

“What Went Wrong?: The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front from Armed Opposition to State Governance”

A Personal Observation

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The World Peace Foundation, an operating foundation affiliated solely with The Fletcher School, aims to provide intellectual leadership on issues of peace, justice and security. It believes that innovative research and teaching are critical to the challenges of making peace around the world, and should go hand-in-hand with advocacy and practical engagement with the toughest issues.

This paper contributes to the WPF’s goals of reinventing peace and improving understanding and the means of addressing armed conflict by examining the processes by which a liberation movement, founded on the ideals of its people, changed once in power. A story repeated across time and geography, understanding these dynamics of liberation turned oppression help illuminate the challenges to consolidating peaceful democracies.

OVERVIEW

This paper discusses how the Eritrea People’s Liberation Front evolved from a liberation front (1971-1991), into a highly successful organization with clear social and political agenda, and, ultimately, into an oppressive state where power is concentrated in the hands of the President and his close network.

The EPLF rose as a liberation army, involving the Eritrean people in an exceptionally arduous armed struggle against a major African army backed by world major powers to win independence. It was an effective fighting machine with clear people-centered ideology and a unique organization that captured the imagination of practically every Eritrean. As an organization, it forged solidarity and camaraderie between diverse Eritrean ethnic, class and gender groups, across rural and urban areas, and between Eritreans living inside the country as well as outside, for one great purpose – the liberation of the people, gaining independence of the country, through getting rid of the Ethiopian occupation force from Eritrea.

The paper documents how the EPLF changed towards the end of the fight for Eritrean liberation and then manifestly failed to provide its people with the fruits of democracy once war ended. In peacetime, people were promoted based on fidelity to the President and dissent was harshly silenced. The disastrous war with Ethiopia was in many ways caused by and further fueled these tendencies. Today, political dissent and news media have been squashed, and Eritreans are fleeing their country in large numbers.

Introduction

Eritrea was liberated in May 1991, after completely defeating the Ethiopian regime militarily. Two years later it conducted a referendum to ascertain the wishes of the Eritrean people and to consolidate its military victory through legal means, thereby achieving sovereign independence as the State of Eritrea.

Eritrea was a creation of Italy, an Italian colony for almost sixty years, until Italy's defeat in World War Two by the Allied Forces. The British took over the administration of Eritrea on behalf of the Allied Forces until the Eritrean case could be brought to the United Nations for a final resolution. The debate within the UN about the future of Eritrea gave Ethiopia the perfect chance to demand the 'return' of Eritrea to its 'mother', Ethiopia, as a strategy of gaining access to the Red Sea. The U.S.'s suggestion, nay, push, to federate Eritrea 'under' the Ethiopian crown received enough votes in the UN Security Council as to arrange a federal relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Federation was inaugurated in 1952. The federal arrangement incorporated in the Federal Act, was weak, full of loopholes and inconsistencies albeit with guarantees and safeguards for the human rights of the people, enabling Ethiopia to effectively undermine the arrangement, and even to totally abrogate it unilaterally ten years later.

Ethiopia dismantled the federation without the international community, specifically the UN, discussing the merits of Ethiopian claims, assessing Ethiopia's hostile activities in Eritrea; no serious objections were raised and Ethiopia's deliberate steps to undermine the UN arranged Federal Acts passed without any international censure. Appeals to the UN by Eritrean political groups and nationalist individuals to redress Ethiopian transgressions, and their entreaties to the UN to assume responsibility, fell on deaf ears. The glaring failure of the UN and the international community at large to object to Ethiopia's transgressions emboldened Ethiopia to proceed with its total disregard of the federal arrangement and to forcibly annex Eritrea into Ethiopia as one of its provinces under a contrived resolution to that effect by the Eritrean Parliament. Ethiopian impunity and the UN's conspiratorial silence and inaction during the long period of Ethiopian encroachment, had a profound impact on the psych of the Eritrean people. The resultant suspicion, feeling of betrayal, isolation, (even self imposed as seen in recent times), and the feeling of the world constantly conniving against it strongly impacted the Eritrean movement for independence, lingering long after Eritrea gained its independence; feelings exploited by the present leadership to keep its people in a state of fear, insecurity and suspicion of any other.

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was founded in 1961 in response to Ethiopian repression. By the end of a decade it found itself splintering along political, religious and regional lines, hopelessly unable to conduct the war of liberation effectively. One of the groups that emerged out of the splits was the Eritrean

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People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) becoming the dominant armed resistance liberation front against Ethiopian occupation and ultimately winning the war.

What Went Wrong in Eritrea?

The problem that Eritrea faces today is largely because the post-liberation Government, the State of Eritrea, was not able to make a successful transition from a liberation movement in the field to a democratic civilian government in office. Why has it proved impossible for it to make this transition despite its experience running civilian departments that acted like ministries in a free country? Why does the Eritrean Government still act more like an opposition group, perhaps better armed and resourced, although it has liberated Eritrea, manages a country with its entire population and is accepted as a member of the international community of nations?

In the twenty years of its existence as a liberation front (1971-1991), the EPLF developed into a highly successful organization with clear social and political agenda, effectively involving the Eritrean people in

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this exceptionally arduous armed struggle against a major African army backed my world major powers to win independence. The EPLF developed into an effective fighting machine with clear people-centered ideology. It was a unique organization that captured the imagination of practically every Eritrean, an organization that accommodated, brought together and forged solidarity and camaraderie between diverse Eritrean ethnic groups, classes, and gender, rural and urban areas, Eritreans living inside

the country as well as outside, for one great purpose – the liberation of the people, gaining independence of the country, through getting rid of the Ethiopian occupation force from Eritrea.

The EPLF’s organizational capacity was phenomenal. The dedication of its members to the cause was unparalleled, its commitment to the Eritrean people unquestioned – ‘liberate the land and the people with their active participation’ was the EPLF’s motto. The EPLF based itself among the population in Sahel province in a physical sense. It situated its base area in this rugged, mountainous, inaccessible location as a form of military protection. But in reality, its members came from all walks of Eritrean life – of highly-educated in the best universities of the world, including Harvard, Sorbonne, and Oxford, of successful businessmen, of highly-skilled individuals trained by well-known companies such as Mercedes-Benz in the automotive industry, of medical doctors, pharmacists, and engineers. The EPLF fired up the imagination of farmers and people of nomadic background in the rural areas, of ordinary people who lived any where inside the country and those in inside Ethiopia, and across Africa, the Middle East, Europe and North America and beyond. For some Eritreans it was a natural and logical progression of their life to join the EPLF as a combatant after graduating from universities in Europe without any questions asked and without any hesitation. Membership in the Front was an act of faith. Had it not for the conflict, incessant contradictions and confrontation with the ELF that led to a harsh fratricidal war, it would have been easily



said that the EPLF had one hundred percent support of the entire Eritrean population living within the country as well as outside.

The EPLF articulated the Eritrean struggle as part of the anti-colonial African struggles and saw itself as an African liberation movement. It never accepted the UN-arranged federation under Ethiopia as reflecting the will of the Eritrean people. The subsequent unilateral annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia was termed an act of conquest and imposition of a colonial rule and taken to heart as such. The EPLF said, in simple terms, that a colonizer does not have to come from overseas with a white man’s face. It proved, to the satisfaction of the Eritrean people, through Eritrea’s own history and through parallels with other African countries, that Ethiopia’s presence in Eritrea was an act of occupation, that Ethiopia was a colonial power and that the Eritrean people possessed the inalienable right of self-determination thus entitled to organize themselves into a resistance group, including to wage armed struggle to ascertain and exercise their rights. This belief, bolstered by an effective organization and commitment to principles of right of self-determination forged over several years became the engine that drove the war of independence.

The Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), in neighbouring Ethiopian province of Tigray, significantly contributed towards the military defeat of the Ethiopian army and the downfall of the regime, the Derg. The TPLF’s armed struggle on its own and in coordination with the EPLF, its historic support of the Eritrean referendum when it assumed power in Ethiopia (as the leading member of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front – EPRDF - coalition), and its support’s impact on Eritrea’s acceptance as a member of the international community must be mentioned here. This was an act of friendship, brotherhood, a principle faithfully adhered to and implemented without hesitation; honouring of a relationship forged through blood and sweats that built strong comradeship with the intention of sealing a bond between the two countries and peoples forever. For seven years, 1991-1998, the relationship between the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea was held up as a rare and magnificent example of how a leadership, Ethiopia’s, could willingly and democratically allow separation of Eritrea to proceed, legally and peacefully.

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The question persists, why, the EPLF and its leadership, despite its glorious history of forging solidarity among Eritreans, its clarity in its purpose and success in ending the war and achieving independence, despite all the dreams and expectations it ignited among the Eritrean people for a brighter future, despite the tremendous goodwill bestowed on it by the Eritrean people before and after independence, despite the total consensus by all citizens to make Eritrea a democracy, it did not move vigorously to create an open, inclusive, democratic, developmental and tolerant society?

There were, for sure, certain important measures taken that seemed to be leading to a democratic future. One example was the February 1994 Third EPLF Congress which separated the Front from the Government, renaming itself the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) ostensibly to broaden the base of the EPLF and replace the structures of a front and a military organization with that of a civilian



party. Another example was the resolution to introduce a multi-party democracy in Eritrea; a third was the drafting and ratifying of a new Constitution (1994-97). The Eritrean constitution was drafted with the participation of the entire population inside Eritrea. Diaspora Eritreans were also provided the opportunity to participate, through their committees, and to contribute and to be part of the process of drafting and ultimately ratifying the Constitution. The EPLF Charter approved during the Third EPLF Congress enjoins the new Eritrean government to form: ‘a democratic constitutional system based on sovereignty of the people, on democratic principles and procedures, on accountability, transparency, pluralism and tolerance.’

All these hopes ended in complete disappointment. More than eighteen years after the ratification of the Eritrean constitution in May 1997, it remains unimplemented, completely disregarded although it is claimed that part of it is in implementation according to the spokespersons of the regime. Recently, the President has been speaking about drafting a new constitution based on the political lessons he learned so far without explaining what that really means. However, no action has so far been taken and no official body to draft the new constitution announced. Eritreans have lost all trust in the leadership, if there is anything that can be taken as such, and say that the President will give them his own constitution that will constitutional affirm a one man life dictatorship.

Was there a change of heart on the part of the Eritrean leadership and the President in particular in forging a democratic nation taken the commitment all members of the EPLF and the larger Eritrean population entered into and expected to see, or was it an unachievable dream from the very beginning that could not have materialized given the nature of the EPLF as a liberation movement and the President in absolute control? There were a number of concrete steps taken to move the country in the path of democracy. An election law was drafted and presented to the legislative body, the National Assembly; a political party draft legislation that was intended to govern the establishment and development of a multi-party democracy was ready for public discussion, local elections were held as prelude to national elections, and the overall commitment to a democratic transition was still tangible although there were worrying signs of reversal, until the eruption of the renewed war with Ethiopia in 1998.

EPLF: Militarism, Political Orientation and Diversity

The primary aim of the EPLF was to win the independence of Eritrea through armed struggle. Thus, the organization that was formed for this task in 1971 was primarily a military one: strict discipline, hierarchical, zero tolerance of any kind of challenge or defiance to authority, zero tolerance of real or imagined dissidence in its own ranks, and, to a large extent, authoritarian as any military establishment. During its two decades of armed struggle, the EPLF stated that it was waging war on colonialism and on a system of institutionalised injustice and oppression. This oppressive colonial rule was manifested by political and military domination of Eritrean citizens and the country by outside forces, Ethiopian administrators and officials, by a denial of civil and political rights; rights of associational life, freedom of expression, of

political system choices, of proper elections, formation of civil society organizations, political parties, independent newspapers: in short, denial and flagrant violation of the basic rights of the Eritrean people. The Ethiopian regime also possessed a well-equipped and well-organized army, navy and air force which threatened and constantly harassed the Eritrean people and the Eritrean liberation movements, especially after the exit of ELF, the EPLF, on a daily basis. During these years, the EPLF focused on self-survival while incessantly weakening the Ethiopia enemy militarily. Under the circumstances, the EPLF could only set up effective administration but not set up effective democratic institutions in the liberated areas to replace those that were instituted by successive Ethiopian regimes, nor could it develop democratic values extensive and deep enough that could be sustained after independence, core values for successful transition after the defeat of the colonial power.

The absence of democratic processes, procedures and institutions was tolerated during the war of liberation, and, even accepted for the greater goal. EPLF could violate the rights of its own members and the population in the liberated areas at large in the name of the greater cause – the revolution that would bring independence, that will restore the dignity of the Eritrean people and guarantee all their fundamental rights as citizens. Eritreans widely conceded the Front’s powers to coerce even non-combatant citizens to give service to the organization without any compensation, to dispense with democratic and moral values justified by the exigency of fighting a superior enemy and winning the war. This, however, led ultimately, albeit slowly and almost deliberately in post-independent Eritrea, to a situation in which the leadership exercised absolute power and absolute control over people’s lives, flagrantly manifesting undemocratic behaviour, which led to the development of authoritarian and unaccountable patterns of rule. Certainly, the EPLF spoke about democracy when the opportunity availed itself but in a defiant manner. The commitments shown during important occasions in the Front’s life, like congresses, the long-term declared pledge to democratize, to building a multi-party system, to encourage an independent civic formation, etc. enshrined in its organizational programme and its Charter was all easily and conveniently indefinitely shelved. The following became meaningless:

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‘The political system must be based on democracy... the existence of a society governed by democratic principles and procedures, the existence of democratic institutions and culture, broad public participation in decision-making and a government that is accountable to the people.’

These commitments were however never properly tested and their meaning and significance never properly explained and propagated let alone practiced.

The EPLF had, after liberation, every opportunity to implement its principles and to practice its declared political objectives unhindered. The EPLF was accepted almost by the entire population of Eritrea; the good-will bestowed on it was without limit. After all, it won the war and brought the peace. Regrettably, the habit of using force seemed to come too natural in its relations and communication with its members,



citizens at large and ultimately in its inter-state relationships. Doing things the military way seemed to be more expedient, certain and quicker and producing clearer results. In the final analysis however, this led to effective abandonment of justice; just cause, just war translated into sheer force justified by expediency. It is not difficult to cite many examples. Is it because the seeds of authoritarianism were long planted in its very nature? Is it because it was a primarily a military organization with a military code of conduct and discipline for which civilian administration, civil and political rights were concepts to be played with and implemented and practiced only when expedient? Could its Marxist-Leninist political orientation, its donning upon itself the vanguard that knew all, that thought about everything, that led to intolerance towards other parties, groups and opinions? All of the above?

What happened during the concluding years of the war of liberation, 1987-91, can be taken as an illustration of change coming in the relationship between EPLF and the Eritrean people, even more visibly within the EPLF itself. After the 1987 EPLF Second Congress, in the name of winning the war quickly and attacking the enemy at its weakest and on many fronts, EPLF resorted to widespread forceful recruitment of the youth into the liberation army. The EPLF, before this period, was an organization and army totally composed of volunteers, of individuals who joined the struggle out of their free will and commitment to the independence of their country. This new action of resorting to forceful recruitment turned EPLF from a highly effective organization with highly committed and motivated army of volunteers into an army mostly composed of forced recruits, including many young Eritreans that were not willing to join, and who cared even less to sacrifice for freeing themselves and their country from the Ethiopian colonizer.

The result was dramatic change in the very composition of the EPLF and the relationship between the leadership and rank and file. As a result, many individuals attempted to flee and defect. The EPLF, in reaction, gave directive to shoot on sight on any recruit who tried to flee, whether leaving for the Sudan,

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back to their villages or to Eritrean towns controlled by Ethiopian troops. One can imagine the implications for the organization, the relationship between those forcefully recruited and those who joined voluntarily and the enforcement of the directive of shooting to kill of those who were found abandoning the army. One can imagine the attitude of the leadership which could, without any accountability, not only take kids forcefully from their families but also shoot them if they tried to go back to their families, villages, or anywhere where they could escape their forceful conscription into

a military that they were not committed to. One can also imagine how this whole scene directly impacting on any future democratization process, the mindset of the EPLF leadership and the relationship between different parties in the national context.

During the war of liberation, peasants were asked to perform tasks for the EPLF without any reward. No explanation was given by the EPLF nor demanded by the people why the peasants needed to perform the tasks and why at a particular time. It was understood. No one needed to explain. It is for the common good. Camels, donkeys and other pack animals would be commandeered, the people would be asked to



perform physical labour, run errands, dropping everything they were doing; although very much inconvenienced by such demands and actions the peasants did not mind. Their inconvenience was not manifested in any way but was understood as a necessary demand made by their children to defeat the enemy, or to stop the movement of the enemy that was also harassing them. At the same time, however, the EPLF gave them security, provided them with health care as well as education for their children and supplied them with relief aid when they were in need. It was a time of trust based on a common vision, there was harmony, unity of purpose as they all worked for the same goal.

After independence, the EPLF turned into PFDJ, and expected the same relationship to continue. Similar sacrifices were demanded from the people, especially in the rural areas. An official of a village administration would ask peasants to perform certain chores. The peasants would not comply readily or would not fulfil what is demanded of them immediately as they could not see the immediate need. The enemy is gone. Life should turn back to normal. Thus they would do their own work first followed by the task demanded of them. They did not see the urgency of the matter asked of them; times have changed: from a time of war to a time of peace; from a colonized people fighting for their independence, to a free people living in an independent country. They needed to work for themselves; survival was a primary issue and taking care of one's affairs and family a priority. However, governors and government/party representatives did not change and would be unhappy with the reluctance to act immediately and would take the non-immediate performance of task as non-obedience, insubordination and therefore subject to reprimand, punishment, assignment of additional task, even detention.

Within the organization itself, anyone seen or perceived as straying from the 'correct line' as prescribed by the leadership, would be harshly treated. Criticism and self-criticism were tools not only to correct mistakes but to also harshly treat people, to humiliate them, and for those who are seen as political deviants, a tool of repression with the effect of instilling fear in the minds of all who witnessed. Bringing up serious political issues, though very uncommon and almost unthinkable, when it occurred, was dealt with harshly.

During the long years of the Eritrean struggle, Eritrean armed organizations had developed among themselves the culture of resolving important differences harshly and violently. In the 1970s, the contradiction between ELF and EPLF was reduced to military confrontation and was ultimately resolved through military means; the EPLF, with the collaboration of the TPLF, militarily defeated the ELF and expelled it from Eritrea altogether. It must be stressed that it was the ELF, the older organization that initiated the armed struggle for Eritrea's liberation, that declared war on the EPLF and ignited a terrible fratricidal war whose negative impact is haunting Eritrea's political transition and development until this day. The causes of the conflict, its resolution and process of reconciliation remain unaddressed to this day.

EPLF/PFDJ: Government and Party

In the months leading to and during the Third Congress of the EPLF, in February 1994, a new view about a ‘new blood’ of leadership surfaced, whatever it was meant to express or signify, brought to the fore by the President, with the result of electing younger people into the Party Executive and Central Committee. This ushered in, within the party executive body, a new political elite, a clique that did not have adequate experience in leadership, no history of motivating others, no discernible track record in their contribution to the armed struggle, and no clear constituency. The President did not explain the need to bring ‘new blood’ into the party leadership; he did not want it debated and he chastised those who wanted discussions held on the question of leadership in view of his statement effectively shutting down the debate on such an important issue of leadership. One could only deduce that the President did not want to share his intentions but wanted his idea supported without any questions asked and any debate held. One can again say that the President’s intention was less than honourable and certainly not for the best interest of the Party.

The ‘new blood’ brought into the leadership by the President, proved to be ambitious and more cunning and ruthless. Their loyalty and subservience to the President was beyond limit. They were ready to serve the master without any qualms. They made themselves available to become instruments of suppression without any hesitation. In reality the ‘new blood’ proved to be as old and as archaic as any obedient instrument of a vicious master who would do anything to ingratiate themselves with the boss as the only way of remaining in power.

These newcomers took upon themselves the sole guardianship of the gains of the revolution; they suspended indefinitely meetings of party membership, stopped explaining policies and issues, and refused to provide information to the members on important national and party issues, and, when they did, sporadically, it was a teacher lecturing to small kids. Power for them became equivalent to survival and their ascendancy as a miracle and an opportunity to cling to. Instead of running the offices of the party, they assumed unfettered powers that brought disaster to the country, state, politics, economy and civil service.

The ‘new blood’ were younger and more energetic, relatively more educated, but less experienced in mobilizing opinion and people, in management and administration, in accommodating other views, in winning trust and respect. They were however, hard working and manipulative. They could easily talk about transforming Eritrea single handedly oblivious to the fact that Eritrea gained its independence because of the participation of the entire population. For them, transformation in Eritrea could only happen as long as they cling to the power that they have usurped. However, their youth, energy and

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radicalism did not accord them the wisdom to understand and learn, let alone accommodate different ideas. They did not have any notion of the importance of national reconciliation and national harmony in a politically divided multi-ethnic, multi-religious society; no notion of inclusive political processes. The EPLF’s principle of ‘unity in diversity’ gave way to an identity of political correctness that polarized Eritrea into ‘us versus them’, ‘for us or against us’ under the new blood. These ‘new blood’ of leaders became adept at citing the revolution, its gains and sacrifices as their own; they are good at organizing ceremonies and festivals, such as martyrs’ day, independence day, and justifying their actions in the interest of the revolution and our martyrs; mystifying the Eritrean struggle and its achievements and fabricating events to prove their point. Their role in the struggle of course is equally mystified, blown out of proportion, becoming the fighters who represent all fighters; the liberators who sacrificed all; fanatically labelling any dissent as hostile to the interests of the country, considering dissenters as ‘enemies of people’, ‘defeatists’ and ‘sub-nationals’.

The new blood’s boundless ambition and power hunger pushed the notion of the ‘party leading the state’ to the extreme, deliberately blurring the boundaries between party and government; running the functions of many line ministries themselves, subordinating, replacing, undermining and inevitably, paralyzing and destroying state institutions. This was clearly against the resolution the party passed in its 1994 Congress. The head of the Economic Department of the party became practically the governor of the Bank of Eritrea and the Minister of Finance combined, he commanded more foreign currency than the national bank; he ran the economy of the country by sheer command of enormous financial and material resources and his closeness to the President. All the party’s property and the trading and investment companies of the party were put under him. He was accountable to no one but the President. The head of the Political Department of the party became the political advisor of the President, the super-diplomat, the virtual negotiator of war and peace, effectively replacing the Minister of Foreign Affairs. All Eritrean embassies and diplomatic missions in foreign capitals were ordered to send a copy of every report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the head of the political office of the party. The head of the Information Department manipulated news, controlled what should be presented to the public in the government controlled media, run social and cultural activities, defined and managed national holidays, etc.

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All this could not be conceived let alone carried out without the President’s support, if not initial push, approval and protection.

‘New blood’ is needed in any organization of any nature; new thinking, new ways of execution; revival and renewal. The old should leave space for the young; the young should learn under the old; improvise and change. It is about succession. However, succession can only be done with proper planning and in an organized manner with well defined goals communicated to and understood by all. Renewal and revival prevent decay and ultimately death.



In the same vein, the President created a parallel group of loyalists, another centre of power, of senior military officers who were beholden to him. These military officers have little in common with the ‘new blood’ party leadership. They are veteran fighters who were military heroes of the war of liberation. In post independence Eritrea however they came to owe the President their position, their titles and their livelihood. They were given by the President the authority to run businesses in the name of using the abundant human resources under their command for a constructive purpose, as well as to keep the youth busy; to also earning income for their units and save government revenue from being used for the military. However, this gave the military commanders enormous financial power and political clout, becoming a state within a state as they controlled local government affairs and functions, buttressing further their positions and privileges. Inevitably, self-enrichment and corruption became the hallmarks of these military officers within a short period of time without much effort. They got involved in food production activities, ran shops and businesses, all completely outside of the state system, un-audited, unaccounted for, untaxed but still treated as private property, competing with and undermining the legitimacy of the private sector.

Under the circumstances, ‘national interest’ got appropriated by the ‘new blood’ of leaders and senior military officers combined to become synonymous with whatever the ruling elite decides it to means – self and clique interest. ‘National interest’ has been used to justify all kinds of authoritarian practices, freely using terms such as ‘anti or sub-national’ or ‘unpatriotic’ applied to any person or group that resist, oppose and condemn the power of the ruling elite of the day. Under such circumstances, many people chose to keep their silence, pretend to be loyal to the party, relegating the principles they fought for, and the sacrifices their comrades paid with their lives to the history books. But, this cannot last long. Opposition to the clique and the President is expressed in various ways; many have been washing their hands from helping destroy a wonderful country and decent people.

Renewed War with Ethiopia

It was under such a situation in which the nation was getting increasingly disillusioned with national politics, with a few people dominating political, economic, social and cultural life, that the war with Ethiopia broke out in May 1998. This was a shock and a complete surprise to all. Though it was clear at the time for even the casual observer that the relationship between the two governments and ruling parties was getting frostier based on some statements coming out of the Eritrean media alone, although it was possible to discern hostility in those statements indicating the fast deteriorating relationship, no-one could anticipate that the two countries would revert into an all-out war over issues that could only be taken as differences of opinion, or policies, programmes and even values. The war was misleadingly explained as a border conflict by both parties.

The failure to forge a long lasting relationship between EPLF and the TPLF/EPRDF and the post-1991 governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia can be found in historical differences between the two in areas of economic, political and social policies, in the democratization processes taking place in each country, in different actions and institutions of both countries, concurrences, similarities and diversions expressed differently. Above all, in the case of Eritrea, there were no institutions, balancing power centres, clear and transparent policy and decision making procedures to review and temper when necessary the President’s personal decision that could lead into reckless actions and avoid national disaster.

The resolution of the war was referred to international arbitration with two commissions established: The Eritrean-Ethiopian Boundary Commission and The Eritrean-Ethiopian Claims Commission. The Boundary Commission ruled that Badme, the flash point of the war, belonged to Eritrea, and that Ethiopia had to abandon it and allow the boundaries to be marked on the ground as agreed. Ethiopia refused to abide by the ruling contrary to the commitment it entered, that the ruling was to be ‘final and binding’, i.e. to be accepted and implemented without any possibility of appeal. At the same time, there was no pressure applied to Ethiopia, let alone the consideration of sanction and threat of sanction, for violating an international agreement and a binding decision. The witnesses to the treaty did not want to push Ethiopia to accept the ruling and allow its implementation. This apparent lack of willingness on the part of the witnesses to the treaty to pressurize Ethiopia to accept and allow implementation triggered and re-enforced the old belief that the ‘international community is against Eritrea’. This belief is also used by the regime in Eritrea to militarize the people and deny them the enjoyment of their basic rights. For the government, Ethiopia’s presence on Eritrean sovereign territory as an act of foreign occupation and a declaration of war; no one can exercise their rights in a state of war.

The Claims Commission, on the other hand, ruled that Eritrea started the war by using excessive/disproportional military force, rejecting Eritrea’s claim of ‘self-defence’. Regardless of the background to the disagreement, the provocation claimed, the land illegally occupied, it was Eritrea that escalated a skirmish into a major military engagement, an all out war was the ruling rendered by the Commission. Major questions still remain unanswered around this event. Why did the Eritrean President order the military to attack the Ethiopian army with such a huge firepower? How was the decision to wage a full-scale war arrived? Did he even intend to start a war at all? Was his intention

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to only send his army into a ‘punitive’ expedition, to hammer home to Ethiopia that it could not play games with a conceivably stronger and older brother/neighbour, albeit ruling a much smaller country, and that Ethiopia should not take him personally for granted?

Accounts from some individuals with access to inside knowledge indicate that the President had no idea what he was getting into, and that he did not mean to wage a full-scale war; rather his intention was to punish Ethiopia for its transgressions, including its military incursions into Eritrea in hot pursuit of some Ethiopian opposition groups operating from Dankalia; its unilateral efforts to redraw the boundary between the two as demonstrated in some of the maps coming out. This is in addition to his sheer desire



to punish Ethiopia for its general attitude of defiance towards Eritrea as interpreted by the President. At the time, to the dismay of the Eritrean President, Ethiopia had started to restrain if not absolutely control the unbridled economic activities of the PFDJ in Ethiopia, had refused to honour the new Eritrean currency, the Nakfa, as par with its own currency, the Birr, and had even refused to take the Birr back with its value intact as an Ethiopian currency that was in circulation in Eritrea at the time of the introduction of the new Eritrean currency.

When the President decided to send his military to ‘punish’ Ethiopia, he did not consult his cabinet, his military commanders and obviously did not bring any discussion to the Eritrean National Assembly or party leadership prior to making his decision to go to war. He called a cabinet meeting after the war broke out and subsequently informed the populace of the outbreak of the war and his declared readiness for peace. The reason he officially gave for going to war was Ethiopia’s occupation of Eritrean territory along the common border at a location called Badme.

The President’s action and inaction in regard to the renewed war with Ethiopia set Eritrea in an uncontrollable motion of catastrophic paralysis and indefinite suspension of all the initial steps taken towards democratization, developmental activities and nation building efforts, deferring, *ad infinitum*, the implementation of the ratified constitution with all its implications for the rule of law and democratic governance, economic liberalization and development, the construction, development and proper functioning of national institutions, such as the National Assembly, independent judiciary, executive institutions, deviating from normal international relations, reducing the country into ultimately a primary producer of refugees in Africa and number two world-wide only surpassed by Syria, a country in a full-fledged civil war.

This was the President’s war with the anticipation of great victory therefore great honour for the President; but the defeat, the loss--human and material--and shame was every Eritreans; it was national.

Open Fracture within the Leadership, Political Dissent and Consequences

As seen above, Eritrea found itself in a full-fledged war with Ethiopia in May 1998. But, the political leadership, the commanders of the armed forces, cabinet ministers and of course the population at large did not have any idea why the two went to war and whether they had differences of a nature that could not be resolved through dialogue, arbitration or legal means before resorting to war. Eritrea lost the war, with it losing its aura of untouchable and undefeatable one, undermining its strategic strength in the region, losing credibility as a serious government, its confidence plummeting. What is worse is, the leadership of the party, the Central Committee, and the country, the National Assembly, were not properly informed let alone involved in the decision to whether to go to war or not let alone in its execution. Many of the former military leaders, intelligence officers, logistics experts, those that led the war of liberation



and had incredible contribution towards winning independence, were completely sidelined. This was the President's war with the anticipation of great victory therefore great honour for the President; but the defeat, the loss--human and material--and shame was every Eritreans; it was national.

The President had long abandoned called meetings of the leadership and the National Assembly on a regular basis as the transitional arrangement and Party directives demand. And whenever he called a meeting, important and strategic issues of national concern were given more as form of information; they were not debated and no agreement to be followed up reached. The President had long lost his appetite to hear other's opinions, consider alternatives views, broaden his understanding of his world and beyond; he knew it all. For the President, calling meetings was a burden, a waste of time, even an irritant. The first meeting of the Party and national leadership after the war officially ended was therefore taken as an opportunity to ask hard questions, interrogate the President and even criticize him for the war and its handling and the manner the peace process was conducted. As an outcome, agreement was reached to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of how the nation has been managed so far - its economy, its politics as well as the recent war - to which the President agreed. It was also agreed that a meeting would soon be called to hear the report that would subsequently be released to the people. They left the party leadership, the new blood, to prepare the report.

Instead of respecting the resolution passed in the Party and National Assembly meeting, the President, through his cadres in the party executive committee and youth union, started campaigning against the members of the leadership in complete negation of the agreement to conduct evaluation, making it clear that there was not going to be any meeting as agreed, let alone any serious evaluation of his manner of leadership and its impact on the country. The leadership asked him to call a meeting, to which he gave a deaf ear; they sent him letters, which he ignored or replied with meaningless but subtle threats. When all attempts to make the President call a meeting failed, the President being the Chairman of the Party Central Committee and the National Assembly and therefore the only person with powers to call a meeting of both bodies, the rest of the leadership resorted to collecting signatures in order to force the President to call a meeting, but to no avail. This group of leadership had both to convey their concerns and defend themselves against the vicious attacks the PFDJ operatives and their affiliates in the Youth Union, and to resort to giving interviews to the independent media that was just emerging in Eritrea. They wanted to share their views with the larger public in anticipation of gaining support; they wanted to combat the negative propaganda against them waged by the President and Party operatives and make it clear that they were not 'enemies' of the country, foreign agents, nor collaborators of the Ethiopian regime. They also wanted to show that they were not, as claimed, 'defeatists', 'sub-nationals' nor saboteurs.

Going public was unheard of before in the EPLF/PFDJ. Internal problems should be solved through internal mechanisms. In this case however, internal mechanisms and processes had already collapsed and effectively were shut down by the President. The President had refused to call a meeting and allow the continuation of the debate over important national issues, issues the direction the country was heading, war, peace and the economy among others that began a few months prior.

The President and the Party operatives were unable to sustain what they started and get away with – using the government controlled media to defame and isolate the opposition within, what have now come to be called, ‘dissidents’, ‘reformers’, the 15 senior members of the leadership, the G-15, who, by that time,

Not only those with messages, the G-13, but also the messengers – the editors of the independent media - were also arrested and their offices closed down.

have opened a public debate on the extremely pertinent issues of national interest. This was possible because of the existence of the private/independent media that was beginning to make its mark on Eritrean public information, communication and dialogue. The independent media that began to emerge right before the outbreak of war in 1998, had to toe the nationalist, pro-Eritrea line during the war out of necessity, for reasons of nationalism and respect for those who were giving their lives in the front line

defending the country. Right after the cessation of hostilities however, the independent media shifted its attention into internal matters, provided space for all interested to convey their messages and create a huge debate on all issues that was Eritrean. Of course, one important message that was of national interest was the burning issues that the G-15 that the independent media raising if not championed. The independent media not only did it cover the issues and discussions that the G-15 were raising but also provided space to members of the G-15 to write articles and conducted interviews whoever was ready to or wanted to be interviewed and also requested.

A few months continued in 2001 with public information and debate kick-started by the G-15. The attention of people who could read was drawn into the debate. The newspapers were read with intense curiosity. They were all sold out within hours of their distribution to newspaper stalls and street vendors. The government media lost its monopoly of determining what should be read and listened to. Public awareness of what the issues of the leadership were, concerns raised, the criticism aired, were seen as a threat to the government, more specifically, to the President. The President ordered the arrest of the G-15, by that time reduced to 13, one September day before dawn, 2001. Not only those with messages, the G-13, but also the messengers – the editors of the independent media - were also arrested and their offices closed down. To date, the whereabouts of the G-15 and the editors of the independent newspapers remain undisclosed. No one seems to know whether they are even alive although rumours abound of the death of some, the incapacitation, whether physical or mental, of others, and sheer ignorance of the existence of the rest.

The G-15 and the journalists’ arrest and disappearance created fear in the heart of the nation. Complete and absolute dictatorship reigned since, with any person suspected of harbouring sympathy with the reformers or showing any political opposition arrested and left to rot in the prisons that mushroomed too fast for such a small nation.

The President demonstrated, through such actions of arrest and disappearances, through total intolerance of different ideas, let alone action, fanatical hatred of any form of debate and associational life. As far as he was concerned, independence could mean nothing for the people of Eritrea, what they and their children fought for and paid the highest price for could mean nothing if things did not go his way, however

disastrous his ways were. The President crossed a line; his sheer incompetence and absolute cowardice resulted in the betrayal of the glorious struggle for independence; arrested the development of nation and state building in Eritrea with severe consequences for a long time to come.

The President did not bring the reformers, the ‘dissidents’ to court, or any tribunal for that matter, let alone one that is legally constituted. He did not charge them with any crime; the same was the case with the journalists, and, subsequently with too many others--no charges, no presentation before any tribunal, even setting up a committee reporting to him to look into the various cases. Holding people in jails, incommunicado, in most cases, with families and relatives not knowing in which jail, as there are several jails in the country, whether they were alive or dead, became the order of the day.

This single act of arresting and causing the disappearance of the members of the senior leadership of the war of liberation, the government and party, caused the nation and society grave pain, an irreparable damage. It demonstrated in no unclear terms that the President would go to any length to destroy those

Unprecedented tyranny reigned in Eritrea after September 2001, banishing all hopes of a free, developed and prosperous nation and society that can live in peace and harmony with itself and the world.

he suspects as his opponents, whatever it costs the nation, the people and society at large. Resorting to silencing all who dared to speak out with any means can only be an act of a person in an extreme state of insecurity and fear. His insecurity grew because what he thought would be a simple victory over Ethiopia brought military and economic disaster to Eritrea. He was frightened of calling any meeting to discuss national issues and face questions, especially strong criticism about what went wrong with his administration. The President was not ready to

face the charge that any perceived threat to ‘national security’ provoked the impulse to resort to violence to resolve inter and intra-state disagreements. He was not prepared questions about where the economy of the country was heading, or what had happened to the implementation of the constitution, the rule of law and the democratisation process.

Unprecedented tyranny reigned in Eritrea after September 2001, banishing all hopes of a free, developed and prosperous nation and society that can live in peace and harmony with itself and the world. It is obvious to any close observer and veteran member of the EPLF that the situation in Eritrea was not right; that there was something terribly wrong with how Eritrea was being managed. Its people were disillusioned and demoralized, its youth were leaving in the tens of thousands, its resources and its sovereignty and integrity were compromised; its very survival tested. There were too many confrontations of military nature in such a short time of independence. It is not uncommon to have disagreements with neighbours, whether cross border operations, policies on either side that affect the people on the other side, who are related by blood, culture, values, economic and social ties, etc. The important question is how these differences are managed and resolved. If one develops the tendency to flex muscles, attack and then talk, if the military route is taken lightly and used indiscriminately against all those that are taken as ‘not listening’, ultimately, one lands in a situation of no return. If the other party is also using the logic of



force and the instinct to use it decisively, this situation produces disastrous result for the weaker one – weaker in resources, human, material, support, regional or international.

How it became easier for the President to become an absolute dictator regardless of betraying the principles and the goals of the liberation movement – free, democratic and prosperous Eritrea founded on the rule of law and respect for the fundamental rights of the people, is beyond this reflection. The EPLF Charter, one that can be taken as the provisional constitution of Eritrea pronounced:

‘In independent Eritrea, it is our basic desire to build a stable political system which respects law and order, safeguards unity and peace, enables all Eritreans to lead happy and peaceful lives, guarantees basic human rights, and is free from fear and oppression... a democratic constitutional system based on sovereignty of the people, on democratic principles and procedures, on accountability, transparency, pluralism and tolerance’.

That goal still stands.

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