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2 The EPLF/PFDJ experience: how it shapes Eritrea's regional strategy

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Introduction

Power in Eritrea is exercised through layers that are increasingly opaque as one approaches the centre, like a set of Russian *matryoshka* dolls nesting one inside the other. An exploration of this phenomenon as it developed within the circle that now rules Eritrea will shed light on the way the country's 'acting' but unelected president, the former guerrilla commander Isaias Afwerki, governs and will help us to understand the way he and his circle act to extend Eritrea's influence across the Horn of Africa.[1] The two are intimately linked and reflect a sophisticated approach to force multiplication that uses small, disciplined cores to manipulate larger, more loosely organized bodies in order to achieve political ends. Organization, not ideology, is the governing principle and effectiveness is the determining value – a feature that is often misunderstood and incorrectly characterized by observers.

Although it is clear that ultimate authority in all political matters in Eritrea today lies with President Isaias himself, it is hard to pin down how specific decisions are made. This is the case even if one is on the inside of the ruling liberation movement, once known as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) but now calling itself the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), or the People's Front for short. Part of the difficulty is that power is exercised through alternating conduits as Isaias shifts among instrumentalities and individuals to carry out particular tasks and policies. It is also complicated by his propensity for moving people from position

1 Isaias assumed his present position as head of state when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, which he commanded, seized control of the country in 1991. He was confirmed by a transitional national assembly set up in the mid-1990s from the liberation front's 75-member central council and a similar number of party-designated representatives from regional assemblies. But national elections are yet to be held, the ruling front has itself not had a congress since February 1994 and there has been no move to reconfirm Isaias's appointment by any other institutional body.

to position within both the People's Front and the state (much as Emperor Haile Selassie did with the Ethiopian nobility in the 1950s and 1960s) and for removing officials from active duty by 'freezing' them in a peculiar status in which they continue to be paid but are not permitted to do their former jobs or to seek alternative work. These practices are designed to prevent the accumulation of power not only by particular individuals but also in geographical or institutional bases.

But the main problem in charting the exercise of power in post-independence Eritrea is that Isaias operates through organizational and political mechanisms that are nested one inside the other and hidden from all but those who are inducted into them. This chapter retraces the development of this pattern, Isaias's *modus operandi*, as it is present in nearly every political relationship or project in which he is involved. By then applying this pattern to Eritrea's regional relations, it demonstrates that the country's foreign policy, as erratic as it may sometimes seem to the uninitiated observer, is guided by identifiable principles and predictable outcomes.

Liberation: the formative years

President Isaias has worked through front organizations from his earliest involvement in politics, at secondary school in Asmara in the 1960s. There he was part of an illegal but officially tolerated group set up to promote Eritrean culture, then banned by the emperor's provincial administrators. Ethiopian authorities knew about the organization but tolerated it, as they viewed it more as a minor irritant than a threat. However, this semi-underground cultural organization housed a secret cell that was dedicated to building a militant nationalist movement. It provided a protective buffer between the political core and the authorities (Connell, 2004: 25–68).

Isaias's political involvement at Haile Selassie University in Addis Abba followed the same pattern: He and others who had come south from Asmara participated in the quasi-legal student movement there but maintained strict secrecy and discipline in a clandestine party that operated inside the larger movement. He carried this approach with him when he joined the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1965 with a plan to challenge that organization's ethnic and regional warlord structure from within; and he took it to the new Popular Liberation Forces, the precursor of the EPLF, when he and others broke with the ELF in 1969. This was not

long after he had returned from China, where one of the most important lessons he learned from his political training was the centrality for any revolutionary project of a vanguard party. Certainly he was not alone in this, nor always the one at the forefront, as the threat to political activists in these environments was very real and the secrecy they practised was adaptive. But whatever the rationale, the experience was seminal in shaping the organizational and political strategy he brought to the independence movement in the 1970s.

In fact, the EPLF's consolidation as a unified coherent political and military force at the start of that decade – stitched together from three breakaway groups from the ELF, of widely differing political orientation – took place under the direct guidance of a newly formed clandestine party, the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). It had been launched in 1971 by Isaias and a handful of his closest comrades and in the 1980s was renamed the Eritrean Socialist Party. The EPRP ran the EPLF throughout its existence up to the point when the front seized power in Eritrea in 1991 and began a transition from resistance to governance. This experience was seminal to Isaias's political development. Understanding it is essential to grasping how he rules (Connell, 2004: 139–69).

The use of onion-like layers of organizational disguise was the means by which Isaias and his colleagues unified the three former ELF fractions into the Eritrean People's Liberation Forces and then, after their organizational congress in 1977, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. They accomplished this by the consolidation of the leadership, which at its core was simply the leadership of the EPRP without identifying itself as such, and by the development of ideological unity among the fighters via an intensive political indoctrination process led by clandestine party cadres operating within the new force. Those who held out were eliminated or arrested – some were held for years in primitive prisons similar to those in use for dissidents today – during two major purges before the congress. The first was targeted at critics from the left, identified as the *menqa* (Tigrinya for bats, those who move about at night), the second at the *yamin* (Arabic, [those coming from] the right).

This mixture of infiltration and indoctrination from below was the strategy the EPRP intended to use in a protracted merger it proposed to the ELF in the late 1970s. The ELF leaders no doubt grasped this because they had a secret party of their own, the Eritrean Labour Party, and therefore resisted in that form. The result of this standoff was renewed civil war in

1980–81 in which the ELF was eliminated as a force in Eritrea, although it lived on outside Eritrea through various offshoots.

The EPRP went on to guide the EPLF throughout the 1970s and most of the 1980s, managing the visible structures of the front, both its non-military departments and its fighting units, through a network of disciplined cadres and a hidden leadership. The EPRP Central Committee was the EPLF Politburo, with a single exception (the late Mohammed Siad Barre). EPRP congresses were convened secretly ahead of the two EPLF congresses (1977 and 1987) so that programmes could be drafted and agendas drawn up for the leadership in advance of the open sessions. All major policy decisions in this period were imposed on the front after being taken by the party. It was under Isaias's direct control even as he acted the part of the second in command of the front in public behind the EPLF's general secretary Romedan Mohamed Nur, who was for all practical purposes a figurehead.

There was a major power struggle in the party and the front in the mid-1980s, known as the 'Three Privileges Campaign'. This was a Cultural Revolution-style crusade in which Isaias appealed to mid-level cadres to heap shame on their leaders for drinking, womanizing and using their positions to secure material advantages. After weakening his political rivals, he brought three generals into the party and front leadership, installing them on the EPRP's Central Committee and, as a direct consequence, adding them to an expanded EPLF Politburo that was finally under his overt leadership. Today, they are among the most powerful people in the country. But in terms of behavioural patterns, what is illuminating is that the campaign itself was a dress rehearsal for the 2001 purge that was conducted along much the same lines and that completed Isaias's seizure of unchallenged power in both the PFDJ and the state. In this respect, it was the first phase of a two-part *coup d'état* from within.

The restructuring of the EPLF at the end of the 1980s and the introduction of large-scale military conscription signified the start of the transition from resistance to governance. It was under way in earnest after the dramatic EPLF battlefield victory at Afabet in March 1988 and gathered momentum through the final battle outside Asmara in April 1991. During this time, the EPLF's armed forces grew to nearly 100,000 men and women, even as the content of political indoctrination shifted from egalitarian internationalist to fervently nationalist (Connell, 1997: 321–4, 331–3). This was also the point at which Isaias unilaterally froze the operations of the clandestine party, then calling itself the Eritrean Socialist Party, although

he continued to meet with its top leadership in secret until the front's transitional congress in 1994.

Meanwhile, the EPLF's non-military departments were reorganized in preparation for their absorption into the new state, officials were moved around and the mass organizations of women, workers, peasant farmers, and youth and students were suspended. This last, coupled with the acceleration of military conscription, was carried out mainly to focus the front's energy, attention and resources on ending the war. But it also provided a means to dismantle the front's internal political structures ahead of the effort to rebuild them in new forms and under a reorganized leadership in the new state – that is, to marginalize Isaias's rivals and to position a new generation to take their place.

From resistance to governance

From this point on, the state became the main instrument of rule. A restructured EPLF, now called the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, was reduced to the role of an implementing body with specialized functions, particularly in the economy but also in monitoring capacity and behaviour at the base of society. In this regard, it became more a mechanism of social control than the EPLF had been, while the state took on many of the functions the front had fulfilled during the war years. However, there were parallel channels within both state and front that offered Isaias options for implementing political decisions or mobilizing public opinion and action and for checking each institution's influence and power in society at large.

Today, Eritrea appears not to have a structured party within a party, but that in itself proves little, as the party that ran the liberation front throughout the 1970s and 1980s was not obvious either. Instead, what one sees from the outside are the effects of organized, clandestine decision-making, from which can extrapolated that now, as then, there is an organized force managing both the PFDJ and the state. It may not be a formal, named party with tiered internal leadership structures, periodic congresses and a body of trained, like-minded cadres, but it is obvious that the exercise of power through hidden mechanisms that operate through false fronts is still the rule and that the visible political institutions in Eritrea are little more than a façade.

The formal structure of the state is composed of an executive branch with its various ministries and departments; a legislative branch centred on the National Assembly and having its counterparts at the regional and local levels; and a judiciary consisting of an elaborate tiered court system at the top of which is the High Court in Asmara. This is paralleled in the ruling PFDJ in a pyramid-style power structure in which the upper levels are ostensibly elected by and accountable to the tiers just below them and, ultimately, to the general population. Much as was the case with the EPLF during the independence war, the party convenes periodic congresses that elect a central council to act between congresses on behalf of the whole, and this in turn elects an executive committee to manage the party's day-to-day affairs. But, as with the EPLF, this organization has been little more than a decoration: Decisions have consistently flowed downwards through these tiers rather than upwards from the base. And, for that matter, the PFDJ does not even pretend a democratic process exists; it has not convened a congress since February 1994, when it was first installed. The reality is that these institutions have never functioned as seats of power in the sense of originating decisions or policies, or holding others accountable for decisions or policies. Their function instead has been as implementers and enforcers of decisions made elsewhere.

What counts in post-independence Eritrea are the informal channels. Among the most important are:

- Appointees in the President's Office.
- Leaders of the armed forces (the four theatre-of-operation generals and a handful of other top officers but not the minister of defence, who is a figurehead with little power or influence).
- Leaders of the security services, particularly those grouped around the national security chief Abraha Kassa.
- Departmental heads in the PFDJ secretariat, who control the key sectors of the economy and serve as principal political advisers to Isaias on political and organizational matters.
- Individual rising stars scattered among other institutions, such as the information minister, Ali Abdu.

The first of these channels, the President's Office, constitutes a structure parallel to that of the Council of Ministers on critical matters of policy. It includes advisers who meet privately with Isaias in order to hammer out critical decisions and who do not report to anyone else. The ministries are apprised of these decisions and asked to implement them. Nothing of

what this office does is on the public record. The core leadership of the PFDJ constitutes another channel, affording Isaias options for designing and implementing programmes without scrutiny and for monitoring the outlook and behaviour of the theatre-of-operation commanders, who take precedence over civil authorities throughout the country, provides yet another one, although its role is primarily that of enforcement and security. Both the commanders and the civilian *zoba* (regional) governors are appointed by Isaias.[2]

The president uses all these individuals and offices at different times, sometimes in overlapping assignments; and in some cases – notably the generals, the civilian administrators and the cabinet ministers – he moves them from one post or geographical area of responsibility to another with little warning or consultation and no public discussion. As noted above, one reason is to keep them off balance and to avoid investing control in a single institution or region. However, it may also reflect the fact that a secret party or party-like network is practising a division of labour as opportunities present themselves, much as happened during the liberation war, without regard for the public institutions through which it acts. With or without such a party, in any case, the institutions themselves simply do not matter, and the offices are largely ceremonial, unless Isaias personally invests those who hold them with authority.

The independence war hero Petros Solomon, a charter member of the EPRP's central committee and the front's politburo, illustrated this in an anecdote about his tenure as foreign minister in the mid-1990s. After mentioning that Isaias broke off relations with Sudan at the end of 1994 without telling him until afterwards, he described learning about the conflict with Yemen over the Hanish Islands a year later in a casual phone call well after the fighting was under way. 'You know they called our ministry the "fire brigade",' Petros told me. 'We always said, "The President throws a bomb past us, and then we have to move in and put out the fire."' He said that he was not consulted about the situation but instead was given instructions on damage control. This was typical. His job as a minister was not policy-making but public relations, a key reason he decided to resign his ministerial post. But when he voiced his concern, Isaias did not permit him to leave government service, or to get out from under control

2 The zonal commanders include Brigadier General 'Manjus' Tekle Kiflai, Major-General Philipos Weldeyohannes, Major General 'China' Haile Samuel and Major General 'Wuchu' Grezgher Andemariam. The commander of the Air Force, Major-General Teklai Habteselassie, is also in this elite circle.

by the party. He shifted him to the Ministry of Fisheries, whose administrative offices were out of the capital but not out of view of the president's security apparatus (Connell, 2004: 128–30).

Cracks in the façade

From 1991 to 1998, the period between Eritrea's wars with Ethiopia, two trends competed under the old EPLF umbrella to set the shape and structure of the post-liberation political landscape. One was more democratic than the other, although both had roots in the same authoritarian culture of the EPRP/EPLF. Isaias and his inner circle were committed to what they called 'guided democracy', a very centralized 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; and in the tradition of state-centred authoritarian socialism, political democracy was relegated to the status of a luxury. For those wedded to that concept, the answer to all queries about civil or human rights was 'The time is not right.'

Contesting this outlook – to which many latter-day critics had once subscribed, or at least in which they had passively acquiesced – was a rights-based trend. This tendency of belief if not activity – for it was not a self-identified movement until long past this time of peace – included people, organizations and spontaneous expressions of all sorts. There were the critics within the EPLF/PFDJ leadership, such as those identified with the former liberation front leaders and high-level government officials known as the Group of 15. There were members of rival nationalist organizations, all of which were banned by the EPLF from operating publicly. Also, there were the new institutions of Eritrea's fragile civil society, including NGOs and the private newspapers that sprang up prior to and in the early years of the border war. There were prominent individuals associated with the process of organizing and drafting the new constitution, as well as artists, entrepreneurs and others who had tasted liberty in their personal or political lives and believed in its creative power without having a fully formed ideology based upon it. But although the many people subscribing to the rights-based trend were in effect travelling in the same direction, they never talked with one another, they were not organized, they had

no clear strategy (or at least no effective one) and they were thoroughly isolated from one another. As a result, those that popped up to challenge the emerging dictatorship were easily identified and quickly crushed.

The principal milestones in the consolidation of autocracy in the 1990s included:

- The refusal to permit the rival ELF to return to Eritrea in 1991 and participate in reconstruction and nation-building.
- The defusing of a major protest in May 1993 by rank-and-file EPLF fighters and the subsequent arrest of protest leaders over the forced extension of their terms of service at subsistence levels.
- The violent response to a disabled veterans protest in 1994.
- The restructuring of elected village assemblies to a system of party-appointed leaders at the start of the 1990s.
- The closing down of domestic NGOs in the mid-1990s.
- The sharp restriction of foreign NGOs in the same period and the subsequent expulsion of many of them.
- The restructuring of the armed forces as a purely nationalist force lacking the political culture of the liberation era (Kibreab, 2008).

Then came the return to a permanent war footing when fighting broke out with Ethiopia in May 1998 after a series of incidents along the as yet undemarcated border – what amounted to an indefinite but undeclared state of emergency that has since been used to suppress all independent organizing or expressions of dissent and to justify the open-ended extension of conscripted national service. The conflict itself capped a series of military confrontations between Eritrea and its neighbours. To this day, Eritrean officials explain them away as each having its own distinctive characteristics without seeming to reflect on the pattern of the Eritrean response, which was invariably a resort to military force rather than negotiation. In this respect and others, Isaias still behaves as though he is the commander of a liberation army and not a head of state. But the conflict with Ethiopia dwarfed those with Sudan, Yemen and Djibouti that had preceded it, and it has shaped Eritrea's role in the Horn of Africa ever since. The fighting itself, erupting three times between mid-1998 and mid-2000, also provided an arena for a climactic confrontation between the two contesting political trends within the leadership and for what amounted to a coup from above.

Most accounts of Isaias's brutal consolidation of power during and after the border war focus on the public political struggle that broke out in 2001

when mass arrests of critics were carried out and all public discussion of political issues was effectively suppressed. But the contest at the leadership level had already come to a head, in 2000. It had first surfaced among top party and state officials at an informal level in June 1998 when Isaias refused to go along with a US–Rwanda proposal for disengagement during several rounds of shuttle diplomacy between Asmara and Addis Ababa (Connell, 2004: 103–24). It began to build momentum in a series of secret meetings among top-ranking critics in 1999, particularly after round two of the war with Ethiopia in February and March when Isaias was forced to concede control of the disputed village of Badme and to accept what was in effect precisely the terms of a truce he had rejected several months earlier when presented with them by the mediators. However, he did so only after losing actual control of the disputed village and suffering embarrassing losses in the field. By this time, Ethiopia had forwarded a new set of demands for Eritrean withdrawal from other disputed territory, some of which had been seized by Eritrean forces in the first round of fighting. Isaias peremptorily dismissed these demands, leaving the two sides more or less where they had been before this round, except with different flashpoints to bicker over. The result was predictable: diplomatic stalemate and renewed mobilization for yet another round of fighting.

During the third round of fighting, when Ethiopian forces overpowered the Eritreans and very nearly broke through to Asmara, the leaders of this slowly evolving challenge are reported to have raised the question of whether Isaias should consider stepping down from his post voluntarily in order to facilitate a negotiated end to the fighting. He refused to entertain the notion and would later use it to accuse his critics of treason, claiming that they acted not on their own but at the behest of the United States and Italy, which then represented the European Union in Eritrea. Peace itself thus became treasonous if it involved questioning Isaias's authority or competence, much as would later be the case in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe.

At the same time, many party and state leaders in Eritrea were beginning to question the president's judgment as each round of fighting produced the opposite outcome to that which he had predicted. They voiced their criticisms directly to him at a closed session of the PFDJ leadership in January 2000, five months before the final round of fighting, and they took them up again with greater force in an August 2000 PFDJ executive council meeting, after the disastrous battlefield losses in May and June. They did

so a third time in the National Assembly in September, in which they mobilized a large majority to call for commissions to assess the country's conduct in the war and to produce guidelines for multiparty national elections. (This was the last time that Isaias permitted either the party leadership or the National Assembly to meet until it was purged of his critics in 2001.) Meanwhile, critics within the party were reaching out to allies in the emerging civil society movement, which had already produced a strong letter of criticism delivered to Isaias in October 2000.

This letter, which came to be known as the 'Berlin Manifesto', called for greater transparency in Eritrea's institutions and greater freedom of expression, and it questioned the causes of what it called 'this tragic war'. It went on to declare that Eritrea was at a 'crossroads' and insisted that 'the military threat posed by Ethiopia cannot be dealt with separately from the political and economic challenges that confront us as a new nation.' It was signed by 13 prominent civic leaders and academics, including the former head of the Constitution Commission, Dr Bereket Habte Selassie. Isaias dismissed them out of hand, meeting with two of them and berating them harshly while refusing to respond to any of their concerns. The letter's publication marked a sharp escalation of the challenge to him and was the first time that it had spilled into the public sphere. The confrontation escalated steadily from then on.

The consolidation of dictatorship

A limited public political debate had been tolerated up to this point and had gained momentum with the appearance of a vigorous and critical, if small, private press. But the public exchanges became increasingly vitriolic in the first six months of 2001 as the PFDJ began convening seminars for its mid-level cadres to prepare the ground for a move against Isaias's higher-level critics – seminars from which the ministers, generals and other top leaders who had privately criticized his behaviour were excluded. No one doubted the implications of this exclusion.

With Isaias also blocking efforts to reconvene both the PFDJ's executive council and the National Assembly, all avenues of private debate had been closed off. The critics from within the ruling party went public with an 'open letter' chastising Isaias for his anti-democratic behaviour and calling for structural reforms of the party and the state, as well as for a full and

open assessment of the war with Ethiopia. They were quickly nicknamed the Group of 15 (for the number of signatories, including former ministers of defence, foreign affairs, trade and industry, and others, several of whom had roots in the origins of the EPLF itself). A handful of the most prominent among them also gave highly critical interviews to the private press; and for several months, it was nearly impossible to buy a daily newspaper in Asmara after 10 am because they immediately sold out. In July 2001 an international conference of the Eritrean Studies Association was held, the first ever in Asmara. Local activists and academics discussed Eritrea's democratic future with visiting scholars in packed panels and plenaries at the Intercontinental Hotel. One session included a passionate exchange between Teame Beyene, the High Court chief justice, and Yemane Gebreab, the top presidential adviser and head of the PFDJ political affairs department, over the issue of Isaias's interference in judicial independence. (Beyene was sacked a week later.)

What amounted to Eritrea's version of the 'Prague Spring' stopped in the summer and autumn of 2001 with a wave of high-profile arrests, starting with that of Semere Kesete, the president of the University of Asmara student union. He was jailed at the end of July for criticizing the university president and the government in his valedictory address. Six weeks later, the G-15 signatories who were in the country at the time, together with members of the private press, were swept up in a massive crackdown on 18 and 19 September. Hundreds more were arrested, often for indeterminate periods, in the weeks and months that followed. The continuing hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea then provided the Isaias government with a rationale for indefinitely suspending moves towards democratization and for suppressing all public criticism of the regime. Soon after this crackdown, the government began to carry out house-to-house round-ups of young people. They were accused of avoiding national service and often beaten in public places before being crammed into military trucks and taken away for service with no opportunity to contact family members and nothing with them but the clothes on their back.

People who questioned the policies of the regime or refused service to it simply disappeared. No charges were brought against them, and not even their families had access to them once they were imprisoned. The lack of clarity about what would get one arrested engendered a pervasive terror of the authorities and a growing mistrust of friends, neighbours, co-workers and others in the general population. Many dissidents and critics, particu-

larly members of the military, were incarcerated in unfurnished shipping containers in the desert lowlands along the Red Sea coast and on offshore islands in the Dahlak Archipelago, where they were often beaten and held for long periods with inadequate water and food. This led to a significant number of deaths, according to sources among those who later escaped or were released. It is impossible to know how many because the government routinely denies the practice, and no neutral party has been granted access to these prisoners, but they are estimated to number in the thousands.

Former prisoners and escapees from the armed forces tell disturbingly similar stories about a wide range of torture techniques commonly used against dissenters, including the 'helicopter', in which the victim is stripped of his clothing, tied with his arms behind his back and either laid on the ground face down or hung from a tree branch and left in this position for several days and nights. In one well-documented and widely publicized incident in November 2004, dozens of young conscripts were killed in a prison camp at Adi Abieto when they protested against their treatment. In its 2006 human rights assessment of Eritrea, the US State Department noted reports that more than 160 conscripts were executed in 2006 when they tried to flee the infamous Wia army camp in the sweltering coastal lowlands near Massawa.[3]

Eritrea's regional relations

The ruling circle's experiences during the liberation struggle and through its first decade of governance repeatedly showcase the pattern by which they gained and then exercised power. If we turn to the Horn for an examination of how the new country behaves towards its neighbours, we find similar patterns at work: Isaias has used nesting organizations within regional opposition formations both to disguise and to multiply his circle's impact and influence; and when their subterfuges have failed to achieve the sought results, they have reflexively fallen back on force and coercion. If these actions appear 'irrational' to observers, it is only because they are not reading the 'code' correctly.

Eritrea's regional strategy is driven by two overlapping concerns. First, there is the long-range view that as a small, vulnerable state with extremely limited resources but a vision of itself as a major player in the

3 See, for example, www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78733.htm

region, Eritrea needs to keep its larger neighbours either in its thrall or internally divided in order to compromise their ability to govern and therefore to project power in the Horn. The most effective vehicle for this is insurgent forces that challenge them from within, support for whom will yield leverage over those regimes and over other powers with interests in the region. Secondly, the short- and medium-term view is that the best defence of Eritrea's own borders against hostile acts by neighbouring states or by opposition groups based in them is the creation and support of effective insurgent forces that will, as a quid pro quo, assist it in patrolling its borders and act as buffers as well as levers.

The EPLF's approach to Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s prefigures the Asmara government's current behaviour and should be carefully scrutinized. After the emperor was deposed in 1974 by a military junta calling itself the Derg (Amharic for committee) the EPLF invested heavily in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP, not to be confused with the Eritrean party of the same initials) as a vehicle for replacing the new regime with one disposed to accept the former colony's independence and to recognize the EPLF as its rightful ruling organization. Initially, it looked to a party with common ideological and political roots and to personal relationships.[4] However, the Ethiopian PRP declined as a significant force in less than three bloody years after the coup, removing the option of an all-Ethiopian alternative to the ruling Derg. The EPLF then redirected its primary support towards a medley of ethnic opposition forces that included the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front and the Western Somali Liberation Front, among others. At the same time, it began to exert pressure on the TPLF to abandon its ethnic nationalism and build an integrated, national (that is, all-Ethiopian) alternative to the Derg. This approach contributed to the falling out between the EPLF and the TPLF in the mid-1980s, and it was a continuing source of tension once they renewed their tactical alliance at the end of that decade. The TPLF, itself torn between regional and national ambitions, chafed under Eritrea's insistent interference in its political life.

This strategic outlook and this pattern of behaviour towards allied movements (treating them as subordinates rather than partners) informed the approach of the EPLF's successor, the People's Front for Democracy and

4 The similarity in the names of the two revolutionary parties was hardly a coincidence. Both took shape within the student movement at Haile Selassie University in the early 1970s. The particular formulation of a 'people's revolutionary party' is one that shows up often among Maoist parties of that era.

Justice, towards Sudan throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Among the groups the Eritreans successively supported were a small force to the left of the Sudanese Communist Party in the 1980s that had grown out of the trade union movement and later merged into the Sudan Alliance Forces (SAF); the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) as of the early 1990s; the Free Officers Movement, which became the dominant trend in the SAF, in the mid-to-late 1990s; and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) as a whole from 1995 onward.

When these investments proved to be ineffective as national alternatives to the sitting regime in Khartoum, Eritrea stepped up its support for regional forces in Darfur, the north-east and elsewhere while taking advantage of several of these armed groups (then based in or just across the border from western Eritrea) to strengthen its own border defences against Sudan-backed jihadists. This support included the provision of food supplies, uniforms and other goods; repair and maintenance of vehicles; military advice and training; and political direction in the form of lengthy seminars at the remote, mountainous rebel base area at Belasid.

Acting mainly through the PFDJ under the guidance of the head of organizational affairs Abdella Jaber, the Eritreans formed a group within the NDA from small regional and ethnic forces that they thought they could control as a counterforce to the large, traditional sect-based parties and to the NDA's main military force, the SPLM/A. They also sought to influence, if not manage, the SPLM/A as part of a general effort to manipulate the NDA, although they were less successful in this. They promoted Mohammed Osman Mirghani, the head of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) which represents Sudan's second largest traditional Islamic sect, as the alliance's nominal front man, though he held little actual power, much as Isaias had done with Romedan Mohamed Nur in the EPLF up to 1987 (see above).

When this investment of attention and resources also failed to generate an effective, sustained opposition on a national level and when the SPLM, under intense US pressure, entered substantive negotiations with Khartoum for a truce to end the north–south conflict and then to pull its forces out of other regional theatres, Eritrea stepped up its 'investment' in Darfur and the north-east. It worked with the Beja Congress and the Rashaida Free Lions to form yet another regional alliance called the Eastern Front. This retrenchment from national to regional forces paralleled its earlier repositioning in Ethiopia, although it was driven by different externalities.

It reflected a consistency in strategy and tactics towards the Horn, as the Eritreans adapted to changing opportunities without regard for ideological or cultural affinity or, for that matter, anything but a pragmatic assessment of where and through whom they could exercise leverage.

Simultaneously, and with the same logic, Eritrea was investing in opposition movements in Ethiopia and developing allies in Somalia, a process with roots well before Somalia's current civil war, in which Eritrea has become deeply involved. Among the forces Eritrea has historically supported in Ethiopia with training, strategic advice and logistical assistance are the Oromo Liberation Front, the Ogaden National Liberation Front, the Tigray People's Democratic Movement, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement and armed groups from the Sidamo and Beni Shangul regions of southern Ethiopia. But Eritrea's most significant, and effective, assets have been the Somali groups challenging the Ethiopian-backed Transitional National Government there.

These investments paid off dramatically in 2006 when the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), acting with Eritrean logistical support and military advice (if not the thousands of soldiers claimed by some critics at the time), seized control of Mogadishu and presided over the first period of relative stability the shattered society had experienced in more than 15 years. But the ICU quickly overreached itself and, as happened to the Eritreans in Badme in May 1998, it was lured into a confrontation that provided Ethiopia with an excuse to invade, which it promptly did. This was not the first Ethiopian incursion into Somalia, but it was by far the largest; and there was direct American collaboration in its planning and execution, a fact that reverberated throughout the region after the US also carried out air raids against Al-Qaeda operatives reported to be in southern Somalia.

The Eritreans, not surprisingly, saw this as a joint US–Ethiopian operation that provided final proof of the alliance against them that Isaias and others had been railing about for months. But the rapid Ethiopian drive to Mogadishu was, like the American push to Baghdad in 2003, quickly followed by the onset of a fierce and apparently unexpected insurgency in which Eritrea was deeply implicated from the outset. To give the insurgency a greater degree of political coherence, and to institutionalize its own influence, Eritrea invited all anti-Ethiopian forces to come to Asmara and establish an NDA-style coalition. The Somalis came and created the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS), a broad front aimed at draining the resources and fighting capacity of its main foe, Ethiopia. This

was another example of the Isaias circle's strategy of force multiplication through the layering of political organizations, onion-style, around a core that they hoped to use in order to steer the larger bodies.

Here again Isaias demonstrated that he would support whichever group appeared to advance Eritrea's interests in the region. If the tide were running towards Islamists, as it appeared to be doing in Somalia, Isaias and his circle would ride the wave. And if secular nationalists were ascendant, they would support them, for both were instrumentalities, not ends. Support for Islamists does not signify an ideological shift by a state built on principles of radical secularism and that itself faces a threat from Eritrean Islamists. It is just an opportunistic extension of the ruling circle's long-standing strategic goal of weakening Ethiopia from as many directions as possible until it achieves a balance of forces favourable to a direct confrontation. And it will do so through nested organizations within broader alliances, as it has done in Eritrea itself, in Ethiopia and in Sudan, whatever the apparent ideological orientation, because the leaders have become convinced by their own experience of the transience of ideology and the pre-eminence of national interest.

Such transparently self-serving stratagems can also, and often do, backfire, because others have interests not always coincident with those of Eritrea. The clearest case in point is the relationship with the TPLF, treated in the 1980s as a junior partner. It was even called into service in Eritrea in order to help crush other Eritrean nationalist groups, as happened in the EPLF–ELF civil war in 1981, only to emerge at the head of a large, powerful and proud state, Ethiopia, in the 1990s and no longer in a mood to be pushed around.

Two incidents that I learned about on visits to the Eastern Front in 2001 demonstrate Eritrea's penchant for offending its 'junior partners' even as the incidents suggest the future possibility of another rupture with these latest tactical allies, similar to that between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998. In 1999, Ahmed Bitai, the brother of a prominent Beja religious figure, Sheikh Sulieman broke with the Beja Congress over internal differences and announced that he was taking his following to join the New Sudan Brigade.[5] The Eritrean response was decisive and swift. In August, in a scene with eerie echoes of Badme only one year earlier, they sent a large armed force supported by armour and infantry into the NDA base to demand

5 Author's interview with the ranking SPLA political-military officer, Belasid, Sudan, 2 February 2001.

that Bitai should be turned over to them. The ensuing confrontation lasted three days, after which a humiliated NDA (the SPLA included) acceded to Eritrean demands. Bitai was reportedly held for six months before being turned over to the Beja Congress and eventually released. At this point, the angry Bitai defected to Khartoum, where he worked to deepen divisions among the Sudanese Beja and open avenues through Beja areas for Eritrean jihadists to infiltrate across the border, heightening the security threat to government and party installations throughout northern and coastal Eritrea.[6]

Later, in 2000, after its devastating losses in the third round of war with Ethiopia and newly eager to protect its western flank, Eritrea launched a diplomatic initiative that brought Isaias and his foreign minister, the late Ali Said Abdella, to Khartoum in October to thaw relations between the two countries. But a few weeks after these meetings, the SPLA commander Pagan Amum led a surprise attack on the government garrison at Kassala without seeking prior approval from his Eritrean handlers, as was the standard operating procedure for all NDA military operations.[7] Commander Amum later told me that the SPLM/A feared that the Eritreans were losing faith in the NDA and might sell them out for a tactical advantage. For this reason, he said, the NDA needed to demonstrate its strength with a dramatic move that would, as a by-product, undercut the Sudan–Eritrea rapprochement. Before he acted, he secured SPLM/A head John Garang's personal blessing, as well as DUP head Mohammed Osman Mirghani's approval, but neither breathed a word of it to their Eritrean counterparts. In the event, a 2,000-strong SPLA–DUP–Beja force captured the government garrison at Kassala and held it for nearly 48 hours, after which Khartoum's relations with Asmara quickly soured.

Both incidents illustrate the manner in which the Isaias circle seeks to control and direct the actions of its allies and proxies in the region and how such behaviour can generate a backlash, as former allies become more resentful about the use made of them and the absence of honest give-and-take among them. One can see in the latter incident the seeds of a rift between the SPLM/A and Asmara, along the same lines as that between the EPLF and the TPLF. And it is likely that the same will hold true in future for other Sudanese allies as well as allies in Somalia. It is a pattern

6 For more on Eritrea's involvement with the Eastern Front, see Dan Connell, 'War and Peace in Sudan: The Case of the Bejas', Crisis in the Horn of Africa, SSRC Web forum (available at http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Connell).

7 Author's interview with SPLA Commander Pagan Amum, Asmara, 19 January 2001.

that those disturbed by Eritrea's seemingly rogue behaviour need to keep in mind in assessing the substance of its alliances and anticipating future outcomes.

Method in the madness

Some analysts have suggested that Eritrea's leadership, disillusioned with its early Marxist orientation, has undergone an ideological shift and somehow slipped into the Islamist camp. Others have charged that Eritrea is 'out of control' and suggest that this is reflected in a loss of mental balance on the part of Isaias, whom they suggest is flailing about without rhyme or reason. But there is method in this apparent madness, as I have tried to demonstrate. The Isaias circle's ideology is and has always been one of radical nationalism, distorted of late perhaps by the intensifying megalomania of its leader but nevertheless quite consistent. In fact, the basic mode of action of the state is the same as it was for the liberation movement and for the party that guided it – and it is eminently predictable.

The Isaias approach starts with the premise, drawn from long experience of manipulation and betrayal, that if you trust no one, you can ally with anyone. There are no bad allies, only ineffective ones. This holds true inside the country and across the Horn of Africa as a whole – indeed throughout the world. Such a crass Machiavellian formulation is, of course, a variation on the enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend approach to foreign relations. But it runs deeper than that, for it posits that there are no reliable 'friends' anywhere, only tactical allies. Thus when former friends turn against Eritrea, as the TPLF did, this only proves the premise that 'they were not genuine friends in the first place'. Perhaps this is a matter of paranoia. But Isaias has history on his side in this argument, and many Eritreans share his outlook, making it relatively easy to convince them that yesterday's partner is today's adversary.

Another prime tenet of the Isaias circle's approach to regional relations, drawn from the liberation movement's experience, is the firm conviction that ideology is ephemeral: it is a mobilizing tool arising from current conditions (local and global) and it can and should be adapted or even jettisoned when those conditions change (as was Marxism-Leninism in the EPRP/EPLF experience). Nationalism is the first principle, with all else subordinated to it, and it is the liberation movement's experience that is

decisive in shaping how this nationalism is conceptualized and practised. This is because in many respects the new and yet fragile state of Eritrea functions as an enlargement of the guerrilla base area from which Isaias operated for decades, in which precise borders do not matter as much as they appear to, unless they provide leverage for mobilizing the nation and for extending its influence outwards.

History demonstrates again and again that Eritrea will aggressively pursue its interests on the basis of convictions and via means that the Isaias circle, ever changing in its make-up but for the man at the centre, has used from its earliest days. As long as its interests are substantively threatened, as they are now by a hostile Ethiopia, the Eritreans under Isaias will find ways to escalate the pressures on their foe through proxies and allies, using the devices and interlocking relationships described above. But although stirring up trouble among their neighbours, injecting themselves into existing conflicts and pulling disparate political forces together to increase their impact can exacerbate existing problems, the Eritreans' penchant for (and skill at) multi-tiered regional engagement also creates avenues for conflict-resolution by their very capacity to influence the positions and negotiating stances of conflicting parties. This was shown with the Eastern Front in 2006 when it suited Eritrea to defuse tensions with Sudan. Similar possibilities exist in Darfur and Somalia. In the latter case, however, they seemed too distasteful for the Bush administration to use. And this is precisely Eritrea's intent: to be a player in regional politics that local and global powers ignore at their peril.

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