

Saleh Eyay: Member of a Remarkable Generation that Was

By
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In Blin, Saleh Eyay's mother tongue that he could not use except in his early childhood, there is a saying that goes: "*Sabur girga entgini*". It literally translates: "May the day of praise not arrive[to you]" - i.e. death. It implies that people usually talk about the good part of you when the 'Day of Praise' falls on you. That unwanted day of admiration has come to Saleh and the Palestinian leader on 11 November 2004. And no wonder that a couple of articles eulogized Saleh Eyay within our Eritrean community as did the entire Palestinian nation mourn and praise Saleh's other friend of the old Beirut days, the late Yasser Arafat. May their souls rest in peace.



Saleh Ahmed Eyay was a member of a remarkable generation of Eritreans who reached adulthood in the late 1950 and early 1960s, at a time when peoples of the Third World were being set on fire in a passion called Revolution for National Liberation. Many Eritreans of different backgrounds and origins were engulfed by that irresistible zeal and devotion for independence that lasted their lifetime – but may probably not continue in the same degree beyond Saleh's generation and the one that followed it immediately. It was the political environment that mattered, and matters. Within Eritrea, Saleh Eyay's political environment was special. It was Keren, the town that served as the headquarters of the first and the second biggest Eritrean parties that advocated for independence a decade earlier – i.e. the town that was the headquarter of Ibrahim Sultan's Eritrean Moslem League, and the reformed New Eritrea Party. There was no escape for Saleh Eyay from being part of "a poisonous generation". But first allow me to tell you something about this "poison".

When he replaced Tedla Bairu as autonomous Eritrea's Chief Executive in the summer of 1955, Asfaha Woldemichael arranged a visit to Keren and gathered everybody at the football field to tell them as follows: "This Keren, your Keren, is a cup of poison and the rest of Eritrea is a barrel of water. If we mix the two, it is the cup of poison that transforms the barrel of water to poison and not the other way round. We will see to it that the poison is not mixed with the water". Ibrahim Sultan was around listening to the

talk and probably also the then 18-year old Saleh Eyay. But unfortunately for the new Chief Executive, Asfaha Woldemichael, there was no way to stop that “poisonous generation” from cropping up in Keren and other places and gradually spreading to every corner of the country.

Saleh was already a known agitator in Keren before he went to Port Sudan where he met like-minds to continue spreading the ‘poison’. On 2 November 1958, eight young Eritreans, among them Saleh Eyay, met at Mohammed Saed Nawd’s house at Hay Al-Transit in Port Sudan and formed the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM – *Mahber Showate*) that spread all over Eritrea within a short time. In January 1961, *Mahber Showate*/ELM held its first and last conference in Asmara. Saleh Eyay was one of the 40 Asmara conference participants, who also included: Mohammed Saed Nawd, the ELM co-founder, Yassin Uqda, Adem Melekin, Mohammed Burhan Hassen, Ali Berhatu, Tiku’e Yihdego, Kahsai Bahlbi, Mohammed Omar Akito, Abdulkerim Saed Qasim, Sheikh Saddadin Mohammed, Khiyar Hassen Beyan (who hosted the conference in his house) and other still well known names.

Saleh Eyay was present almost in every important meeting place or otherwise that had something to do with and about the Eritrean cause – e.g. he even spent one year in the infamous Alem Beqa prison in Addis. He was at Adobaha in 1969 where he reportedly played an important role, and at the first ELF congress at Arr in 1971.

The purpose of this writing is not give details about Saleh’s life history which has been sufficiently summarized in a few pieces written in the Eritrean websites recently. However, I worked in the foreign relations office which was under his administration during most part of the 1970s and early 1980s, and wished to agree as a witness to the views expressed by his old colleagues whose comments were published in the websites. The ELF-RC’s statement posted in Nharnet.com expressing condolence to his family and friends described Saleh Eyay as “a modest, sociable, generous and at the same time confrontational when need be and stubborn in defense of his political convictions”. Ibrahim Mohammed Ali, the Speaker of the ELF-RC, said these are the qualities that won Saleh the respect of his comrades during many years of the struggle. Ahmed Nasser of the ELF-NC also confirmed this by saying Saleh was a man of “a unique courage”.

Yes, he was a man of unique courage. He was a co-founding leader of the ELM but he had no problem of changing membership to ELF in 1965 when he was convinced that he would do better to the cause. He was bitterly criticized for standing against the legal leadership of the ELF in 1982 but he was a man of singular decisions, and he went ahead with it. Again, most of his old comrades did not trek to Asmara after liberation, but he wanted to try to change from within. Unfortunately, and like Yasser Araft, he was not able to achieve full success in creating a democratic Eritrea in peace with itself and its neighbours. I also agree with Herui Tedla Bairu’s comment that Saleh was free from narrow feelings of region or religion, except that he, Herui, should have added that Saleh Eyay would not agree with anyone of his old comrades in today’s opposition who have been spoiling the political environment and minds of so many innocent compatriots by

using unnecessary political language that bred hatred and encouraged mobilization of our people on the basis of ethnicity, region and religion.

May Saleh Eyay's soul rest in peace.