

Forum for National Dialogue

Press Statement

The Eritrean people waged an epic struggle, won the war of independence against all odds, and opted for sovereign statehood in a UN monitored referendum. However, Eritrea's historic exercise of the right to self-determination as a nation has not been followed by an exercise of the right to self-determination as a people. Our people have been denied the right to constitute a government of their choice. We fought for freedom, democracy and justice. We fought for dignity, human rights and prosperity. In utter betrayal of these values, Eritrea reels under autocratic rule, its economy lies in shambles, and its people languish in a state of harsh repression and extreme poverty, lacking access even to the most basic of necessities.

The shelving of the ratified constitution, the suspension of the National Assembly and the principal organs of the ruling Front, the emasculation of the judiciary, and the suppression of internal dissent have enabled the concentration of power in the presidency. Wielding absolute power, the president rules the country at will, without legal or institutional constraints. The absence of the rule of law sanctions the routine violation of basic human rights; the arrest of citizens, journalists, senior officials and officers, without due process; the indefinite detention of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience under solitary confinement; and the ban on the private press and autonomous political and civic organisation.

A virtual state of siege, in the setting of a closed political space, a moribund coupon economy and open ended active national service, denies the people the prospect of a better life and drives the youth to flee the country at great risk to their lives. Many get shot trying to cross the border, die trekking the Sahara, drown in the sea, or fall victim to human traffickers and organ harvesters.

Today, Eritrea cries for change and change is inevitable. Organised political opposition exists inside and outside the country. Yet, the absence of an institutional mechanism for democratic transition and the lack of freedom of expression and association at home pose the danger of implosion and raise the need for timely engagement to manage change in order to avert chaos and avoid bloodshed.

The Forum for National Dialogue works to catalyse pro-democracy Eritreans, at home and in the diaspora, to work together for an orderly political transition; to reinforce the ongoing covert organisation and preparation at home; and to build consensus on the necessary transitional measures, including the creation of a national body of elected representatives, the adoption of a national constitution, and the election of a government through universal suffrage. It aims to replace the dictatorial regime by an equitable governance structure based on a constitution that guarantees all citizens equal rights, democratic freedoms access to social services, and opportunities to actualise their potential and develop their country.

The Forum strives to engage and empower the youth as the heirs and builders of the future of Eritrea and relies on the cultural values and traditional norms of our society to: (1) promote inclusive dialogue; (2) establish a broad national coalition; and (3) build a bridge between pro-democracy Eritreans abroad and the forces of change at home to accelerate an orderly transition. To this end, it welcomes all those who support a democratic transition and embrace the political agenda for national renewal.

Further, the Forum works to win regional and international support for an internal process of democratic transition; establish cooperative interstate relations on the basis of mutual benefit and non-interference; end the 'no-war-no-peace' situation and normalise relations with Ethiopia through the unconditional implementation of the *final and binding* decisions of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary and Claims Commissions; and accelerate common development in the framework of stable peace, political cooperation and economic integration in the IGAD region.

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