

PRESIDENT ISAIAS AFEWORK (PIA): AN ARSONIST OR A FIREFIGHTER?

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I wonder how many times the spin doctors are going to be proven wrong. In the past days, many confusing posts have crossed my way. They comment on PIA's latest visit to the Amara region of Ethiopia. PIA's itineration caused goose bumps and produced many village criers, sounding alarms of አይብልናን'ዶ (Haven't we said so).



Some are doing it out of genuine concern; others are seasoned peddlers. It is reasonable to press for Eritrea's interests which comes down to the demarcation of the border and ensuring that the current rapprochement yields positive net dividends for Eritrea. However, blowing things

out of context is not right.

However, what if we try to see what PIA is doing is in line with strengthening peace which will ultimately pay off handsomely?

Unfortunately, the border is not going to be demarcated short of a fight when the TPLF has basically blocked it, sticking to its past position. Bringing the demarcation to the forefront at this time will inevitably benefit the TPLF which is looking for an opportunity to undermine Dr. Abiy Ahmed's reformist agenda. Therefore, there should be groundwork of bringing TPLF to its sense by making it understand that the demarcation of the border and having a refreshed attitude towards Eritrea would serve its long-term interest.

The above outcome could be achieved by cornering or opening a frontal attack on TPLF, but by helping it see that there is a better future for Tigray when it works to consolidate peace in Ethiopia. I do not doubt that PIA's meetings with the Ethiopian PM and the Amara regional government officials will also deal with issues of security that directly affect the Tigray region. Meskerem.net described PIA's latest role accurately as similar to that of a firefighter, in this case dozing off ethnic fires that the TPLF itself had set.

The second part of the equation deals with matters related to if Eritrea is getting a fair share of benefits from its latest robust diplomatic endeavor in the region. Though this side of the equation is a work in progress, there are tangible results to which one can point.

- The state of war has ended
- There are cross-border trade and movements between Eritreans and Ethiopians
- There is a groundwork taking place to bring the region up to speed in creating a common platform where the next stage of concrete joint economic, security, diplomatic and political ventures take place.
- The unjust sanctions laid on Eritrea is said to be soon lifted.

All the above concrete achievements wouldn't have been materialized had Eritrea chosen to be a prisoner of its past experiences, i.e., fearing engagement. There is no question that the sanctions are being lifted because Eritrea demonstrated it is a responsible regional player. The USA saw that, and the rest of the world also took note of Eritrea's constructive role. Soon, Sudan is coming into the fold.

Some claim that PIA is working to materialize his goal of dissolving Eritrea into the Ethiopian ocean. Others had it have a bit of a cynical spin: they said PIA is working to corner Tigray. Well, from my vantage point, nothing could be further from the truth, and the waterproof evidence is that this is not PIA-Amara get together affair: the Somali president is also joining them, and according to waltainof.com, the leaders will discuss "continental, regional and international issues and ways of creating a stabile [sic] corridor."

There you have it. It is not Isu-Amara get together affair. It is about regional matters that includes Somalia. Of course, Isu could be expected to be carrying with him a big fire hose to put out raging ethnic fires the TPLF ignited. And speaking of arson, the arsonist is sitting in Mekele disseminating false accusations to confuse Eritreans.

Though I am aware that many compatriots are rightfully worried, and this is because of poor PR and information management by the government, I believe we need to give things some time. We have been victims of misinformation for too long. Mind you, there are hell bent distorters who have perfected the business of disinformation. They are seasoned spin doctors.

During their heyday, these spin doctors served as the tip of TPLF-controlled Ethiopia's policy to isolate and weaken Eritrea. They rationalized and justified the unjust sanctions placed on Eritrea. They contended that the border issue was PIA's matter and their number one goal should be changing his regime. However, we see them today playing the opposite of everything their past game plan had laid down. They worried about Eritrea's sovereignty more than those who defended it tooth and nail. Mashallah!!

You have every right to oppose PIA, but then provide us with viable alternative pathways. There is a difference between having a propensity to reject everything that comes your way and standing as an opposition that strives to furnish better options and practical means of achieving those options.

I oppose the PIA government where it should be, and I provide an alternative proposal. I don't object everything that comes out of Asmara. That would be an automatic reflex or worse a pathological disposition. The goal of voicing an objection should be out of our desire to improve the situation by providing better options; it should not be born out of desperate attempts to undermine everything PIA does. Hit him on what has gone wrong, and at least accept the fact that in Eritrea things sometimes go right and that engaging Ethiopia and the countries of the region are right measures that we have to support. Efforts of political resistance should not emanate from tenacious grudges that have controlled the minds of some.

The Abiy factor: Dr. Abiy Ahmed has undoubtedly played a positive role in setting the diplomatic tone in the region. I continue to support his domestic and regional agendas. However, Eritreans are still suffering from past Ethiopian militarism, and as they hear Ethiopian naval build up, they quickly associate it with past Ethiopian expansionist policies. As the PM of Ethiopia, seeing into the modernization of Ethiopian military is within his duties. However, when he says Ethiopia will be building a robust navy, coupled with the silence we get from Eritrean officials, it naturally raises concerns in Eritrean minds. He needs to be more forthcoming and articulate lest he is seen as a loose cannon.

Although Ethiopia has many ways of building a navy (provided it has the money to do so and keep it afloat), both countries need to resolve some underlying issues before the PM makes such repeated and bold statements. Demarcating the border and addressing all outstanding matters should take priority.

Ethiopia could hammer out agreements with several countries to lease bases; it could form a joint regional naval force; it could use international waters, and so forth. Therefore, Ethiopia's choices of building a navy are not limited to Eritrea. The Ethiopian Deputy Chief of Staff was cautious in his latest statement. He acknowledged the sovereignty of Eritrean coastal lines, and that was appropriate. The problem is not that Ethiopia is planning to build a naval force, but the lack of comment from the Eritrean side. Also, there are more pressing priorities that should concern both countries, mainly the demarcation of the border. Additionally, the continuity of Ethiopia, as a united country, is also another concern at this time and that should consume the energy of the prime minister.

Building and maintaining a robust naval force is not an easy task. It takes massive investment and years to accomplish it. Hence, at this stage, the PM's statements could be considered as aspirational. It could also serve him as political leverage by massaging Ethiopians' sentiments.

Finally, building trust is a basis for ongoing engagement. And I don't know how that could be done without addressing what Eritreans consider crucial. Dr. Abiy needs to put his house in order and show Eritreans he is serious about his commitment to demarcate the border.

Selam/peace

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