

IS SHOWING BLIND OBEDIENCE TO ATSE ISIAS CHARACTERISTIC OF A PATRIOT?

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“Dissent is the highest form of patriotism.”
(Thomas Jefferson, draftsman of the Declaration of Independence and the third U.S. President (1801-09).

In Eritrea, as elsewhere in the world, to determine to what extent the society is free, we need to look into who are detained, roughed up, tortured, killed, raped, subjected to invasive state surveillance without any evidence of wrongdoing, persecuted and imprisoned for decades or executed without any due process of law, or disadvantaged politically, socially and economically. Start your distressful and disappointing observation from the port of entry, imagining that you are going to Eritrea on vacation, for example the airport in Asmara, the border crossing points with the Sudan, or theoretically the ports of Massawa and Assab (we know that the activities of our ports are heartbreakingly crippled and there are no ships transporting passengers as they did for ages). Next, answer the question: *Who were those whose laptops, notebooks, or cameras were seized without any warrant or have their bags searched with special attention, intensity and humiliation or their passports seized or stopped for interrogation?* You will find, for sure, that all those targeted were put in that unfortunate position because they, at one point, had expressed healthy doubts, skepticism and concerns about the policies of the brutal regime, or in extreme cases (yet to fully evolve) confronted the abuse of power by expressing political or religious views deemed dangers by the regime, with the

cost of saying things going up daily. Similarly, you will observe the same harsh procedures and brutality applied to those leaving the country. In few words, these citizens were targeted not by coincidence but because of their dissent to the regime, which honourably makes them the real patriots. Nonetheless, we need to remember that their number is a very insignificant part of the Eritrean society that is daily experiencing all unheard of human tragedies the report of the Commission of Inquiry about Eritrea of June 2015 has covered.

Casting the network of your observation wider within the Eritrean society, you will conversely find that those who obey the prevailing authority live in a relative peace, with those who support the regime having every advantage, be it political, social, or economic. In that vein, Milgram, the famous American experimental social psychologist, conducted his experiments about obedience to governments. He did that in the controlled environment of the US psychology laboratory of the 1960s and shocked the world with his theory about it. Speaking about those who obey the government, he says, they "obey either out of fear or out of a desire to appear co-operative – even when acting against their own better judgment and desires". What Milgram is referring to applies to our ordinary soldiers and citizens; not the cronies or the ardent supporters of the regime whose interests the regime represents and whose fate is totally tied up to that of the regime. In the Eritrean context, the category of citizens Milgram is referring to in this quotation sadly includes victims of oppression (as detailed above), who wear physical and psychological scars that are seen and unseen but do not notice their chains or try to comply fearing the worst from happening. This is to say that this universal pattern of authoritarian oppression, Milgram had released in his theory, is crystal clear in Eritrea as in any other part of the world, where a brutally oppressive regime rules.

Crossing to the topic of the article with the introduction above as our springboard, the first fundamental question to explore would be: *Who is a patriot in the Eritrean context?* Beginning with this question would make my job to tackle the topic much easier.

Many would answer this question saying that a “patriot” is a person who loves his or her country. I believe this definition is too general to be considered complete because any verbal claim would be taken as “patriotism” unless the definition separates the concept from others by showing how that love is expressed beyond verbal claim. To an objective observer, it would be impossible to see how this incomplete definition of the concept of patriotism is separated from the perilous absurdities emanating from the attempts to create equivalence between it and blind faith on the “leader” whom I call the Boss.

As you could see in the paragraph above, I have put the word “leader” in scare quotes in order to cast doubt on it, or to denote that Eritrea does not have a leader but a Boss. The obvious question that might spring up in one’s mind is: **In what way are the two concepts different?** Though the status of both a leader and a boss are based on authority, a boss is either assigned from above or imposes himself on the people and demands blind obedience, whereas a leader earns his authority through legitimacy, based on election, and trust of the people. This point has absolute relevance to our topic, though it could appear at the surface breaking the coherence of the article.

With all of the above counter-references in mind, to call somebody a patriot his/her love for the country that appears in the common definition of the concept, given above, should at least be quantified in the following ways:

- The person who calls himself/herself patriot should raise his/her voice out of deep concern for the nation, whenever rights of citizens are violated or the interests of the country are compromised. This

means loyalty to the nation and not to the Boss. *How many of the big mouths of the regime do that?* There is only one answer, *and that is very obvious to all.*

- A patriot should insist that all officials in the hierarchy (including the Boss) should tell the public the truth about everything big or small that concern the country. In other words, he/she should stand for transparency or against keeping things in secrecy from the people. To be blunt, one would for instance ask: *How many supporters of the regime who claim to be patriots think that the Boss should tell the Eritrean people -----?*
 - What the Emirates are doing in Assab and in the Eritrean islands.
 - How the money earned from the gold mines is spent.
 - Why prisoners and detainees are not visited by their families and have an open trail.
 - Why he turns a blind eye to the generals and other high ranking army officials allegedly involved in human trafficking, using government cars and their power over the country and the borders.
 - Why livelihood, including the availability of basic necessities and cost of living, as well as basic social services, are devastatingly worse than the time of the Dergue.
 - Why the country like all its neighbours does not have constitution, parliament, and free press.

- Why we have never seen any corrupt official in Eritrea detained, and publicly tried.
- Why Abraham Isias and his sister have never been to Sawa for indefinite service like other Eritrean youth.
- Last but not least, the patriot should hold every official responsible for any act which damages the interest of the country and its people. For instance, for one to call himself/herself a patriot, he/she should demand that the soldiers who fired at the veterans of Marhabar, some years ago, or those who gunned down conscripts in the broad day light and in watch of their parents in the streets of Asmara recently should be identified, face charges, and be tried at the court in front of the public.

When someone who claims to be a patriot is supposed to meet the above requirements, we unfortunately see supporters of the ruling gang and their foot-soldiers, who falsely and boastfully claim to be patriots, urge or try to force Eritrean citizens, with an immense concern about their country, to just sit down and be quiet, refrain from speaking out about their concerns, and force them to show blind obedience, humble submission and respect to the corrupt and dishonest warmongering and human rights violating “leaders”, including the chief bully, and other members of the ruling gang. Accordingly, a complete definition of the word “patriot” will exclude any supporter of the regime from the honour of being one and denies him/her a free hand to mislead, blackmail, and intimidate others, wickedly hoping to impose compliance or identification with the power-holder, so that they could resist or prevent change for which our people have been struggling for over two decades. *If the supporters of the ruling gang are not patriots, according to our definition, what are they then?* They are rather

sycophants or bootlickers who run after the authority in order to gain an advantage, or are members of the frightening culture of blind obedience, while the real patriots are those who rebel against the regime and stand for the truth. That is why the above quotation from Thomas Jefferson holds, “Dissent is the highest form of patriotism.” If this is patriotism and its highest form is dissent, as we understand it as Eritrean justice seekers, then: *What is blind obedience and how does it affect our society?*

Blind obedience is doing what one is told to do without thinking for himself/herself whether he/she should do that. This is different from informed and reasonable obedience, which is a virtue because without it, a society and everything within it, including the family, could break down or lose its individuality, slipping into chaos and anarchy. Consequently, it would be impossible to ensure productivity and well-being of citizens in the absence of stability that stems from reasonable obedience.

On the other hand, blindly following orders and taking authority as absolute and not subject to moral judgment of any kind or scrutiny is undoubtedly a dangerous vice. If we consider the prose of blind obedience, of course, the person or the organization that gave instructions to the individual could be happy and the collaborator could be in the favoured list of the authority or he/she could even get promotion.

Moreover, when we talk about blind obedience, we have to identify two categories of people who could show this unpatriotic behaviour. There are some who carry orders without taxing their conscience. Others could do something they do not genuinely think are right but their conscience bothers them forever that they did not rebel, and the bad taste never goes away from their mouth. Even for the second group, that repents the wrongdoing, the cons are not limited to the

life-long horrible feeling of guilt. The legal aspect, for both groups, is always outstanding and cannot be erased by the passage of time: the person could be charged with the crimes and tried any time. This will lead us to the question: **What examples, both Eritrean and non-Eritrean, could we cite to show how blind obedience could cause both physical and mental pain and suffering to the people?**

Whenever people talk about the destructive consequences of blind obedience to the authority, the first thing that comes into their minds is Nazi Germany, forgetting that current Eritrea is Little Nazi Germany and that the Eritrean Holocaust is on-going since 1991. The other example that comes into the minds of world politicians, journalists, and writers is the case of Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq, where American soldiers were allegedly involved in the most brutal forms of torture. Here too, people forget that the “Eritrean Abu Ghraib Prisons” are spread across the entire country, with their numbers exceeding those of our elementary schools. As in the Nazi concentration camps and Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq, in our “Abu Ghraib Prisons”, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, including torture, rape, and homicide are practiced. We wonder at this world’s hypocrisy and double standard, asking: *Is the Eritrean blood thinner than those of the Jews and the Iraqis to the extent that the international community cares little, if at all any, about the Eritrean victims?*

It is with a broken heart that I remind you of the extremely notorious Maihabar incident, where Eritrean soldiers fired on armed veterans who tried to express their concerns. Here we would ask: *Were the soldiers justified to fire on the veterans simply because they received orders from the Boss?* Correspondingly, it was realizing the destructive nature of blind obedience that the social psychologist Milgram has startlingly warned that “...people have the capacity to do

evil if instructed.” In line with that, the experiments Milgram, and two other social psychologists, Asch and Zimbardo, have conducted confirm that the individuality of any society could be subverted by the blind obedience of some humans, who could turn into mindless drones, uncritically carrying the orders of their superiors in the position of power. In any case, the question remains: *Could the Eritrean soldiers escape responsibility by saying that they were given orders by the Boss or their superiors?* This question applies to all Eritreans who have caused any harm to citizens in detention camps, prisons, borders, streets, Sawa, neighbourhoods, public places, and elsewhere.

In fact, experiences from different countries show attempts of some to remove the blame from themselves and escape responsibility during trial, by arguing that he/she merely carried out orders from those above, have never been accepted by the defense. A good example is the most well-known and well-publicized Nazi general, who was responsible for the death of thousands of Jews, Eichmann. The Nazi general attempted to remove the blame from himself, arguing that he merely carried out orders from his superiors. However, that was not accepted as a defense. Similarly, the same argument to escape responsibility was used by the American soldiers alleged for involvement in the human rights abuses in Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq. *Is the rejection of this defense argument appropriate?*

If the society follows their path, “...people would be nothing more than tools; unthinkingly carrying out our superior’s every desire regardless of the harm it may cause others”, as one author put it, commenting on the case of the Nazi general. In fact, emphasizing that people deserve their independence, Milgram warns government security officials and government aides saying that they should open their eyes

to what they are asked to do. In other words, he is saying that succumbing to the absolute authority of superiors to perform inhumane acts on citizens or any human being has dire legal consequences. Many people forget that, unlike animals, the human race is defined by its actions towards others. It means that causing harm to others just because a superior gave orders is not the cause to follow. In a nutshell, if one is given orders to do something, he/she has two choices: either to follow the orders or assert his/her personality by rebelling against the orders. Here the decision is for him/her to make, remembering that there are consequences, legal or otherwise. That is why Eritreans working with the regime have to open their eyes wider, realizing that putting the blame on the person who gave the orders, when the day of reckoning comes and which will eminently come sooner or later, will not work for them, as it has never worked for others before them.

As absolute denial of any human rights violation, corruption, anti-people crime, and the act of compromising national interests, even in the presence of valid proof, is a basic strategy of the Eritrean ruling gang and its supporters, they would not hesitate to ask: *How do you know that Isias demands blind obedience?*

To examine the question above, we need to look what his approach of communication, as the head of the executive body of government, looks like. All his meetings are one way communications, going from him to his subordinates. We have never heard ministers speaking on important occasions or addressing the people, to the extent that makes one suspect if Isias has cut their tongues. He is the only one to speak about all ministries (his annual interviews are glaring examples) that make up the executive branch of government. I have never heard

about any report that challenges him or questions his assumptions. Further, he neither has a Deputy President nor a Prime Minister. In theory, the other remaining two branches of government are the legislative and the judiciary. As Eritrea does not have a parliament that makes laws, it does not have the legislative body. The third branch of government is the judiciary, which exists only in name and has no independent existence because Atse Isias, the Boss, runs everything through his office. He is everything or three-in-one (as we usually describe machines): the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary body. It means, one person makes laws, interprets them and executes them. Add to that, the country does not have a constitution which could serve as the basis for all laws of the country. There is no free press to criticize him, and academicians have no freedom to do so. In fact, most of the academicians were either put in jail, and nobody knows if they are still alive, or were forced to leave the country, while many who had worked as diplomats abroad had to defect and join the opposition, with the exception of few. Besides, political and civic organizations are unheard of in Eritrea. Simply put, Atse Isias's policy of leaving no margin inside the country for any criticism and opposition, even on minor issues, tempts one to ask: *What does all this imply then?*

If communication is one way or a monologue like we saw it above, it means everybody is afraid to speak out, and that shows they are expected to keep quiet and appreciate what was said by the Boss. This shows that they are demanded to show blind obedience, and in its absolute and ugliest form. However, what makes us human is our capacity to think and question without taking things for granted or uncritically. If Atse Isias denies that right to those he leads, not only his "colleagues" or "office boys" in the government but the whole

people too, then he is looking to the whole population as less human. In addition to that, the Boss is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the prime Minister, and sadly enough ruling without any election and constitution.

If the above is the way Atse Isias has been running the country for the last quarter of a century: **Is there anybody to convince us Atse Isias does not absolutely demand blind obedience that destructively delivers the killing blows to the country and its people? *In what way could those who have succumbed to his absolute authority and have been performing all inhumane acts alien to the goals and ideals of the Eritrean Revolution be considered patriots? What is helping an oppressor to silence the people and tighten his grip, if it is not national treason?***

As it was attempted above to show the destructive nature of blind obedience and how it has delivered fatal blows to the Eritrean society since independence or for a quarter of a century, one would ask: ***How could a society like future Eritrea guard against blind obedience and blind trust?*** To answer this question, we need to see the experience of the biggest democracy of the world, the USA, from which we have a lot to learn, especially from the developments that are evolving since Donald Trump became the President.

There are certain guarantees and institutions whose aim is to guard against blind obedience and blind trust towards the authority, provided that the country has a functional constitution. The first obvious one is free press or Media. When we say Media, we are referring to the main traditional source of information that includes TV, Radio, Magazine, Newspaper, and lately the Internet and Social Media. It plays a big role in the life of a society in the sense that it is one of the forces

that keep the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judiciary) in check. This duty stems from the fact that checks and balances are what a constitution of a country, like the US, is all about. It exposes the weaknesses and the state of turmoil in the government, informing the general public about things (In President Trump's words, "illegal leaks") that will never be known if it were not for the Media. In short, it serves as a check against political authority. That is why it is sometimes referred to as the fourth branch of government. It suffices to watch the role of CNN, Washington Post, and New York Times are playing these days. The second institution is the academia or the community of intellectuals concerned with the pursuit of research, education, and scholarship. This institution also plays the same role as the Media, though to a lesser extent. The third and the fourth institutions are the judicial branch or courts and the legislative branch; all independent from the executive branch of a government. Add to these, the civic organizations that include professional associations, women's organizations, and different unions, as the fifth institution, that through protests and press releases make the administration stand on its toes. But the caution about these five institutions is: we need to observe if any of them frequently rallies behind the power, rather than against it. Similarly, with regards to the Media and the academia, we need to observe if they eagerly use their professional and intellectual tools to glorify, justify or cover up the acts of the political authority or violation of the constitution, rather than exposing its weaknesses, challenging or subverting them. When these five institutions, that are expected to provide checks, fail to do so, the authority would do whatever it wants without any opposition or challenge. But the good news is that most of them are genuinely against blind obedience and blind trust.

For both the success and failure of the Media in providing these checks, one should watch the role of the US Media mainstream or the “dishonest Media”, according to President Trump (CNN, Washington Post, New York Times for instance), in contrast with the conservative Media outlets, Trump’s “honest Media” (for instance the Fox News). The role of the US academia is equally divided these days too. At the same time, remember the ruling against Trump’s Travel Ban given by a Seattle Judge on February 5, 2017 and the ruling of the 9th Circuit Court in San Francisco on February 9, 2017. At the same time, the role the Senate is playing in the confirmation process of the cabinet picks of the President and the formation of investigation committees every time some public concerns come to the surface. This is the way checks and balances in a democracy work. Though it is a rough road with all ups and downs, with all its complications, it is worth it.

Here, it should be made clear that I tried to dwell on the issue above in a bit of detail in order to show that blind obedience is not a phenomenon that cannot be guarded against, and in a hopeful note to share the experiences of the US so that we would not be confused when the need to reconstruct the future Eritrea along democratic lines comes.

This article sums up that oppression in Eritrea, as in any other country, is aimed at enforcing blind obedience and submission to the authority. It is true that most of those who carry out the orders of Atse Isias and his cronies without any critical thinking or scrutiny are doing so due to fear or selfish interest or low political awareness or naiveté. Consequently, they are exploited by the oppressive regime to become agents in a terribly destructive process. However, as their actions are incompatible with fundamental standards of humanity,

before becoming nationally unpatriotic, and the actors are seen as renegades of the national goals of the Eritrean Revolution and the aspirations of the people, the fact that they simply carried out orders from their superiors does not save them from accountability. We see trials for similar crimes happening in many parts of the world, including crimes committed during the WWII. Here we could easily see what blind obedience to Atse Isias is all about. For those who show blind obedience and blind trust to him, it is nothing but playing with fire. For Atse Isias, it speeds up his demise, as it did to Nazi Germany. Reading the history of Nazi Germany would tell, both Atse Isias and his blind obedient supporters where they are heading to. I have one more thing to raise before winding up this article, apologizing for its length.

We had been raised by our Eritrean parents and teachers to be obedient to authority, to the effect that we do not argue or be stubborn, even if we have a stand in which we believe. We were expected to do what we were told and slowly learn what is best from the elders. That is why we often confuse the difference between obedience and respect, fear the police uniform, and still believe that disobedience to authority costs one his/her life. Atse Isias and his wickedly ruthless gang of thugs have tremendously capitalized on these remnants of the feudal culture, introduced by kings and nourished by feudal lords, whom the current ruling gang has unfortunately replaced, though the official name and the methods or the form differ, but the content remains the same (the same wine in a different bottle). They came up with all youth programs, including the military conscription and the youth organization, to nurse, water, and reinforce it with new innovations, expertise, generous funding and refinements, working day and night to reap its fruits. To pull this feudal culture

from its roots and ensure that no such wicked gang emerge again in our history, hijack our society, uproot the youth from their country and disable the future of the country, we need to break with our traditional way of parenting and schooling. *How do we do that?* We do it by teaching our kids to gain the skills to question authority and stand up against it or for the truth whenever things get thicker, their rights, the rights of the society at large, and the national interests are at stake. It should be made clear here, that this valuable skill could only develop at an early age with the help of responsible parents and patriotic teachers/educators/curriculum planners, who should be confident enough to permit the kids to question their parenting and schooling styles, and cut the school curriculum in a way that achieves this noble end. This should be the fundamental assignment of *PARENTS* and the *SCHOOL SYSTEM* in Eritrea. It has been successfully done in many countries, and there is no reason to believe that it cannot see light in Eritrea too, though social change takes time.

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