

Across Brussels in Five Myths ...

by Selam Kidane, 19 November 2009

The day before gedab news heralded the Brussels conference, many of us in the list of 'Brussels associates' some members of the reference group and a couple of invited guests received an email from Saleh Ghadi, informing us that Gedab are going to do an item about the upcoming conference and that he was giving us opportunities to give our side of the story... I know some of my colleagues did... I didn't, our own announcement statements were coming out in accordance to our media strategy and that was that... that would give everyone all the information that they needed... I have never known conferences to be announced this far ahead of the event... surely the idea was to time it so that the event is current news and not old news by the time it occurs... but that was me and this is Eritrean politics in cyber space... all it takes for conspiracy theories to brew is a couple of names an event and one or more connections to a past event... and a spectacular fireworks show ensues... I must say I enjoyed reading and listening to most of the Brussels coverage... I particularly revel in the fact that it sent one big massive jolt of enthusiasm right across our resistance camp... I admired the information networks and the speed with which people are able to produce news items, editorials, declarations of no confidence, letters of support... letters of condemnations and all in various languages and with utmost eloquence... we are a rather resourceful bunch aren't we?

My only irritations is the fact that we were not half as active as all this when the EU was actually drawing the very policies that meant we needed to lobby them... why is Eritrean activism only ever at its best when it is each other we are targeting it on? Anyways I like the current form of our resistance... reactive, engaged, energetic and interactive... if we could capture all this and direct it onto activities that would make a real difference we will get our commitment's worth of impact (I honestly think all this is wasted on us... I mean me and my colleagues over at the EEPA reference group... let's direct our vivacity at a more worthy target...)

...Onto my tour of Brussels across five myths...

Awate busted us... if it didn't would we have invited all those people, including all the media people and we would have knocked on the offices of EU officials and Ambassadors from the region all in secret? I find that very difficult to picture for two reasons; firstly there simply was no reason to do so... we counted on wide coverage... we wanted the world to see how much interest there is in the policies pertaining Eritrea and wider region we wanted everyone to know the plight of our people in Eritrea... we wanted to shed as much spotlight as possible on the glitchy (***sigintir maletey eyou***) EU approach despite its own principles and the agreements between itself and Eritrea... the more coverage we got the better and hence there absolutely was no need to keep this one a secret...

Secondly we knew gedab were about to cover it and we could have put something out then (at the same time or the night before) surely it doesn't take that long to write an announcement of an event that we knew was happening where all the invited guests were in the process of confirming our attendance and some of us (not me... but the more organised lot had already written their presentations...), but we decided not to. We stuck to our original strategy of announcing in the week leading upto the conference (give or take a day to try and stave off some of the misinformation)... it was more important to us to give the conference the advantages of primacy of information as opposed to reacting to media. I honestly thought that the gedab news item (minus the few factual errors including signing me to an organisation that I am

not a member of) was not that bad in content...the detail was in the big prints (i.e. the title) and in case we missed that the team had a whole Editorial that came out during the conference...as I said before with Gedab at the behest of announcing some uninclusive and opaque operation it was only a question of time before the prophecy of some catastrophe about to befall the opposition camp came to be...

And that came in the form of a letter from the Chair of Eritrea Democratic Alliance (EDA)... the **Brussels conference will jeopardise the upcoming national conference for democracy in Eritrea...** ahhhhhh that up coming event that was upping and coming for quiet a while now...again I find this a complete and utter myth for two reasons; firstly the fact that the Brussels conference was a completely different genre with a completely different theme and convened under a completely different theme that had nothing to do with an inter Eritrean conference... the two conferences could have happened in the same day and even in the same building and other than the fact that some of us figuring out how to be in two places at the same time nothing in one would have impeded on the other. ...

In any case my question to EDA is (the second reason for my disbelieve)... is the said national conference for democracy happening anyway? Back in the summer I went to Addis (in the muddy rainy season there and in the midst of London's brief, three day long, heat wave season... hence I missed out an opportunity to enjoy the sun!!) to attend a workshop that was convened to plan the said conference... numerous papers... a big media flurry (Eritrean opposition and Ethiopia media) and five months later... I have nothing but one email from EDA to show for that... no work programme no action plan... no further discussions... no indications of a time line as to when or where and maybe even if, this event is going to happen... I was so enthusiastic about the idea of such an event enabling us in the resistance to work towards a concrete and coherent strategy to consolidate our years of working silos, I briefed my colleagues in the Network of Eritrean Civic Societies in Europe and we are on the way to firming that up in our action plans for the coming year... but post my return from Addis all I heard from EDA on the matter was one email... if there are any concrete plans about the national conference it is very difficult to discern from where I sit as a person who dropped every thing at such a short notice and flew half way across the world to be at an almost week long workshop, where I really thought EDA might just be able to pull it off this time... every week that passed since has dampened my enthusiasm and I think it is outrageous for EDA to blame whatever quandary that that event is having on the Brussels conference.

Some concluded that, **this was a ploy to create an opportunity for a group of people to warm their way into power in Eritrea by excluding others** in the context of mysterious wheelings and dealings...there were two forms that this myth took... one route was the weakening and destruction of EDA to become the alternative and the other was offering some form of an olive branch to PFDJ and suggesting power sharing... both scenarios induce a sardonic reaction...(in me...and no you are not allowed to ask; 'what else is new?') PFDJ and power sharing are as mutually exclusive as darkness and light... there is no darkness where there is light... and if power sharing was something that PIA ever considered, in this lifetime, we wouldn't have needed to go to Brussels to talk about EraEro and September 18, 2001...

The weakening and destruction of EDA... to prepare oneself for assuming power in a post PFDJ world assumes that, that world is actually at hand and we are nearing the end of our struggle for justice and democracy in Eritrea...I fear the proponents of this theory are counting their chickens, in preparation for the chicken market, perhaps way before they hatch...

And I think it is this miscalculation that caused the next myth... **EDA, Network of Eritrean Civic Societies in Europe (NECS-E) and other organisations have been blighted by the Brussels Conference** (and the democratic struggle has been harmed in the process)... EDA I have referred to above... NECS-E folks had followed their democratic rights and were in the process of asking serious questions off of those of us who were in the Brussels reference group, using constitutional processes and were even going a step further and getting additional advice on how to go about this without harming member organisations or the network... that is democracy at its best.... That process is still ongoing and if anything what may harm that process is three organisations pre-empting the outcomes of the internal processes and going public with their judgements... I am glad others have veered away from that and are focused on resolving the impasse in accordance to our constitution, this will strengthen and not weaken NECS-E or the democratic struggle... (oh and I am glad that K Beshir has made a couple of appearances on this side of activism... years from now we will thank Brussels for getting him here...)

.... I really can't remember what the fifth myth was (and I can't believe there were only four, so I am going to keep the title) but I will use this space to say a bit about how speakers for the Brussels conference were selected... the group had a single objective of choosing people who would help us articulate our difficulties with the various policies that the EU and to an extent the US were pursuing regarding Eritrea... we were fortunate enough to get two whole days out of the diaries of various people and we chose an option (in the form of the list we arrived at) there probably was a zillion other options and every other combination of people would have done things differently... this was us...

The evening after the day of the conference I was going back to my room having been working on parts of the conference documents with Noel Joseph and we bumped into Abdurrahman and Daniel Rezene (who was coming down with a cold) who had also been doing the same down in the lobby somewhere... in the lift lobby we sat and consolidated our respective sections and worked a bit more...it was gone 2 am... after two long days and away from our homes and families there still was a lot of enthusiasm and energy to do more... this is exactly how I will remember my colleagues at Brussels for a long time to come...an amazing group of people that gave it their all and were still prepared to give some more at silly o'clock in morning!