

# Redeeming the failed promise of democracy in Eritrea

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The struggle for freedom and democracy waged by the people of Eritrea has been a long and complicated one. It has spanned more than a century of rule by a dizzying array of European and African powers (the Ottoman Turks, Egypt, Italy, Britain, Ethiopia). It has thrust them into battle with successive superpowers, as first the US and then the Soviet Union threw their weight behind Ethiopia. It challenged them to construct a new state just as the major world powers were disengaging from Africa at the end of the cold war. It tested their survival capacity through more war with neighbouring states (Yemen, Sudan, Djibouti and Ethiopia). It drew them into the deadly vortex of religious and ethnic politics that infects the region on both sides of the Red Sea. And it now suffers corrosion from within through a power grab that seeks to reverse the nation's otherwise impressive strides toward openness, inclusion and equality.

That said, I do not intend to focus on the many threats this young nation has endured up to now but, rather, to examine how Eritrea's leaders have responded to them and where they are taking the nation today; for it is in the crucible of such experience that a political movement's character is revealed—certainly in terms of the depth and quality of its commitment to democratic development. This I see as fundamentally a *political* process, carried out in the context of both social and economic democratisation. And there is no separating these dimensions—efforts to sequence them, on the basis that popular political participation must await the achievement of social integration or increased productive capacity, for example, are ruses designed to avoid sharing power. And I would argue that the failure of political democracy in Eritrea will eventually and inevitably undermine the early strides the nation has made toward social and economic equality.

In these most basic respects, I am convinced that Eritrea is moving backwards.

Many Eritreans and long-time friends of Eritrea are grappling with or have also come to this conclusion. But it is not an easy one to arrive at, both because of the promise of multi-ethnic, largely crime- and corruption-free, secular democracy that Eritrea once represented and because of the existential threat it now faces in the form of renewed war with Ethiopia.

## **The early promise**

I first encountered Eritrea in April 1976, when I slipped into Asmara with Ethiopian troops when it was surrounded by Eritrean forces. There I witnessed the assassination of a high-ranking Ethiopian official and its bloody aftermath—the execution of dozens of innocent civilians. My report on this massacre and the conditions of those living under siege in Asmara appeared on the front page of *The Washington Post*. Next, I flew to Sudan, where I contacted the two nationalist movements headquartered there—the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). I then travelled into guerrilla-held Eritrea for five weeks to see the conflict from their side, during which I came to within a few miles of the very places I had just visited in and around Asmara. I went on to write about this not only for *The Washington Post*, but for the New

York-based *Guardian*, the BBC, Reuters and more than a dozen other print and broadcast media in Europe and North America.<sup>1</sup>

What I found moved me deeply: not just the military strength of these highly developed liberation armies, though it was impressive, but the efforts they were making to transform Eritrea's diverse and deeply impoverished society as they were liberating it. Over the next three decades, travelling mainly with the EPLF, I chronicled the experiments with radical social transformation underway in 1976; the near defeat of Ethiopia's American-backed army in 1977; the intervention of the Soviet Union and the liberation movement's strategic retreat in 1978; the famine that swept the region in the mid-1980s; the final Eritrean victory in 1991; the effort to reconstruct and develop the war-ravaged new state later in that decade; the renewal of war with Ethiopia in 1998-2000; and the economic and political reverses that flowed out of this latest conflict.

The EPLF's main achievement was to mobilise the people—half of them Christian, half Muslim, from nine distinct ethnic groups—into a highly-motivated, remarkably well-disciplined force that was able, with almost no outside support, to bring successive US- and Soviet-backed Ethiopian governments to their knees. As it did so, the Front worked to liberate women, workers and peasant farmers from centuries of grinding poverty, chronic hunger and unspeakable oppression. In fact, it was experiments with land and marriage reform and the provision of services like agricultural extension, primary education, adult literacy and village-level public health in the liberated areas, implemented in a highly participatory manner, that motivated such large numbers of peasant farmers, workers, women and youth to join the struggle. I am convinced now, as then, that the linkage between these two projects—national liberation and social transformation—is the most important lesson of the Eritrean experience.

This linkage appeared to carry over into the early post-war years, though there was much going on below the surface and away from the spotlight that told a different, more disturbing story. It was a story that pointed to later, painfully disappointing outcomes concerning the transformation of this victorious liberation movement into a force for post-war, democratic development. There are many threads that one could follow to draw this out, but, as the EPLF was widely known and respected for its pioneering work on gender equality during the liberation struggle, the experience of Eritrean women in the decade after independence is a good starting point.

### **The struggle for gender equality**

Women played a central role in Eritrea's war for independence, but their post-independence participation in public life presents a mixed record. By the time of the nationalist victory in 1991, they made up nearly a third of the 95,000-strong EPLF and 13 per cent of frontline fighters. Women served in many non-combat capacities – as teachers, paramedics, political organisers, technicians, garage mechanics, drivers and more – while thousands of women civilians organised to support the war effort. This positioned them to challenge traditionally submissive roles in the strictly patriarchal society and to demand equal participation in the economy and the country's post-independence political life. But there has been significant slippage in their wartime gains.

Women activists were drawn into important but time-consuming political projects: writing a new Constitution, revising the civil code, developing legislation, restructuring the civil service, demobilising former fighters, forwarding recommendations for economic

development and drafting other new policy initiatives. This represented a sharp break with the grassroots-level work to change gender relations with which they had been engaged. Meanwhile, women fighters saw a spike in the divorce rate as male comrades opted for more subservient partners. Men in some communities also formed clandestine committees – later exposed and dismantled – to prevent women from participating in post-war land reform.

In the early 1990s, the government acted to institutionalise gender reforms piloted during the liberation struggle, but measures such as universal land reform, national service, the enforcement of laws against sex discrimination by a woman minister of justice, the appointment of a near majority of women to the Constitution Commission, and the reservation of 30 per cent of the seats for women in newly-elected regional and national People's Assemblies were not enough to counter the resurgence of patriarchal values in the deeply conservative society. In addition to struggles over land and spiralling divorce rates, there were sharp rises in child marriage and other formerly banned practices, such as humiliating 'virginity testing' for prospective brides.

The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), with 200,000 members in 2004, was the largest of three sectoral associations (along with those of workers and youth) that had spun off from the liberation movement and was the only legal institutional vehicle for women's interests in post-war Eritrea. Founded in 1979 by the EPLF, the NUEW retained strong links with the liberation movement (renamed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice [PFDJ] in 1994), which controlled both the programme and the composition of the NUEW's leadership. The union managed skills-training, literacy and self-improvement programmes, as well as rural credit schemes and other development projects, and it advised other bodies on legislation, trade union contracts, and policies that affect women.

However, the EPLF/PFDJ did not tolerate rival non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and it discouraged programme initiatives outside the union's mandate as defined by it in secret meetings (from which nearly all union leaders were excluded), so no women's organising or advocacy developed within or outside the NUEW framework. The government's early hostility to independent civil-society organising intensified after the border war with Ethiopia in 1998–2000. Since then, it has also shut down the country's private press, detained leading critics and stifled policy-oriented public debate. Thus there were no public forums in 2004 – in or out of government – where women could discuss, let alone contest, law or policy.

The country's Constitution, ratified by an augmented National Assembly in 1997 but not implemented by the president, prohibits discrimination based on race, ethnic origin, colour, and gender and mandates the National Assembly to legislate measures designed to eliminate such inequality.<sup>2</sup> The government has declared International Women's Day an official holiday and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). A number of prominent women also influence public policy and three hold ministerial portfolios—justice, tourism, and labour and social affairs—and in local elections in 2002, women won more than a fifth of the posts. But gender-related changes in the public sphere are not woman-led. Eritrean women have access to the top, but they lack representation in the president's inner circle, where policy is determined. More importantly, women lack a genuinely autonomous and activist social movement to push the state (and the party) from the outside. Thus, their social gains have not automatically translated into – or even set the stage for—increased political power.

On the contrary, the government continues to prohibit women from generating new organisations or even letting the NUEW determine its own agenda and elect its own leaders. In this respect and others, the union embodies the political condition of the larger society.

### **The post-independence state**

Eritrea's contemporary political culture has long been an authoritarian one, predicated upon secrecy and the arbitrary exercise of absolute power. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the EPLF was organised and led from within by a clandestine, Marxist core, chaired by Isaias Afwerki and strongly influenced by contemporary Maoist political currents—the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). The EPRP met in secret to draft the EPLF's programme prior to its three general congresses (1977, 1987, 1994); to select slates for leadership prior to elections; and, unbeknownst to non-party members, to manage its affairs on a day-to-day basis. Party and Front members who broke the rules would be punished mercilessly and then suddenly rehabilitated, as had been the practice in China, where Isaias had received military and political training at the height of the Cultural Revolution in 1968-69. This pattern of behaviour, established in the liberation movement in the 1970s and 1980s, held true for the government in the 1990s and obtains today; moreover, it will define the practices for future elections convened under this leadership—if and when they occur.

Isaias took formal control of the EPLF at its second congress in 1987, though as party head he had always been the key figure within the EPLF, controlling the party and pulling the strings for the liberation front. In 1989, he 'froze' the operations of the EPRP (known by then as the Eritrean Socialist Party) but continued to meet secretly with its leadership to plan the post-war transition. This positioned him both to assume the post-war presidency and to make the state the dominant institutional apparatus in an independent Eritrea, subordinating both the Front and what remained of the party to it.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the EPLF's third congress in 1994, when it changed its name to the PFDJ, Isaias convinced many veterans to step aside from the leadership in order to bring what he called 'new blood' into the political movement. Afterwards, however, he rarely used the Front's newly elected bodies to decide issues. Instead, the PFDJ's nineteen-member executive committee spent most of its time discussing how to implement policies determined elsewhere. In this respect, the newly christened PFDJ mimicked the EPLF's operational forms during the liberation struggle, but with a singular difference: There was no organised party providing the guidance—no collective body, however secret, operating behind the scenes. There was only one man and his personally selected advisors.

The same was true of the state. Though the new government had the appearance of a separation of powers—an executive office with a cabinet of ministers, an interim parliament (pending the first national elections) and a nominally independent judiciary—it was an illusion. The cabinet did not provide a forum for debate or decision-making. It, too, served mainly as a clearing-house to determine how policies hammered out elsewhere would be put into practice. Even the military remained under the president's personal control, as Isaias leapfrogged his own defence ministry to exercise direct command through four theatre-operation generals, whom he had brought with him from the EPRP.

Throughout the 1990s, Isaias expanded and strengthened the President's Office with specialised departments on economic and political policy that duplicated (and effectively out-ranked) similar ministries. He staffed these departments with loyal individuals who reported to no one but him. Ministerial portfolios were frequently shuffled to keep rivals

from developing power bases of their own. High-ranking officers and government officials who questioned the president's judgement found themselves removed from their posts, kept on salary but not permitted to work, and then abruptly brought back into the fold when they were perceived to be rehabilitated.

Meanwhile, members of oppositional groups like the ELF were allowed to return to the country, with a few awarded positions in the ruling party and government or on special commissions such as the one that drew up the Constitution in the mid-1990s—but only if they renounced their former organisations. However, most found their loyalty constantly questioned, and some suspected of continuing ties to the ELF simply disappeared into political prisons. With the outbreak of war with Ethiopia in 1998 and the alliance of several ELF splinters with Ethiopia, many who had been incorporated into state structures were stripped of their posts as the regime circled its political wagons and purged those considered potentially disloyal to the beleaguered president. This left no independent institutional avenue to challenge Isaias's leadership.

Up to 2001, however, the president's authority and judgement had been vigorously contested behind the scenes within the PFDJ, and measures to draw a widening circle of the general population into the country's political life had encouraged many to hope for a more open future. The two-year mobilisation for the 1993 referendum on Eritrea's political status brought thousands of people into the political process for the first time. A three-year, highly-participatory constitution-making process produced a legal foundation for the articulation, exercise and future contestation of basic civil and human rights. Despite its flaws, the manner in which it was produced, involving tens of thousands of Eritreans at home and abroad in discussions on what rights they held dear and what they wanted from their newly created state, added value beyond the document itself. And it fed the dream held by many liberation-era veterans that Eritrea was on the road, however rocky, towards the development of a popular democracy that would come to operate transparently within a defined legal framework once the country passed the transitional stage.

Up against this dream was the apparent conviction at the centre of power that the people could not be trusted to rule themselves, especially in this unsettled regional environment where enemies and spies might manipulate them against their interests. What was needed under these conditions, those close to Isaias argued, was 'guided democracy' in which an enlightened few would make the key decisions about Eritrea's future and involve the general population (and the rest of the movement) in those decisions largely by mobilising people *post hoc* to implement them.

These two lines co-existed and contended through the early post-independence years, but the contradictory possibilities that they represented for Eritrea's future collided head on when war broke out with Ethiopia, during which the latter faction engineered an internal *coup d'état*. In doing so, its adherents decimated the emerging democratic trend and set back Eritrea's political development by at least another decade. For this reason, this period demands closer attention.

### **Renewed war**

Relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia had appeared to be friendly after Eritrea's independence, allowing the US to pursue ties with both, but a legacy of petty rivalry and tension remained close to the surface. After several disputes over economic policy in the mid-1990s and following a year-long series of armed incidents along the two countries' as-

yet-undemarcated border, war broke out in May 1998. Early American efforts to mediate the conflict collapsed amid Eritrean charges that the US was tilting toward Ethiopia.

There were three rounds of fighting before a ceasefire was reached—May-June 1998, February-March 1999 and May-June 2000. Once the combat began, long-buried resentments and unresolved grievances erupted with a depth and intensity never before experienced in this volatile region. First Ethiopia, then Eritrea rounded up and deported people whose ethnic origins—sometimes going back two generations—identified them with their foe, regardless of whether they were legally citizens of the country from which they were being ousted. This helped to poison the atmosphere for future reconciliation.<sup>4</sup>

A temporary truce between the warring states came into effect in June 2000. A formal agreement to end hostilities and turn the dispute over to an international commission was signed in Algiers in December of that year. United Nations peacekeepers were deployed in February 2001 and have remained in place ever since, their mandate routinely renewed by the UN Security Council at six-month intervals. On 13 April 2002, the Boundary Commission that had been established to adjudicate the border dispute issued its binding verdict. Both states at first accepted it, but Ethiopia subsequently rejected key parts of it, leaving it unimplemented to this day. As a result, hundreds of thousands of soldiers remain deployed along the disputed frontier. Ethiopia's November 2004 announcement that it was ready to accept the ruling, despite continuing objections, raised hopes that an end to the confrontation might be in sight, but the five-point proposal left key details unresolved, and Eritrea has shown no willingness to engage in talks to close the gap.

Thus, throughout the 1990s, the country followed two paths at once—one towards shared participation in the very definition of the New Eritrea, as well as in its reconstruction, development and rule; the other towards increasingly centralised executive power that stripped the population of any *agency* in the process—providing them with material benefits but only as objects, not subjects, of their collective destiny. In a word, patronage. Renewed war brought these contradictions to a head—and decisively resolved them in favour of the latter path.

### **The crackdown on dissent**

The continuing hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea after the peace agreement provided the Eritrean government with a rationale for suppressing all public criticism of the regime. The limited dissent that had been tolerated after the independence war—a period that saw the appearance of a vigorous and critical private press, heated debates among government and party officials, the convening of an international Eritrean Studies Association conference with papers raising questions about democracy and development, and more—was sharply curtailed in the summer and fall of 2001. But the stage for this had been set earlier, with the failure to implement the new Constitution after it had been ratified in 1997.<sup>5</sup>

In August 2000, several high-ranking PFDJ officials privately criticised Isaias's conduct of the border war at a closed-door session of the PFDJ leadership. Among them were top military and political leaders who had been at the forefront of the liberation movement for thirty years. They also questioned the president's resistance to diplomatic solutions to the conflict before Eritrean defences collapsed in May 2000, and they called for rapid progress towards multi-party democracy in Eritrea. These criticisms were repeated in September at a closed session of the National Assembly (a majority of whose members are

comprised of the PFDJ's Central Council). This was the last time Isaias permitted the body to meet until it was purged of his critics.

Over the next four-to-five months, Isaias's critics continued to question his leadership within the EPLF/PFDJ. When he refused to convene a meeting to take up their charges, they went public. First, the critics—known as the Group of 15 (or G-15)—published their critique on the internet. Later, several gave lengthy interviews to Eritrea's private press. This kicked off a vigorous public debate over the country's political future.

The crackdown gathered momentum in July 2001 with the arrest of a University of Asmara student leader, Semere Kesete, after he criticised the government for underpaying students for enforced 'national service' during the summer months—echoing protests raised by liberation army fighters in May 1993, the only mass public protest in Eritrea's modern history. Hundreds of University of Asmara students were rounded up after this incident and sent on a work project to contain the rising protest on the campus. Parents who protested the treatment of their children—several of whom died—were also arrested. Semere remained in prison for months, with no charges brought against him, before making his escape with the help of sympathetic guards.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the government shut down the university's autonomous student union and replaced it with a chapter of the party-run National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students.

On 18 and 19 September 2001, the Eritrean government initiated a sweeping crackdown on its high-level critics, arresting eleven of the fifteen who had signed the open letter to the president. (One recanted and three were not in Eritrea at the time of the arrests.) Shortly after this crackdown, the government closed all the private newspapers in the country and began arresting others associated with the G-15 or with other 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 formal charges were brought, no evidence presented, no trials conducted and no explanations ever offered.<sup>7</sup>

Eritrean public opinion on this and other political issues has been extremely difficult to gauge since the crackdown began, as there is no legal outlet for expressing perspectives at odds with official policy. This has produced a climate of fear in the urban centres, where citizens believe that telephones are tapped, public conversations are monitored and email is routinely intercepted. These anxieties have been enhanced by the manner in which arrested dissidents are treated. People disappear, after which no one has access to them, including their families. The lack of clarity on where the red lines are—what will get one arrested—has engendered a pervasive terror of the authorities and a growing mistrust of friends, neighbours, co-workers and others in the general population.

By the middle of 2004, visitors reported that residents of Asmara long noted for their outspoken character, spoke of politics only in hushed tones and clipped utterances. Most had become deeply pessimistic and were preoccupied with the declining economy, as prices had doubled or tripled, and fuel was extremely scarce. More disturbing, the people, once noted for their generosity and openness to outsiders but fed on a steady diet of anti-foreigner propaganda since 2001, had begun to turn aggressively xenophobic toward outsiders, blaming them for their increasingly desperate plight. All foreigners are now required to get special permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to travel outside Asmara. Few do so, leaving most of the country cut off from contact with the outside world and informed about it only through party cadres and government-controlled print and broadcast media.

### **Redeeming the promise**

For the country and its citizens to recover from the trauma of these last years and resume the long march to popular democracy, the structures of intimidation and the culture of secrecy that dominate its political life need to be dismantled and new expressions of self-organisation need to sprout and grow. This would be no easy task under any conditions, but it is more difficult than ever in the poisoned environment that exists today. Were the lid to come off the political pressure cooker in Eritrea, bitter recriminations could overwhelm creative dialogue, and the thirst for revenge crowd out the prospect of a peaceful transition to an open society. To avoid this, while giving vent to the accumulated grievances that many Eritreans brandish as an integral part of their political identity, there needs to be a cooling-off period in which *all* political tendencies co-exist as the truth comes out – perhaps through a truth commission like that of Argentina or South Africa. It is vital to account for the excluded, the injured and the missing and to clear up who has done what to whom over these past years.

When it comes to actual mechanisms through which a people can participate in political life, there are numerous alternatives available—and a rich heritage within Eritrea upon which to draw—from consultations among community elders and town-meeting-style village assemblies to the sort of civil society organisations (trade unions, student movements, women’s groups, cultural organisations, neighbourhood associations), competing political parties, elections and parliamentary forums that developed—and were then crushed—in the 1940s and early 1950s. It was precisely this legacy upon which the commission that drafted Eritrea’s Constitution in the mid-1990s drew. Now, once again, the Eritrean people need a chance to breathe free air, to take the measure of themselves and each other, to understand what happened to their bold and courageous liberation struggle and how it did so. And to dream again of the bright future that so many imagined throughout the decades in which they fought and sacrificed to open up that possibility.

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<sup>1</sup> See Dan Connell, *Taking on the Superpowers: Collected Articles on the Eritrean Revolution (1976-1982)*, vol. 1. (Trenton, N. J., Red Sea Press, 2003) and *Building a New Nation: Collected Articles on the Eritrean Revolution (1983-2002)*, vol. 2. (Trenton, N. J., Red Sea Press, 2004).

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<sup>2</sup> Eritrea Constitution, Articles 5 and 7,

<<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/CAFRAD/UNPAN00464.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> See Dan Connell, ‘Inside the EPLF: the origins of the “People’s Party” & its role in the liberation of Eritrea,’ *Review of African Political Economy* (Vol. XXVIII, September 2001), pp. 345-64.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the underlying complexities of this conflict, see Leenco Lata, ‘The Ethiopia-Eritrea war,’ *Review of African Political Economy* (Vol. XXX, September 2003), pp. 369-88.

<sup>5</sup> See Dan Connell, ‘Enough! A critique of Eritrea's post-liberation politics,’ retrieved from <<http://allafrica.com/stories/200311060876.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> For a narrative account of these measures, see Debessay Hedru, ‘Eritrea: transition to dictatorship, 1991-2003,’ *Review of African Political Economy* (Vol. XXX, 2003), pp. 435-44.

<sup>7</sup> I was in Eritrea in 2001 as the criticism of the president went public, and I interviewed several top-ranking dissidents shortly before they were imprisoned indefinitely. These interviews appear in Dan Connell, *Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners* (Trenton, N. J., Red Sea Press, 2004).