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The Latest Reconciliation Talks for Peace and Unity within the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC): Are there any Tangible Results for the Faithful to Celebrate?

by

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The most recent round of mediation efforts that took place in Dallas, Texas in the first week of December, 2012 to bring the two EOTC Holy Synods---the exiled and the indigenous-- into harmony has not been, from all indications, as reassuring as many of the faithful would like it to be. No new grounds were unearthed in the talks, nor has a promising drive toward a final resolution of the crisis, which has beleaguered the Church for more than two decades, been discerned. For all practical purposes, the issue of divide still remains fully unaddressed. The core dispute within the centuries-old, storied Church is that the violation of the canonical law governing Oriental Orthodoxy was violated 21 years ago, when the regime that came to power removed a living Patriarch and replaced him with another, thereby forcing the former into exile. To exact "the wrong" then would be to return the exiled Patriarch to his rightful throne, without preconditions.

However, the Synod at home is preparing to install a new Patriarch in spite of the talks in Dallas. So, one may then ask, where is "the beef?" In reality, what the representatives of the two Synods at the talks did was "agreeing to disagree" on the crux of the matter that has been in contention for more than 20 years. At this very juncture, this really means that the position that each team of negotiators brought to the table still remains intact. The negotiating stand of the Holy Synod in Exile has been that the canon law of the Church was irresponsibly violated 21 years ago and that the exiled Patriarch should be reinstated to his former position with the full rights and authority that were taken away from him by force. In contrast, the Home Synod counters by insisting that His Holiness Abune Merkorios could return to and live in Ethiopia as a "spiritual, symbolic figure," without having his rights fully restored. With this being the case, the question that comes to mind is what actually was accomplished in the talks? To me, personally and also as a layman, the meeting was no more than window-dressing, which was merely intended to ease the woe of the "grieving souls" of the Ethiopian Orthodox faithful, who have been praying for reconciliation, peace, and unity among our religious Fathers. As such, it may have already shattered the highly-charged optimism and hope of many, both in the Diaspora and in Ethiopia, who may have thought that the unity of the Church under one Patriarchate was finally coming to fulfillment.

In retrospect, this optimism was predicated from the outset on an unrealistic expectation, intrinsically imbedded in a spiritually-based belief by many and a false sense of feeling by some,

who may have reasoned that the passing of both former Patriarch Abune Paulos and Prime Minister Melese Zenawi has opened up the door of reconciliation in Ethiopia. Even so, the members of the *Council of Peace and Unity of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church* have tried, although unsuccessfully, the traditional duty of peacemaking through mediation, a centuries-old practice that is part and parcel of the Ethiopian social lore. For this, they must be held in high esteem, and warmly applauded for what undeniably has been a noble mission of valiant heights, at least in my personal opinion.

Nonetheless, it is the view of this writer that the mediation effort from the start was doomed to failure because engaging in the reconciliation process was more of a symbolic gesture for the Holy Synod in Ethiopia than a genuine desire to bring the unity of the two Synods, or to uphold once again the canonical law of Orthodoxy in the Ethiopian Church, which was indisputably violated with the forced removal of Patriarch Abune Merkorios from his throne. It was then that the Tigrean People Liberation Front (TPLF)-led movement took the reins of leadership and reconstituted the make-up of the Ethiopian state, with a massive emphasis on ethnicity, camouflaged under a minority ethnic oligarchy. The ideological and political guiding principles of the regime still remain in place even after the passing of what has turned out to be the regime's cult-like figure---Melese Zenawi. With the same regime still holding the levers of power in that country, there would hardly be any genuine interest in changing the status quo in some significant facets of societal arrangement, including the exercise of minority ethnic domination in government, religion, economy, and foreign affairs. Furthermore, the total control of the security and military apparatuses of the state affords the regime to dictate what it wants and chooses.

Perhaps, there is no more startling evidence of power consolidation by a minority ruling clique in TPLF's reconfigured Ethiopia than could be revealed in these figures: 90% of the command posts in the Ethiopian army, the air force, and national security and military intelligence are held by Tigreans; among the latest 37 promotions awarded to high ranking military personnel, 26 involved Tigreans; 20 of the richest Ethiopians, excepting Mohammed Al Almoudi, are Tigreans; 66 parasitic companies with millions of dollars in both cash and assets belong to the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT), the largest business conglomerate that rivals Al Almoudi's MIDROC (Mohamed International Development Research Organization Companies); and even within the EOTC, minority ethnic overrepresentation is clearly reflected in the composition of the Holy Synod in Ethiopia itself, as 16 of the 47 members of Synod are of Tigrean pedigree. Taking everything into account, there is no doubt that minority ethnic oligarchy has taken a fanatical hold in Ethiopia since the change of regime in 1991. Let us not forget that **whoever controls the prizes of power also dictates the behavior and functions of those entities that the power holder thinks are essential for the perpetuation of societal domination.** The EOTC is clearly under the command of the regime in power. Expecting

otherwise would be a denial of Ethiopian realities under the TPLF-dominated governance in that country today.

Given that the TPLF-commanded rule in Addis Ababa is one characterized by absolute authoritarianism, the regime's influence and dictate have no bounds in the Ethiopian social and political milieu. Thus, it would be in line with the character of the ruling clique to dictate the actions or inactions of even the most highly-visible civil society components of the state, such as the EOTC, thereby making them subservient and a tool of governance. As they become extremely predisposed to regime dictates, religious organizations and other entities in Ethiopia ostensibly become open to the whims and orders of ideologically-driven regime political bosses. Without a doubt, the EOTC in Ethiopia and its Holy Synod in particular, have fallen under this gambit. In this regard, it would be almost utter naiveté to even imagine that the team representing the Holy Synod in Ethiopia in the peace and unity talks came to negotiate with their counterparts of the Exiled Synod on their own terms, knowing well the government's record of intervention and even-handedness in religious affairs, be it Christian or Islamic. It would be unthinkable to assume that a highly-visible religious entity such as the Holy Synod would function independent of regime pressure. In this writer's view, the TPLF ruling clique probably has a person of interest (a candidate for the position of head of the Patriarchate), who they wish to enthrone, replacing the one they crowned 21 years ago, but is no longer with us.

For a regime that has shown no inclination to negotiate with its political opponents, returning the exiled Patriarch to his rightful throne would constitute a prototypical ceding of power by the rulers to an individual--His Holiness Patriarch Abune Merkorios--- whom they had removed from his position in the first place upon their seizure of power in Addis Ababa. To think otherwise, in my view, would be reckless at worst and uninformed at best.