

The Great Illusion

Part V

Isaias Afwerki's Language of Politics and his Politics of Language

By

Worku Aberra

Politicians of all hues are infamous for misusing a language for their political ends. And Isaias' interview provides an excellent case study of falsehoods, subterfuges, euphemisms, and obfuscations.

My comments on Isaias' language of politics will be restricted to the interview he gave in English. Unfortunately, I don't speak Tigrigna (I wish I did!).

An Excellent Command of English

Politicians don't lie; they "misspeak". In the interview, he "misspoke" on many occasions not because his lack of mastery of English but rather because of the clarity of his intentions. Actually, for someone who spent 25 years in the bush fighting a guerilla war, he has an excellent command of English. Therefore, his misstatements are deliberately, consciously, and purposefully crafted to advance his strategic objectives in Ethiopia.

Who knew that a guerilla leader could be so fluent in English, so adept at twisting issues, so adroit at evading questions, and so ingenious at distorting the facts? One cannot but reluctantly admire his skills. But if words reveal one's fluency, deeds expose one's character. And our only evaluative criterion should be what he has inflicted on the Ethiopian and Eritrean people.

Scapegoating others and Evading Questions

To deconstruct all of his obfuscations requires many pages of writing. Instead, I will just select a few of his remarks to highlight my point. When asked about his role in drafting the EPRDF's constitution, he characteristically scapegoated "*...external forces...*" presumably

the US. I am not sure why the US would want to see a divided client state in the politically volatile Horn of Africa.

When questioned about the EPLF's role in creating separatist ethnic organizations, he responded as a skilful evasive politician would, "... *we did not create the EPRP...*" That was not the question.

Avoiding the Word "Independence" as a Taboo "I" word

When discussing the struggle for independence, fearful of the negative reaction that the word may evoke among some Ethiopians and wishful of raising the hopes of some Ethiopians for a union in the future, he avoided using the word "independence" throughout the interview. He turned it into a taboo word, the "I" word, at least temporarily. He chose instead awkward euphemistic expressions such as "... *our struggle was not just to overthrow Mengistu...*" Why not clearly state the truth?

Attempting to Connect with Ethiopians

He tried to build a psychological bridge with his viewers and listeners by appealing to the pride of Ethiopians. Recognizing that Ethiopians of all ethnic groups are proud of our language, culture, and history, he saluted our common Abyssinian civilization, which now includes Eritrea, stating that it is not just 3000 thousand years old "... *maybe it is more than 300 years old... maybe it is 5000 years old...*" With 5000 years of civilization under our belt, we are all one happy family; let's all do the tango or shall we say the "*iskista*" together. The man has really morphed into an Ethiopian nationalist.

Cognizant of the fierce devotion of Ethiopians to national unity, he blamed the TPLF-controlled regime for creating Bantustans, for sowing division among the different ethnic groups, and for pitting one ethnic group against the other for "*Woyane's narrow agenda*". But his state-owned TV and radio stations are spreading divisive, inflammatory, separatist propaganda in Afan Oromo and Somali to disintegrate Ethiopia.

Emotional Appeal: His Profuse use of the Word “Woyane”

Knowing full well that the word “Woyane” is not just descriptive, but attributive, evocative, and associative, he uses it profusely throughout the interview. Because of the dictatorship of the TPLF-controlled regime and its ethnic repression, divisiveness, and discrimination, the word “Woyane” has undergone what linguists call a semantic shift, taking a social and political meaning opposite to its original meaning. By using the emotionally loaded word repeatedly, he tried to tap into that large emotional reservoir of Ethiopians against the TPLF-controlled regime. But that does not qualify him as an ally of the Ethiopian people.

Distortion, Distortion, and Distortion

It seems that Isaias’ favorite word is distortion. I cannot speculate on the psychology behind his choice, but I can state its Orwellian use: to deny reality. He used the word many times, because he faces many problems that must be hidden, confused, and obfuscated. For him, the reality is distortion; his distortion, reality. The problems facing Eritreans, his autocratic rule, the isolation of his regime, the economic impact of the war, and other issues are all hidden as “distortions”.

Isaias Afwerki’s Politics of Language

When asked why he declined to conduct the interview in Amharic, he told the journalists it was “...*a matter of practice...*”, not politics or hatred because, “... *hatred is a disease...*” He tells the interviewers that “...*I wish everybody spoke five languages...*”

Let’s accept his word at face value that he is not fluent in Amharic. After all, not all Ethiopians speak Amharic fluently. So, we cannot fault him for not being eloquent in Amharic, yet he could have uttered at least one or two sentences, clause, phrases, or even a word, “*amesegnalhu*” as a conciliatory gesture of goodwill.

It is not uncommon for foreign leaders to say one or two phrases in the language of the people they are addressing. We all remember how Barack Obama started his speech at Cairo University on June 4, 2009 with “*as-salām 'alaykum*”. Isaias could have done the same. He chose not to because of political reasons.

Amharic: The “Colonial Language”

It is astounding to hear Isaias say, “... *why should you politicize a language...?*”, when he had spent 25 years precisely doing that against Amharic in Eritrea. The struggle for independence in Eritrea initially started as a struggle against Amharic, when the Emperor imposed it on the Eritrean people. And Isaias’ decision not to utter a word of Amharic is surely political. Speaking in Amharic would have been tantamount to repudiating his previous stand. He was caught in his own trap.

Second, he would have provided further ammunition to his ultra nationalist opponents; speaking in Amharic could have provided additional “proof” that he is not a true Eritrean. He would have been portrayed as a traitor, conversing in the language of the enemy, the enemy that he had successfully manufactured.

Banning the Musical Language

Third, his government banned Amharic songs in bars, hotels, and public places in 2003. On January 6, 2003, the BBC reported that: “*Amharic music, which originates in Ethiopia, has been banned in Eritrea*”. ([here](#)). One of the reasons that Amharic music appeals to Eritreans is that his totalitarian regime uses music for propaganda purposes.

The BBC report goes on to say, . ([here](#)). “...*songs in Amharic are often about love, while those in the Eritrean language of Tigrinya are more often about war and nationalism...*” And the Eritrean people are exhausted from his wars.

The ban notwithstanding, many Eritreans have continued listening to Amharic songs openly, as an expression of civil disobedience, political dissent, and social discontent. How ironic? Therefore, it would have been too hypocritical, even for him, to speak in the language that he had once banned from public use.

In Search of Clarity on the Need for Unity

A clever politician, who has outlived his internal and external enemies, Isaias used clever language in his charm offensive against the Ethiopian people, but we should not fall for it. He used confusing language to confuse Ethiopians, to avoid taking responsibility, to scapegoat others, and to hide his real strategic objectives.

But in their struggle for democracy and national unity, the Ethiopian people need clarity: clarity of political objectives, clarity of strategic allies, clarity of the urgency for unity, and clarity of the means to achieve them, all stated in clear language. Ethiopian opposition politicians ought to rise to the challenge.

Worku Aberra (PhD) teaches economics at Dawson College, Montreal, Canada.