

The Political and Economic Philosophy of the Eritrean Congress Party (Part One)

A. INTRODUCTION

An Ideological Overview

1. 'Sovietism'

At the height of the Industrial Revolution and the age of imperialism, society was ranged along the Labor and Capital class divide. Leninists as well as social democrats agreed on the observation that the bourgeoisie dominated the state. Moreover, these two major ideological tendencies of the socialist movement shared the Marxist view that the state was the legal engine of capitalism, where the political representatives of the capitalist class played the role of the executive committee. Nevertheless, Marxist-Leninist and Social Democrats diverged in their solutions to the problems of class struggle and the conquest of state power. The Marxist-Leninists upheld the strategy of establishing a working class state by revolutionary means; as a result, the concept of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was formulated as an alternative to the original Marxist notion of 'the executive committee of the capitalist class'.

The Leninist party took power in Tsarist Russia and replaced it with the Soviet State; the factors of production and distribution were appropriated by the state; inherited culture and religion were castigated as residues of backwardness; and independent trade union organizations of the working classes were rendered illegal. Paradoxical as it may sound, the communist party, the so-called champion of the working classes, muffled the existence of independent trade unions, as superfluous and anachronistic. In short, the Marxist-Leninist solution to the standing tension between Labor, Capital, and the Capitalist State, was based on the strategy of eradicating the three named institutions, via the mediation of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The party and the state became everything, while society was reduced to a mere appendage of the institutions of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It can be asserted that the Stalinist state collapsed, partly as the result of the top-heavy communist oligarchy that dominated the state and society; and to a great extent, as a consequence of the life and death competition with the West for the control of the resources of world. The alternative path of reforming the capitalist state into a Welfare State; of building democratic trade unionism; the co-operative movement; and the structures that support civil society, were left for social democracy to tackle.

2. Capitalism

Capitalism, whose demise was predicted to be historically inevitable, survived not only because of the inherent dynamism of the free market, and the cultural advantages of the capitalist classes, but also because of the structural weaknesses of the Soviet system that challenged it. That is to say, in addition to the profit motive that fuelled the internal dynamism of capitalism, the suffocating character of the Stalinist state deflected sizeable parts of humanity from the attractions of socialism.

Incredible as it may seem, capitalism was also given a kiss of life by the democratic path adopted by social democracy, and by its embrace of the peaceful programme of building the welfare state. The awareness by social democracy of the dynamism of the free market, and its acceptance of the principle of private ownership, made peaceful competition with capitalism possible. Social democracy is equally aware of the fact that unrestrained capitalism causes injustice, wastage of resources, unemployment, and economic crisis. The international dimensions of capitalism make the protection of the interests of working populations difficult; vigilance is needed to protect developing economies from the dangers of global capitalism.

The moment the interests of capitalism are threatened in the Third World, the international owners of capital would not hesitate to support dictatorships in preference to democratic governments. The anti-serum to dictatorship is a relentless engagement in daily, democratic, work: open debate must be promoted; political and economic pluralism defended; and popular participation in the decision-making processes protected.

3. The Tenets of Social Democracy

During the momentous struggle against capitalism, social democracy countered the idea of revolution with its own ideological line; namely, the path of the legal and peaceful struggle. An equally important position adopted by social democracy was that the democratization of the state and society was preferable to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus, social democracy espoused the tangible objective of building the welfare state in preference to tinkering with the unmanageable idea of the withering away of the state. Another key concept embraced by social democracy was the credo that independent working class unions and civic organizations constitute the foundations of economic and political equality.

In the West, social democracy conducted a monumental struggle to protect the state from control by communist and capitalist oligarchies. It is appropriate to state that social democratic parties and trade unions played a central role in the evolution of Western democracy as we know it today.

The collapse of the Soviet system, and the gradual softening of Chinese communism, gave birth, in ideologically rigid circles, to a fundamentalist faith in the infallibility of the capitalist system: that is why social democracy needed to be vigilant against born-again capitalism. It is true that capitalism aided by novel technological and scientific innovations has expanded production in basic needs as well as luxuries. The fact remains, however, that the growth of output in the post-industrial world is achieved at the expense of much destruction of the environment; displacement of large groups from the labor market; and defective distribution. Awareness of these challenges needs to be enhanced so that natural resources are not depleted, human resources are not wasted, and the environment is not exposed to degeneration.

The Soviet experience has demonstrated that a class-based society does not vanish by the mere act of instituting collective ownership in favor of private property: the struggle between Capital and Labor is resilient and likely to stay with us for a long time to come. Economic democracy, accompanied by a shared decision-making

process between management and workers, is the key to political democracy. Democracy belongs to the majority; but unless citizens participate actively in the democratic process, the door will always remain open for minorities to establish authoritarian political systems.

3.1 Economic Democracy

In order to achieve the goal of economic democracy, it is important to expand the opportunities of the wage and salary-earning majority to own their homes; and farmers to own their farms. It is also imperative for workers to maintain their trade organizations; for peasants to own their co-operative movements; and for all to be free from state control, and the dominance of the owners of capital. Full employment is the ultimate objective of economic democracy, not only because it is the right of every able-bodied and willing individual to work, but also because a sound economy is dependent on full employment. It is well to remember that the promise of liberty, equality, and solidarity, attain significance when they are accompanied by a good working life and good health.

Once the promise of economic insecurity of the individual is redressed; and the exercise of full-fledged citizenship is attained; the few shall not be able to control the lives of the many; and the owners of capital shall not be the sole decision-makers in the economy and politics of society.

Progressive taxation is a powerful political weapon for correcting societal inequalities. Social needs such as illness, old age, and unemployment benefits can be met via progressive, fair, taxation. Establishing pension systems, collective savings, and funds on behalf of the wage and salary earners can counteract the monopolistic power of capital owners. The majority of working people is likely to remain outside the confines of economic, cultural, and social resources of society, unless access to education is made available to them. Encourage adult education! Upgrade existing skills! Introduce new ones! Create study clubs! Such are the clarion calls of democracy.

3.2 Economic Development

It is obvious that there cannot be welfare without economic growth; it is equally obvious that growth at any cost is self-defeating. Development that is dependent on depleting irreplaceable natural resources, and that canalizes the fruits of labor of the majority into the hands of the few is undesirable. Growth must be related to material security; good health; humane working conditions; and cultural development. That is why economic democracy strives to clear the path for economic development, so that the fruits of material well being are equally available to all sectors of society.

Uncontrolled growth not only depletes scanty resources but is known to poison the soil, the air, and the sea of our world. Internal regional balance is also important to growth so that some regions do not develop at the expense of the remainder. Uncontrolled growth can also create run away inflation; enhance unemployment; and promote inequitable distribution. This is a recipe for dividing society into the 'haves and the have-nots': corrective measures need to be taken so that the interplay between equitable rights and obligations of citizens is maintained, and the differences in economic and social resources are evened out.

3.3 The Parliamentary Path

Legislation, as opposed to violent intervention, is another instrument by which democracy advances the rights of the working population. The history of democracy has demonstrated that the only way to democratize political life, redress social inequalities, and correct glaring economic disparities, is via legislation. The advocates of unhindered free market denounce legislation, in the social and economic fields, as forms of social engineering; nevertheless, a flexible interplay between the public sector and market economy is essential for dynamic production and fair distribution.

Similarly, advocates of the, perfect, free market argue that public ownership and public bodies are cumbersome. The truth remains that natural resources (such as minerals, gas, oil, etc.) belong to society and not to individuals and, as such, must be

administered by public bodies. Negotiations between employees and employers, national health, public transport, and the protection of the environment, and similar tasks, are a few of the areas that need the intervention of public bodies. The institutions of the free market and the public sector are not contradictory; on the contrary, they are complementary!

3.4 The Principles of Foreign Policy

The preservation of national independence is the most important principle of democratic foreign policy. The respect for national independence and international law safeguards peace, and protects small nations from aggressive powers. It is equally true that membership in bellicose alliances, and hostile block formations, foment conflicts. Democracy condemns dictatorships and authoritarian regimes and fights to protect the Third World from plunder and the destruction of its environment.

4. The Guidelines of Eritrean Democracy

4.1 Introduction

The primary aims of Eritrean democracy are: the preservation of the independence of our country, the establishment of pluralist democracy, and the preservation of individual dignity based on democratic values.

Eritrean democracy shall strive to liberate Eritreans from the degradation of centuries of colonialism and authoritarianism, by placing decision-making powers of production and distribution in the hands of the majority. Our aim is to liberate Eritrean society from class and ethnic domination and build a just community based upon ***liberty, equality, democracy, and solidarity***. These goals are rooted in the heroic struggle of the Eritrean people for liberation, as they are in the struggles of countless working peoples throughout the world. It is the firm aim of Eritrean democracy to learn from the rich experience of the global democratic movement.

4.2 Liberty

Eritrean democracy is committed to the principle that individuals have the right to be in control of their destiny, free from interference by the state, and powerful economic interests. Eritrean democrats believe firmly in the principle that equality between all nations, whether rich or poor, powerful or diminutive, forms the basis of global peace.

We hold that the principles of civil rights, universal franchise, freedom of expression, and the right to organize and associate freely, are incontrovertible. These rights must be protected vigilantly from the encroachments of power groupings and vested interests. It is the cardinal aim of Eritrean democracy to emancipate the overwhelming majority from economic, cultural, and political hegemony, so that they might be able to preserve their liberty and exercise their civil rights.

4.3 Equality

We believe unswervingly that equality is a pre-condition to liberty. Individual rights will remain empty dreams without equal access to economic opportunity, education, and culture for the majority. Eritrean democracy holds that equality of the distribution of the resources of society and mankind lies at the heart of establishing equality among individuals. It is important that a democratic party rejects a society founded on class, ethnic, and gender domination.

4.4 Solidarity

Society is composed of those whose capacity is greater than others but whose needs are not as great as the overwhelming majority. The ECP is concerned with encouragement of those who contribute most so that they enjoy the fruits of their capacity, while at the same time making sure that this does not lead to the domination of the strong over the weak. We believe firmly that democracy cannot be founded on the forces of the free market alone: it must be complemented by solidarity. Democracy is the basis of solidarity; therefore, the values of democracy

need to permeate all aspects of the political, economic, social, and cultural life of our nation.

At the national plane, Eritrean democracy shall strive to achieve the stated goals by organizing the wage and salary earners, and peasants. At the international plane, we shall strive to harness the goodwill and solidarity of the international democratic forces. Only when Eritrean democracy demonstrates its seriousness, dignity, and incorruptibility can it expect the experienced democratic parties of the industrial world to extend their unstinting solidarity to our nation. The essence of solidarity, whether it is at the national or international levels, is based on co-operation and not conflict.

5. The New Conditions of Struggle

5.1 Modern Challenges

The challenges of the post-industrial and post-colonial age differ radically from the problems that were faced by the working classes of last century; modern class challenges are more complex and far more difficult to tackle. The collapse of the bipolar system has exposed the working peoples of the world to new insecurities. The workers in the Third World are exposed to international capital in a way that might undo the ephemeral gains of independence; worse, they are exposed to massive health and environmental hazards by the catastrophic global exploitation of natural resources.

It is self-evident that the nations of the world have the right to develop their societies without fear of domination or control by any single political power. Towards this end, Eritrean democracy shall co-operate with the international democratic forces to fill the void caused by the collapse of the bipolar system; it is important to seek a new international order based upon respect for legality and civilized behavior that can replace the old.

5.2 From Class Society to the Welfare State

Eritrean pre-colonial society was an impoverished non-productive Adi society; with Italian colonialism there developed an agricultural proletariat; traditional crafts were replaced by the factory system; and with it there developed specialization and division of labor. Italian colonial capitalism in Eritrea manifested itself as 'war capitalism' (in preparation of the Italo/Ethiopian war). Italy was part of the European industrial revolution, where the working classes were divorced from the labor of their products, and alienated from society in a way that denied them the opportunity to partake in the development of a worthy life and culture. The ruling classes of the newly united Italy saw colonialism as vehicle of exporting surplus population as a measure of reducing the contradictions between the Italian working and propertied classes.

5.3 Building Eritrea into the National Home of All Eritreans

Eritrean democracy shall found an Eritrean National Home in independent Eritrea, at peace with itself and its neighbors. Eritrea shall be a national home for all Eritreans, where class, ethnic, and religious distinctions shall be regarded as sources of cultural wealth rather than sources of first and second class citizenship. Internal and external peace is enhanced not by punishing capital but by making the conditions of a worthy life available to owners of capital and labor resources.

The Eritrean people's National Home cannot be established by military governments, anti-democratic nation building programs, constitutions by referenda (which cannot be amended by democratic means), and state parties. An Eritrean people's National Home shall be created in an environment of multi-party democracy, peacefully and by legislation, in a vibrant civil society where the wage and salary earners are actively engaged in protecting their interests. Active participation on the part of the ordinary citizens is essential for influencing social development; democratic

awareness, formulated and crystallized in the interest of the ordinary people, is the key to legislation.

The fruits of production must be distributed in accordance to the needs of the ordinary people and not the whims of capital! Mass poverty and mass unemployment must be removed! Civil right bodies must grow to defend themselves from the abuse of power of the state and capital! Wage workers and salary earners must be organized into unions independent from the power of capital and the state!

In sum, the aim of in Eritrea is to fight for the economic and social security of the working people, and to improve the standards of life and culture of the people by achieving full employment. The modernisation and democratisation of the communes is the basis of civic rights, where producer and consumer co-operative forms of enterprises can work side by side with profit based enterprises. Through the combined efforts of the Eritrean Congress Party, independent unions, the co-operative movement, and the free market a sound basis for building the Eritrean national home shall be available.

5.4 The Challenges of the Future

Emerging new technology and globalization have created new nuances in the class structure - the trend is certain to continue; nevertheless, class privileges have not changed their basic characteristics. The dominance of international corporations, international capital, and the never ending technological development have exposed the interests of the trade unions to new dangers; and made economies of the Third World dependent upon international financial forces. Under these circumstances it has become increasingly difficult for national banks and parliaments to achieve national objectives. Our party shall be on a constant alert to defend Eritrean society from these threats.

Another challenge is the increase of dictatorships and authoritarianism. Political democracy has to be defended against dictatorship by mobilising members of society to protect their rights and interests in a responsible way. In addition to dictatorships, class chasms, ethnic schisms, and other imbalances caused by

international finance capitalism; the working peoples of the world are also being dehumanised by epidemic diseases, and environmental catastrophes. Our party shall be at the forefront in the struggle to restore the plundered seas, soil, air, vegetation, and animal life.

Restoring naturally sustainable conditions will demand great efforts; towards this end, Eritrean democrats shall appeal for aid from international democratic forces. Another threat that hangs over the wage and salary earning Eritrean population is the media conspiracy. In the age in which we live politics has become dependent on the mass media; it is becoming more and more difficult for the wage and salary earning working people to form and formulate their own views. Our party shall fight for freedom of the press, and the right to break the monopoly of the one party state over the mass media.

Part two shall deal with *Strategy Adi*

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The Eritrean Congress Party