

North Korea. Eritrea is Africa's North Korea. The people start to line up in front of bakeries beginning from 4:00 am every day. Sugar and other items are rationed. Sometimes, when some youngsters flee the country, the government takes away that ration card from the family. This is how harsh the government is.

We cannot speak about anything in terms of people's rights. Nobody gives attention to the people's plight there because there is little or no viable interest which other countries want to pursue in Eritrea. There is no one to care for the people.

Some NGOs at some time tried to give assistance to the people. But before long, Esayas suspended their operations. So outsiders have no idea of what's going on inside Eritrea. But youngsters are flocking to the Sudan and Shemelbal in Ethiopia refuge camp in the thousands. On average around 250 people flee to Khartoum every day. The situation is tragic.

Even the UN has not given the Eritrean refugees their due attention. It even doesn't fulfill their basic rights as refugees.

I honestly believe that if the Ethiopian people have any idea of the scourge that has befallen the people of Eritrea, they would start a struggle to free them.

**What made Esayas so strong and exert absolute control over the people? Here, I'm raising the age-old debate as to whether the people create dictators or dictators mold subdued people? In fact, didn't he have popular support that he was even said to be worshiped by the people?**

We, as a people, created Esayas the dictator. Only a few people in the US used to oppose president Esayas. 99.9 percent of the people there supported him directly or indirectly.

Esayas, by nature, is a dictator. He has killed a lot of intellectuals over the years. But the Eritrean people's orientation was only towards the nationality question. What could happen after independence was not addressed at the time. Neither the intellectuals nor the people did answer that question.

**Was the question even raised?**

No, it was not raised. During the days of military struggle in the bushes, he committed two major acts of crime. First, he purged those who challenged him. He killed a lot of them. Then he went after the conservatives. He, in fact, killed and purged many members by labeling them either leftist or rightist. Then he finally surrounded himself with his henchmen and entered Asmara in 1991.

Saying Esayas is undemocratic and cannot administer the country constituted a serious crime for the first five or six years following independence. Let alone accusing him of being undemocratic, saying that he could be mistaken was a crime by itself. If you say that the people would accuse you of being an Ethiopian, not an Eritrean. We were beaten in the US by some Eritreans for criticizing Esayas.

Honestly speaking, we created Esayas the dictator, and it is our responsibility to remove him. Of course, Eritreans residing in the country would not even think of making a move towards that end. The people are living under harsh conditions. To give a comparison, during the Derg time (former military regime) was better in some aspects as the people would say. Some even say that Esayas is the Tigrigna speaking Mengistu Hailemariam (former Ethiopian military leader). The difference between the two is that they speak two different languages. Nowadays, the people are saying that Esayas has become even worse than

Mengistu. Living conditions were better back then.

All commodities being sold in Eritrea are owned by the business arm of the ruling party Popular Front for Democracy and Justice, formerly known as EPLF.

**It was basically the popular support which strengthened the liberation movement though there was considerable outside assistance. Now, in the absence of popular movement or support for freedom from tyranny, how do you expect other countries to support you to remove Esayas?**

I've been in the opposition camp for 25 years. The Ethiopian government, both as a government and as liberation movement, has been closely watching the Eritrean opposition. Regarding the US, I couldn't exactly say what their interest is in Eritrea.

**I was not talking about any country in particular.**

I understand that. But if America gives the green light, no other country would dare to oppose. We've been to the State Department many times. They have repeatedly told as that we were not strong enough to get their support. Sometimes they said that since the opposition coalition includes two Islamic fronts, they are reluctant to extend that support. But the Americans themselves went to Khartoum and met people from the two fronts and concluded that they are nationalists rather than pure Islamic movements.

Let me tell you one fact, there is no shortage of people who can replace president Esayas as a leader.

**But it is not about individuals or their leadership talent. Is there any capable organization that can smoothly handle the transfer of**

**power and lead the country?**

We have many organizations. Yes, some of them were weakened due to their own mistakes.

If we take the Ethiopian government, it did not make a serious effort so far to help create a strong opposition to topple Esayas.

**Do you believe that the Ethiopian government can do that?**

If there is the political will, the Ethiopian government can replace Esayas within a week. Forget a direct military action. If Ethiopia officially decided to remove Esayas and make some political move, Esayas' government will jitter. In short, there are two problems. First, the opposition is weak and second, there is no outside government intervention to support and coordinate the opposition camp to remove Esayas.

The Sana'a Forum which consists of Sudan, Ethiopia and Yemen has already faltered. Sudan deviated from its stand and befriended Esayas. They also closed our offices there and exposed us to more threats from Asmara. The only option left to us is the government of Ethiopia's support. In fact, Ethiopia has more responsibility. After all, the

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