



President Isaias Afwerki gave a live Radio and TV interview to national media outlets on the 22nd and 23rd of January 2016 on a wide range of domestic and regional issues. Excerpts of the Interview, (4thpart), follows:

Q. Mr. President, the Eritrean Government recently issued a statement supporting the initiative sponsored by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to fight terrorism. Could you tell us the backdrop of the statement and its significance?

President Isaias: Our foreign policy statements and positions should not be understood in isolation or seen as knee-jerk reactions to changing or burning issues in our region. It is critical to understand the fundamental principles and parameters that inform and dictate our foreign policy towards our neighbors. These take into account our appraisal of regional developments and above all, they are designed to enhance our national security interests as well as our collective regional interests. We do not adopt incoherent and inconsistent positions that shift constantly with unfolding events. That may be the norm in other places but this is not how we operate. We are essentially dealing with a continuum.

Our foreign policy is predicated on our analysis of global developments of the last twenty five years as well as the preceding period. Eritrea’s independence coincided with the end of the Cold War and the advent of a so-called new world order. There may be several perspectives and explanations on how the Cold War came to an end. What is relevant to us is what our aspirations are against the backdrop of the regional developments that have transpired in the last twenty five years; especially in the context of the escalation of conflicts and upheavals in our region that we see at this juncture. Every country, every people, cherish stability and development; they aspire for wealth, prosperity and collective well-being. These are resources that must be gleaned through hard work, sweat and toil. Peace and stability are likewise secured through hard work; they are not gifts that drop from Heaven like “Manna”. Global interdependence – as we do not live in insulated islands – also dictates that we secure these benefits taking into account our collective interests.

We can enumerate a number of influencing factors and players for the chaos prevailing in our region in the past twenty-five years. From a global perspective, the contour of the prevailing uni-polar world is distinctively discernible. Bipolarity was the defining characteristics or hallmark of the global power balance in the period of the Cold War. What is often termed as the “West” (I don’t want to call it the US or Europe; it is actually the world of corporations) has emerged in its sequel. The dominant logic at that time was that an unassailable uni-polar power that will dominate the world for the next 50 years without rivalry or competition in the technological, military, economic and other spheres has emerged and is here to stay. This new tendency

replaced the philosophy that existed during the Cold War with ardent extremism. Many so-called philosophers, writers and politicians propagated the advent of this new uni-polar world order. The hallmark and driving force of this new entity is greed.

The primary causes for the litany of regional and global turmoil that have been unleashed in the past 25 years can only be attributed to this power. Before the fall of the Soviet Union the war zone was Afghanistan. We might think Afghanistan is located far away and it doesn't affect us. In reality it is the cause for the prevailing turmoil we are witnessing in our region. Then came the Iraq and Iran war. That also has its own dynamics. That war continued for about eight years. After the end of the war the adventurous policy of Saddam Hussein resulted in the invasion of Kuwait and that witnessed the interference of external forces. The conflict prevails to this day. The existing situation in Iraq, the creation of ISIS and other terrorist forces cannot be looked at in isolation.

Recently, the world witnessed the so-called Arab Spring. No one stopped to ask what the real cause was? Where is it heading? What change would it bring in this region? The situations in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya followed. The chaos we are presently witnessing has been in the making for over 25 years. Some philosophers call it 'creative chaos'. You create chaos and then you manage the chaos. This is the strategy of the uni-polar world system. You divide the world into different zones and sub-zones. There is one representative force in each zone and sub-zone. That was the main cause for the prevailing chaos in our region. The beneficiaries and players of the chaos at global level are many who perceive themselves as regional powers. There are different forces that instigate chaos and conflicts directly or indirectly with the support of some superpowers. If we look at the terrorist groups that surfaced in the name of Daish and Al-Qaida they are the forces responsible for the lack of stability, peace and the supremacy of international law in our region. And there are forces covertly working behind all this. There are a lot of propaganda and media campaigns being conducted to avert truth for the sake of prioritizing self-interest. We can mention the causes in terms of force, country, government and what have you.

All these events are documented. If we desire to have peace and stability in our region, it is of paramount importance that we work in cooperation and mobilize joint resources for our common interest. And for that it is important that we create understanding with the forces that we think have influence in the region. Working in isolation will not produce dividends. We should not expect foreign powers to work on our behalf for maintaining peace and stability in our region. Instead, we should create common understanding and work together for peace and stability by routing the elements that are creating instability in our region. In this case, the Saudi government is our partner. This partnership is not something that emerged after the so-called Arab Spring. We have a similar policy towards Egypt and other countries in the region.

The forces that pursue the support of the so-called superpowers in a bid to have influence in the region do not contribute to the peace and stability we aspire. Every country has its own priority and interests. We have the right to create relationships with any country but not at the expense of our common interest. We have to evaluate the contribution made in this region by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Israel, Libya and others in the past 25 years. Were they allowed to mind their own business or were they victims of the interference of external forces? We need to come

together, identify the basic problems and chart out common strategy to mend the predicaments that have been created by external forces. And for that to happen, we need to have sustainable and continuous engagement. And that was how we were working with the Saudi government. And that is not temporary but part and parcel of our long-term strategy.

The Saudi government has declared to combat terrorism. And that is something that has to be supported without pre-conditions. The elements of instability in this region should be routed out. We could talk about the mechanism and the resources available to tackle the problem. The main agenda is to get rid of terrorism from the region. Similar and failed initiatives were taken by others. It is said that an alliance led by the US was established against terrorism. Russia also took an initiative to form an alliance to combat terrorism. The reasons for the formation of the different alliances are numerous. The Red Sea region, the Nile basin, the East Africa region and the Arab peninsula are complimentary to one other. Especially the Bab-el- Mandeb and the Eden peninsula have attracted the interference of foreign forces in the name of protecting the ‘international water way’ and combating terrorism. This is one of the scenarios that emerged in the past 25 years. We are not opposing the existence of foreign forces in the area. What we mean is that the countries in the region, and especially those who have the influence and leverage, should take the responsibility of overseeing the peace and stability in the region. That is how terrorism and piracy could be eliminated. So far, no solution has been found with all the foreign interferences. But do the countries in the region have the capacity to assume the responsibility? Do they have a strategic plan to fight terrorism and piracy? What makes the Saudi initiative unique is that it is the initiative taken by countries in the region. And if properly handled, it could register progress and bring positive results. That is why we supported the initiative without reservation and pre-conditions. Will such initiative bring about timely solution is another issue. We have to contribute our capacity for the success of the initiative. The level of contribution might differ in terms of power and resources but the need for cooperation is timely. If we want to see the end of the prevailing chaos over the past 25 years, we have to strengthen cooperation among the countries in this region. There is no other alternative for creating peace and stability in this region. If the situation becomes beyond the capacity of the region, they could then ask assistance from foreign parties. Those who say the countries in the region are not capable of enforcing the desired peace and stability should be asked to forward their justification. No country should be allowed to meddle and create chaos in the region. Hence, the Saudi initiative is one piece of the larger plan to fight terrorism.

Q. Mr. President, we are hearing that the divergence between the followers of Sunni and Shia Islam is growing. There is also conflict of interest. Our policy has been neutrality throughout the years. Don’t you think that our support to the Saudi initiative is in variance with our long year’s policy of neutralism?

President Isaias: Let me revert back to the point I raised earlier. The core problem in the past 25 years was imparting religious connotation to compound the underlying societal problems. Religion, be it Catholic, Protestant, Shia or Sunni, has nothing to do with the objective situation in the region. Religion is to be left for individuals and not for institutions.

No excuse could be given to those who aggravate chaos after chaos in the name of ethnicity and religion. The people in this region have a long history of tolerance and living in harmony

side by side in peace.

The chaos created and manufactured between different political forces and countries should not be associated with religion. This has opened room for the meddling of foreign forces in the internal affairs of countries. The worst thing is that modern information technology is playing its part in exacerbating the situation. Unexpected hatred has been witnessed among peoples and countries in a short span of time that did not exist in the history of the region. This is one of the anomalies that should be corrected through joint action and partnership. Differences have been there for long.

What use does it serve to stoke conflicts in the name of Christianity and Islam? It has nothing to do with the lives of the concerned people or future generations.

The genesis of the scourge is also associated with the sponsorship of Al-Qaeda presumably to put an end to the presence of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The misguided approach at the time was to use “Islam” as an instrument to change the situation there. What that has left in the past 25 years is obvious. In the same vein, the establishment of Shia Islamic State in Iran is the right of the Iranian people. To try to publicize such ideology for personal interest is the one that is creating problems.

A new phenomenon i.e. “our religion is the best” is emerging. With what religion or ideology could the killings of people and the conflicts among people be associated? This has to end through sustainable awareness-raising programs. We should not allow the forces with special interest exploit the situation for their vested interests. We are observing who is militarily and economically benefiting. The political forces and governments in this region should be aware of the prevailing situation and try to mend it through partnership.

Q. Mr. President, Eritrea’s longstanding political tradition has been against joining any sort of alliances. In this context, how is the current support to the Saudi-led coalition seen?

President Isaias: It is not that we support an alliance. This stance is clearly mentioned in the announcement. It is a timely and positive initiative taken by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. And, it is an initial step that leads to better regional cooperation. It is not of a primary concern whether it is an alliance or not; or who has joined it and who has not. As unequivocally stated in the announcement, the initiative needs to be supported without any reservation.

What would be the emerging trends and what are the forthcoming plans is yet to be decided through active and joint engagements. At its initial stage, it might have been described as an Islamic Alliance. But we can also allude to different alliances consisting of forty, fifty, hundred or more members that have been announced in various places in past times. Leaving such minor controversies aside and irrespective of whether it is seen as a religious or a secular alliance, we believe that the initiative has to be supported for the broader context of bolstering mechanisms and architectures of regional security.