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Everything has changed, but nothing has changed – Assessing the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea

One key indicator of the status of the relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia today and the conditions within Eritrea itself in the wake of the July 2018 peace declaration is the flow of refugees out of that country. Has it slowed since the peace agreement? No. Have refugees in Ethiopia begun to return to Eritrea? No. On the contrary, the declaration of peace and the opening of the two countries' common border triggered record outflows. I begin and end my assessment with this unsettling phenomenon.

²⁴ Interview with TPLF Executive Committee member, Mekelle March 2019.

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Since 2012, I've travelled to 19 countries in Europe, North, South & Central America, Africa and the Middle East to interview Eritrean refugees on why they left their homeland, how they got out and what happened on their journeys. Most of you have heard such stories from friends and relatives. You may have a powerful one yourself, so I probably don't have to tell you how traumatic this has been for thousands of people.

But I bring it up now, because I'm convinced that it's essential to heal the deep psychological wounds that many people carry—what health professionals call PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)—not only to lay the groundwork for a healthy society but to build a vibrant, inclusive movement to achieve that goal. This trauma is a major obstacle to that—it cripples some people's capacity to act for change, it twists that of others into poisonous anger, and it divides people from each other as effectively as religion, ethnicity or politics.

Each story is different, but they carry common threads: The majority I have interviewed, if we exclude children, fled from some form of political or religious persecution or from the **fear** of it based on something they said or did—fear being the operative feature; most of the more than 700 refugees I've spoken with said they were convinced that nothing they could do would change things, which is both a reflection of the reality they faced and their own trauma.

Surprisingly, many said they would go back again in a minute, but only if there was genuine, deep-going change. When I asked what that meant, they talked about getting more control over their lives and livelihoods; being able to help aging parents and afford to get married and have children; having a society of rules they could depend on, and not having to be afraid all the time. The concept of fear and uncertainty came up over and over. This is a culture where talking about one's fears, pain, and grief is not easy, but doing so in a supportive context is a necessary step in getting beyond them to lead healthy lives and build a healthy society. I urge attention to this no matter what side of the political arguments you are on.

Little has changed in Eritrea since the declaration of peace last July to change any of this, which is why the outflow of refugees not only continues but accelerates. In the first month after the border opened, nearly 16,000 people registered with the UN refugee agency (UNHCR). Many were women with children who hoped to join husbands already abroad, though more than 3,000 were unmarried youths of national service age. This record outflow continued through December but briefly decreased after the two crossing points in central Tigray at Zalemessa and Rama were closed to vehicles and border guards began checking people's IDs. By February, the numbers had climbed again, however, this time with a greater share of young people, using more than a dozen mostly unmonitored crossing points. When I spoke with the head of the Ethiopian refugee agency, ARRA, in March, they were registering 300 new arrivals each day.

Assessing the current context

Nearly ten months since peace was declared, the outlook for the future is laced with uncertainty within both countries and in the region—a jumble of promising initiatives, dangerous trends and unresolved crises. So many balls are in the air, it is difficult to know where to begin, but here's a stab at highlighting the main issues.

The Eritrea-Ethiopia peace process

Though progress on the peace agreement seems to have stalled, it continues to build informally among mid-level civilian and military officials and the people on both sides of the border, and there are bilateral teams dealing with specific issues. But there are also problems and pitfalls that could derail it.

There has been little institutionalization at the formal level, though sources in Addis Ababa say progress is likely soon on such things as border controls, customs, and port access.

In my view, the fact there has been no move to demarcate the border yet is a good thing, as it leaves open the possibility of minor adjustments to reflect the reality on the ground once relations are normalized without derailing the process. I would expect small swaps around the Irob and Tserona areas before this is over.

But avoiding demarcation altogether would be extremely dangerous; uncertainty itself is dangerous, given the history of the dispute and the continuing tensions. A specific timeline for demarcation is needed, whenever it is to take place. Otherwise, we're left with an *ad hoc* arrangement very like we had in the 1990s.

Here's what I worry about:

Eritrea closed two of the four crossings to vehicular traffic in January—Rama and Zalemessa, both in central Tigray—and two more in recent weeks. There were several reasons for the first move, but the impact was to curb the petty trade with Tigray and take charge of currency exchanges, over which Eritrea had lost control.

There's been no follow-up to the impromptu meeting at the Om Hager/Humera crossing between President Isaias Afwerki and Tigray's President Debretsion Gebremichael in January, and there is no prospect of a breakthrough in sight. This is worrisome, as Isaias has had meetings with the leaders of both the Amhara and Oromo regional states. But I do not expect progress on this until Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed makes it happen.

Anti-*woyane* rhetoric in Eritrean official media shows no sign of letting up, and last month Isaias was reported to have told his top commanders to be on the alert for a TPLF incursion into Eritrea, as far-fetched as that sounds.

There is a pattern here that's impossible to miss: Isaias is still fighting old battles while he pursues a broader agenda in and with Ethiopia. These trends do not bode well for a stable peace. One possibility is that he is setting up an excuse to claim national service cannot be scaled back because there is still a national security risk.

The situation within Ethiopia

Despite some government claims to the contrary, inter-ethnic violence, often spontaneous, continues to erupt with devastating consequences, at the same time that organized ethnic nationalists are growing in influence, particularly in the Amhara and Oromo states:

One of the worst recent outbreaks of inter-ethnic violence took place in the Gedeo and Guji zones of southern Ethiopia where up to a million were displaced in 2018. In March, eight months after the crisis erupted, the UN reported there were still over 620,000 IDPs and enormous difficulty in gaining access to them.

The federal government at first downplayed the conflict and only acted after international and Ethiopian media gave extensive coverage to the crisis and the State of Tigray sent Gedeo EB5 million in humanitarian assistance.

Other areas experiencing inter-ethnic violence include the Moyale region near the Kenya border, the Wollega region of western Oromiya, the southern zone of Beni-Shangul, the Harrar region between Oromiya and the Somali state, and the Qimant district of Amhara.

Political clashes also took place recently on the outskirts of Addis between *qeeroo* militants from Oromiya and militant Addis youth over a decision by the appointed Oromo mayor to give priority for leases on newly constructed apartments to Oromos from outside the city over residents already in the queue.

That clash put PM Abiy in a squeeze between his Oromo roots and his all-Ethiopia vision.

Meanwhile, pan-Ethiopianist Berhanu Nega had to cancel a public forum in Bahir Dahr when Amhara youth protested his insufficiently Amhara nationalist platform.

Both incidents highlight the rising force of ethnic nationalism. In the Amhara state this is manifested in violent conflict around Qimant and claims on two districts of Tigray—Wolkeit and Raya/Kobo—with the threat from some nationalists to go to war with Tigray.

To summarize: Unrest continues in many parts of Ethiopia, while ultra-nationalist forces continue to gain strength ahead of the 2020 elections. Isaias's actions in this regard have not been designed to promote stability, especially when it comes to Tigray. And Abiy has not been putting enough time or attention into dealing with this.

Regional Issues

Throughout this year, Abiy's main preoccupation has been promoting peace and regional integration, focusing mainly on a three-way alliance among Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia:

In March, for example, President Kenyatta of Kenya came to Addis to meet Abiy, who took him straight to Asmara for talks with Isaias on regional peace and stability.

The next day Abiy took Isaias to Juba for talks with South Sudan officials on peace and regional security.

Two days later Abiy hosted Somali President "Farmajoo" and whisked him off to Nairobi for talks on Kenya-Somalia border issues; a week after that he hosted the Somaliland leader, but he was unable to get him and Farmajoo to sit down together.

Throughout this diplomatic blitz, Isaias went along with the bilateral contacts but refused to engage with IGAD or the AU, both of which he begrudges for past acts against Eritrea; more importantly, I think, he sees them as institutions too big and too diverse to dominate until he has solidified a sub-regional base

In pursuit of this, he has worked with Abiy to include the extremely weak Federal Republic of Somalia in their partnership while ignoring Djibouti and Sudan.

So, what's this about?

Some reflections on where this is headed

Some Eritreans interpret this as a new version of Ethiopian expansionism in which Isaias is giving Abiy control of Eritrea. I take the opposite view: Regional integration is a key objective for Abiy, but the way it is unfolding reflects the long-term strategic interests of Isaias. Each may be using the other.

Building a sub-regional alliance on as shaky a foundation as these three countries provide is either the height of hubris or a crafty long-range strategy for establishing a core alliance from which to engage with stronger states and other regional bodies. My guess based on Isaias's behaviour over the past five decades is that it is the latter—a well-thought-out strategy. I also think that Abiy is aware of Isaias's intent but is okay with it so long as it meshes with his own vision of an integrated region whose member states eschew conflict.

Abiy's hope is that economic integration will blunt inclinations toward conflict between states by giving each one a stake in maintaining the peace. The big question is whether it will also dampen conflict within these states and whether it can survive as a project if it does not. Other such undertakings in Africa, the Middle East or Europe do not provide a basis for optimism. A comparable example would be the ill-fated United Arab Republic (UAR) that "united" Egypt, the Gaza Strip and Syria, but only lasted from 1958 to 1961 when a coup in Syria caused it to collapse.

And while this is playing out, Ethiopia is in the midst of its own transition from an authoritarian, one-party state, dominated by a single ethnic group (which it has been for over a century, though the dominant groups changed), into a more open, democratic one—a state in which regional power has also shifted dramatically, even as conflict within and between regions has intensified.

Several scenarios appear possible:

1) The continued degradation of the ruling Ethiopian Revolutionary Democratic Party, EPRDF, as a functional coalition could end with its reconfiguration into a slimmed-down party based on individual membership that replaces the "one-region, one vote" structure it has today. This may be desirable in the long-term, but it could have a destabilizing impact if implemented too hastily.

Under such conditions, the TPLF might either be excluded or could exclude itself and seek alliances with other regional parties, like the Afars, or with parties completely outside EPRDF.

And what remains of the other two core EPRDF members, the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP) and the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) in the face of internal challenges from ultra-nationalists in their states, might constitute the core of a slimmed-down, pan-Ethiopia EPRDF allied with elements from smaller states and pan-Ethiopia parties.

EPRDF could also give way to a new formation altogether that engages in a free-for-all, after which the winners negotiate a new European-style coalition.

Or, worst case, Ethiopia could fragment into competing mini-states, a number of which would face internal conflicts as well as conflicts among themselves.

A 4th alternative would be for EPRDF to regain its balance in present form, bring TPLF back into the fold (for now) and get through the 2020 elections before restructuring the political arena and with it the Constitution; that is not out of the question if the only other option is chaos.

Bringing TPLF back into a stable, if short-term, relation with Abiy and EPRDF would provide a basis for bringing Eritrea into a dialogue with the Tigray state under the auspices of the federal government.

It would also strengthen the federal government's capacity to address internal security issues and to pursue and consolidate other regional initiatives by engaging Tigray in the efforts, especially those involving domestic conflicts.

This is what I think would be wisest for the short-term and the best for Eritrea.

And then there is Eritrea, which has so far shown no sign of reform. This in itself is not surprising. The regime has never been quick to act, and it is clear they had not prepared for the outbreak of peace. They had no master plan when it was achieved, and they don't appear to have the human capacity to meet all the challenges and opportunities peace brings—not the diplomats, not the negotiators, not the skilled managers, not even the skilled workers to carry out the plans they will eventually come up with.

I do not see how they can avoid making some reductions in the national service and loosening the tight controls over the economy, if they want to slow the outflow of skilled manpower, let alone entice members of the diaspora with necessary skills to come back to help. Such changes are also needed to attract foreign investment and stimulate trade, and they're a precondition for curbing the flood of refugees leaving the country, which, if sustained at present levels, will eventually incapacitate the state itself and undo the gains made so far.

Against this backdrop, here are two questions I am left with:

Plans to improve and expand the main roads and port facilities set the stage for a major challenge to the continuation of national service as now practiced by offering a unique opportunity for transitioning to a wage-based labor force. This is a one-time opportunity. If not taken, it will not come around again. Will the government seize this chance and take the first steps toward reform?

What impact will the still unfolding uprising in Sudan have on the Eritrean population—and the military? It's too early to tell, but Eritrea is now bounded on two sides by countries in the midst of major transitions away from authoritarianism. Will this increase the pressure for change or cause the government to dig in its heels further and resist it?

Meanwhile, more refugees are staying in Ethiopia, due to the risks of onward migration and to the hope for change at home—and new refugee-driven initiatives are surfacing. On my last trip, I met members of an association of university students who tutor other refugees for entry exams to Ethiopian institutions and provide services to their community. This work, by design, prepares Eritreans to return home to help rebuild when circumstances and opportunity align. They at least are pointed in the right direction—home. All they need is change there and they will head back right away.