

TDA-UK at Crossroads

These should have been interesting times for TDA.-UK. It has been allowed to be managed by a director again after a lull of four years, when its office was run by a coordinator or part-time office admin. It shouldn't have taken it four years to have a director or a manager of its own. Two years ago it got the approval from TDA International to employ an Administrative & Fundraising manager, but the process was locally frustrated and the employment was suspended. The present Management Committee, elected four months ago, had the suspension lifted, upgraded the post to a Managing Director's level, and swiftly finalized the recruitment process. The speed of the appointment has been admirable, but the legality is questionable, and their selection criteria are dubious and highly controversial.

When we are told that the appointee was the husband of one of the Management Committee members, it smacked of a serious conflict of interest. One wonders what mechanism they used to circumvent this problem. Whatever it was, it would not save the Association's reputation from being tarnished by the experience. But, let the legal experts deal with this. My main concern here is to comment on what the Committee and TDA International disregarded and schemed in employing the individual, which I find disturbing.

The newly appointed director, Ato Feseha Alemayehu, was a member of the previous management committee, the committee that preceded the current one. As it was known by TDA International Office, the TDA-UK Management Committee and almost all TDA-UK members, the previous management committee spent most of their time disagreeing and squabbling with each other. In the two years they were trustees, their achievements were slender. No fundraising, no meaningful developmental work, as their report at the AGM revealed.

TDA-UK came out weakened under their trusteeship. And it was not just the squabbling, where Ato Feseha was the main player and the cause – according to many – that was to blame for the underperformance. It was also shortcomings in capability of the previous committee, as confessed disarmingly by their chairman at a meeting of Tigrayan professionals in London. It was significant that the meeting was presided by the Executive Director of TDA International.

Towards the end, the previous committee did the sensible thing. They all agreed not to stand for re-election as they were individually and collectively responsible for weakening the Association in the two years they 'managed' it. The TDA International Executive Director who apparently had attended their meeting also confirmed this. When someone at the AGM suggested that it should be left to the members attending to decide, citing that some in the committee might be good enough for re-election. The Executive Director intervened stating that he had heard the reasons why they decided not to stand for re-election when he met with them and he advised the AGM to accept.

It is against this backdrop, that the present management committee members, in all their wisdom, decided to appoint an individual who had done his share in weakening the Association. It was not the case of an unknown applicant with an impressive resumé, who dazzled at the interview. The Committee were dealing with someone who was well known to

them - a permanent fixture in the community scene – who tried to lead all the Tigrayan associations in the UK, Tigray Community, UTE and TDA with disastrous consequences. His penchant for intrigue, smear, and divisiveness in pursuit of his own self-centred goals is legendary, known to all and sundry in the community. Left to their own devices, most in the community agree, the management committee would not have employed him in a million years!

Why did the committee appoint this individual then?

It is common knowledge in the community that the previous committee stopped Ato Feseha when he illegally wanted to apply for a manager's post while he was still a member of the management committee. Since then he vowed that he would move heaven and earth to get the job he wanted at TDA. To realize his aim, he employed every trick in the trade, eventually winning the support of the Executive Director of TDA International who was on a working visit in London at the time.

The director, charmed by Ato Feseha and influenced by the pleadings of his friends, weighed-in to the Committee to select Ato Feseha for the job. During this period, it can be recalled from the reports of the time, the International Director made a successful working tour in the USA. His UK visit too would have been a success had it not been for his intervention, the repercussion of which he would not have fully appreciated.

But why did the Committee easily acquiesce to the intervention by the director?

In the four months they have been in office, we have come to learn that the decisions of the TDA-UK committee are primarily influenced by the chairperson. His chairmanship status, experience in charity work, and personality may account for this. An unrepentant Dergist for a long time, he attended his first AGM of TDA-UK where he cleverly told us his politics have metamorphosed enough for him to come back to the fold. He was welcomed and duly elected to serve as a member of the management committee. The committee then elected him as their chairman. A few weeks later he was despatched to Tigray to represent TDA-UK at the congress where he was also elected as a Board member. He gave media interviews with flamboyance before his return to the UK - a dizzying sequence of events and a heady move for a man to make in just 1-2 months. . In his haste to be accepted by the community, he has become unnecessarily vulnerable.

It was when he was in such a situation that the chairperson was asked to employ Ato Feseha Alemayehu after a make-believe selection process. That he had such pressure from above was variously confirmed by him to his close friends. He thought he was left with no much choice but to go along with the employment plan. To sideline the wishes of one with the stature of the Executive Director of TDA International was not on. This obedience, he must have reasoned, would facilitate his rehabilitation. The timing was awkward for him. Otherwise he is his own man, and his decision would have been different since he knew the appointee well.

The implication of this appointment for TDA is immense. It is the only paid job in the association and it is at a management director's level, paying in excess of £26,000.00 per annum. The salary has to be paid from the income of the London TDA building. This works out to be about 60% of the present income or 40% if all the rooms are rented out. The income from the building is earmarked for the running of the college at Kelamino. So the

pay arrangement should be a short-term one. To sustain the post, funds from donors must be sought. To the dismay of members, however, the appointee is not a skilled fundraiser. In fact, the original job description which made fundraising compulsory had to be changed to put the emphasis on general management. It is believed by members that 'fundraising' was downgraded as a requirement in the job advert to suit the presumed skills and experiences of the appointee. If that were not done, it would have been too obvious, difficult to justify shortlisting some one without the requisite skills. But it shouldn't be forgotten that the single most important reason for creating this post was for fundraising.

The damaging aspect of this appointment has also been on the effect it would have on the membership of the association. Some members are angry. Others like me are disillusioned. Questions are being asked which must be answered. If not, members will leave the organization in droves. The person appointed seems to have that effect on members. Lessons should be learnt from past experiences.

I have been reliably told by members of past committees that TDA-UK fought long and hard to get approval for this post. The job is crucial for its overall activities. What you can achieve by volunteers over here is quite limited. The holder of this high-level post should be expected to be committed, competent, with a proven track record in fundraising. If we can not find such a person from within, then we have to look outside the community. Employment agencies can help with the hunt for such a professional. You don't give a job to some one just because he coveted and solicited it incessantly. We should not squander such a resource. TDA-UK's success depends on it.

In conclusion, I have to say that in the six years I have been a member of TDA-UK, I have seen it going downhill. The appointment, if not reversed, will complete its demise, at least as far as its membership is concerned. We should not allow this to happen. TDA is nothing without its members. TDA's wealth, as its slogan goes, is its members.

To save TDA-UK, the Management Committee has to call an extra-ordinary general meeting and explain the damaging and divisive action that members are talking about. All issues around this controversy have to be addressed openly and transparently. Sensible decisions could then be taken to redeem the situation. These are indeed difficult times for TDA-UK. But the opportunity is there for it to spring back strengthened.

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