
- The leadership that emerges from a national assembly model is bound to attain political recognition at the national and international levels.
- In this model all political organisations have the right to maintain their autonomy while being represented by their delegates at the legislative and executive levels.

## **Government in Exile**

Governments in exile do not have to be constructed from the national assembly model; they may also be created out of a variety of models. The fundamental condition that this model needs to satisfy is whether a given government in exile enjoys national legitimacy and international recognition. Outside the framework of the legitimacy principle - represented by the national assembly model - the danger of Eritrean

organisations forming a plethora of governments in exile cannot be discounted. This model foresees a negotiated agreement between the opposition organisations on the matter of building a government- in - exile; with the possibility of extending its incumbency to the transitional phase. It also foresees a negotiated agreement on matters dealing with the future political system of our nation. In this context the national conference may render legitimacy to a previously arrived at political arrangement.

### **The PLO Type**

The PLO brought together several Palestinian organisations under one umbrella. In this model, while the different organisations maintained their political and organisational autonomy, they ended up by revolving around FATTAH – the real dynamo of the PLO. To offset the dominance of the FATTAH, these organisations were represented at the national assembly and the leadership structure of the PLO. This model provides the advantages of a legitimate, united, political centre - much in the way that the national assembly does. The disadvantages of this model lie in the fact that the old guard tends to retain power - thus delaying the empowerment of the people - and also in the fact that a strong organisation may establish hegemony over the weaker organisations.

### **Dialogue Conference**

A dialogue conference, as the name denotes, aims to launch two related themes in the area of political culture: the first being, shaping a consensus around the central issues that have ensued from the political crisis in Eritrea; and the second being, fashioning an encompassing goodwill among the contending Eritrean organisations. Some of these issues are:

- The issue of dialogue and reconciliation
- The issue of national salvation
- The issue of planning Eritrea's political future
- The issue of harnessing popular support for the elimination of the dictatorship
- The creation of a new political culture
- The issue of laying the foundations of democracy

## **4. The Preparation of the Conference**

The preparation of the conference may be based on the agreement arrived at between the opposition organisations at a consultative meeting. In this respect, there are three organisational levels that may need to be taken into consideration. These are: the hosting body, the consultative meeting, and the national conference.

### **The Hosting Body**

The hosting body is the ENA. It is difficult to imagine congresses, conferences or even seminars being organised without hosting bodies. The ENA is not only the initiator of the idea of a national conference, but has also accorded this important national project a prominent position in its National Charter. Furthermore, the participants of the Kessel Festival endorsed the ENA's claim to organise the conference. These two legitimating

items deposit the duty of transforming the national conference - from a desirable idea into reality – squarely upon the shoulders of the ENA.

### **The Consultative Meeting**

A consultative meeting needs to be called in order to forge an agreement between the various organisations that shall partake in the national conference. The purpose of the consultative meeting shall be to discuss the relevant aspects of convoking a successful conference in a participatory spirit. Some of these aspects that readily come to mind are:

- The establishment of the preparatory committee
- The formation of the secretariat of the conference
- The electoral body
- The selection of the country in which the conference shall be held
- The funds that need to be raised
- The mass media
- The security of the conference
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### **The National Conference**

The national conference is the end product of the work of the hosting body and the consultative meeting.

### **Participation**

The principle of participation at the national conference is a matter to be agreed upon by the various organisations at the consultative meeting. All seem to agree that political organisations and civil societies shall constitute the main constituency blocks of the national conference; nevertheless, a conference of this magnitude needs to explore ways and means that allow the participation of the non-cadre sectors of our people. It is generally agreed that the delegates to the conference need be elected democratically; in this respect, the question of the number of participants is an important item that needs to be agreed upon at the consultative meeting. An equally important aspect of participation is the matter of fair and balanced representation; the national conference needs to be the mirror image of the Eritrean nation - towards this end, the political, cultural, age, and gender cross-section of our nation need to be taken into consideration. The question of invitation of foreign governments, organisations, and prominent personalities is also a matter to be resolved at the consultative meeting. The same ought to be true of the criterion of observer status.

### **The Preparatory Committee**

Of all the possible items in the agenda of the consultative meeting, the matter of setting up the preparatory committee, the secretariat, and the electoral body, occupy prominent positions. The preparatory committee ought to be a vehicle of preparing the conference and nothing else. The secretariat has the responsibility of administering the conference and organising its deliberations. The electoral body's task is – depending on the agreement of the parties at the consultative meeting - to ensure a watertight election procedure. In order to make these bodies free from undue political influence two steps may be necessary: firstly, the selection of these bodies needs to be free from political

control as it needs to be representative; secondly, these bodies may need to be non-eligible for candidacy to political offices.

### **The Venue**

The issue of where the national conference should be held needs to be agreed upon at the consultative meeting. This step has the advantage of eliminating unnecessary controversy!



### **Raising Funds**

The campaign of raising funds and its proper dispensation is one of the pressing issues that needs to be discussed at the consultative meeting.

### **The Mass Media**

A unit for the mass media needs to be established so that there is a concerted effort to mobilise national and international support for the conference. A mass media unit equipped with a website, bulletin, and radio facility, has the double-edged advantage of opening access to world opinion, and keeping PFDJ infiltration at bay.

### **The Question of Security**

The question of security is important to the success of the conference. A security unit needs to be established in order to gather, sift, and evaluate information. A fire wall needs to be built between the national conference and the agents of the dictatorship - the protection of life and the success of the conference depend on this crucial step.

## **5. The Documents of the National Conference**

The Eritrean national conference, like most conferences, has a limited duration; it is impossible for the conference to take up all the elements discussed in this paper from scratch. Common sense dictates that now is the right time to delve into the debate about the national conference. The organisers of the conference need to follow the national debate with care so that due consideration is given to public opinion. The following themes may be deemed suitable documents for the deliberation of the conference:

### **Ways and Means of Replacing the Dictatorship by a Democratic System**

This document needs to focus on the central elements of a coherent strategy that maximises the weaknesses of the Eritrean dictatorship, and minimises the weaknesses of the opposition. The document needs, likewise, to define the duration of the provisional and transitional stages.

### **Agreements Governing the Post-Issayas Period**

This paper needs to focus on areas of agreement that shall guide the victorious opposition during the post-dictatorial period. This agreement shall be the basis of a democratic legitimacy at the national and international levels; in this context, the ideas

revolving around the provisional and transitional governments must be explicitly defined.

**Principles of Unity in an Environment of Diversity**

This paper needs to tackle the fundamental principle of unity in a societal environment of diversity. The recognition that Eritrean diversity is a cultural given, and that the question of the forms of unity is a variable, provides the flexibility to explore the required democratic solutions.

**The Paper on a Suitable Organisational Model**

This paper needs to monitor the Eritrean national debate regarding the models presented above; a wise selection of the appropriate model is essential to our victory. This model needs to be selected from the perspective of retaining the autonomy of the opposition organisations so that they operate as living and dynamic units within a flexible and functional structure.

**6. The Procedures of the Conference**

If the hosting body and the support units, put together at the consultative meeting, perform their tasks properly, then we can assume that the participants shall be ensconced in their quarters safely; the security unit has isolated the conference from the outside world; and the mass media unit is suitably perched at a vantage post. The following procedural steps are equally important for the successful conclusion of the conference:

- The Hosting body, and the leaders of the opposition organisations read their speeches
- The preparatory committee presents its report and resigns its responsibility
- The secretariat for the administration of the conference is elected/selected
- Workshops are set up
- The plenary session deliberates and approves the documents discussed by the workshops
- An electoral body is put in place
- The leadership of the new structure is elected
- The secretariat resigns
- The new leadership assumes its duties



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