

“Eritrea’s Anti-Corruption Experience”: Speech by Mr. Hagos Gebrehiwet, Head of Economic Affairs of the PFDJ, at the “World Political Parties Meeting” in Beijing, the People’s Republic of China.



Mr. Chairman  
Distinguished Delegates  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to join previous speakers to express my profound appreciation for the CPC to organize this important forum and for the honour accorded to me to share the experiences of the PFDJ (People’s Front for Democracy and Justice) in Eritrea on a topical issue whose imprints and ramifications on national development remain of immense magnitude.

As we all agree, corruption, particularly its official variant, is a malignant disease that devours and destroys the fabric of a society; indeed the soul of a nation and people. Corruption has different tentacles and manifestations to include: bribery, extortion, cronyism, nepotism, parochialism, patronage, graft, and embezzlement of public funds. Critical and viable public projects may be squandered and rendered white elephant due to corruption by senior government officials who short-change public trust for greedy personal ends. The independent judiciary may degenerate into Kangaroo courts that specialize in miscarriage of justice under conditions of rampant corruption. Corruption may also facilitate criminal enterprise such as drug trafficking, money laundering and human trafficking, though it is not restricted to these activities. Misuse of government power for other purposes, such as repression of political opponents and general police brutality may also be considered as political corruption. The list is indeed long.

Excellencies & Distinguished Delegates,

The problem does not lie, of course, in the full diagnosis of corruption with all its conceivable manifestations. The critical challenge is to devise, from the outset, institutional remedies that prevent corruption from taking root in the first place and to eradicate it fully and completely if or once it rears

its ugly head. Allow me to revert to the limited experiences of Eritrea and to the underlying conceptual and methodological approaches that we developed in the past 26 years to prevent corruption from mushrooming and stop it at the beginning.

1. The mantra of “zero tolerance for corruption”. A defining characteristic of corruption is its endemic nature. Any laxity in vigilance, public regulatory practices, and rigorous accountability measures invariably create a conducive environment for the malaise to mushroom and multiply at an alarming pace. The policy of zero tolerance for corruption is thus a guiding principle that must be implemented without interruption and vigorously. Recognition of this basic fact indeed impelled the PFDJ and the GOE to spell out the ground rules from the outset and adopt “zero tolerance for corruption” as the key policy instrument. This policy was further reinforced by institutional measures that would ensure its complete and rigorous implementation.

2. Rigorous sensitization campaigns to reinforce policy percepts: Eritrea’s armed struggle for independence was not only long and arduous, but it was also conducted against a backdrop of insignificant international support. This rather peculiar operational environment entailed norms of self-sacrifice and almost puritan egalitarianism both among the combatants and the larger population who were organized in student, workers, peasant and women’s associations all over the world. At the time of independence after a 30-year armed struggle, the EPLF had more than 100,000 active freedom fighters. The mass associations were much larger. In a population of around 2 million at the time, literally all Eritrean households had at least a couple of freedom fighters and other members of the mass associations. The number of martyrs was 60,000 which translated at least one martyr in most families. These realities were easily leveraged to bolster and instill norms of integrity and responsibility in the new Civil Service which was largely formed from the demobilized freedom fighters. The entrenched tradition of rigorous accountability in the liberation struggle, the weekly practices of criticism and self-criticism that were essential to cultivate consensus in the difficult decades of struggle were additional elements that could be invoked as indispensable inputs for consolidating ethical standards that saw corruption as decadent and unworthy values.

Traditional Eritrea society further boasted traits of non-hierarchical social classification: land was in most cases communally owned by the village and distributed every seven years to all eligible residents on an equitable basis. Customary laws were detailed, some of them encoded as early as the 15th century and regulated village life and societal interaction on strict ethical and equitable basis. These were additional cultural ingredients that had relevance to post-independence Eritrea with proper adjustments and particularly for incorporation in sensitization and civic education programmes.

3. **Lean, Clean, Efficient and Highly Paid Civil Service:** Apart from inherited moral and ethical standards, what the PFDJ and the GoE pushed in the early years after independence was to restructure and constitute the Civil Service around the theme of a "Lean, Clean, Efficient and Highly Paid" institution. The logic behind this guiding principle was that if the Civil Service was reasonably remunerated, and if the accountability mechanisms were transparent, explicit and rigorous, tendencies of seeking bribes and corrupt practices would be greatly diminished, if not totally eliminated.

4. **Strict Regulations on Business Licenses of Public Servants:** In addition to all the measures cited above, the Government also decided, in 1996, to ban business licenses for senior officials and government employees. The consideration behind this rather strict regulation was to eliminate conflicts of interest and abuse of one's authority or public position of influence in the pursuit of individual business activities. The regulation had however a downside as it tended to ban all business activities that could be run by the spouse or immediate family member of the Civil Servant and that were not related to the position of the Civil Servant in question.

5. **Strict Financial Accountability of Government Ministries & institutions:** The Government also reinforced and empowered the Office of the Auditor General to ensure periodic and comprehensive accountability of public finances in all government Ministries and associated bodies. The report of the Auditor General and the recommendations made after every audit are deposited in the Office of the President as well as the concerned Ministry. Minor administrative discrepancies or faults are corrected in a hearing and through a written report that the Office of the Auditor General conducts with the government body in question. If the Auditor General's report contains cases of misuse of public funds, the report is sent to the Office of the Prosecutor General for appropriate legal action.

6. **Special Government bodies:** The accountability instruments described above will not be enough by and in themselves to eliminate or curb corruption. Indeed, critical as these are, they must be supplemented with appropriate judicial frameworks that fast track the proceedings of corruption cases to ensure swift administration of justice. These special institutions will also be vital in sending a clear signal, from the outset, that embezzlement of public funds are serious offenses, as well as social taboos, that elicit stringent judicial measures.

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I hope the brief description that I have tried to present in a skeletal form can shed some light into what the PFDJ and the GOE had set out to

achieve in the immediate period after independence in order to stem corruption.

Of course, what looks impressive or perfect on paper does not always translate seamlessly in practice. In our case, the border war that erupted with Ethiopia in 1998, and other adverse externalities (sanctions etc.) have affected economic growth that was promising in the early years. With extended National Service, the size of the Civil Service could not be maintained with the limits of a lean institution as envisaged in those years. Civil Service salaries were frozen for many years effectively reducing the purchasing power of the Civil Servants. Due to all these factors, elimination of corruption has not been secured to the level projected in those years. But the commitment and policy orientations remain as strong as ever.

In conclusion, let me revert to one important aspect that I have not delved to in the presentation above is the fact that also in corruption; it does take two to a tango. Corruption cannot thrive in a vacuum; without service seeking individuals or entities that are also willing to pay bribes for to secure illegitimate services or to cut red tape and expedite services that they are entitled too. Foreign companies are particularly guilty of these practices and Governments need to devise strict business license, procurement and other regulations to eliminate corruption induces by these entities.

I thank you

Beijing 02-12-2017