

Comments on "The Eritrean Covenant"

Contributed by Ustaz T. Stephanos
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Unfiltered Notes: Comments on "The Eritrean Covenant"

By T. Stephanos Email: testifanos@gmail.com
Blog: <http://unfilterednotes.blogspot.com>

Disclosure: Thinking it might do some good if it reaches out to the same audience; this commentary was first submitted to awate.com, but was rejected because it violated the site's™ no-duplicate posting policy. Although I was surprised to get the rejection email from awate.com, I later found out that awate was right. Being a member of CDRiE, I had also shared the article with my CDRiE colleagues via email, as a result of which it got posted in shakat.com -- thus the policy violation.

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I finally got a chance to read The Eritrean Covenant (<http://eritreancovenant.com/blog/the-eritrean-covenant>) and in spite of some misgivings, which I will get into later, I found it to be a well intentioned document worthy of everyone's™ support. Its clarion call for "radically different and transformative approaches" is a timely one. If heeded, it will go a long way in refocusing the disparate activities of many people and organizations who have so far failed to cooperate effectively to bring about positive change. The document invites everyone to imagine a better tomorrow and its emphasis on "emancipation of women" through education is particularly refreshing. After all, it is impossible for any nation to grow to its full potential when half of its saner population is intentionally diminished.

The document's™ first words are "reviving the Eritrean Covenant", indicating there is an original the authors were striving to bring to life. Could this be a reference to the two underappreciated giants of Eritrean history, Ibrahim Sultan and Woldeab Woldemariam "who, along with their followers, swore to fight for a common cause on the Quran and the Bible some

seven decades ago? If so, even better. (Incidentally, Ibrahim Sultan has at least one high school in

Asmara named after him. I can't name anything named after Ato Woldeab, which is a real shame).

The authors identify the real culprits marginalizing Eritrea today by saying "the privileged clique is a small minority that is mostly made up of Tigrinya-speaking men, Christian Highlanders who now are in their 60s and whose number is estimated to be a maximum of several hundreds (emphasis added) -- which is a good thing. But a few hundred misguided individuals out of 4 million people is hardly representative of Tigrigna speaking, highland Christians. That being the case, why focus on this wording -- especially since these words often stir negative emotions among some? And even after such decent attempt to identify the real enemy of the people, the authors -- by implication or by assertion -- repeatedly chose to credit this "clique" with attributes it doesn't possess.

For example, the authors falsely portray the regime as an entity that is advancing the position of their particular ethnic group(s) to the detriment of others to which one can only say "giher wanaKum!". One hopes the authors will realize, at least in hindsight, how deeply hurtful it is (some might even say insensitive or outright insulting) to tell the victim of abuse that the abuser is actually a caring protector. Doesn't this contradict the call for radically different and transformative approach, that is so critical to building much needed bridges and alliances?

Some of the things missed or misrepresented may not seem important when taken individually but juxtaposed against apartheid like ... ethnocratic patronage system... that advances the position of their particular ethnic group(s) to the detriment of others, it make the good intentioned document lose some of its edge.

The authors seem to forget since this regime came to power, every segment of

Eritrea's population has been impoverished, villages have been drained out of their resources and youthful energy, the family unit has been gutted out to provide the raw material for the regime's failed social experiments, people have become virtual slaves and the list goes on. Can one really name any ethnic or religious group for whom the quality of education has actually improved (remembering the regime closed the only university the country had)? Or where freedom of religion and expression has flourished? Any place where people are free from harassment, imprisonment or disappearances? Any doubt the only thing this regime is good at is distribution of misery?

It is not hard to appreciate and sympathize with the grievances of Muslim Eritreans. Some, like Muslim sites not being included in the Cultural Heritage restoration program, are uniquely Muslim and, of course, shameful. But when the authors list "religious discrimination, marginalization, torture, murder by death squads, abduction, .. harassment; persecution of religious leaders and scholars; imposition of government appointed religious leaders; " as "grievances of Eritrean Muslims", it leaves the rest of their compatriots wondering why they don't seem to recognize these are also crimes being committed against ALL Eritreans.

The regime has devised and implemented many ways to divide Eritrean society. And with easily manipulated population, whatever they tried have worked very well for them. The gebar vs tegadalay dichotomy was a clever ploy that worked very nicely for them right out of the bat. The authors add one of the many divisive practices of the regime by saying "whenever there is a roundup of draft dodgers, some residents of the Eritrean Highlands misdirect their resentments towards those who conduct them, who often are disproportionately Muslims from the Lowlands". That said, why isn't it clear to the authors that they themselves are misdirecting resentments when they say there is an "ethnocratic" regime that is protecting highlanders/Christians to the detriment of others " thus punishing their compatriots for uncommitted crimes? There could, of course, be differences of degree. But that is perfectly in line with the clique's objectives " to give the impression that it cares about this group or that, when it actually doesn't.

Here is a good example of where the authors play right into the devil's hands. The document says "anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of the youth fleeing conscription are Christian Tigrigna speakers from the Highlands. This evokes painful memories in our history when one segment of our society is perceived to be less committed to national causes". The fact that Tigrigna speaking Christians are voting with their feet only proves the clique has never been there to promote their interests in spite of the authors' assertion to the contrary. Yet, and I sincerely hope I have misunderstood this, the authors chose to give the plight of the fleeing youth an unpatriotic twist. Comparing this with "Eritrean Muslims have always been true to national unity" which lacks historical perspective (ELF) and the authors' brave admission of "Muslim leaders played a destructive role in igniting the fratricidal battles that wasted the lives of many Eritrean combatants", only compounds the confusion their readers are subjected to.

At times, it appears the authors could not agree among themselves and it seems statements were thrown in to appease opposing stakeholders who can't reconcile their differences. An example of which is "the amelioration of Christian suffering was not Isaias's concern." And then there is this: "The hopes of Eritrean Muslims were quickly dashed when the court events conspired to bring about Isaias at the helm of power." and "...his old hatred of Eritrean Muslims".

No matter how one tries to spin things, there is no denying it that everyone's hopes were dashed. In the eyes of this regime, there is no privileged group be it lowlander or highlander, Muslim or Christian. And this point is actually not lost to the authors because they acknowledge as much, at times by positive assertion and sometimes through negative logic "as when they suggest highlanders fleeing the wrath of the regime are unpatriotic --but nevertheless admitting, albeit involuntarily, that the regime is not in the business of protecting anyone. What does one expect from a clique whose leader says democracy will never see the light of day in Eritrea and that

Eritrea is a place where "nobody promises anything to anybody"? And why is that alone, not sufficient to galvanize people together? It is not helpful to argue whether this tragic figure hates Muslims more than others -- he hates everybody.

The authors state they "... are encouraged to see the regime is being abandoned daily by its rank and files who are rejecting its divisive policies of pitting Eritreans against each other along regional, ethnic, and religious lines (emphasis added)". Recognizing this fact alone should have been sufficient for the authors to pause and restate some of their dubious assertions. After saying this, it should not have been necessary to say "Eritrean Muslims are treated as second-class citizens by the ruling clique in their own country". There is no doubt Muslims are treated as second class citizens. But then who isn't? Compared to Abdella Jaber, Ali Abdu, Alamin and other Muslim members of the regime (and remembering the ruling clique numbers only a few hundred), any highlander/Christian is a second class citizen. Unfortunately, by focusing on Muslim victimhood and presenting it as if it is happening in isolation, the authors themselves, one could argue, may have inadvertently contributed to "pitting Eritreans against each other".

While applauding the level headed Muslim and Christian writers who objectively share their thoughts with balanced perspective, it is hard to fathom the obsession of some who exaggerate regional, ethnic and religious differences -- playing right into the hands of the regime they proclaim to be fighting against. Why is it necessary to call victims being uprooted from their ancestral villages and forcibly being relocated "land grabbers", for example? Doing so indicates the lack of understanding of Eritrean village life. Does anyone really believe highland villagers woke up one day and said "let's go grab some land from the lowlands"? It will be wise to make a distinction between victim and victimizer.

Remembering where I grew up in

Eritrea, it does not resemble anywhere close to the hateful division our cyber warriors keep on perpetuating. What I remember is PEOPLE (Muslim and Christian) sharing peaceful village life, mutually respectful of each other, at times risking their lives to protect life time friends of the other faith, chatting away for what seemed to be eternity asking about each others' families wellbeing, sharing moments of happiness at each others' weddings, sharing moments of pain at each others' funerals, mischievous Muslim and Christian youngsters conspiring to cheat fasting traditions to the angst of conservative parents and so on. I never witnessed or heard of violence or exchange of angry words based on religion. Where our cyber warriors hail from, I can't say.

If it is prejudice and ignorance that irks them, it is part of the human DNA and there is really not much one can do about it other than to reach out to each other, and to educate one another. Prejudice, of course, should never be justified but it should not be given more weight than it deserves, especially when the one feeling the outrage at the moment is not free from it to begin with. One hears Muslim grievances that Eritrean highlanders/Christians have closer affinity with

Ethiopia and are prejudiced against their Muslim compatriots. Similarly, one also hears grievances that Eritrean Muslims have closer affinity with Muslims from anywhere and are prejudiced against their Christian/highlander compatriots. In the minds of those who have made up their minds, all this is no doubt "true" "even when it is not.

That is why The Covenant is a good place to start for reaching out and for cross education. Although it falls short in some of its analysis and diagnosis, it should be supported for its intended spirit. It should be shared and discussed widely. Hopefully, the authors will one day come out to promote it openly and actively. That will be a great way to honour Ibrahim Sultan and Woldeab Woldermariam "by stopping the blame game and trying "radically different and transformative approaches" to bring about positive change for ALL.

