

Eritrea: London CDRiE Conference Report

Contributed by Michael Abraha
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London CDRiE Conference Report - January 9, 2010

Michael Abraha (January 31, 2010)

"The Eritrean government's reluctance to adopt two official languages [Arabic and Tigrigna] that may willy-nilly polarize and homogenize Eritrean society into two religious groups is theoretically sound. However, it is equally, if not more important to underscore the fact that the government and its supporters have got the politics of it wrong." Professor Gaim Kibreab

On January 9, 2010, a panel of Diaspora Eritrean academicians, professionals and intellectuals debated pressing national issues and problems which the

Asmara regime considers unimportant. These ranged from religious, ethnic and land rights to questions of national languages and governance. About 150 people attended the London symposium which was organized by Citizens for Democratic Rights in

Eritrea (CDRiE). Presentations were followed with counter discussions, questions and comments from the audience. Among the attendees were two former Eritrean Ambassadors, scholars, social and political activists including human rights activists Elsa Chyrum and Selam Kidane and other fellow compatriots.

London CDRiE symposium

The nine papers presented at the symposium are being packaged in a book form and will soon be made available to the public. In the interim, a summary of these papers is being presented in a two-part series. Part One covers presentations by CDRiE Chairman Suleiman Hussein (UK), Professor Yebio Woldemariam (USA), Researcher Ahmed Suleman (UK), and Professor Gaim Kibreab (UK).

Part Two will include papers by Hassan Salman (Sudan), Journalist Habtom Yohannes (Holland), Senait Yohannes (Canada), Simon M. Weldehaimanot (USA), and Professor Kidane Mengisteab (USA).

Here is the first report which begins with a description of CDRiE's activities so far.

CDRiE Chairman Suleiman Hussein (UK) summarized the achievements and challenges faced by the agency since it was first launched in

London in January, 2009 as a global civic organization. Suleiman told participants that CDRiE used its first year in strengthening its organizational structure on the one hand and its relationship with Eritrean and international organizations on the other. Suleiman stressed that after one year CDRiE had succeeded in striking the right balance.

Suleiman Hussein

"To those who welcomed us with high expectations, we promised to do everything we can to become a real catalyst for change and part of the solution to the Eritrean predicament" said Suleiman. "To those who saw us with suspicion, we have sought positive engagement and tried to explain our vision and mission with all modesty", he added. Suleiman said the results have so far been very positive and that many of our critics have now become our friends and supporters. "Among these are some who for one reason or another sympathize with or even support the present Eritrean Government."

Among the major achievements of the year was CDRiE's role at the successful Brussels conference on

Eritrea and the Horn of Africa last November. One other highlight Suleiman mentioned was his organization's participation in May 2009 of the African Human and People's Rights gathering in Gambia, West Africa.

Yebio Woldemariam, Ph.D,
Adjunct Professor
York
College, the
City
University of

New York. Professor Yebio's topic is "Land in

Eritrea: A Contentious Commodity". His discussion is centered on the use and ownership of land as it relates to

agriculture combining livestock and crop production. His paper analyzes landholding systems in lowland and highland Eritrea.

Professor Yebio Woldemariam

Internal migration by "environmental refugees" is a common phenomenon as a means of coping with food shortages, says Yebio. He is by no means opposed to freedom of movement and the people's right to decide where in the country they wish to live. But Yebio is against government sanctioned migrations or settlements without due consideration to the customs and beliefs of the indigenous population.

He says dealing with complex problems such as food security requires careful planning and that activity driven bravado measures won't bring solutions. "The desperation of people to lead a decent life coupled with the extraordinary ability of the plateau people to move beyond their traditional confines will eventually exacerbate social conflicts in Eritrea," according to Yebio. In this connection, Yebio warns of unintended consequences of government measures to "transpose people from the highlands of

Eritrea to the lowlands without the approval and free consent of the inhabitants".

Ahmed Suleman "Researcher" (

UK): The premise of Ahmed's paper is the need to build a "Conscious National Unity". Ahmed underscores at the outset why it is crucial to preserve the "existing national unity, build on it and plan to refine it." He says our "shared future calls us to integrate positively", adding: "We have the right to diversify or differ but we have a religious and historical obligation to remain united".

Ahmed Suleiman

Ahmed believes lack of open and constructive national dialogue is hampering the building of a "conscious national unity" leading to the "current tense silence and endemic rigidity". He says integration does not come automatically and that conscious effort is needed to realize unity under conditions of diversity of ethnicity, religion, culture and language.

Ahmed identifies lack of integrity, crisis of trust and fear as some of the main obstacles to achieving true national unity. He believes it is essential to gather unbiased data on economic inequalities and then work on eliminating religious or ethnic based discrimination. Ahmed speaks of the need to raise the level of social awareness and draw positive programs and effective policies to purge the adverse effects of any uncivilized acts and attitudes. He recommends the "setting up of an independent national security committee" as a supervisory body on discrimination.

Professor Gaim Kibreab (

UK): on "Language Policy of the Eritrean Government". Professor Gaim delivers a very compelling argument in support of making both Arabic and Tigrigna

Eritrea's official languages. He appears to have reached this position not only because of Eritrea's unique experience in this regard, but also because of his convincing comparative historical analysis of the development of national languages policies in such countries as France and

Iran.

Professor Gaim Kibreab

Gaim chronicles the different language policies operating in Eritrea under the Italian colonial rule, post-WWII British Administration, the Ethiopian federal administration followed by Ethiopian occupational rule, and finally under pre- and post-Eritrean independence. Gaim argues that the future of both Arabic and Tigrinya as national languages was shaped by attitudes and policies under the British Administration (1941-1951) and later upheld by the Federal System (1951-1961).

Gaim warns against the reluctance to adopt two official languages - a move the Eritrean government believes might polarize the Eritrean society into two religious groups. While Gaim recognizes such argument as legitimate, he discounts it as politically untenable.

Gaim underscores the urgent need to create a society that is fluent in both Tigrinya and Arabic. He believes such a move would make Arabic and Tigrinya to cease being the monopoly of Muslims and Christians. "More importantly", Gaim says, "the perceived links of Arabic with Islam and Tigrinya with Christianity would come to an end."

It is important for the reader to look at Gaim's entire paper in order to fully appreciate how his analysis led him to embrace the two-language solution as described in his conclusion below:

"During the Federation Muslim children were taught in Arabic and Christian children in Tigrigna at primary school. Although the decision to adopt Arabic and Tigrinya as co-official languages was commendable, the approach of teaching Arabic to Muslim students and Tigrigna to Christian students was wrong. During the Federation, the school system instead of fostering national integration fomented division and disintegration. This mistake should never be allowed to be repeated. Eritrean children should from the beginning be taught in Arabic and Tigrigna simultaneously regardless of their religion, ethnicity and region. The effect of this will in the long-term be the creation of a bilingual society committed to a single nation of

Eritrea where all citizens live in peace and harmony."

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