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From resistance to governance: Eritrea's trouble with transition

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Nation-building in Africa was hobbled by the inheritance of centralised, authoritarian 'states' prior to the consolidation of nations within them. Armed liberation movements overcame this to some degree by constructing common identities out of the struggle to throw off foreign rule. Yet the degree and kind of control inherent in such a militarised project fuelled despotism in the post-war state. Eritrea seemed to break this mould, with its high level of popular participation in its war effort, its engagement in social transformation during the fighting, and the participatory constitution-building process that followed its victory. Yet less than a decade on, the liberation front shut down the press, jailed its critics, and turned the country into a political prison. This article will situate this reversal within the transition from colony to independent state, explore its specific characteristics, and consider the prospects for a more democratic outcome.

Keywords: Eritrea; EPLF; PFDJ; political opposition; civil society; alternative media; human rights; transition

The consolidation of dictatorship

Eritrea showed uncommon promise of dynamic, egalitarian growth in the 1990s after winning a 30-year independence war against successive US- and Soviet-backed Ethiopian governments, with few of the social fault lines or economic fetters that had constrained most postcolonial African states. The victorious Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had successfully mobilised support across ethnic, religious and gender lines, and it began its post-war transition with remarkably low levels of crime and corruption and an educated diaspora eager to help with reconstruction (Connell 1997, Doombos 1999, Iyob 1995, 1997). It had also made a public, though as yet untested, commitment to political pluralism. But even as the country embarked on a three-year, highly participatory constitution-making process, (Bereket 2003), it simultaneously waged a series of regional conflicts capped by a border war with Ethiopia in 1998–2000 that plunged it into a cycle of military mobilisation and political repression which both stymied its development and reversed the apparent progress toward democracy (Gilkes and Plaut 2000, Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut 2005).

Throughout this transition, two trends competed over the shape and structure of the new political landscape. One was more democratic than the other, though both had roots in the liberation front's authoritarian culture. The man who had commanded the EPLF and now served as the state's interim president, Isaias Afwerki, and a small circle of military and

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political leaders loyal to him, were committed to what they called ‘guided democracy’, a highly centralised form of control through which they proposed to reconstruct and develop the economy and to unify and transform society before relinquishing the reins of power. Democracy in this view had more to do with participation (voluntary or not) than accountability. In the tradition of state-centred authoritarian socialism, they relegated political democracy to the status of a luxury, appropriate to Eritrea only after substantial economic growth and development.

Contesting this outlook were critics within the EPLF/PFDJ (People’s Front for Democracy and Justice) leadership whose commitment to an open society had either been on hold during the struggle or had evolved (Plaut 2002); members of rival nationalist organisations eager to return to Eritrea and participate in the construction of the state; new institutions in Eritrea’s fragile civil society; and prominent individuals associated with the constitution-building project, as well as artists, entrepreneurs and others who had tasted liberty in their personal or political lives and believed in its value without having a fully formed ideology. However, though they were travelling in the same political direction, they rarely talked with one another, were not organised, had no clear strategy (or at least no effective one), and were thoroughly isolated from one another. Those who challenged the emerging autocracy were easily identified and quickly crushed. The outcome, once the struggle was joined in earnest, was the quashing of all democratic initiatives and the consolidation of dictatorship (Connell 2009a, Mengisteab and Okbazghi 2005).

Two decades after winning its *de facto* independence, Eritrea’s constitution, ratified in 1997, has yet to go into effect, and there have been no national elections. Critics, including top government and party officials, have been jailed in their hundreds, independent organisations banned, and the non-state press shut down altogether. Meanwhile, the confrontation with Ethiopia has come to dominate the political discourse to the point where all dissent is branded as treason under the leadership of former EPLF commander, now president, Isaias Afwerki, who justifies his brutal dictatorship by the fragility of the nation over which he presides, even as he perpetuates the threats to it (Connell 2004, 2009a, Kibreab 2008, 2009, Hedru 2003, Hepner 2007, Reid 2005, Tronvol 2009). As dramatic and all-encompassing as this turn of events was, however, it was by no means the first instance of extreme intolerance in this movement. Nor was it, as some opponents argue, merely the product of one bad leader which could be easily excised with his removal.

The roots of the present despotism lie within a movement that arose under conditions of unrelenting political repression necessitating secrecy and subterfuge for its very survival, that came under attack at one time or another from nearly every major regional and global power, and that, like most of its liberation movement contemporaries, drew on Leninist traditions of highly centralised authority for its inspiration. In Isaias’s case (Eritreans traditionally go by first names), this was reinforced by training in China at the height of the Cultural Revolution, during which he received intensive exposure to Maoist doctrine whose themes of extreme ‘voluntarism’ and populism continue to define his world view (Connell 2001, 2009a). Acknowledging this heritage – and owning it – will be an essential part of getting beyond it.

Gaim Kibreab’s analysis of the poisonous obsessions with control that plagued both the EPLF and the original independence movement, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) from which the EPLF split, is instructive. Each front tried to monopolise the national movement. In the ELF’s case, this began with the eradication of the rival Eritrean Liberation Movement in the 1960s, followed by an unsuccessful three-year effort to crush the breakaway factions that evolved into the EPLF in the 1970s, all the while insisting that ‘there can be no more than one struggle, one organisation and one leadership in our country’ (Kibreab 2008,

p. 173). A decade later, the EPLF turned the tables and – with the help of its ally, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) – drove the ELF out of Eritrea. It has steadfastly refused to allow the ELF – or any other organised political force – to return ever since, leaving the victors, now calling themselves the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the only show in town. Kibreab’s point – one too often overlooked – is that the drive for a political monopoly was not exclusive to the EPLF, even if the EPLF perfected it.

Challenges to this autocratic tendency occasionally surfaced, but they were repeatedly suppressed in the interest of maintaining the unity and discipline needed to win the war – a difficult argument to refute when new enemies kept popping up from every geographical and political direction imaginable. A defining moment for the EPLF came in 1973–74 with the brutal suppression of a dissident political trend calling for greater internal democracy and limits on Isaias’s authority whose members were known as *menqae* (‘those who move about at night’ – bats) and accused of being ‘ultra-“left”’. Isaias ordered the execution of its leaders and the imprisonment of dozens of fighters deemed sympathetic to them. Among those killed was one of Isaias’s childhood friends and long-time allies, Mussie Teklemichael, who bore the scars of a capital ‘E’ carved onto his upper arm where in 1965 he had taken a blood oath with Isaias and another comrade to commit their lives to Eritrea. Kibreab calls the crushing of the *menqae* a seminal event ‘that has left a lasting impact on the psychology and subsequent behaviour of the EPLF/PFDJ leadership, particularly on Isaias’s attitude toward any form of dissent or opposition to his method of leading the Front, and now the country’ (2008, p. 278).

The *menqae* crisis led to a resuscitation of a clandestine Marxist-Leninist party that Isaias and a handful of other comrades had formed in 1971 – the Eritrean People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) – but which had been dormant since then. Once re-established, it controlled the EPLF throughout its existence. Operating behind the scenes, the party drafted the front’s programme in secret, chose its leadership prior to elections, and managed its day-to-day affairs by covertly manipulating its formal leadership structures (Connell 2001, 2004, Makki 2002). It also carried out extensive surveillance on EPLF members to identify – and snuff out – any signs of dissent or disloyalty before they could develop, using a newly formed internal security force known as *halewa sowra* (‘shield of the revolution’) to enforce its judgments. Set up during the *menqae* crisis, *halewa sowra* was initially headed by Solomon Woldemariam, who was himself imprisoned and later executed in a purge of another dissident trend known as *yameen* (‘rightists’). Though the EPRP was officially dissolved on Isaias’s orders in 1989, its utterly opaque top-down management style has been systematically replicated within the new state structures. In this respect, little changed in the form of control. However, the transition from resistance to governance was accompanied by a series of moves that further distanced the leadership from the base and that required ever more coercive measures to sustain.

Though the clandestine EPRP was hardly an example of popular democracy at work, it was nonetheless a framework for strategic planning and decision-making that involved a degree of consultation within its leadership, and among its members, that acted as a check on arbitrary action at the top. However, it peaked in the 1970s and steadily declined during the 1980s as the party and front expanded, both in size and scope of operations. Still, the party’s abrupt dissolution at the end of the decade severed a limited form of communication and accountability within the dominant political movement. The concomitant decision to dissolve the mass organisations of workers, women, peasant farmers, youth and students was even more dramatic in this regard, as it severed communications links between the leadership and large sectors of the population. And the decision shortly after the war ended to abandon the practice of having villagers elect leaders to their people’s

assemblies (*baitos*) – albeit in party/front controlled selection processes – completed the disconnect. Taken together, they represented a major rupture.

With the formation of new state institutions in 1991–93, the reorganisation of the EPLF into the PFDJ in 1994, and the relaunch of the mass organisations, or national unions, as they were called, loose links with the general population were re-established but they were far more centrally controlled and served mainly as one-way channels for implementing decisions taken in the capital. As the most experienced community organisers were absorbed upward into the state and party machinery, their skills, their knowledge of conditions at the base of society, and their ability to grasp and respond to these conditions atrophied, much as has happened in other such transitions (Connell 2002, Marais 1998).

The National Assembly, which, like the Cabinet of Ministers, has met only when called into session by the president, was at best a rubber stamp for proclamations drafted in the president's office, no longer makes a pretence of functioning and has not convened a formal session in years. The judiciary lacks independence and is routinely bypassed through a system of 'special courts' and clandestine prisons that now hold thousands of suspected dissidents, draft evaders, and others. All media are controlled by the state. No political parties or non-governmental organisations are permitted apart from the PFDJ and its satellites. The result is a façade of institutional normalcy that masks a remarkably efficient tyranny.

Now, as during the liberation struggle, hidden networks are far more important than visible institutions. In this and other respects, Eritrea functions less as a modern state than as a guerrilla movement headed by a single charismatic figure holding a liberated zone. The two most important power centres over the past decade were in the armed forces and the PFDJ. Individuals have been more important than offices, topped by Isaias, who brooks no competition and who rewards personal loyalty over competence. Control rests almost entirely with the man at its centre, who has spent decades manoeuvring to reach this point, aided by a shifting coterie who either shared his values or tolerated them in the naïve hope of one day transcending them. The inner circle today consists primarily of top-ranked military officers and a handful of advisors in the presidential office, the security services, and the upper tier of the PFDJ, though this last group has recently faded in importance, too, as the president has begun once again to empower another set of lieutenants to check the influence of those he tapped in the early 1990s. For its part, the party maintains a system of informers and enforcers that reaches into every village and town through party-run neighbourhood committees called *kebeles* as well as into diaspora communities through an overseas network of PFDJ supporters who monitor dissent among Eritreans living abroad and report on them to their local embassies (Connell 2004, 2009a, Kibreab 2009, Reid 2005, Tronvol 2009).

The crackdown on political dissent began in July 2001 with the arrest of University of Asmara student union leader, Semere Kesete, after he publicly criticised the government for the inhumane conditions of enforced 'national service' during the summer. He remained in prison for months before escaping with the help of sympathetic security guards. Hundreds of other university students were rounded up that summer and sent on a work project to contain the rising protest on the campus. Leaders of the student union were among the government's main targets for detention (though none were formally charged), as the organisation was disbanded and replaced by the party-controlled National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS). Parents who protested the treatment of their children – several of whom died – were also arrested (Kibreab 2009).

Then, on 18 and 19 September, after nine months of internal mobilisation that included lengthy party-run seminars to discredit those targeted for the purge, and with much of the

world's attention on events in the United States after the dramatic al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington, the Eritrean government initiated a sweeping crackdown on its high-level critics, arresting 11 of the 15 who had signed an 'open letter' to the president chastising him for anti-democratic behaviour and calling for structural reforms of the party and the state, as well as a full and open assessment of the Border War (one recanted and three were not in Eritrea at the time of the arrests). Next, the government closed all the private newspapers and began arresting others associated with expressions of dissent during the previous year. The justification was that those arrested – and the press – had been a 'fifth column' for Ethiopia, though no charges were brought, no evidence presented, no trials conducted, and no formal explanations ever offered. Soon after, the government began house-to-house round-ups of young people accused of avoiding national service, with many beaten in public places before being crammed into military trucks and taken away with no opportunity to contact family members or take anything with them but the clothes on their backs.

I was in Eritrea for much of the spring and summer of 2001, during which I interviewed several top-ranking dissidents before they were arrested – all of whom were fully aware of what was coming (Connell 2004). I also witnessed first hand the round-ups of young Eritrean men and women and the brutality visited upon them as they were trucked away. I returned three times in 2002, and was struck each time by the changed political atmosphere. Long-time confidants refused to express criticism of the regime in public places, even in whispers, for fear they might be punished. Nor would they voice criticism over the phone or in emails, as they believed all electronic communication was monitored. And few young people were visible in public places. Their anxieties were made more acute by the manner in which arrested dissidents and conscripted youth were treated. People who questioned the policies of the regime, including those who merely voiced such views to friends in public places and were overheard by government supporters and then reported for their indiscretions, or who refused to serve the regime, simply disappeared. No formal charges were brought against them, and no one had access to them once they were imprisoned (even their families). The lack of clarity on what would get one arrested engendered a pervasive terror of the authorities and a growing mistrust of friends, neighbours, co-workers and others within the general population. Not long after I criticised these practices in an interview with an externally-based Eritrean website, *Asmarino.com*, I was ordered to leave the country.

Since then, there has been extensive documentation of such practices by independent human rights agencies. Over the past decade, political and religious dissidents have been incarcerated by the thousands in secret prisons scattered throughout the country – in the basements of urban police stations, in caves in the rugged mountains of northern Sahel, and in unfurnished shipping containers in the desert lowlands along the Red Sea coast and on islands in the Dahlak Archipelago – where they are beaten and held for long periods with inadequate water and food. This has led to a significant number of deaths. In its 2008 World Report, Human Rights Watch said that many political prisoners:

are packed into unventilated cargo containers under extreme temperatures or are held in underground cells. Torture is common, as are indefinite solitary confinement, starvation rations, lack of sanitation, and hard labour. Prisoners rarely receive medical care, even when severely injured or deathly ill. Death in captivity is common.

In an April 2009 report Human Rights Watch said:

Those who try and flee the country are imprisoned or risk being shot on sight at the border. Refugees who fled to Malta, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, and other countries and were forcibly

repatriated have faced detention and torture upon return to Eritrea. Given the pervasive human rights violations in Eritrea and the risk of torture faced by those who are returned, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has advised against all deportations to Eritrea, including of rejected asylum seekers – and all refolement of Eritrean refugees should end. (Human Rights Watch 2009)

Former prisoners and escapees tell disturbingly similar stories about torture techniques commonly used against political and religious dissenters, including the ‘helicopter’ in which the victim is stripped of his clothing, tied with arms behind his back and either laid on the ground face down or hung from a tree branch and left for several days and nights in succession. In one well-documented and widely publicised incident in November 2004, dozens of young conscripts were killed at a prison camp at Adi Abieto when they protested against their treatment. More than 160 were reportedly executed in 2006 when they tried to flee from the infamous Wia army camp in the blistering Massawa coastal lowlands, and at least a dozen died there in 2007, according to Human Rights Watch. In a 2008 report, Amnesty International wrote:

Torture by means of painful tying, known as ‘helicopter’, continued to be a routine punishment and means of interrogation for religious and political prisoners . . . Military offenders were tortured. Many were young people who had tried to flee conscription or who had complained of harsh conditions and the indefinite extension of their national service. (Amnesty International 2009)

Kibreab (2009) documents how this pattern of one-party domination extended into the post-independence economy, as the regime sustained itself on the basis of diaspora remittances and rogue business deals, coupled with the use of national service conscripts as cheap labour on party and state projects. Here, however, is one place where he misses a crucial aspect of the regime’s survival strategy when he decries the government’s treatment of international mining companies as ‘capricious’ and assumes the worst in future outcomes. As it happens, Eritrea is today on the brink of a gold rush that the government views as its lifeline and that has caused it to moderate (or at least disguise) its behaviour. The Canadian firm Nevsun Resources began production at the end of 2010, with a forecast that its Bisha mine will generate a million ounces of gold. The Australia-based Chalice Gold Mines is close behind, and nearly 30 other foreign firms are in Eritrea in the hope of cashing in on the windfall.

With the government due to break even on its investment in the mining sector by 2012, the future could hold unsettling surprises – for Eritreans, for Eritrea’s neighbours and, eventually perhaps, for the very companies that have hung tight to this point. As the regime closes in on this bonanza, it has tightened restrictions on the few international aid agencies left in the country – Norwegian Church Aid, Lutheran World Relief and the International Committee for the Red Cross – and put the United Nations on notice that its operations will be sharply curtailed after June 2011, while telling NCA and other NGOs to wind up their projects by the end of the year. It has also tightened the restrictions on diplomatic personnel based in Asmara in what appears to be a calculated move to diminish the leverage of outside powers over both its repressive policies at home and its capricious behaviour in the region.

Contesting dictatorship

Eritrea, like its neighbours to the north and east before they erupted in popular protest this year, shows none of the obvious signs of political instability, largely due to a sophisticated system of social control under which no public expression of difference or dissent is

tolerated. Many Eritreans are understandably cowed or discouraged by this. Others put up with it out of fear that cracks in Eritrea's unity heighten the risk of a loss of sovereignty to Ethiopia, an apprehension constantly stoked by the Isaias regime and given substance by Ethiopia's continuing efforts to manipulate the external Eritrean opposition. Nevertheless, popular dissatisfaction runs wide and deep as reflected in such indicators as the decline of remittances, the record outflow of refugees and asylum seekers, and the stagnation in much of the domestic economy, which is powered today by a shifting mix of diaspora 'tax' payments, loans against future mineral wealth, shady business dealings, and the semi-enslavement of much of the country's youth through open-ended conscription in the National Service (Human Rights Watch 2009). As pressure builds, questions loom: what will come next, how might a change come about, and who or what is positioned to help make it happen – or to ride the wave and steer the ship once change gets underway?

Opposition parties

The organised political opposition is based outside Eritrea, with parties and armed groups mostly headquartered in Ethiopia, and civic organisations and alternative media mainly active in Europe and North America, though they can be found across the Middle East and as far away as Australia. What opposition there is within Eritrea is invisible and difficult to measure as it either takes the form of passive resistance or ultra-clandestine organising, due to the absence of legal channels for airing grievances. The result is an appearance of calm that belies the country's structural fragility.

The core of the political opposition is the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA), the third iteration of a loose coalition of externally-based forces opposed to the EPLF/PFDJ, that was first launched in March 1999 as the Alliance of Eritrean National Forces (AENF). It began with 10 organisations and grew to 13 by 2002, when it was renamed the Eritrean National Alliance (ENA), nearly all of whose members derived from the two main branches of the liberation movement, the ELF (itself now divided among several factions, one of which carries the original name) and the EPLF. At a January 2005 conference in Addis Ababa, the Alliance was expanded again and transformed itself into the EDA, which adopted a charter that assigned weighted votes to its members, based upon size, and set up a permanent leadership structure.

Two years later, however, the EDA was paralysed by an ELF demand that its vice-chair take over as Alliance chair. In the ensuing dispute, two blocs formed. The first was comprised of self-described secular nationalists, dominated by the ELF-Revolutionary Council (ELF-RC) and a breakaway PFDJ faction, the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP). The second bloc was made up mainly of those drawn from identity-based constituencies, either religious or ethnic, or in some cases both, among which was the ELF. There were others outside these two blocs, but they were not themselves organised into a similar caucus. This rough division continues to define the Alliance today, though in 2008 the two blocs reached agreement on the EDA chair and expanded the Alliance to include several other small groups. Since then, many have been engaged in realignments and merger talks that reinforce the bifurcation that surfaced in 2007.

At the end of 2009, three secular-nationalist forces – the ELF-RC, by then reorganised as the Eritrean People's Party (EPP), the EDP, and another largely EPLF-derived faction, the Eritrean People's Movement (EPM) – combined to form the Eritrean People's Democratic Party (EPDP). In early 2010, the ELF, the Eritrean Federal Democratic Movement (EFDM) and two Islamist groups, al-Khalas and Islah, joined to form a coalition called the Eritrean Solidarity Front (ESF), dedicated to what it termed the 'restoration of

Muslim rights'. Two ethnic minority organisations, the Kunama-based DMLEK and the Afar-based RSADO, also formed a coalition – the Democratic Front of Eritrean Nationalities (DFEN) – which was joined later by a new organisation with a largely Saho constituency. This left a miscellaneous assortment of others yet to commit to one or another of the emerging political hubs.

For all the intensity of its internal struggles, however, the EDA did very little beyond providing a political umbrella for those groups determined to oust the Isaias government, failing even to agree on a strategy for doing so, or a programme to follow in the event they were successful. In 2008, the opposition website *awate.com* called it 'a dysfunctional parliament in exile'. A decade after its launch, the EDA appeared to be little more than an address for the resistance. It had no internal coherence, no substantive common programme, and few if any shared activities apart from congresses and conferences. It had no social or economic projects either, such as aid or education for the refugees in Sudan and Ethiopia, and no publications apart from a largely dormant website. Its main unifying feature was hatred for Isaias. It had taken a handful of decisions over symbolic issues – such as agreeing to accept the existing national flag – but it remained divided over such issues as whether to wage an armed or non-violent struggle and whether or not to embrace the existing constitution as a starting point for a post-Isaias legal system. It was also widely distrusted among Eritreans outside its immediate sphere of influence because of its reliance on Ethiopia. Nevertheless, the EDA was as an important point of intersection for what there was of an organised opposition and an arena of struggle for giving sharper definition to it. This has highlighted its primary division between the highland Tigrinya-speaking Christians who make up half the population and dominate both the government and the EPDP and the lowland Muslims from Eritrea's eight ethnic minorities that constitute the other half of the population and the social base for most of other EDA members.

Those making up the two armed EDA caucuses – the ESF and the DFEN – draw membership from particular ethnic and confessional constituencies and generally operate within the areas where they live. The four identified with the former take their support from the Beni Amer, one of Eritrea's largest minorities, who inhabit much of the Gash-Barka plains and the mountainous area of northern Barka, as well as swathes of eastern Sudan, where the largest Eritrean refugee camps are sited. During the independence war, this was the base area of the ELF, which broke up in the 1980s after being driven out of Eritrea by the EPLF and its Tigrayan allies. It is familiar territory to leaders of the ELF faction that today dominates the ESF bloc (the 'ELF'). For their part, the Eritrean Islamic Reform Movement (Islah) and the Eritrean Islamic Party for Justice and Development (al-Khalas) derive from what was once called Eritrean Islamic Jihad (patronised by Osama bin Laden while he was in Sudan), but whose ethnic base among the Beni Amer is as important as its religious orientation. The fourth, the Eritrean Federal Democratic Movement (EFDm), has its base among the mostly Muslim Bilen from the area around the city of Keren and is principally concerned with minority rights.

The DFEN bloc consists mainly of the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK), whose social base lies along Eritrea's northwestern border with Ethiopia and overlaps with Ethiopia rather than Sudan and the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organisation (RSADO), whose base is primarily on the coastal plains stretching south from Massawa and the Dahlak Archipelago to Djibouti. They were joined in 2010 by the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of the Eritrean Saho (NDFLES), whose membership is drawn from the Saho minority in Eritrea's eastern highlands and in northeastern Ethiopia. All rely heavily on support from Ethiopia, though they draw from constituencies with genuine grievances for which there are no legal political channels to seek redress.

All three reserve the right to ‘self-determination’, which most interpret as an option to secede from Eritrea should they choose, and which raises the spectre of the creation of Somali-style mini-states in the event the centre collapses and the opposition were unable to offer a coherent, unified alternative. They are also the ones most closely identified with acts of armed resistance.

On balance, despite numerous setbacks, 2010 saw a lessening of the rampant sectarianism in the opposition camp. For its part, Ethiopia announced a significant shift in its policy toward Eritrean refugees, who by then numbered 60,000, by allowing them to live outside rural camps so long as they lacked a criminal record and were able to sustain themselves financially (UNHCR 2010), and Addis Ababa University set aside 100 places for Eritrean students. These moves were intended to damp down the hostility between the two peoples and signalled Ethiopia’s decision to strengthen its ties with – and control over – the EDA, by giving its members, with the exception of the EPDP, whose headquarters remained in Europe and which continued to push for non-violent alternative means of struggle, freer rein to recruit and operate, even while stepping up its support for them. In a speech in April 2011 to the Ethiopian Parliament, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi explicitly committed his government to regime change in Asmara.

Civil society

Many Eritreans distrust all these parties, which are led by people who have vied among themselves to dominate the national movement since the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, the younger generation, many of whose members have spent time outside Eritrea and experienced democratic societies firsthand, has declined to join EDA affiliates in significant numbers, focusing instead on building human rights organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or simply tracking the situation through the numerous Eritrean websites and engaging on an individual basis. This trend too needs to be mapped and treated as an integral part of the emerging alternative.

Eritrea’s civil society blossomed in the late 1940s, during the second half of Britain’s interim administration, which is often described by Eritreans as their ‘golden age’. That decade saw the formation of independent political parties, trade unions and newspapers representing a broad spectrum of Eritrea’s diverse population. It also saw the establishment of Islamic institutions, like the Supreme Islamic Council, as religious identity began to coincide with political identity during the contest over Eritrea’s future political status.

Ethiopia’s suppression of Eritrea’s civil society began immediately after the imposition of the UN-sponsored Federation in 1952. Within two years, the most militant trade unions were suppressed. Eritrea’s main independent newspapers were closed. And independent political parties were harassed and then prohibited. Over the next decade, the territory’s cities were rocked by frequent protests and demonstrations, with the largest in March 1958, during a massive three-day general strike that drew as many as 80,000 people. The government’s violent response marked the death knell for civil society, as all trade unions were subsequently banned, together with a wide range of other organisations, leaving only a handful of faith-based associations.

Over the next three decades, the independence movement sought to mobilise its supporters at home and in the diaspora, particularly after it split into ELF and EPLF in the early 1970s. The former set up General Unions of Peasants, Workers, Women and Students, while the latter built ‘National Unions’ of the same constituencies, all of which were appendages of the parent movements. Diaspora Eritreans also established organisations, such as Eritreans for Liberation in North America and Eritreans for Liberation in Europe, but they

were soon incorporated into the fronts' networks and placed under their control. After the Derg seized power in Ethiopia in 1974, it, too, established mass organisations in Eritrea, but few Eritreans participated. Thus, there was a significant hiatus in Eritrea's experience of autonomous civil society prior to independence.

In 1989, as the end of the liberation war neared, the EPLF – by then the only armed force operating within the country – abruptly dissolved its national unions, taking many by surprise in what later appeared to be an effort to demobilise political organisations that might seek an independent role. After independence, the EPLF and its successor, the PFDJ, revived all but the peasants' union, turning them all into service branches of the new state with no advocacy role and no control over leaderships or programmes (the peasants were not reorganised on their own out of concern they might develop into a self-consciousness interest group at a time when the leadership had determined that small-scale, subsistence farming – much like pastoralism – was a drag on development and needed to be phased out). Several former fighters started new NGOs – notably the Regional Centre for Human Rights and the Eritrean Women War Veterans Association (Bana) – but the government quickly shut them down, claiming they duplicated the efforts of party-led unions (Kibreab 2009).

Meanwhile, new organisations arose in the diaspora, ranging from NGOs and professional associations to websites. New community centres also developed independently of the PFDJ in urban areas with high concentrations of Eritreans, providing cultural and language programmes along with other social and economic services. However, they, like the NGOs and the new media, became contested terrain during the political crackdown, and many were forced to close after 2001.

From this point forward, much of the growth in diaspora civil society took the form of rights-based organisations and advocacy groups. Among the latter were the London-based Citizens for Democratic Rights in Eritrea (CIDRiE), which brought together Eritrean intellectuals in Europe and North America in 2009 as a sort of global think tank and advocacy formation; the Eritrean Law Society in North America, launched in 2010 to promote the rule of law and assist Eritrean victims of human rights abuses; the South Africa-based Eritrean Movement for Human Rights and Democracy (EMDHR), which arose in 2002 among students sent abroad for advanced study and was fed by a steady flow of refugees who made their way south over the following decade; and Eritrean Global Solidarity, born out of a network of mostly US- and Canada-based civic organisations in 2007. Numerous small rights-based watchdog organisations and advocacy groups also appeared with specialised missions, ranging from the UK-based Eritreans for Human Rights and Democracy (2001) and Release Eritrea (2004), which focused on civic rights and religious persecution, respectively, to the Association of Disabled Eritreans in France; the Association of Eritrean Asylum Seekers in Stockholm and the Swiss Association for Eritrean Children, to name just a few. A Sweden-based Network of Eritrean Civil Societies-Europe brought together a dozen groups at the start of the decade, and that is just the beginning.

The alternative media

One measure of the energy and dynamism within the opposition, if not its numerical or organisational strength, is the vibrancy of the external Eritrean media, seen in its creative and original, if at times overly polemical, reporting; and the frequency and geographical diversity of hits on both independent and oppositional websites, and the spirited engagement of Eritreans in debates on them. The three most active websites to generate original material have been Awate, Asmarino, and Assenna, but there are others that post articles,

opinions and diatribes on the party in power, as well as on one another, and attract wide followings, not only in the diaspora but also, and often at considerable risk to the web surfer, within Eritrea.

However, the medium that reaches the most Eritreans within the country is radio. Several externally based broadcast initiatives have come and gone in recent years, including Asmarino's Voice of Delina, which carried programming by the South Africa-based EMDHR but had to close for lack of resources. Radio Erena ('Our Eritrea') has been broadcasting in Tigrinya via satellite from Paris since 2010, with the support of Reporters Without Borders, and is also carried over the internet by Asmarino. There is also an EDA operation, *wagheta*, that broadcasts in short wave out of Ethiopia, using Ethiopian facilities, and there is a part-time station called Radio Asena that puts out programmes in both Tigrinya and Arabic. A new station is slated to go on air from the Netherlands, and there are numerous Eritrean community-generated programmes broadcast locally and regionally in North America and Europe.

Print also remains an important medium, both because it provides an opportunity for in-depth critiques of past mistakes and transgressions, and detailed visions and programmes for the future, and because it preserves and passes on Eritrea's rich cultural and historical legacy. The most important vehicle for this outside Eritrea is the Red Sea Press, in Trenton, NJ, which, over the past 25 years, has brought out close to 150 titles related to Eritrea, and which continues to put out new titles, now digitised and printed on an on-demand basis, to ensure continued availability. This, together with the broadcast and online media, helps to keep a dispersed and discouraged population engaged with its homeland, and sustains a broad constituency for change, even as it nurtures a democratic culture in which a new politics can take shape and grow.

Prospects for the future

The only certainty is that Isaias is not forever. Should anything render him incapable of ruling, such as new health problems or personal injury, a scramble among those seeking to succeed him would quickly ensue, as there is no mechanism in place for succession. In the absence of a coherent opposition that could command the popular support to manage a transition peacefully – and neutralise the armed forces as an independent actor – the most likely prospect for the coming years is instability, possibly involving political violence rising to the level of civil war or devolving into a version of warlordism that would manifest itself in persistent localised conflicts. But we cannot rule out the possibility of a popular uprising that would thrust forward fresh leaders in the manner of those societies experiencing sudden upheavals this year in North Africa and the Middle East. In Eritrea's case, though, the driving force would have to come from within the military, as civil society has been so thoroughly gutted, and because so many young people, who might otherwise take the lead, are in the National Service.

In the absence of such an uprising, we are likely to see an escalation of low-level conflict involving Ethiopia-backed insurgents in the western lowlands and coastal plains, but also extending into the slope areas where much current mineral exploration is underway. This will not threaten the regime itself, but could disrupt mining operations and transport and slow the flow of mineral-derived revenue to the Asmara government; and, in so doing, add a fresh note of instability to the political environment. The placement of landmines along heavily travelled roads has been a hallmark of such groups, which enjoy tacit support from local populations, which rarely participate in such actions but do not assist the government in identifying perpetrators either.

On balance, it is clear that substantive threats with any chance of success will only come from within the country, where there is a growing disaffection within the state bureaucracy and in the armed forces, especially among the young conscripts, whose terms of service have been repeatedly extended, leaving thousands under arms or in menial jobs for a decade or more. A smoothly executed *coup d'état* is unlikely (though not impossible), due both to disunity among top officers and officials and to the web of security mechanisms set up to prevent such moves. Another possibility is an assassination attempt on Isaias that, if successful, would trigger a power struggle among the four most powerful military commanders. Against this backdrop, the main long-term threat to the unity of the country arises from the reinvigorated ethnic and religious identities that are a defining feature of the alliances developing within the armed political opposition, and which open the door for the penetration of new, more virulent forms of extremism from outside. Among the possible short-term (one-to-two-year) scenarios for Eritrea, three stand out:

- (1) The situation remains as it is, with the regime continuing to borrow against future mining revenue while presiding over an ever-tightening security state as the economy continues to decline. Regional relations remain tense but not explosive, despite South Sudan's emergence as a new state, and Eritrean opposition groups, internally divided, are unable to take advantage of the situation. The US prevails on Ethiopia not to intervene further and compensates it by strengthening its defences and assisting further in stabilising the beleaguered Transitional Federal Government in Somalia. In 15–18 months, Eritrea breaks even on its initial capitalisation in the mining sector and either reinvests in its badly eroded social and educational services, and demobilises large sections of its armed forces, or it goes on a spending spree to ramp up the capacity of its armed forces, after which it resumes its aggressive regional behaviour with renewed swagger. Either is possible, though experience suggests the latter is the more likely of the two courses.
- (2) Eritrean opposition groups, acting with Ethiopian support, escalate their attacks inside Eritrea, disrupting exploration and production at key mining sites. People in these areas provide varying degrees of support for the opposition forces (intelligence, food and water, temporary shelter), triggering intensified counterinsurgency measures against Muslims and ethnic minorities in these areas. This heightens tensions within the Eritrean armed forces and the wider society, which either triggers mutinies within the armed forces leading to some form of uprising and a rolling coup against Isaias, or Isaias, if he recognises the threat early enough, takes the country back to war with Ethiopia in order to regain control of the internal situation and then initiates a brutal purge of real and suspected opponents.
- (3) Isaias is incapacitated, setting off a crisis of succession. There is a violent struggle among the top generals, while Eritrean opposition forces increase insurgent activity. This ends with a 'palace coup' by lower-ranking officers who issue a call for a ceasefire, following it with a declaration of a state of emergency, while they try to draw together the various armed and unarmed political factions for a conference to establish a transition to national elections and constitutional rule.

Any one of these is possible, as are further variations. Among them: Isaias is imprisoned and held for trial, or other states intervene to halt the fighting – and shape the outcome. Among the least likely: Isaias steps aside voluntarily or dramatically changes his approach to governance and regional relations.

However this plays out, Eritrea appears headed for a political crisis that may or may not be violent but that will substantially alter or replace the present regime. For a transition to be peaceful and democratic, involving both the external opposition and elements of the existing state and armed forces, the opposition would need to achieve a much higher degree of organisational and political coherence than is now the case; as well as a far greater degree of public trust among Eritreans within the country, based on the articulation of a transitional programme that insiders and outsiders could buy into, including plans for a unity government (with people from the existing state and its armed forces) to serve as a caretaker for that process.

Above all, Eritreans need reassurance that a peaceful and democratic transition is possible. Given their experience, it will take a lot to convince them to take risks to make it happen – certainly more than mechanistic formulas based on an abstract faith that democracy cures everything, even as those propounding such a philosophy appear to contradict it in their own actions. Moreover, to rally people out of their cynicism and lethargy, would-be leaders need to articulate what they propose to do on the issues that most directly affect a population that has been staggering under the weight of this regime and the decade-long war-footing.

Questions abound: In the event of a constitutional conference as part of the transition, for example, what would be the starting point – the 1952 Constitution, the 1997 Constitution, some amalgam of both? What do the various political players and interest groups propose be amended and how? For example, how do they propose dealing with the critical issues of language and land ownership, the limits of executive authority, the triggers for a national state of emergency? What economic principles do they propose for restructuring the society, what role do they see for the public sector, what will they do with those sectors now controlled by the state or the PFDJ (or in some cases, both), and how will they compensate national service conscripts for years of underpaid work? Of utmost importance, how will a post-Isaias regime guarantee the rights of ethnic minorities and other structurally disadvantaged and disempowered groups without emasculating the central state and leaving the country subject to either external manipulation or disintegration?

A viable political alternative must have not only a compelling programme on minority rights but also a track record of respecting them in its own operations and structures. The rise of small, armed ethnic parties – whether or not encouraged by Ethiopia – is a response to the lived experience of domination, from personal insult and cultural chauvinism to discrimination and systematic exploitation and exclusion in the economy and politics. Inevitably, demagogues and external forces will exploit such popular dissatisfaction. But those who would counter them must come up with programmes that undercut their appeal so they can be isolated and marginalised. Only a demonstration of both sincerity and effectiveness will accomplish this, as Eritrean politics are replete with examples of soaring rhetoric and unfulfilled promises.

These and other questions do not need to be settled, but options need to be put out to stimulate public discussion and to demonstrate that those who propose to rule a post-Isaias Eritrea have the imagination and the sensitivity to do so in a manner that speaks to the deepest-held needs of the Eritrean people. Nothing would be more constructive than a vigorous public debate on these issues among leading opposition figures – one that not only showcased the positions of those involved but that demonstrated their capacity to carry out a debate without resorting to violence or coercion to determine the outcome. The people need hard evidence that those who propose to lead will be different from those they have today, not only in what they say but in what they do and how they do it.

Eritrea has a long way to go to achieve political stability and the democratic institutions to sustain it, as well as the political culture to nurture it over the long term. Widening the circle of those discussing this – and making it far more transparent – is the most urgently needed step today. New leadership is just as important in this process as new ideas.

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