

Twenty Years of Independence Series—No. 6

Eritrea: 20 years of National Harmony

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May 18, 2011

As Eritrea celebrates its 20th independence anniversary, few salient phrases are being used to sum-up the fruits its independence. The phrases include: “dignity”, “unity” and “pride.” One other key ingredient phrase that I want to dwell on today is “harmony.” Eritrean society’s harmonious coexistence has always intrigued and fascinated those who know Eritrea. Personally it’s deeply satisfying to be part of a society as diverse and scarred as Eritrea, yet with no match to its sacrosanct perfect harmony.

In the 20 years since independence, the societal harmony has been palpable. Granted, Eritrean harmony has been tested, challenged, disparaged and assaulted. And yet it kept maturing and intensifying. Eritrea’s 20 years of harmony is a model of a kind. That is why the independence journey has been described as a “Perfect Harmony...for National Dignity”.

Eritrea is hardly the likeliest place for such phenomenon. Let alone for countries like Eritrea composed of many ethnic groups and different religions, national harmony cannot be taken for granted in countries that speak one language and adhere to one religion. Furthermore Eritrea is located in a volatile region, surrounded by hostile nations that are in a constant state of religious and tribal feuds. In fact, there has not been a single year, in some years not even a single month, when one of Eritrea’s neighbors is not on the news over some tribal or religious turmoil. Despite this glaring disharmony next door, there has not been a single such incident inside Eritrea in all these years. It’s a marvel that defies logic and confounds enemies and friends alike.

How has Eritrea managed to harmonize its society while such concept had eluded its region for ions? It would take a careful academic research to quantify and get to the bottom of the real causes for Eritrea’s leap into harmony. Generally speaking, the genesis may be traceable for centuries. For example Christians and Moslems have coexisted together without a single incident of religious tension for close to 1500 years. Eritreans have always believed in the “unity in diversity”. In my opinion, Eritrea’s perfect harmony has also been fine-tuned by the desire to fend off successive rulers. The latter stages of Eritrea’s armed struggle for independence, was particularly key in shaping the post independence norm of national harmony as we see it. For example one of the key visions of the Eritrean government as crystallized in its National Charter of 1994 is “National Harmony.” The national charter states that the vision of Eritreans is “for the people of Eritrea to live in harmony, peace and stability, with no distinction along regional, ethnic, linguistic, religious, gender or class lines.” To this end the vision is to continue fostering an environment where “all sectarian, divisive -attitudes

and activities” are instinctively despised and rejected. To ensure this “unity, equality and participation of all sections of the Eritrean society” is being made the bases of all national programs. There is no tolerance for any form of “discrimination and domination, including ethnic and regional.” Eritrea’s diversity is seen as “a source of power and unity” and any system of government “should be secular, separate from religion, yet respectful of the equality of religions.”

The fact that Eritrean society now enjoys a harmonious livelihood is hardly a topic for debate. It’s no wonder then that the country remains an oasis of harmony in an otherwise raucous region. There’s also little wonder that the other key ingredients for perfect harmony --- unity, dignity and pride - are found disproportionately in abundance in Eritrea compared to the region.

How has the effect and perception of harmony been to the Eritrean society? Again, this is a topic worthy of research and study. Undeniably, Eritrean harmony has greatly contributed in channeling the energy of a diverse and disadvantaged population into an efficient workforce that is fast transforming the nation. It’s not uncommon to see Eritreans with various religious and tribal backgrounds working effectively like a small family in complex projects. In short, harmonized Eritrea is playing a vital role in synergizing the goals, visions and aspirations of its society.

It’s hard to imagine that a country as diverse and as victimized by divisive forces for decades if not centuries defies the odds and ends up a model of national harmony. It’s what makes Eritrea such a unique country.

Happy Independence Day Eritrea!