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VANGUARDIST NATIONALISM IN ERITREA

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This paper examines Eritrea's history through the lens of the theory and practice of nationalism and self-determination by the vanguard of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. It provides a brief account of the succession of colonial rulers in Eritrea and the evolution of an Eritrean nation, followed by the crystallisation of Eritrean nationalism during the armed struggle for independence, under successive liberation movements. Turning to the post-liberation period after 1991, the paper documents the way in which the Constitutional Commission of Eritrea went about its work, its attempt to institutionalise the sovereignty of the people, and how its outcome was thwarted by arbitrary and authoritarian intervention from the head of state. The paper examines how Eritrean nationalism and self-determination developed through two rival processes, namely public discourse among Eritreans around the question of the future of the territory, while the practical political exercise of self-determination was achieved only through the military victory of a vanguardist liberation front. The tension between these two processes has yet to be resolved.

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INTRODUCTION

Nationalism has proven a potent political force. Eritrea under the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) is a particularly marked manifestation of fusing the intractability of cultural politics with the power of the state, demonstrating the power of nationalist doctrine, implemented through a well-organised political vanguard, to organise individuals into a cohesive political community, sometimes inspiring violence and xenophobia, and sometimes supplying the wellspring for sentiments such as patriotism and self-sacrifice.

During the heated ideological debates within the university student movement in the Haile Selassie I University in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one of the key issues of contention was whether the Eritrean question was a 'colonial question' or an 'Ethiopian national question.' If Eritrea were to be defined as a colonial question, the revolutionary students would conclude that Eritrea was entitled to the right of self-determination including independence; if however it were a national question, Eritreans would be one of the many nations and nationalities within the multi-ethnic, multi-national entity that was the Ethiopian Empire, which would not automatically entitle them to the option of independence. The debate was not resolved.

The debate continued within EPLF's affiliates in the diaspora, especially the Eritreans For Liberation in North America (EFLNA) and its European counterpart, Eritreans For Liberation in Europe (EFLE). These groups positioned themselves in solidarity with other African liberation movements, articulating the Eritrean struggle as a struggle for independence from a foreign and colonial power, namely Ethiopia, an enemy that differed from European colonial powers only in that it did not come from across the sea. This was in rejection of labelling the Eritrean struggle as a 'secessionist,' a concept and characterisation promoted by the Ethiopian government and some Ethiopian student radicals. The EFLNA and ELFE rejected 'secessionism' by producing papers, refining ideological interpretation and attending political meetings of influential groups such as the Socialist International. However, both the eastern and western blocs in the Cold War accepted the 'secessionist' label, which made the Eritrean cause untouchable internationally. The United Nations, despite its role as custodian of the Federation and its silence when that agreement was unilaterally abrogated by Ethiopia, did nothing to recognise Eritrea's right to self-determination. The Organisation of African Unity, strongly influenced by its host Ethiopia, also forbade discussion of Eritrea's claim to nationhood (Yohannes, 1985). A cogent articulation of Eritrea's identity as a nation and its right to self-determination, within the parameters of the ideological discourses of the international anti-colonial, progressive and Communist movements was therefore important for the EPLF leadership.

I participated in producing the first publication on Eritrea as a colonial question, in my capacity as a Chair of the Wisconsin Chapter of the EFLNA, and was the editor of Liberation, the monthly publication of the EFLNA, in 1975-76. The paper in question was entitled 'The Eritrean National Question'[1] and was based on research into the theory of Marxism-Leninism and the right of peoples to self-determination. The conclusion was that the Eritrean question was a colonial one deserving its right of self-determination, including the formation an independent nation-state. This was based on Eritrea's colonial history, history of struggle for independence, separate political and economic evolution from Ethiopia and a defined territory. The paper also developed a crucial argument. It stated, with respect to the different nationalities that exist within Eritrea, that a nation such as Eritrea can have different nationalities within it with their particularities, such as language and territory, but which still remain tied to the rest by geography, common history of struggle and a common psychological make-up that solidified their unity in struggle and their search for independence.

1 Original on file with the author.

The argument articulated in 'The Eritrean National Question', in due course became the EPLF's own theorisation of the issue, and as such, influenced not only the Front's discourse about nationalism and self-determination, but its practices as well, and indeed the historical trajectory of Eritrean nationalism.

Eritrean identity emerged from the diverse ethnic groups inhabiting the territory that the Italian colonisers carved out from the adjoining areas with which it had historically closer ties, especially the highlands of Eritrea with Tigrai (Abbay, 1998; Gebre-Medhin, 1989; Mesghenna, 1988; Chelati Dirar, 2007), although global power politics consigned Eritrean interests to footnotes to the agenda of great power rivalry, culminating in the absorption of Eritrea as a region within the Ethiopian empire. Eritreans, nevertheless, engaged in vigorous debates over their future early on, expressing diverse opinions and organising, in many cases, in a fragmented manner: these public debates helped crystallise the idea of an Eritrean nation, but did not provide the means of political organisation strong and cohesive enough for Eritrean self-determination to be made into a reality. Instead, it took a strong-armed liberation movement—the EPLF—waging protracted war under a vanguard leadership with a vision and political programme that combined national independence with revolutionary socio-economic transformation, to achieve the two goals of forging the unity of the nation and achieving the reality of independence. The liberation war, culminating in victory in 1991, produced a new reality of a people and a land that finally came to constitute an internationally recognised political unit.

This struggle for self-determination formally concluded with the referendum on independence in 1993, internationally recognised as free and fair (Referendum Commission of Eritrea, 1993). The second objective of the liberation war, to achieve a constitutional democracy with the active participation of the people, remained a work in progress, frustrated by the same people who brought independence. At the time of writing, Eritrea still remains the only country in Africa without a constitution, as the President has openly disavowed the constitution and rules without any reference to it.

In examining Eritrea's history through the lens of nationalism and self-determination, this paper will first offer a brief account of the succession of colonial rulers in Eritrea and the evolution of Eritrean nationalism. The subsequent section will examine the crystallisation of Eritrean nationalism during the armed struggle for independence. The paper will then document the way in which, following independence, the Constitutional Commission of Eritrea went about its work, and how its outcome was thwarted by arbitrary and authoritarian intervention from the head of state. Finally, the paper offers some reflections on the current situation.

The Birth and Evolution of Eritrean Nationalism under Successive Colonial Systems

Italian conquest brought together peoples of different ethnicities, regions and religions into one territorial polity. It created a sense of shared identity through processes of urbanisation and industrialisation and through the common experience of colonial oppression. The coloniser's self-serving aim of shaping its' newly-acquired territory to serve its domestic interests contributed to the development of Eritrea. The Italians expropriated vast tracts of land for agriculture and colonial towns, built factories, built and developed the ports along the Red Sea coast, and constructed roads and railways that connected them all. The Italian Fascist war effort to conquer Ethiopia in the 1930s amplified this process such that, by the early 1940s, Eritrea was Africa's second most industrialised territory, following South Africa (Negash, 1987; Mesghenna, 1988; Tseggai, 1981).

The Eritrean colonial experience was quite distinct from the countries in the Horn of Africa, particularly Ethiopia. It had the most intense colonial experience: sixty years of Italian rule and ten years of British administration on behalf of the Allied Forces, a unique combination of (first) a settler

coloniser who planned to stay in Eritrea for good, creating an Italian colony in the sun; (second) rapid industrialization, urbanization and infrastructural connections linking all parts of the country; and (third) forcing the multiple ethnic groups into a single colonial workforce. Italian colonialism fundamentally altered the pre-colonial relationships that existed among the people. The introduction of a modern centralised administration and a new economic order brought together diverse peoples in the service of the colonial power. Large-scale recruitment of Eritreans to labour in the industrial, agricultural, infrastructure, service and military sectors also meant practically every family, every village in every region, highland and lowland, had contact with the colonial power. Eritrean small farmers started growing cash crops to sell to Italian companies; Eritrean maids served in Italian households; Eritrean labourers worked on construction projects. By the late 1930s there were 75,000 Italian settlers in the country. Eritreans encountered the Italians as policemen, tax collectors, employers, shopkeepers and traders. Urbanisation also led to the emergence of a new Eritrean social class from all over the country including small traders, truck drivers and auto mechanics, and a growing educated bureaucratic class. Italian colonialism also severed and ruptured pre-existing relationships between the peoples in question and their former neighbours, especially Ethiopia. For example, highland Eritreans were politically separated from Tigrai despite their shared cultural, social, and economic histories.

Political agitation of party policies and positions, rallies and open meetings developed into a desire and commitment to struggle for self-determination.

The emergence of a bourgeois society was also to later bring into sharper contrast the glaring incompatibility with the feudal and traditional government over which the Emperor presided in Ethiopia under the enduring dominance of the Amhara aristocracy, with only cosmetic reforms. Moreover, as Italy unintentionally began to forge an embryonic Eritrean nation, a political evolution was also set in motion redolent of wider experiences (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983). The colonial administration's exploitative and discriminatory policies contributed to the emergence of Eritrean nationalism around a shared anti-colonial imperative. Resentment of oppressive colonial rule emerged at an early stage due to Italy's aggressive policies and practices of dispossession of land, heavy taxation, extraction of forced and exploitative labour in plantations and industries, destabilisation and shattering of the communal traditional lifestyle and the everyday insults and indignities of rampant racism. Rejection of these policies and practices evolved into patriotic sentiments expressing the desire to see an end to Italian domination one way or the other. Some Eritreans fought against Italy on the side of Ethiopia either as defectors from the Italian army or having directly joined the Ethiopian resistance army after the 1935 invasion.[2]

The consolidation of an Eritrean national identity accelerated during the British Military Administration (1940-52) which came into effect after the Italian East African army was defeated by British, Indian and Sudanese forces. The incipient political activism that started during the Italian period took public shape during this time. Although fractured and at times acrimonious, public debates in the Tigrinya and Arabic languages intensified the feeling of and strengthened common Eritrean identity, leading up to the formation of political groupings and parties that espoused different platforms. The Eritrean working class came into maturity, with its own trade unions and organisations. Daniel Yohannes (1985) has argued that Eritrea was home to the earliest working-class organisations, associations, and movements in Africa, besides South Africa.

Political agitation of party policies and positions, rallies and open meetings developed into a desire

2 The story of the former Italian ascari Andom Tesfatsion is but one of many examples of Eritrean fighters who joined Ethiopian patriots against invading Italian Fascist forces inside Ethiopia proper. See Weldemichael, 2005.

and commitment to struggle for self-determination. However, common rejection of colonial rule, Italian or British, did not mean common understanding and agreement on the nature of self-determination. There were two divergent manifestations of the quest for the right to self-determination by Eritreans, neither of which were free from external influences. While some political parties opted for complete independence and the formation of a free country of their own, the desire and struggle of other parties was to join Ethiopia as a best way to terminate European colonialism and the best outcome for the Eritrean people (Tesfai, 2001). Eritrean nationalism also drew on two distinct sources: Islam with Arabic language; Christianity (especially the Orthodox Church) and the Tigrinya language (Tesfai, 2001). Nevertheless, although religion and ethnicity played a role in the positions of parties, they did not represent categorical or rigid divisions or create a situation in which one group was dominating or subjugating the others (Mesfin, 2017, p. 89). Faith was however a main source of pro or anti-union stance and a source of Eritrean nationalism.

Eritrea's first political party was clandestinely established in 1941 with the primary goal of ensuring the end of Italian colonialism. This was called Mahber Fiqre Hager Eritra, MFHE, (Iyob, 1995, p. 65), and had as its members and officers people from the lowlands and highlands, Muslims and Christians. Defeat of Italy created economic hardship, unemployment, insecurity and unrest, prompting opposition to the British Military Administration (BMA). However, besides anti-colonial sentiment, there was no commonly-agreed longer-term plan nor deeper understanding about the options for the future, or the forces that Eritreans would have to face, thus the divisions and split and counter-split within the MFHE, that were to bedevil Eritrean politics for decades. Using violence, manipulation and financial support, Ethiopia left no stone unturned in its attempt to promote Eritrean support for unity with Ethiopia. This alarmed others who split from MFHE to form a separate party opposed to union with Ethiopia, rejecting the interference of the Coptic Church and advocating a Western style liberal political system while other members entertained bringing the Tigrigna speaking people of Tigrai in northern Ethiopia to join the Tigrigna speakers of highland Eritrea. This aroused suspicion within the Muslim members of the MFHE who rejected the implication of this agenda. They also feared union with Ethiopia in any form, knowing that it would have the effect of making them a minority under the dominance of Christians. They were, therefore, forced to set up in 1946 their own political party, El Rabita El Islamiya (ML, Muslim League) with a platform of rejecting partition of Eritrea and any form of union with Ethiopia, and instead supporting total independence for Eritrea (Iyob, 1995, p. 70). At this stage, remaining MFHE members re-established a party with a clear position of uniting Eritrea with Ethiopia, best known as Unionist Party (Iyob, 1995, pp. 73-77).

After the multiple divisions of the MFHE emerged, many other parties mushroomed in ways that reflected the prevailing state of confusion not only about whether to be independent or join another state, but more fundamentally about what Eritrean identity itself meant, although they stayed, generally, within the two extremes—unity with Ethiopia or a totally independent country. In short, while the period of the brief British military rule opened up the gates for a flourishing political life in Eritrea, it also revealed how Eritrean nationalist politics was fragmented, ridden with factionalism and conflict, swayed by external interference, bereft of common direction and lacking strong leadership.

Meanwhile, the Ethiopian emperor was determined to 'return' Eritrea to its 'mother' Ethiopia. One reason, was that Ethiopia needed access to the sea. To attain its goal, Ethiopia encouraged and sponsored political banditry and assassination attempts against political figures that opposed unity and who advocated independence (Tesfai, 2001), while the UN resolved to federate Eritrea under the Ethiopian crown. Eritreans across the political spectrum, even those who supported independence, gave this federal arrangement a chance;

a constitution was drafted by the UN for autonomous Eritrea and ratified. Although Eritrea's internal autonomy quickly proved to be incompatible with the monarchical constitution of Imperial Ethiopia, it gave Eritreans their first experience with constitutional rule and helped reinforce a distinct Eritrean national identity.

Drafted by UN experts in 1952, the Eritrean constitution stipulated that it was to be adopted and ratified by the Eritrean people (Article 1), introducing the concept of 'the people' and their 'free will'. Articles 16 and 17 stated that the constitution was based on the principles of democratic governance; it also guaranteed the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms to all people. Under these circumstances, the Ethiopian Emperor was obliged to revise Ethiopia's 1931 constitution in an effort to bring some degree of compatibility with the federal arrangement and the Eritrean constitution. However, ultimate power in the 1955 revised Imperial Ethiopian constitution remained with the Emperor, not the people. Article Two stipulated: 'The Imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line of Haile Selassie I, descendant of King Sahle Selassie, whose line descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of the Queen of Ethiopia, the Queen of Sheba, and King Solomon of Jerusalem.' Article Four read: 'By virtue of His Imperial Blood, as well as by the anointing which He has received, the person of the Emperor is sacred, His dignity is inviolable and His power indisputable.' The Constitution did not promote democracy or protect human rights as enunciated in the Eritrean constitution. Indeed, for many Eritrean intellectuals, the Federation and its implementation marked a new stage of colonial rule, different from its predecessors solely in that the coloniser did not come from across the seas but was the absolute ruler of a neighbouring African empire.

Eritrean nationalist mobilisation reached new heights during the ten years of the Federation in parallel with Emperor Haile Selassie's encroachment into internal Eritrean affairs, culminating in his total breach of the federal agreement and annexing Eritrea into Ethiopia in disregard of the federal arrangement. This was met with increased resistance first by students and workers in the urban centres, and by political parties' demand for the right of self-determination and independence. Ethiopia's steps in undermining the federal arrangement brought growing consensus among all Eritreans, even those who initially favoured and fought for unity with Ethiopia, about the lack of seriousness on the part of Ethiopia to abide by the Federal agreement.

In addition, Ethiopia strongly supported those who wanted union with it through every means, including personnel, finances and guns. But, Ethiopian intervention in Eritrean internal affairs, its increasing suppression and military repression, perpetuation of physical and structural violence, control and manipulation of Eritrean politics fuelled further Eritrean resistance, pushing the eruption of an armed struggle in 1961. Ethiopian forceful annexation of Eritrea a year later reinforced the independentists' convictions.

Nationalism and the Armed Struggle

From 1961, the Eritrean struggle for self-determination was dominated by two armed liberation movements: first the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and then EPLF. This phase of Eritrean nationalism passed through several tumultuous stages, each of which was marked by its own theory of nationalism and practice of armed struggle.

The ELF in Theory and Practice

The first ten-year formative period of the armed struggle was one that reproduced many of the fractures that existed in Eritrean society and which had been evident in the political mobilisation of the BMA and Federation periods. The ELF did not succeed in managing these tensions.

The ELF for sure saw its struggle as one of decolonization and resistance against an oppressive foreign enemy. It defined the struggle in ethno-national terms adjusting tactically its formulation of national struggle and its political practice, but was

unable to remove itself, at least initially, from its founding constituency and place (Egypt) and later sponsors, the Arab countries. The ELF espoused a nationalism that was a hybrid of different social and political agendas, united solely by the cause of independence from Ethiopia. There were certainly people within the ELF leadership committed to Eritrea as a whole, but there were also many within the leadership who were narrow, sectarian and conniving, showing conflicting political tendencies such as Islamism, Ba'athism, communism/socialism, and social democracy.

Hence, the initial period of the armed struggle was similarly ridden by factionalism, intrigue, contestation for dominance based on regionalism and the search for outside support. The Arab world was, at the time, under the influence of socialism with many governments openly espousing their brand of Arab socialism mostly expressly in Ba'athist parties. As the armed struggle intensified and many young people joined the front from different ethnic and religious backgrounds and outnumbered the earlier, more provincial leaders, many conservatives who found their nationalism in religion abandoned the armed struggle as they saw the organisation they founded overtaken by the influx of progressive or communist Muslims and Christians (Habtemariam, private communication).

The Derg proved to be even more dictatorial, militaristic and extraordinarily bloodthirsty.

The ELF, under such circumstances, failed to articulate its goals clearly, and it managed its disputes either through violence or by decentralising political-military command along ethnic/regional lines, sharpening and complicating existing social contradictions within the Eritrean society. This led to demoralisation, desertion and serious internal strife. When Ethiopian repression intensified in the early 1970s, the ELF found itself unable to absorb the many new recruits flooding into its ranks, and as its numbers swelled, its fractures deepened.

Under these circumstances, three small groups split from the ELF in the late 1960s and early 1970s coming together to eventually forge a second front, the EPLF. The ELF branded the EPLF as a spoiler, as 'anti-struggle', 'anti-revolution', and declared in 1972 that it must be physically eliminated. Thus, a civil war within the liberation movement was launched that resulted in a major setback to the nationalist struggle. Both contending fronts were consumed with a fight for survival vis-à-vis one another, with nationalist and revolutionary language being used tactically for advantage. The EPLF, for its part, called the ELF 'reactionary' and concluded that it was imperative that this evil be eliminated in order for the revolution to advance and for the speedy achievement of self-determination. To its detriment, the ELF also had a serious conflict with the Tigrai People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which controlled the adjacent territory immediately south of the Eritrean border, making it easy for both the EPLF and TPLF to collaborate against the ELF in the early 1980s and push it out of Eritrea.

The Eritrean war was one of the causes of the political crisis that resulted in the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 by junior army officers called the Derg as it also caused the demise of the Derg itself. Initially there was a moment of hope for Eritrea: many Eritreans anticipated that the 'revolutionary' military rulers would correct the errors of the Emperor and negotiate in good faith to end the war. But these hopes did not last. The Derg proved to be even more dictatorial, militaristic and extraordinarily bloodthirsty. Its deeds contradicted its progressive, socialist pronouncements, retarding and obstructing the transformative potential of society and polity, and leaving the Amhara administrative and military elite at the helm in Ethiopia. The Derg did not try to reach out in any meaningful manner to the Eritrean nationalists and freedom fighters. It instead spent an inordinate amount of resources and effort to strengthen its military to defeat the Eritrean liberation movement.

The EPLF in Theory and Practice

From the outset, the EPLF was markedly different from its elder sibling. Its leaders adopted a radical Marxist-Leninist agenda and vanguardist model of organisation. Having learned from the weaknesses and blunders of the ELF, the EPLF made it a priority to clarify its political and ideological position, rallied and mobilised many young, urban and educated Eritreans into its ranks and flourished rapidly.

Eritrean students in the Haile Selassie University in Addis Ababa led discussions about Eritrean nationalism and self-determination at the heart of the Ethiopian Empire itself, contributing to linked discussions among radical students on the agenda of revolutionary transformation in Ethiopia. While actively participating in the Ethiopian student movement, Eritreans also undertook clandestine political work in Ethiopian university campuses in furthering and supporting the armed struggle being waged in Eritrea. The key partner in the Addis Ababa debates was the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) which evolved into the EPRP, which dominated the political-intellectual arena with its agenda of Marxist-Leninist overtones. Others, parallel to the EPRP or splintering from it, included Oromo nationalists, Tigraian revolutionaries who founded the TPLF, and MEISON (the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement) that advocated tactical cooperation with the Derg to its demise. The EPLF's relationship with Ethiopian revolutionaries depended wholly and solely on the latter's' position on the Eritrean question: whether the Eritrean question was a colonial question and that Eritrea was entitled to self-determination including independence. Most Ethiopian revolutionaries held at that time that a socialist revolution would make the issue of self-determination redundant as all will be equal; or, at most, that Eritreans would be entitled to national self-determination in the more limited sense of cultural emancipation and autonomy within a united Ethiopia with conditional rights to independence. The EPLF was not concerned with ideological niceties. The EPRP was thus taken as a tactical ally only, as it was not unequivocally committed to supporting the independence of Eritrea. The TPLF took the line that Tigraians were entitled to self-determination as an Ethiopian nationality, while Eritrea was entitled to self-determination as a colonial entity. This position did not change even during serious differences between the two fronts and allowed a strategic alliance to evolve and endure until independence (Berhe, 2009; Young, 1996; Negash and Tronvoll, 2000; Weldemichael, 2013).

Some members of the EPLF leadership grew, in part, out of the same revolutionary milieu and shared the same Marxist-Leninist vocabulary as the Ethiopian student revolutionaries, which translated into the vanguardism of the EPLF practice of armed struggle that ultimately enabled it to prevail over an enemy with far superior resources. Some had also been trained in China both in Marxist-Leninist ideology and Mao Tse Tung's thought and practice of guerrilla warfare. However, the EPLF did not internalize Marxism-Leninism in the same way as its Ethiopian counterparts such as the EPRP and the TPLF.

This can be seen in EPLF's handling of the issue of nationalism and self-determination. Among the student revolutionaries and the founders of the various revolutionary fronts in the 1970s, there was a vigorous debate about whether the rights of different groups in Ethiopia should be considered as 'colonial' or 'national' questions, and how the Marxist theory of nations should be applied in the context of an African feudal empire. In the central committee of the EPLF there was no such debate: the question of Eritrean nationalism was taken as having been resolved already—a colonial question with independence as the correct and necessary outcome. The head of ideology in the EPLF, Haile 'Duru' Woldensae, was not himself a fire-brand Marxist-Leninist. He was a progressive, conversant in Marxism-Leninism, who built up the cadre school, adopted its curriculum and trained its cadres in such a manner that they used Marxist mode of analysis but did not inculcate a Marxist language and terminology in their day-to-day communications. The leadership as a whole was

more pragmatist than Marxist; it used and adopted Marxism-Leninism to the particular situation it found itself.

In the diaspora, by comparison, the debates were vigorous and deeply ideological. The EFLNA had assumed the task of becoming the guardian of ideological purity of the EPLF. It had autonomy from the EPLF in the field in developing and propagating ideological positions. Because of its assumption of ideological guardianship and because of the difficulty of smooth communication with the field, the EFLNA was briefly able to take an independent line vis-à-vis the EPLF regarding ideological outlooks. Having studied and internalised its analysis of the thinking of Mao Zedong, the EFLNA started to criticize the Soviet Union's brand of socialism. This was also at a time—after 1977—when the Soviets were directly involved in the war on the side of Ethiopia not only through the supply of weapons and training, but also providing military advisors and even commanders on the ground. The EFLNA understood this involvement as the Soviets going outside a pure Marxist-Leninist line, becoming revisionist therefore social imperialist, and insofar as the EPLF was refusing to condemn the USSR, it too was collaborating in this revisionist stance and was therefore reactionary. Not only did this ideological divide bring a condemnation of the EPLF leadership as reactionary and 'capitulationist' but also created organizational fracture. EFLNA had declared itself, in 1977, a mass-organization of the EPLF, instead of merely a supporter and in solidarity with. This ideological stance that culminated in condemning the EPLF however created internal tension within EFLNA itself causing splits, demoralization and, in effect, the termination of a vigorous organization that mobilized thousands of Eritrean across North America (USA and Canada) in support of the Eritrean struggle. EFLNA forgot one cardinal thing: what sustained and kept it strong was its relationship with an organization that was active in the field. EPLF was EFLNA's anchor. Without this anchor, EFLNA lost its radar and its internal solidity, splitting into pieces never to regain its strength, its cohesion and its level of support for the EPLF; its relevance to the Eritrean struggle for self-determination quickly waned. Nonetheless, the EFLNA's intellectual work was reflected in the EPLF's position on self-determination.

In the 1977 National Program, the EPLF articulated a revolutionary nationalism, rooted in a progressive political and ideological frame. The gun was portrayed as a means of liberating the land and the people, militarism was downplayed but seen and practiced as unavoidable, a necessary evil, a means to destroy the enemy, a tool that helps advance the political/ideological thrust of liberating the people, creating a new society and defeating militarism in the process of conducting the armed struggle itself, as manifested in the slogan 'Liberating the land and the people step by step'. This also reflected the revolutionary praxis of forging the nation itself through the armed struggle, which was taught at the cadre school and in the political education sessions in military training.

The orientation of the struggle for self-determination had also clear Marxist-Leninist component as it was also taken as a class struggle: building an egalitarian society, a classless society where the workers and peasants would assume power led by a vanguard party. Class struggle was regarded as the highest stage of nationalism, a demand for and facilitator of the right of self-determination, a right to determine the political, social and economic choice of the Eritrean people. Progressive nationalism based on Marxist-Leninist analysis, in the Eritrean case, was able to fuse people's sentiment and desire to exercise their rights to self-determination with a readiness to assume and absorb very high cost to lives, limbs and material, going through complex processes with no initial tangible result at the end of the tunnel. Because of that, EPLF grew in number and strength tremendously challenging Ethiopian military might effectively.

In 1978, the EPLF faced the massive offensive of the Derg's military that caused a major setback for the Eritrean revolution. The EPLF executed a 'strategic withdrawal' from almost all

liberated, semi-liberated and highly populated areas into a narrow mountainous space in the Sahel region bordering the Red Sea and Sudan. This physical isolation into a remote area lasted several years. It also seemed to have caused isolation from the wider Eritrean public. However, and interestingly, this isolation and setback was largely confined to major military activities (Weldemichael, 2009). The period of the strategic withdrawal proved to be an opportunity to deepen the political grounding and educational level of the fighters, strengthen its organisational structure and, to the extent possible, embark on agricultural and land reform, organise Eritreans within the country into social classes, i.e. Peasants'/Farmers' Association, enabling their participation in the struggle, encouraging and fostering the liberation of women from conservative cultural norms and opening the avenue for their participation both as members of the peasant associations and in joining the ranks of the EPLF as combatants. This was also the period it focused on other sectors of society, especially in the diaspora: workers, women, youth and students, and developing, within itself, revolutionary cultures—languages, literature, education, music, cultural troupes, which gave nationalism different colours—from emotional to rational (my personal observation and experiences).

In 1980 the EPLF published its proposal for a solution to the war, namely a referendum, in which the Eritrean people would be allowed to choose among three options: full independence, federal association with Ethiopia or regional autonomy within the Ethiopian state (Referendum Commission of Eritrea, 1993, pp. 123-124). This was an effective move on the part of the EPLF as it demonstrated, on the one hand, its readiness to resolve the Ethio-Eritrean conflict peacefully; on the other, exposing the anti-people and militaristic nature of the Derg. The EPLF knew that the Derg would not accept a referendum as the struggle for independence was widely supported by the Eritrean people. This was also the time when the socialist camp, in particular the USSR and East Germany, had accepted the Derg as progressive, a member of the socialist camp, led by a Workers/Communist Party, and insisted that, for the EPLF to remain progressive, it would need to talk to the Derg and make peace with it. However, the Derg, set on a military solution, mounted repeated large-scale offensives with its destructive impact on people, livestock, property and land, until the Derg was completely driven out of Eritrea through total military defeat in May 1991 (Africa Watch, 1991; Connell, 1993; Weldemichael, 2013). In a historical irony, Eritrea achieved its independence as a modernist and modernising state at precisely the historical conjuncture when these achievements were becoming less meaningful and indeed were going against the grain of a neoliberal globalising trend (Hepner and O'Kane, 2009).

Achieving Independence

In May 1991, the EPLF achieved military victory that put its forces in uncontested control of the entire country. It was therefore in a position to impose its programme on Eritrea in line with the resolutions of EPLF Congresses and the EPLF's Charter. At the moment of liberation, the U.S., the majority of the international community and the OAU were still opposed to Eritrea's 'secession' from Ethiopia, but such was the military fait accompli that the single concession that the U.S. Administration could extract from the EPLF was that the referendum would be held two years after the military victory rather than one. As so often in Eritrea's history, the world powers were focused on other issues: in the Americans' case, the priority was trying not to set a precedent for state break-up that would have implications for Yugoslavia, which was at the cusp of its violent fragmentation at that very moment. But the EPLF prevailed: having shown extraordinary determination in winning its war it would not compromise on its victory.

Ethiopian support for the declaration of independence was critical. The new government in Addis Ababa (headed by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, of which the leading coalition member was the TPLF) had supported the EPLF armed struggle and, despite serious political disagreements with the EPLF, had never wavered on its commitment to the right of Eritrea to nation-

al independence, which also meant that the TPLF's principled position on Eritrean independence made it possible for the two to come together again as allies and remove the Derg not only from Eritrea but from all over Ethiopia.

Following its military victory, the EPLF formed a Provisional Government of Eritrea, which in essence meant that its own administrative structures moved into government buildings in Asmara and took on the functions of state authorities, empty of senior Ethiopian bureaucrats. The Provisional Government established the Referendum Commission of Eritrea (RCE) with representatives reflecting the composition of the Eritrean people and pledging to provide the RCE all that is needed to conduct its task effectively.

Although, in 1980, the EPLF referendum proposal had been for three options: full independence, federal association with Ethiopia or regional autonomy within a united Ethiopia, the question put to the people in the 1993 referendum was simpler: Full independence or union with Ethiopia: 'yes' or 'no'. It was formulated in such a way that no middle ground was left; no equivocation or sentiment to remain somehow tied to Ethiopia. Of course, people voted for 'yes' with 98.8 per cent. Soon after, an independent State of Eritrea was declared.

The Eritrean Constitution Making Process: Constitutional Commission of Eritrea (CCE)

Having achieved formal independence, the next step was to draft and ratify a constitution. The EPLF held its third Congress in February 1994, during which it established a successor political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, PFDJ, and adopted a National Charter, promising peace, justice, democracy and prosperity. Immediately thereafter, the Eritrean National Assembly, by Proclamation 55/94, established the Constitutional Commission of Eritrea (CCE) to draft a constitution 'that establishes a democratic order through popular consultation and participation… a wide-ranging and all-embracing national debate … education… public seminars … lecture series on constitutional issues' (1994, Articles 4-5). Following this legislative directive, the Commission was tasked to make sure that the whole process was participatory; accordingly, the Commission designed a process of intensive public involvement with frequent face-to-face engagements with the public as well as employing available mass media and other means with the clear purpose of conferring ownership on the people.

Speaking at the opening session of the CCE's work in April 1994, President Issayas Afwerki said:

> The object is to work out a specific constitution and political system that serve the fundamental objectives of a state and people at a given historical juncture; under a given internal, regional and international environment... the constitution ...will uphold the basic principles of democracy and rights and duties of the citizens; defines clearly the powers of the fundamental pillars of government notably the legislature, executive and judiciary - as well as delineate the scope of decentralization.... The constitution will have to take the history and realities of our society and country as its point of departure and serve our short and long-term tasks of nation-building.

The CCE took the key principles and values laid out in the EPLF's 1994 Charter as a 'major source of national consensus' (Selassie, 2003, p. 133) and values that the CCE believed the new constitution should 'promote, nurture and protect' so that the new state's constitution should become an embodiment of those principles and an 'instrument to express them'. The CCE also adopted those principles of the Charter as a basis for planning its public engagement, principles such as: national harmony; peace; justice; stability and national unity; democracy; economic and social development; social justice; gender equality; and rule of law and respect for the rights of citizens.

The CCE mounted a widespread consultative process, designed to involve the active participation

of the people in a series of town hall style meetings. Such engagements usually affirmed the value of the proposals made by the Commission; acceptance of the draft that came into being through a series of public participation and of the values and principles it enunciated. One needs to take the fact that, for most of the Eritrean participants, to be consulted in the making of their national constitution was a wholly new experience. Very few were old and informed enough to have had any personal experience of the constitutional period of the 1950s. For most, with limited literacy and little experience of participatory politics, the place of a constitution in nation building would have been beyond their comprehension. Rather, the people applauded the EPLF whom they regarded as their 'children' for securing peace and independence, and expressed their wonder in the liberators asking them to have a say in making the rules and regulations by which they would be governed and hold responsible those in authority.[3] But, this was also the honeymoon period, a period of excitement and euphoria at gaining independence, a period of absolute trust on the EPLF.

The decision for a participatory process was based partly on Eritrean local traditions, in which inclusive decision-making and dispute resolution mechanisms through councils of elders were recognised to bring justice and harmony at the local community level. In part, it also reflected the experience of the armed struggle, and the participatory practices that had been so fundamental to the spirit of endurance shown by the EPLF fighters confronting overwhelming odds. The Commission strongly believed that it is only through active public participation that the people will assume ownership of, embrace, respect and defend the constitution. It also drew on the desire for building a legitimate nation and state and the positive experience of the referendum (Selassie, 2003, p. 23), among other things.

The CCE also envisaged the constitution-drafting process as an educational exercise. In pursuit of this, many international legal instruments and treaties were translated into Tigrigna and, in the absence of Arabic original version, also into Arabic, and circulated widely. These included the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, and others. The Commission produced a handbook, using simple language easily understood by the average citizen, proposals and issue papers at each stage. This was intended to focus discussions on the principles of constitutions and political ideas such as democracy, rule of law, separation of powers, fundamental human rights and duties, electoral systems, women and constitutions, decentralisation, the issue of language, and the place of defence and security forces. It trained about 400 Eritreans from all over the country who would play leading role in civic education and public debates that followed. In many of the meetings, people raised questions, made suggestions, sometimes concerns that had little or nothing to do with the constitution. The exercise of consultation itself made people feel empowered, as they were keenly aware that they were determining the system of their future government.

Different means of involving the people and ascertaining their participation were employed: Mobile theatre and music groups travelling throughout the country enabling tens of thousands of people to participate in; organising contests on constitutional issues among high school students up to the national level; reaching out the youth at the National Service programme; engaging members of the defence forces and encouraging their participation; actively using the media in all Eritrean languages twice a week, the newspapers carrying tens of constitutional articles, and holding televised panel discussions. From all this, a documentary film entitled 'The Journey of the Constitution Making

3 I conducted public meetings in the Southern Highlands and the Assab-Danakil region of Eritrea. I also held discussions with the most senior officers of the Eritrean Defence Forces and the troops deployed around Qarora on the border with the Sudan on the draft constitution.

Process" was prepared and shown with mobile video equipment throughout the country up to the village level.[4] All the organised "civil society"[5] formations also participated: the National Union of Eritrean Women, the Eritrean Youth and Students Association and the National Confederation of the Eritrean Workers (NCEW). An open- door policy was declared where the public was encouraged to reach the commission by any means convenient, mailing, faxing, walking into the Commission's office in person without appointment, etc. Meetings were also conducted in the Middle East, Europe and the U.S., as well as in Ethiopia.

Eritrea's 1997 Constitution guarantees the people's sovereignty in very clear terms. It repeatedly ascertains the sovereign powers or popular sovereignty as vested in the people.

If this process was going to be truly participatory, it was thought, it was imperative that women were not only involved in the seminars and public debates, but also be strongly represented in the Commission itself. More than half of the 50 members of the Commission were women.[6]

Some critical and sensitive issues were raised. One such issue was whether or not to have official language(s), specifically Tigrigna and Arabic, thereby downgrading the other indigenous languages to "unofficial". Another sensitive topic was the implications of the word 'secular' with reference to the state, which could easily be misinterpreted as 'atheist' or 'God-less' when translated into local languages and presented to a conservative society. Affirmative action on behalf of women was debated. Prohibiting serving members of the armed forces from joining political parties was controversial (Selassie, 2003, pp. 68-69). Another vigorous discussion was whether the country's president needed to be Eritrean by both parents, not just by one parent (My discussion with the defence forces in Qarora, north eastern Eritrea).

The Constitution as an Exercise in Self-Determination

The CCE completed its work in 1997 with the finalisation of the draft constitution of the State of Eritrea. Eritrea became one of a small number of countries that include the title 'State' in their official names—testament to the long and difficult struggle needed to attain statehood. At the same time, the draft constitution gave a high level of significance to the legal and political notion of the principle of 'people's sovereignty'. The CCE had spent three years drafting a document with the participation of a wide range of Eritreans at all levels, and obtaining their endorsement and promoting their understanding of the text and the principles that underpinned it. The document was written in such a way as to demonstrate the people's wish to exercise their right to determine their own political, social and economic life through establishing institutions of accountability.

Eritrea's 1997 Constitution guarantees the people's sovereignty in very clear terms. It repeatedly ascertains the sovereign powers or popular sovereignty as vested in the people. Article One contains the wording: 'In the State of Eritrea, sovereign power is vested in the people, and shall be exercised pursuant to the provisions of this Constitution' and 'The government of Eritrea shall be established through democratic procedures to represent people's sovereignty.' Article Two identifies the Constitution as 'the legal expression of the sovereignty of the Eritrean people.'

The Constitution has strong provisions for limiting the power of the executive. It provides separation of powers and limitation on those powers so that abuses are prevented, protection of human rights are guaranteed, clear provision of services to the

4 I was a member of the Commission, serving as a member of the Executive Committee.

5 All these were part of the Front and not independent civil society.

6 From my personal notes as a full-time engaged in the drafting process in my capacity as a member of the Executive Committee, in charge of research. Also conducted public education within Eritrea as well as in Europe.

public and promotion of equitable development are established. It also includes checks and balances among the three branches of government as well as through the establishment of independent bodies that can make government more accountable. Perhaps most importantly, the constitution also states that 'the National Assembly may, by two-thirds majority vote of all its members, impeach or impeach and charge the President before the end of his term of office' (Art. 32), clearly affirming that no one was above the law.

The Constitution similarly provides for regular, free and fair elections, for gender equality and affirmative action, and important international conventions that guarantee human rights are also built in. In short, it was a model for democratic, inclusive and progressive government.

As seen above and supported by the Proclamation that established the Commission, the Eritrean constitution making process was designed, from the very beginning, as participatory and inclusive as possible with great emphasis on the involvement of the people at different stages of the process. It was thus driven by the people and owned by the people. This has reinforced the strong feeling of pride and boosted Eritrean nationalism enormously. Eritreans harbour a strong sense of nationalism, whether inside the country or outside, even while facing seemingly insurmountable and life threatening challenges, and their constitution amplified that sense of nationalism. After the ordeal those who escape Eritrea undergo to reach a safe place (Europe or North America), defying shoot to kill policy while leaving the country, crossing the desert, detained and their organs harvested in the Sinai, arrested, abused and ransomed in Libya, one would expect they would completely forget Eritrea and move on with a new life. But, they still harbour strong nationalism demonstrated by their constant engagement with things to do with Eritrea: efforts to expose and oppose the unjust system they left behind; efforts to celebrate Independence Day or Martyr's Day celebrations, including some going to the Eritrean embassies to join in such celebrations.

The Fate of the Constitution

Proclamation 55/94, which established the Constitutional Commission, also indicated in Article 4(4) the way the draft was to be ratified - that the final draft should be submitted 'to a democratically formed representative body.' The then existing National Assembly was mandated only to approve the draft. Thus, a Constituent Assembly was established with the sole task of ratifying the Constitution and taking 'all the necessary legal steps for the coming into force and effect of the constitution.' Accordingly, elections were held in the six regions of Eritrea and among Eritreans in the Diaspora to form the Constituent Assembly with 536 members.

The Constituent Assembly convened at Asmara City Hall from 21-23 May 1997, debated the draft constitution and accepted the draft with minor modifications and ratified it. The eve of Independence Day on 23 May and the Independence Day celebration the following day also served as a celebration of the ratification of the Constitution. The ratified constitution was presented to the President during the May 24 Independence celebration in the Asmara stadium amidst a huge public cheering, clapping and ululating that symbolically entrusted him with respecting it and taking all necessary measures to have its provisions implemented. The President received the Constitution and some preparations for its implementation were set afoot, drafting, immediately thereafter an election laws, and in 2000, a political party law.[7] Then nothing more; the President took no steps to seriously implement it. He didn't formally abrogate it: he had simply ignored it—until 24 May 2014.

What changed in the seven years between the inauguration of the constitution-making process that culminated in a ratified constitution and the president's rejection of its outcome? Kidane Mengisteab and Okbazghi Yohannes (2005) argue that in 1994, the EPLF was still well-connected with the

7 I was a member of the election law drafting committee, 1997/98.

populace and enormously popular, but it became detached over the following years. During those years, they suggest, the EPLF and its successor Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) became more authoritarian and business-oriented, as well as losing popularity as the state-society cleavage had suddenly widened. Moreover, having initiated the constitution-making process itself without having to negotiate with any external power, the party leadership may have felt entitled to cancel that process without negotiation. This can only be a partial explanation.

Additionally, with the start of the 1998 war[8] with Ethiopia, everything came to a screeching halt. The country has since been ruled with neither reference to its Constitution nor respect for its principles, norms and procedures or any law. After years when ranking government and ruling party officials went on claiming that all aspects of the Constitution have been or are being implemented except presidential/national elections, the president finally declared that the 1997 constitution was 'practically dead.' On 24 May 2014 President Issayas declared that he would be drafting a new constitution. In a follow up interview with the Eritrean TV station EriTV on 30 December 2014, he was asked to elaborate on his statement of drafting a new constitution. The president's answer was: 'there is no constitution; it is dead without being declared dead; it is a document that is dead in practice. A committee is now at work to draft a better constitution, one that will bring qualitative changes in the life of our people, narrow the gap, even prevent a gap from happening again among the people' (Reported in Eritrea Profile, 10 January 2015).

The fact that the president has wholly disregarded the Eritrean Constitution, even openly denying its existence and considering it a useless piece of paper, has major implications for democracy, sovereignty of the people and to the kind of 'self-determination' Eritrea may be said to have achieved. Twenty-three years after the Constitution was ratified, the rule of law has no meaning in Eritrea. Members of the leadership detained in September 2001 remain uncharged, they have not been brought before a court, and their whereabouts remain unknown.[9] They have simply disappeared. Many journalists, students, members of religious institutions unsanctioned by the government, national service members, old and young, remain in detention indefinitely. The National Assembly, the law-making body of the country, has been suspended since September 2001. No one is accountable for the violation of the basic rights of the people, for the economic stagnation, or the feeling of insecurity that prevails in the country.

It is important to note, at this stage, why the leadership of Eritrea decided to allow the making a democratic constitution if it did not have any intention of implementing it or respecting its prin-

8 There had been tensions along the common border of Eritrea and Ethiopia instigated by Ethiopians crossing into Eritrean territory in "hot-pursuit" of their armed opposition groups. The constant unauthorized crossings and publishing, by the administration of Tigrai region, of a map of Tigrai that incorporated parts of Eritrean sovereign territory, was interpreted by Eritrea as a manifestation of expansionist ambition and unfriendly disposition on the part of the Tigrayan administrators. These seemed to have prompted Eritrean leaders, the President, to take "corrective measures" by "punishing" them through military action, triggering an all-out war between the two. However, there must be other reasons unexplained besides blundering into a military confrontation that caused such a ferocious war.

9 These are long standing members of the leadership of EPLF/PFDJ who questioned waging war against Ethiopia, the manner the war was executed and the peace process handled. Some of them where high ranking and experienced military leaders, intelligence chiefs and ministers who could have made a difference under the circumstances.

ciples in the first place. The drafting of a constitution for an independent Eritrea did not come about solely because a new state needs a constitution. It was done because, during the armed struggle, it was articulated in the EPLF programmes, congress resolutions and Charter and because people believed in it and sacrificed to achieve it.

Contrary to the promises of the liberation struggle, present-day Eritrea is replete with injustice; the rule of law is totally absent; devoid of democratic principles and practices, making a mockery of the dearly achieved independence; absolute denial of the peoples' human and democratic rights to the extent that the leadership and government is accused of having committed crimes against humanity (UN Human Rights Council, 2016). The President's shelving of the constitution that he was obliged to respect and tasked to implement, a constitution drafted and ratified by active participation of the people, is a betrayal not only of the heavy sacrifices paid but also of the aspiration of creating a just and peaceful democratic political system and a promotion of modern day l'etat c'est moi.

Nationalism as Authoritarian Populism: A Generation without Politics

Eritrea achieved de facto independence in 1991, but the character of the nationalist project demanded that this reaches its fulfilment in a democratic and progressive political system based on a constitution—a constitutional democracy. Since the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia, domestic political repression has nurtured a different nationalist project. Eritrea has been described as a 'populist authoritarian' state (Mengisteab and Yohannes, 2005).

When the war with Ethiopia broke out in May 1998 it was immediately marked by a resurgence of a simple patriotism. Former fighters spontaneously went back to their units to pick up arms to fight 'the enemy' although it was with the hope that the war would be over soon and that they would resume the life they left behind. But that was not to be. The war was protracted and exceptionally bloody and ended with a humiliating battlefield defeat for Eritrea that was taken personal by the President and thus his ever vengeful bid to hit back at the TPLF at whatever cost.

The war officially ended with the Algiers peace agreement in December 2000. But Eritrea remained on a war footing, with mass indefinite military conscription. Some soldiers have remained in the army since the war without option of release. National service for young people became not only compulsory but also indefinite. The patriotic spirit that meant that a previous generation of young people was willing to make enormous sacrifice for the cause, country and people, has morphed into a sullen, desperate and reluctant endurance of national service, with young people trying to flee the country at any opportunity. Many have sought asylum in Ethiopia—a course of action that would have been unthinkable in earlier decades. The government is considered by the people, especially by youth, as the source of their frustration and misery, as the force that deprives them of their future. Older people and former combatants have a profound feeling of disappointment, even betrayal.

What has happened to Eritrean nationalism under these circumstances? The government propagates a predictable patriotic message that includes glorifying, beyond proportion, the armed struggle, amplifying a narrative that promotes a unique national narrative of heroism, sacrifice and self-reliance that defines what it means to be an Eritrean. As noted by Tekle Woldemikael, the EPLF's experience as a guerrilla movement became a resource for creating 'a mythical and ideal past of harmonious, faultless, and integrated relationship between the movement and society' (2009, p. 15). This narrative elevates the endurance and patriotism of the EPLF fighters during the liberation war and demands that the younger generation match their spirit. It makes a parallel between Eritrea's current international isolation and the manner in which the EPLF fought on alone during the 1980s, but downgrades contemporary Eritrean youth as unworthy inheritors of a grand tradition, who must

suffer and struggle in order to gain the privilege of citizenship. This nationalist story adds elements about the historical development of Eritrea as an entity, its future and the challenges it is facing (Dawit Woldu, private conversation, Houston, April 2017).

In a similar vein, Tekle Woldemikael argues that Eritrea still has the trappings of a modern state- and nation-building project, though they are wearing very thin (2009). President Issayas's use of a national myth and narrative, his pervasive militarisation, his use of the education system to control the population, especially the youth, all indicate a persistent 'state of exception,' redolent of the heyday of 19th century European nationalism. Issayas is building a 'total state' in which the institutions of power are wholly integrated in the person of the President. Tekle identifies nationalism as a 'cover story' for oppression.

The new Eritrean patriotism has been strongly hostile to Ethiopia (at least until July 2018, see below), dwelling on Ethiopia's refusal to implement the Ethio-Eritrea Boundary Commission ruling that Badme is Eritrean territory, and extending that hostility to the broader international community, especially the U.S., for not pressuring Ethiopia to abide by the agreement. This is all presented as a repetition of a great power anti-Eritrean conspiracy that was manifest in the 1940s and '50s, a conspiracy that commits a gross injustice once again against Eritrea. The siege mentality is used as a tactic to stifle dissenting views, to keep all national life frozen, labelling anyone who questions the official line as sympathiser with the historic enemy, Ethiopia, specifically the 'weyane', a derogatory characterization of the Tigrai Peoples Liberation Front – the TPLF.

This nationalist narrative excludes non-EPLF members, including ELF fighters who also had a claim of participating and contributing to the liberation of Eritrea. It serves thereby to suppress different political opinions, to deny the right to form associations outside of the ruling party, even outside of the country, and to ensure that there are no mechanisms for holding the government accountable.

The regime's new patriotism has been successful insofar as it has sustained the dominance of the PFDJ and has polarised political discourse, with all those opposed to the government labelled as hostile to Eritrea itself. The social technologies it is using—compulsory mass conscription, total control of the media, consistent deployment of a the armed struggle story that has sufficient resonance with experience to be credible, infiltration of any real or perceived opposition group abroad—are familiar from small, besieged authoritarian states elsewhere in the world. This is an introverted nationalism, which elevates the nation-state and devalues its people. It is a reduction of self-determination to its simplest shell: the government of a territory by a president who hail from that territory, regardless of how they conduct that government.

CONCLUSION

The politics of Eritrea's self-determination has proven far more complex than its relatively straightforward legal claim as a former colonial territory. Eritrean nationalism is also a complex historical phenomenon, moving through different phases. Eritrea's early nationalism derived from colonial capitalism and the transformations it generated among the country's communities, and the vigorous debates conducted among the emergent Eritrean political class in the 1940s and 1950s. But while sentiments of shared national identity were created through these debates, there was no political organisation capable of marshalling this nationalism into a coherent and effective political programme.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Eritrea's revolutionary nationalism, fostered mainly by the EPLF through its vanguardist political and social mobilisation and the shared experience of repression and isolation, did create an organisation capable of withstanding extreme hardship and prevailing. In 1991, liberation was achieved by force of arms,

and in an exceptional manner in the contemporary world, the legally legitimate process of self-determination was based upon that fait accompli. The victorious EPLF then enjoyed such domination over the political sphere and such popularity that it could proceed without negotiating with any other domestic or international actor. The EPLF chose to implement its long-standing commitment to self-determination in the sense of a constitutional democracy which guaranteed rights and freedoms.

The Constitution that enshrined these rights was thwarted at the moment when it has been ratified, by the same leadership that had led the EPLF to victory. Thereafter, Eritrea has been subject to a minimalist, introverted patriotism, a populist authoritarianism which uses a representation of the liberation struggle as a political resource for maintaining itself in power. In this manifestation, it is the people who owe a duty of unquestioning obedience to the state, not the state having obligations to the people under a democratic constitution.

However and uniquely, it is interesting to see the still strong sense of nationalism of Eritreans whether inside the country or outside even while the government is starving them and denying them of any future as well as while facing seemingly insurmountable and life threatening challenges.

Since the completion of this paper, there have been dramatic developments in Eritrea. Following the resignation of Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in March 2018, the EPRDF elected Abiy Ahmed as its leader, enabling him to become the Prime Minister. PM Abiy immediately embarked on radical political changes in Ethiopia that would have been unthinkable a few months earlier and causing a definite end to liberation fronts politics. These changes including extending a hand to Eritrea, nullifying the seventeen year of a 'no-war, no-peace' hostile relationship with a single dramatic act. The Eritrean President, on the occasion of Eritrea's Martyrs' Day, 20 June 2018, accepted the gesture. The two leaders have since met frequently and normalised their personal relations leaving many aspects of their countries' relations unchanged.

Initially, these changes generated a mood of hopeful anticipation for political transformation among the Eritrean people. They hoped for a lifting of the burdens of their day-to-day ordeals of surviving, from the fear that grips them on a daily basis, the release from indefinite incarceration of their children, family members and former liberation leaders; expectation to be allowed to work, to travel, to congregate and discuss a better future. This was not to be. The President, let alone taking practical steps towards political and economic reform, did not even deign to make a public address to explain how things had changed and what might be expected. Thus, Eritreans are obliged to follow the major dealings between the two leaders through Ethiopian news outlets and Diaspora news as their own had decided to keep them in the dark. Before the peace agreement was made, Eritrea generated more refugees per capita than any other country in the world; after the agreement the exodus not only continued but accelerated. President Issayas evidently intended to make peace, and all other decisions about the fate of Eritrea, without consulting the Eritrean people, demonstrating, once again that he regards himself as bigger than the EPLF/PFDJ, which are defunct, and that he in turn is bigger than Eritrea. The EPLF vanguard had shrunk to a single individual, who had assumed for himself the right to represent and even define the Eritrean nation.

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