

Human Rights or Change in Policy Course?

US House Subcommittee's Hearing on Eritrea

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The Hearing Title Begs an Answer

The US House Subcommittee on Africa has conducted a hearing on Eritrea's human rights condition on Wednesday, September 14, 2016, under the title of "**Eritrea: A Neglected Regional Threat**". The hearing was chaired by Rep. Chris Smith who himself is the chairperson of the House Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations. The title of the HEARING apparently seems injudicious and deceitful prompting one to ask a legitimate question of: **Do they** (the US House Subcommittee) **think it means what we** (the Eritreans) **think it means?** Eritreans were hasty to react even before the hearing was conducted calling it 'ill-advised' and an insult to the Eritrean people.

Not only that but also some Eritreans were infuriated by the conduct of the Subcommittee in that only one side's view was represented in the hearing. However, the hearing was not completely lost its way and the presence of Ms. Bronwyn Bruton was fairly a balancing view and the Subcommittee should be thanked for counting Ms. Bruton as one of the witnesses. In other words, inviting Ms. Bruton, a thought-provoking figure, side-by-side the State Department's officials is an indication of the US House Subcommittee intent to try engaging Eritrea.

My Contention

While I share some of the concerns of fellow Eritreans outside the panel, I strongly contend their premature reactions and interpretations of the matter. In its own right, it is not bad to talk and discuss the human rights conditions and abuses in Eritrea or elsewhere for that matter. The real question is though: is Eritrea really a threat to the region's peace? As far as I understand, the answer for this question is yes or no! I say yes because by 'regional threat' the Americans are meant a threat to the American interest and positions in the Region. I say no because Eritrea is not a threat to the region from the viewpoint of the Horn of Africa's peace and stability. So, in this particular case, when the Americans say Eritrea is a 'neglected regional threat' they do not mean Eritrea is a destabilizing force in the region, rather they do mean American's interest is threatened, particularly by the forces engaging Eritrea including major American allies across the Red Sea.

The US is Feeling Cold

Eritrea already has a warm relationship with China. More recently, its re-engagement with major economies such as Japan, the Gulf states, and the European Union (EU) and its member states such as Germany and others must be a shocking trend for the US. In this regard, collectively, the US must be feeling isolated and threatened by Eritrea's diplomatic move in the recent past. Thus, recent diplomatic victories by Eritrea is not a perceived threat for the US's strategic interest without necessarily being a threat for the Horn's peace. It is a real threat putting the US in a crossroads to engage or not to engage Eritrea. One thing we should not miss to understand is that even the EU is a threat for the US's interest. In fact, the US fears the EU more than it does for the Russians and the Chinese or any other force on earth.

Eritrea is posing a threat not for the Region per se but for the US's strategic interest and position in the Horn of Africa. Its partners in the Region, namely Ethiopia and Kenya, have already begun to feel the cold because they sense encircled by the affluent Gulf states such as UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar who are friendly states for the US. From the US's point of view, as of now, Eritrea must be a threat to its strategic interest in the Horn Region while it is losing its much bigger 'ally' Ethiopia. For these reasons, the US seems to realize its failed policy to isolate Eritrea. Thus, for the US to get out of the cold and encirclement it has no choice but forthrightly to engage Eritrea. It is this fact that forced Mr. Smith to rightly nod for the call by Ms. Bruton for congressional delegation to Eritrea.

In my view, the US House Subcommittee's hearing on Eritrea should be understood from these backdrops. If the hearings were purely about human rights the title "Eritrea: A Neglected Regional Threat" could have a different form or shape, something related to the human rights condition in Eritrea. If we think the hearing was about human rights violations, we must be wrong. If we think the US still wants to disregard/isolate Eritrea we did not get it right too because from the title of the hearing "... A Neglected Regional Threat..." simply refers US's failed and flawed isolationist policy on Eritrea. In this regard, isolating Eritrea by the US administration is close to end and the US House Subcommittee on Africa hearing on Eritrea is a change in tempo and procedural for the next step.

It is also important to note the timing of the Hearing. The US is concerned by the new development in Ethiopia and the hearing on Eritrea under the stated title is simply an indication that the US has already lost confidence on the TPLF-led government in Ethiopia. In fact, the hearing on Eritrea came few days after Mr. Smith and his colleagues announces that they are preparing to introduce a bipartisan resolution against the TPLF-led regime in Ethiopia for its gross human rights violations. The TPLF regime in Ethiopia is not a viable ally for the US any more as the TPLF has already lost not only popular support but also the

country is on the verge of disintegration. In this regard, Mr. Smith and his colleagues must be preparing to crown Eritrea as the next 'ምክሌ' (literally in Tigrigna means a chieftain) in the Region. Eritrea must welcome the US before too late and should prepare for the new 'appointment' and 'job prescriptions'.

On the other hand, some Eritreans were also right when they say Eritrea was not and is not a threat for the Horn Region per se. However, it must be clear that when the US says Eritrea is a 'Regional Threat' it does not mean that Eritrea is creating anything bad to the Horn. It simply means the US's interest is threatened and do something about it. I believe the US has no option but to accept Eritrea as its next land to keep its influence and interests in the Horn and the Red Sea region.

Ms. Bruton Triumphs over the Rest of the Panellists

The invitation of Ms. Bruton, a critique of flawed US policy on Eritrea, as one of the panellists is a clear indication of the US government desire to engage Eritrea. Ms. Bruton was very careful in her witness and her responses to the questions by Mr. Smith and Ms. Karen Bass. On her part, Ms. Bass was repeatedly asking all panellists about the Eritrean regime's ideology. In my view, probably, she was trying to test the water and the potential risks to engage the Eritrean authorities. I think she was also curious to know about Eritrea and its resilience against all odds including by her government. Ms. Bruton was hard-hearted to both the State Department and the US intelligences for their ignorance about Eritrea and its people. She was not vague in her brief presentation to tell the Subcommittee that the American intelligence and American policy makers are completely blind about Eritrea. She was right considering the State Department officials' utterly nonsense presentations and narratives.

As far as I am concerned, the first two US panellists, Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield (Assistant Secretary for African Affairs) and her colleague, seem to have no clue at all about Eritrea. Of course, as a State Department's official Ms. Thomas-Greenfield had no choice but to defend the old positions of her bureau and the notorious Susan Rice's viewpoints. Ms. Thomas-Greenfield, however, did not hide her government's desires to engage Eritrea. She was caught up as saying "...this is not the kind of relationship we desire... surprisingly there has been some progresses... Eritrea is beginning to engage the international communities ...opening up its doors for a handful journalists ... we have not and do not seek to cut-off our bilateral relations with Eritrea ...". All her message in between is just to justify the old position of the State Department's isolationist policy on Eritrea.

The two Eritrean panellists did not get the trick and they were tricked to speak on human rights violation to give the hearing a human right violation taste buds. On the other hand, it seems to me Ms. Bruton was already aware of the Subcommittee's interests and intentions before the event. In fact, she began her

testimony by thanking the Subcommittee for allowing her "...to contribute to the Subcommittees' timely review of U.S. policy towards Eritrea." From this introduction by Ms. Bruton and the content of the questions and answers session of the hearings the event was meant not essentially to discuss the human rights conditions in Eritrea but to assess possibilities to engage Eritrea and change course from the current US's isolationist policy towards Eritrea.

Conclusion

The tendency looks like the US is in desperation with the loss of its big ally in the Horn of Africa. Although did not want to openly admit the US has already lost hope on its one-time indispensable ally, Ethiopia. Thus, the US must be in search of a new and viable ally to crown and that must be Eritrea. In this regard, Eritrea must stop unnecessary rhetoric and welcome the gesture by the US House Subcommittee.