

Cultural Diplomacy in the Promotion of Democracy and Peacebuilding

Ambassador Andebrhan Welde Giorgis

We are gathered here in this historic and beautiful city of Berlin to discuss, analyse and assess the growing role of *cultural diplomacy* in the conduct of foreign policy and international relations. There has been a significant evolution in the theory, practice and role of *cultural diplomacy* in our increasingly interconnected and interdependent globalised world. In contrast to classical diplomacy, which is focused on the narrow pursuit of state interests and has remained the exclusive preserve of state actors, *cultural diplomacy* engages a variety of actors from the public, private and civic sectors in the wider pursuit of promoting democracy, human rights, peacebuilding and reconciliation.

In my brief remarks, I will highlight how a non-state actor, the recently established Forum for National Dialogue (FND), has taken a leaf from cultural diplomacy to help promote: (1) democracy, human rights and reconciliation in Eritrea; (2) stable peace and cooperative relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia; and (3) regional integration in the Horn of Africa. To this end, the FND seeks to utilise the cultural values of Eritrean society, rally Eritrean public opinion, mobilise pro-democracy Eritreans and gain regional and international support to catalyse change from within and prepare for an orderly transition from an authoritarian to a democratic system of government.

I will briefly highlight (1) the state of play in Eritrea today, (2) our objective and principles, and (3) our strategy for transition.

1. The State of Play in Eritrea

Waging one of the longest wars of national liberation in modern African history, the people of Eritrea fought for freedom, dignity and justice. They fought for human rights, democracy and prosperity. Eritrea gained independence in 1993. The Eritrean people, however, have yet to exercise their right to constitute a government of their choice. Eritrea reels under autocratic rule, its economy lies in shambles, and the people live under harsh repression and extreme poverty, lacking access even to the most basic of necessities.

The constitution, ratified in 1997, remains unimplemented. The National Assembly, the country's parliament, and the leading organs of the ruling Front, have been suspended since

2001. Constant executive interference has emasculated the judiciary. The result is the concentration of power in the presidency. Having wielded absolute power, the president rules the country at will, without any legal or institutional constraints.

A virtual state of siege denies the people the prospect of a better life. The basic ingredients of democracy - freedom of expression, assembly and association - are absent. The private press and autonomous political and civic organisations are banned. The imposition of the rule of men allows the arbitrary arrest of senior officials, military officers, journalists and ordinary citizens, without due process, and the indefinite detention of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience under solitary confinement. Basic human rights are routinely violated and people made to disappear.

The concentration of all decision making power in the person of the president has given rise to authoritarian rule, closed the political space and imposed a moribund coupon economy that has rendered life unbearable for the great majority of the population. Indefinite national service drives the youth to flee the country en masse at great risk to their lives. In search of refuge, many fall victim to human trafficking and tragedies like that of the recent drowning of 365 men, women and children off the coast of Lampedusa.

This unacceptable situation is generating increasing opposition, inside and outside the country. The demand for a constitutional government and the release of all political prisoners is gaining momentum. The situation is ripe for change, and the growing challenge makes change inevitable sooner than later. Yet, the ban on open political expression and organization and the absence of institutional mechanisms for democratic transition feed serious concern of the risk of political implosion. This makes timely engagement all the more necessary to avert chaos and manage change.

2. The Objective and Principles

To this end, the FND serves as a catalyst for pro-democracy Eritreans to work together to bring about an orderly political transition. It seeks to overcome the prevailing divisions and create political consensus at home and in the diaspora with the aim to replace the current dictatorship by an equitable governance structure based on a constitution that guarantees equal rights of all citizens, their democratic freedoms and human rights, equal access to social services, and equal opportunities to actualise their potential and develop their country.

Relying on the cultural values and traditional norms of Eritrean society, the Forum strives to: (1) promote inclusive dialogue; (2) establish a broad national coalition on the basis of a minimum program; and (3) build a bridge between pro-democracy Eritreans abroad and the forces of change inside the country to accelerate an orderly transition. To this end, it welcomes all those who support a democratic transition, including government officials and military officers willing to embrace the reform process

Using the relative freedom outside, it works to reinforce the ongoing underground organizing and preparation inside the country and create consensus on the transitional arrangements, including the establishment of a national body of elected representatives, the adoption of a national constitution, and the election of a government through universal suffrage.

Further, the Forum aims to gain regional and international support for the internal effort for democratic transition, establish cooperative relations with all countries, especially Eritrea's neighbours in the IGAD, on the basis of mutual benefit and non-interference in each other's internal affairs, and accelerate common development in the framework of stable peace, close cooperation and regional integration. With Ethiopia, in particular, the Forum seeks to end the 'no-war-no-peace' situation through the unconditional implementation of the *final and binding* decisions of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary and Claims Commissions, normalize relations, secure stable peace and achieve reconciliation using the tools of cultural diplomacy.

3. The Strategy for Transition

The Forum is committed to an inclusive intra-Eritrean dialogue. Emulating the legacy of Nelson Mandela and the *Baito* system of direct or representative assembly, it would apply the cultural values and traditional norms of Eritrean society to mediate the present political divides and polarisation to strengthen the role of the Eritrean diaspora and build consensus for democratic transformation. This would serve as an anchor for the formation of a broad based "National Salvation Council" composed of representatives from all pro-democracy bodies and social groups to manage the change and implement the transitional arrangements pending the establishment of a new democratic dispensation. Furthermore, once the boundary issue is settled through full compliance with the decisions of the boundary commission, Eritrea and Ethiopia can deploy conventional diplomacy to resolve all outstanding issues and cultural diplomacy to heal the wounds of war and achieve communal reconciliation.