

The Politics of Religion

Eritrea Profile

Editorial

October 11, 2017

The scourge of terrorism perpetrated under the mantle of religion; the upheavals, huge loss of life and destruction of property that it entails are not, indeed, new in the annals of the political history of mankind. But it has assumed new dimensions in this century. As such, it is breeding instability in various parts of our world; posing as it does a serious threat to international peace and security and causing increasing consternation among powerful and weak nations alike. The phenomenon accordingly warrants a profound appraisal and serious approach that is commensurate to its gravity.

The purpose of this brief editorial is not to delve into a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter but to highlight some of its relevant features in a concise and skeletal form.

Christianity was introduced in Eritrea (the Land of Habesha then), in 329 A.D. Islam also came to this land while Mohammed was still alive (between 570-632 A.D); when his followers, the “Sahaba”, sought sanctuary in the Land of Habesha from persecution in their homeland. The Bahre Negestat at the time refused to repatriate the “Sahab” to whom they had given refuge when they were expressly requested to do so. From that time onwards, the Christian and Islamic faiths in the county have co-existed in harmony and unity. The overarching lesson of the story is not the historical details (indeed as this is “claimed” by those who really own the history and others who pretend to); but the value-system that it projects. This value-system has ever since become woven into the socio-economic and cultural lifestyle of the society; and constitutes the distinct heritage of the civilization of the subsequent generations. The people of Eritrea are fortunate and proud to be the inheritors of this value-system.

Even during the second half of the 19th Century, during the expansion of colonialism, the entrenched faiths and value-systems could not be indented in spite of strenuous external efforts to introduce “new faiths”. The “religious” ploy that was invoked to weaken and polarize Eritrea’s national political movement was likewise thwarted in the 1940s after the end of the Second World War. The story was the same during the national liberation struggle. Nothing new can emerge now; in this post-independence phase of nation building. The

unflinching resistance of the Eritrean people, before and shortly after independence, when Bin Laden was frantically working to wreck havoc in the region by using the Sudan as a springboard and by recruiting, organizing and arming Jihadists in Afghanistan, is indeed well known to merit elaboration here. The value-system of the Eritrean people remains intact in these times in which mercenaries hired by intelligence agencies or deluded elements are resorting to similar ploys to foment chaos and advance their selfish interests. Their varied and deceitful approaches that include: “we have a new bible” ... “We wish to preach to you the Words of God” , “We can purify you” , “We can give you a ticket to Heaven”...”Mahdi will be coming soon; so we have to prepare the ground etc” continue to be seen and rejected, as ever, as alien and subversive agendas.

Indeed, any activity that aims to foment turmoil and terrorism, through overt or covert subversion in the name of religion – whether in its Christian or Islamic variant; fundamentalist or “moderate” façade, is not tolerated by the Eritrean people as it constitutes a serious matter of national security.