

## **Eritrean Bright Future Movement (EBFM)**

Eritrean Bright Future Movement (EBFM) was officially founded in 2016 as a political organization that aspires for a bright future in Eritrea by striving for total change in its political, humanitarian, social and economic aspects; all of which have been degraded by the current regime in Asmara to the lowest levels imaginable; so much so that the nation has been labeled as “the North Korea of Africa”. EBFM believes that today’s Eritrea exists under massive abnormalities as witnessed in the daily lives of its people; something that goes beyond the usual kind of dictatorship in third world. There is no rule of law of any kind; the population lives under the arbitrary whim of a totalitarian organization, the EPLF. In fact, we, the members of EBFM, do believe that almost all the ills of the current Eritrea can be traced to this Khmer Rouge-like secretive organization’s policies and actions. As a result, our movement intends to strongly fight this brutal regime to bring life back to normalcy, a necessary precondition for any kind of democracy to take roots.

Below, we will first provide the historical background of the nation from the time of its colonial birth in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the end of its armed struggle against Ethiopia in 1991. Second, we will look at its current precarious situation, and at the variables that brought about this predicament. Third, we will try to explain why it is necessary for a regime change by looking at the consequences for Eritrea, in particular, and the region, in general, if no such change comes in the near future. In the end, armed the hindsight of the recent past, we will be to elaborate on the nature and mission of our organization.

### **Historical background**

Eritrea is the creation of European colonialism. Prior to Italian presence, the land mass that has since come to be known as “Eritrea” used to be inhabited by five disparate entities, with little historical overlap. The highlands of Eritrea, locally identified as “Kebessa”, was inhabited mainly by Christian Tigrignas, with long historical connection with the Habeshas of Ethiopia. The Western lowlands, locally known as “Metahit” was inhabited by two distinct populations: the Tigre speaking Muslim population and the Nilotic tribe of Kunama, with its own indigenous religion. The Eastern lowlands were populated by the Muslim Afar of Danakil, having more in common with the Afar of Ethiopia and Djibouti than with the rest of Eritrea. The central coastal area of Massawa was inhabited by Tigre and Saho speaking tribes; an area that has been heavily influenced by long Arab and Turkish presence. It is out of these five disparate areas and nine ethnic groups (of Semitic, Cushitic and Nilotic stocks) that the Italians created Eritrea. Eventually, this multi-layered division in spaces, ethnic groups, languages and religions coalesced into a schism across Christian and Muslim Eritrea.

After half a century of Italian rule and ten years of British midwifery, in 1952, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia. The federation was reached by the UN as a compromise between union seeking Kebessa and separation seeking lowlands. It was an impossible compromise to maintain, for the federation was never accepted for its “virtues” but for what it might eventually offer to the disparate dreams of these antagonistic groups. That

is to say, all the actors involved in this “compromise” were acting in bad faith. The UN, bombarded as it was at that particular time with so many emerging nations clamoring to get their independence from colonial powers, was too eager to get rid of the Eritrean case as soon as it could. It didn’t matter to it that the nature of the compromise it came up with would eventually make it inapplicable on the ground. The idea that an absolute monarchy could accommodate a fully democratic province within its empire was totally absurd. The monarchy could have only accepted this compromise with its eventual dismantlement in mind – which is what exactly happened. But that is understandable, given the huge risk that it would have faced among the larger population seeking similar democratic rights.

So was it with the other two main actors within the confines of Eritrea. The Kebessa saw the federation as an obstruction that prevented them from full union with Ethiopia, and hence to be rid of as soon as possible. The Muslims saw it as a buffer zone that would temporarily separate them from Ethiopia until full separation would be achievable. Neither of them saw the federation in positive terms for what it was – for its democratic, economic, stabilizing and other values. Both of them framed it in terms of “distance”: for the Christians, a distance that had to be overcome for “full union” to materialize; and, for the Muslims, that distance that has to be maintained until “full separation” materializes – the one wanted to come as close as possible to “Mother Ethiopia”, and the other wanted to get as far as possible from Christian Ethiopia. With the dissolution of the federation, the wishes of both the monarch and the Unionists were instantly met. It can also be said that the wishes of lowlanders was also met, for it gave them the excuse they were looking for to go fully “separatists”. The armed movement officially started in 1960.

The liberation war lasted for almost 30 years. It was a messy one that not only pitted Eritreans against the two successive governments of Ethiopia (the monarch rule of Haile Selassie and the military rule of the Dergh), but also against one another. The movement started in the Western lowlands of Eritrea, with strong religious, Arabist and tribal overtones. As a result, various internal contradictions quickly led to some sort of paralysis. This failure forced the ELF to try out the Algerian experiment, whereby different regions were given “autonomy” to form their armed groups – a kind of “federation” applied to *mieda* realities. The experiment lasted only six months, with Christian groups and certain minority tribes or localities were targeted in purges. Eventually, this led to the formation of a rival group, the EPLF, made up from Kebessa and coastal lowland. Since the split, their relation had been antagonistic and confrontational, with occasional cooperation forced by outside circumstances. This pragmatic stance was at its best in the two years they liberated most of Eritrea, culminating in the siege of Asmara. This cooperation came to an end with the retreat of 1978. Two years later Jebha was pushed out of *mieda*.

Once Shaebia monopolized “*mieda* Eritrea”, it went all out totalitarian in everything it enacted or was involved. In fact, all the ills that we associate with the current Eritrea can be traced to the “policies” and actions of this era. Three of those are significant: its security apparatus (*Halewa-Sewra*) that was meant to protect it from internal enemies, its policy of forcibly rounding up (*giffa*) peasants to serve in its army and its rampant anti-intellectualism; all the hallmarks of today’s Eritrea. Thousands perished in the dungeons

of Sahel in one purge after another – Menqae, Yemin, Falul, Jasus, etc. Tens of thousands of peasants were abducted from their villages under the point of a gun to serve in the “struggle”, a blight that ravished the countryside for more than a decade. And Shaebia’s anti-intellectualism is legendary in that it targeted not only university students but also anyone perceived to exhibit the slightest bit of dissent.

These above mentioned totalitarian hallmarks were to make a vengeful comeback in independent Eritrea. After 30 years of bloody war for secession, Asmara was liberated in 1991, and independence was formally announced in 1993 with a referendum – strangely enough, a separation blessed by both the EPLF and EPRDF. Slowly, as normalcy was returning to the lives of Eritreans, Shaebia began to exhibit existential angst. With the return of normalcy, the gradual end of Shaebia as it used to exist in *mieda* became imminent; and that didn’t sit well with the former *teghadelti*. Thus, when the border war with Ethiopia broke out just seven years after liberation, it was welcomed by them as an event that saved Shaebia as an independent entity in the nick of time. Even though this devastating border war that killed about 70,000 soldiers on both sides was seen as a tragedy by much of the world, Shaebia saw it as an opportunity to recreate itself in independent Eritrea. Immediately, it reverted back to its old self, and used its *mieda* blueprint scrupulously on the ground to recreate the abnormal world of its yesteryears in Sahel. First, it resorted to its old proven way of forcibly rounding up citizens to serve in its huge army; only this time the *giffa* included urban areas too. This, of course, required the proliferation of prisons – more than 350 – to accommodate the evaders, deserters, dissenters, conscientious protestors and others; a harbinger for the mass exodus of more than a million in the following two decades. The National Service undertaking was so huge in its scope that it required a totalitarian control of the entire population just to maintain it. The result of this draconian experimentation is a nation totally hollowed out economically, politically, socially and, above all, demographically.

## **Current situation**

How did this meltdown at all levels – demographic, political, economic, social, cultural, humanitarian, etc – take place?

The current situation in Eritrea can be better grasped if we look at the colonial nature of the ghedli generation’s undertaking. In this colonial task, they outperformed even the Italians. To begin with, what mainly motivated the ghedli generation to launch their revolution was to own the colonial past, primarily embodied in Asmara and whatever infrastructural development the Italians left behind. It was a misconstrued understanding of what “modernity” was all about. In fact, Shaebia’s infrastructural development follows this colonial model, where the development is made bereft of its human applicability on the ground; in both instances, the “natives” are not meant to benefit from it. Second, Shaebia’s minimalist education is colonial to the boot, with the intention of keeping citizens minimally equipped to serve their masters only; it was carefully crafted so as not to create independent-thinking citizens that may oppose the system. Third, the maximal militarization of the nation, as implemented in the National Service, has a precursor in the

recruitment system the Italians used in their consecutive colonial wars. Both Shaebia and the Italians managed to mobilize huge sections of the society irrespective of the human cost they incurred. Fourth, the exploitation of labor under both Shaebia and colonial Italy has striking parallels. While Italians exploited native labor in menial jobs with little pay, Shaebia went further to institute massive slave labor in the indefinite National Service. And, fifth, Shaebia outperformed the Italians most in its displacement policy. While the Italians displaced the natives from *bella* Asmara and confined them to the ghettos, Shaebia had to evict more than a million Eritreans from the nation for it to just remain potent. Thus, the mass exodus describes Shaebia at its colonial best.

The result of this colonial undertaking is the massive brutalization of the masses, as displayed in every facet of their lives. The destitution of the masses is to be seen everywhere in Eritrea; aside from the remittance that Eritreans are getting from outside, there is little economic performance in the nation. The only rich entity in the country is Shaebia, a status it has achieved by making everyone else poor. It has dispossessed farmers from their prime lands, bankrupted merchants, took over industries, monopolized banking (and hard currency), and helped itself to free labor force. The result has been a total economic meltdown, where the nation remains propped up mainly by outside forces: the diaspora population (remittance, 10 percent tax, etc), the Arab world's financial help (in return for prostituting itself as a mercenary nation) and, now, Ethiopia, which intends to provide it with economic and political lifelines.

The social meltdown is even worse. In Shaebia's quest for total control, every social entity that has been meaningfully cohesive for it to remain functional has been targeted: among many others, the village, all religions, all sorts of institutions and the family have been its primary targets. The four pillars of the village – *bayto* with its *highi enda'ba* (the legal part), the church/mosque and monastery (the spiritual part), the elders (for wisdom, history and culture) and the peasant family – have come under relentless attack by Shaebia. Now, with ongoing massive mobilization and equally massive exodus, villages across Eritrea have been emptied of their most productive population groups. So much so that dying out villages inhabited by old people only have become common sight. Second, all religions have also been under attack, with the main ones rendered complaint through various coercive methods, such as imprisoning their leaders, pastors and followers. The minor ones – Baha'i, Jehovah Witnesses and Evangelical Churches – have all been outlawed, their worshipping places closed and their followers disenfranchised. Third, every institution – economic, political, legal, educational, cultural, etc – has been gutted out or totally demolished to accommodate the totalitarian demands of the system. Just after the border war, in 2001, senior party and government officials who demanded democratic reform and private media journalists were detained, and ever since have been languishing in secret prison cells without charges and trial. Currently, there is not a single political or civic organization that exists in the country. All sorts of political institutions – the constitution, the parliament, the judiciary, the free press, etc. – have been dismantled or prohibited.

And last, at its most totalitarian task, Shaebia has been relentlessly attacking the family unit. Shaebia has always felt that the family stands on its way in its social

experimentation to mould the Eritrean youth in its own image – that is, in the image of *teghadalay*. The idea of weaning the youth from the warmth of their families as early as possible, and putting them away in the furthest place possible where no family influence reaches them, was done with this macabre social transformation in mind. We can see that enacted at Sawa, in the make shift “colleges” serving as boot camps and in the indefinite National Service. And whenever these experimentation seems to fail in churning out the new *teghadelti*, Shaebia has provided an escape route to them that doesn’t lead back to the family: mass exodus. In the end, the all out loser in this experimentation is the family. Nowadays, the degradation of the family is to be seen everywhere in Eritrea: the youth are either in the National Service or in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, or further scattered throughout the world. In today’s Eritrea it is common to see households entirely made up of aging parents only. We can then say without exaggeration that it is with the all out assault on the family conducted by *ghedli* in the last five decades that the social atomization of the society has been rendered complete.

### **Consequences**

Eritrea now finds itself at the brink of disintegration; with its economy in shambles, its social fabric in tatters and its population gutted out of its most productive group. If the Isaias regime is allowed to exist a little bit longer, the consequences for the nation and the region will be horrendous.

Unfortunately, there are too many variables that are now working against the stability of our region; some from outside and others from inside. Even Ethiopia, that indispensable nation in the region, finds itself in turbulent times. As ethnic identities assert themselves, historical enemies such as Egypt are trying to find weak openings from within to exploit in their attempt to distract the nation from its developmental aspiration. It is within this context that the current situation in Eritrea should be assessed.

Isaias thrives in instability. He could remain potent in the region only if there is an on-going instability in the region. He has no particular allegiance to anyone of these groups; all he is interested is in playing off one region or group against another. That is why, in his long tenure as a leader, he has been allying himself *with* and *against* the same groups in Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia and Ethiopia. It is in this sense that he wants to maintain a level of instability in Ethiopia. Without such instability, he would lose all the leverage he has now in extracting concessions from Ethiopia, such as economic lifeline to sustain a crumbling economy, political rehabilitation in the eyes of the world and land return of the peace agreement.

And if Isaias’ political survival for the near future is guaranteed as result of external prop ups (Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, UAE, etc), with the demographic, economic and social disintegration accelerating, the anarchy that would follow would make the Somali one a picnic by comparison. Such anarchy within Eritrea would be an amplifier for all the negative variables of instability embedded within Ethiopia (among others, regional, ethnic and religious divisions).

## What to be done

What is to be done? This is indeed the question that, as it applies to both Eritreans and Ethiopians, occupies the EBFM members the most. Applied to Eritreans, it further lends to various questions: How do we purge the colonial mentality that has ravaged the Eritrean nation from the minds of its citizens? How do we purge the false sense of superiority, the unwarranted siege mentality and the toxic nationalism that have invariably led to one confrontation after another not only with all the neighboring countries but also with regional (IGAD), continental (AU) and international (UN, EU, etc) institutions? How do we get rid off this colonial mentality before it finishes off the nation itself?

Only if we are able to deconstruct the past, and put to scrutiny everything that the “revolution” did to Eritrea: how the revolution started, and what it set out to accomplish; what occurred during the 30 years of armed struggle; and what have been taking place in independent Eritrea. In the first case, we have to look at the colonial aspirations of both movements: the Arbabist aspirations of the ELF (with Arab expansionism – in territory, culture, religion, language, etc. – in mind) and the colonial aspirations of EPLF that abhorred anything and everything that was Habesha or Ethiopian as something backward or not modern enough. It is the enactment of these alien aspirations on the ground and the sheer brutality needed to maintain them that we see in the second phase. In the case of Shaebia, this draconian task could not be accomplished without an equally draconian means in the shape of totalitarian control. The third phase differs from the second phase only in its scope, since this time Shaebia has the whole of the nation as a laboratory for its totalitarian experimentations.

It is with all the above in mind that Bright Future has identified one of the main battle fields to be the Eritrean mind. It is in this mind that the deconstruction of the revolution in its initial days, struggle years and independence era has to be conducted. Setting the Eritrean mind free would thus require setting it free of its colonial aspirations (and the superiority complex that goes with it); setting it free of its romanticizing tendencies when it comes to *ghedli* (and the toxic nationalism that goes with it); and setting it free from its externalizing tendencies when it comes to the problems created by the totalitarian control inside Eritrea (and the paranoia of ever-seeing external enemies). Only then would Eritreans be able focus on internal problems of Eritrea, and try to find a rightful place for their nation within the larger community of nations within the region.

It is with all the above in mind that many young Eritreans in diaspora decided to form an organization in 2016. Most of these have been recent arrivals from Eritrea, and had gone not only through the horrors of National Service inside Eritrea (indefinite military service, slave labor, sexual exploitation, imprisonment, etc), but also through the horrors of refugee camps, hostile passages of human trafficking, rape, torture and extortion (mainly in Arab lands, especially in the Sinai Peninsula and Libya), and the death and life struggle in the Mediterranean Sea, where thousands of their comrades perished. It is out of this existential desperation that this organization has been formed, with the cry of “Never again!” And since these members realize that the cause for this ongoing mass

exodus is Shaebia's totalitarian grip over the population in Eritrea, their aim is nothing less than the end of this regime through any means necessary.

Thus, what sets this organization apart from other opposition groups is that it refuses to place the problem in the current Asmara regime or even the leader Isaias Afwerki only. It refuses to make a distinction between EPLF and PFDJ, a motivation for many opposition groups to set the former free of blame. It refuses to romanticize the revolutionary past, for it realizes that all the problems under PFDJ have an intimate family resemblance to the horrors of *mieda*. It also refuses to claim that the common man in Eritrea has little to do with the plight of the nation. It believes that had it not been for the common man's ever-accommodating mentality, the Isaias regime wouldn't have survived this long. It especially blames the elite who, in the name of "Eritreanism" (a toxic concoction of narrow nationalism, ghedli-worship, frivolous modernism and anti-intellectualism) have let the regime do whatever it wants with the masses. So much so, that the "Eritrea" these elite have come to worship has no correspondence whatsoever with the Eritrea on the ground.

Another main point that sets apart this organization is that it refuses to accept the history of Eritrea as narrated by ghedli; that is, an Eritrea historically totally cut off from its neighbors (especially Ethiopia), an Eritrea rendered superior by Italian colonialism, an Eritrea whose identity has been created in Sahel, etc. It wants to restore the real history of Eritreans by connecting it with its pre-colonial past and with various links to neighboring peoples. It truly believes that such links would strengthen the nation, contrary to the toxic nationalists who believe that it would weaken it and set out to fabricate a history with no such connections. It thus wants to decolonize the Eritrean mind of that shameful belief that Eritreans are superior because of Italian legacy (especially Asmara). Nor does it want to extol the ghedli legacy that has found a soft spot in the common man's head by relentlessly invoking "our martyrs". EBFM refuses to be part of this culture of martyrdom, where martyrs are constantly invoked to support the regime in its enslavement of the living. Instead, it entirely focuses on the plight of the living; it wants to restore the centuries-old culture of the people on the ground by doing away with the abnormal ghedli culture imposed on the people. In short, it wants to bring normalcy back into their lives, where farmers would be able to farm their lands without any fear of expropriation of their prime lands and products; where National Service comes to an end and parents are allowed to look after their children without any fear of Shaebia knocking at their doors; where students are allowed to pursue their education without any fear of interruption from the regime; where merchants can trade without any fear of bankruptcy or expropriation; where all religions freely worship their respective beliefs; where the massive prison system is dismantled; where mass exodus comes to an end and society begins to regenerate; etc. Once this normal world is reinstated in Eritrea, EBFM believes it would be easy to enact its democratic aspirations on the ground.

Let's now look briefly at the second part of the question, "What is to be done," as applied to Ethiopians. We realize that there would be no sustainable change in Eritrea without the implicit and explicit involvement of Ethiopia. Whatever happens in Ethiopia keeps affecting Eritrea in both beneficial and detrimental ways. We can look at what happened

in Eritrea since the Abiy government came to power in Addis-Ababa. Even as we welcome the end of the no-peace, no-war environment that promoted open borders and free trade (at least, for some time), we feel very uncomfortable at the heavy work being done by PM Abiy and many population groups in Ethiopia to rehabilitate Isaias Afwerki in the eyes of the world and provide him with economic and political lifeline, without the latter doing anything to ameliorate the humanitarian horror that has been going on in the nation for the last three decades. As the sanctions have been lifted (again, with the heavy work done by Ethiopia), Isaias is using this opportunity to heavily arm himself, to the detriment of the welfare of his own people who live in utter destitution and the stability of the region. We have also been witnessing Eritrea being used in the internal ethnic maneuvers within Ethiopia, so as to pit one ethnic group against another (in a macabre way, taken as “peace dividend” for Ethiopia). Therefore, we have come to the conclusion that the peace agreement has been not between Ethiopian and Eritrean peoples, but rather between two governments. When it comes to the Eritrean side of this peace equation, the entity that has been saved by this agreement is Shaebia (with a lifeline thrown to it at its moment of deathbed), and not the Eritrean people who find themselves condemned to live under extended totalitarian horror.

It is thus understandable that EBFM also wants to enlighten Ethiopians on the nature of the evolving peace agreement, and the various variables that inform it in both negative and positive ways. They understand that the battle grounds that they have to fight are not only in Eritrean minds, but also in Ethiopian minds. It is essential that if we – that is, both Eritreans and Ethiopians – are to bring about fundamental changes in our region, the policies and actions that we come up with have to do primarily with peoples in both nations in mind. Anything less might temporarily benefit one group or another, but the damage done to the trust of the people will be irreparable.