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### Critical reflections on the Eritrean war of independence: social capital, associational life, religion, ethnicity and sowing seeds of dictatorship

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Critical reflections on the Eritrean war of independence: social capital, associational life, religion, ethnicity and sowing seeds of dictatorship**, by Gaim Kibreab, Trenton, N.J., Red Sea Press, 2008, xviii + 450 pp., £24.99 (paperback), ISBN 1569022828

**Eritrea: a dream deferred**, by Gaim Kibreab, Oxford, James Currey, 2009, xxvi + 420 pp., £50.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781847010087

The 1991 victory of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) over Ethiopia, ending a gruelling 30-year independence war, was touted by many on the democratic left as proof positive that a mass mobilisation rooted in efforts to transform a society as it was being liberated could so alter the balance of forces that a small, impoverished nation with little external support could vanquish a far larger foe despite the backing of a superpower. Truly, it seemed, this was a 'Yes, we can!' moment.

Much of the literature on the liberation struggle and the early post-independence years that appeared in English reflected this optimism. David Pool's monograph, *Africa's longest war* (1980) and Richard Sherman's *Eritrea: the unfinished revolution* (1980) were among the best early accounts, though Pool's more nuanced 2001 exploration of Eritrean nationalism was more revealing of its contradictions. EPLF fighter/historian Alemseged's *Two weeks in the trenches: reminiscences of childhood and war in Eritrea* (2004) told a ground-level tale of the armed struggle,

as did my 1997 chronicle, *Against all odds*, while Ruth Iyob's *The Eritrean struggle for independence: domination, resistance, nationalism: 1941–93* (1995) offered a more critical account.

Two anthologies captured the immediate post-independence period: Martin Doornbos and Alemseged Tesfai's *Post-conflict Eritrea: prospects for reconstruction and development in Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan* (1992) and Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis's *Emergent Eritrea: challenges of economic development* (1993). On the crucial issue of land and land reform, the most comprehensive treatment was Linda Favali and Roy Pateman's *Blood, land, and sex: legal and political pluralism in Eritrea* (2003). But all took as their primary reference the narrative of the EPLF, and, despite acknowledging worrisome signs (especially Iyob), most were strongly positive, as were members of the international press who discovered Eritrea as if for the first time, the aid agencies that flocked to offer assistance, and even some states and movements that had opposed the Eritreans until then. Many Eritreans – though not all – agreed. Gaim Kibreab says he began his research for the books under review here 'when the country was in a state of euphoria and boundless ecstasy' (*Critical Reflections*, p. xii).

But suddenly the screen went dark.

Eritrea went back to war with Ethiopia in May 1998, ostensibly over unresolved border issues but in truth as the culmination of an ongoing and often bitter regional, organisational and, at times, personal rivalry. By the time the shooting stopped,

some 90,000–100,000 people were dead. In the aftermath, Eritrean critics of President Isaias Afwerki's leadership, including founders of the liberation front, were rounded up and sent to secret prisons. They were joined by the entire independent press corps, as all non-state media were shut down and all debate over the war and just about everything else of political substance was suppressed. Over subsequent months, hundreds more who ran afoul of the regime also disappeared as what had once seemed a bold experiment in participatory nation building morphed into a cruelly efficient tyranny.

What had happened? And why?

Several post-Border-War studies sought to address this. Two explored the war itself, a key turning point if not in itself causal: *Unfinished business: Ethiopia and Eritrea at war*, edited by Dominique Jacquin-Berdal and Martin Plaut (2005), and *Brothers at war: making sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war*, edited by Tekeste Negash and Kjetil Tronvoll (2001). Among the critiques of Eritrea's human rights record, two of the most comprehensive, both published in 2009, were Tronvoll's *The lasting struggle for freedom in Eritrea: human rights and political development, 1991–2009* and an unsigned Human Rights Watch report, *Service for life: state repression and indefinite conscription in Eritrea*. But they were more descriptive than illuminating.

It is Gaim Kibreab who offers the most comprehensive account of the origins of the EPLF's authoritarian tendencies in *Critical reflections on the Eritrean war of independence* and who best helps us to understand what happened to the movement's early promise in *Eritrea: the dream deferred*. The first explores the toxic culture lurking within the movement from its earliest years; the second analyses the despotism it produced. Taken together, they render the present autocracy comprehensible — the product of a 'perfect storm' of cultural, historical and personal factors, not least of

which was the character of the man who has led Eritrea to this point, Isaias Afwerki.

Kibreab zeroes in on the poisonous obsessions with control that plagued both the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, each of which sought to monopolise the national movement. In the ELF's case, this included the eradication of the rival Eritrean Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 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' (*Reflections*, p. 173). A decade later, the EPLF turned the tables and — with the help of its Tigrayan allies — 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.

That front's defining moment came early on, according to Kibreab, with the brutal suppression of a dissident political trend known pejoratively as *menqae* ('those who move about at night': bats) in 1973–74, at the close of which Isaias coolly ordered the execution of its leaders. Among them was one of his childhood friends, Mussie Teklemichael, who bore a capital 'E' on his upper arm where in 1965 he had taken a blood oath with Isaias and another comrade to commit their lives to Eritrea. (The third, Haile Woldehensae, was imprisoned in 2001 on trumped-up charges of treason, after publicly criticising the president.) Kibreab takes us through this emblematic event in meticulous detail, after which Isaias's machinations seem almost anticlimactic — which leads one to wonder how his

comrades in arms could have been surprised when he turned on them.

Kibreab calls this 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’ (*Critical Reflections*, p. 278). The lingering question is how he amassed the power he did with virtually no accountability from within either his movement or his captive society. To probe this, Kibreab walks us through the EPLF’s growth and consolidation, highlighting its efforts to control not only its fighters but also its diaspora supporters and satellite organisations. This included an association in Sweden to which Kibreab belonged that was vilified when it called for more transparency and less centralisation in the EPLF-controlled student movement.

There is much more here that deserves the scrutiny of anyone concerned with Eritrea’s future – the EPLF’s mistreatment of Muslims and ethnic minorities, the rise of Islamist extremism, the continuing sectarianism within the ELF and its many progeny, and ultimately, for Kibreab, the ways in which Eritrea’s chronically weak civil society – its lack of ‘social capital’ – produces an environment where it is extremely difficult to counter the anti-democratic tendencies in both the government and the opposition.

His argument throughout the second volume is that ‘in post-conflict, multi-ethnic and multi-faith societies such as Eritrea, the development of a viable and democratic political system is to a very large extent a function of freedom of association and freedom of engagement in diverse economic activities’ (*Dream Deferred*, p. 2). After a quick scan of the post-independence state, he looks at the Border War’s impact on the contested democratic process. He then recounts the crushing of independent initiatives prior to that war, many of which had been generated by

EPLF veterans, through a series of eight exhaustive case studies. These echo the narratives in the earlier volume, and it is their consistency that is most revealing, not only of the Front’s addiction to control but also its obsession with secrecy, which Kibreab characterises as ‘the worst enemy of civic culture and open debates’ and the *sine qua non* for tyranny.

What is particularly valuable about this volume is his elucidation of the PFDJ’s role in Eritrea’s command economy and its stultifying impact on economic initiative, even as the regime appears to be sustaining itself on the basis of declining diaspora remittances and rogue business deals. Here, however, is one place when Kibreab misses a crucial aspect of the PFDJ’s survival strategy when he describes the government’s ‘capricious treatment’ of international mining companies and assumes the worst in future outcomes. As it happens, Eritrea is today poised on the brink of a gold rush that the government clearly views as its lifeline and that has caused it to moderate (or at least disguise) its capricious tendencies. The Canadian firm Nevsun Resources forecasts the start of production for late 2010, with the Australia-based Chalice Gold Mines predicting the start of production in 2011 and others lined up to join them. With the government due to break even on its investment by 2012, the future could hold some unsettling surprises—for Eritreans, for Eritrea’s neighbours, and, if Kibreab is correct in the pattern he perceives at work here, for the very mining companies that have hung tight to this point.

After exploring the many instances where the fetish with control has worked against Eritrea’s interests, Kibreab comes back to the man at the centre of it all – Isaias Afwerki – whose character and personality continue to play such an outsized role in the country, whatever its cultural heritage and historical circumstances. But in doing so, he also holds those who allowed this to happen and who defend it

even now just as responsible as Isaias for where it has led:

During the war of liberation, whoever stood or was perceived to be standing in the way was condemned or eliminated as being the enemy of the revolution. When these things happened, it was normal either to keep quiet or to celebrate the brutality as a revolutionary act. Such a situation provided fertile ground for the gradual development and consolidation of unaccountable leadership ... Over time, [Isaias] became habituated to the exercise of absolute power without constraint. (*Dream Deferred*, p. 391)

These are important books not only for Eritrea scholars and activists but for all

who struggle to understand the challenges armed revolutionary movements and their leaders face in the transition from resistance to governance. They are especially valuable for placing otherwise disparate and discouraging events within a coherent historical and analytical framework through which readers can not only grasp where they came from but where the levers are to change the result—and, one hopes, to avoid a repeat performance.

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