

# Enough!

## A Critique of Eritrea's Post-Liberation Politics

By Dan Connell

*One political party cannot be the solution – this is a very dangerous and risky game. The only alternative is a pluralistic political system, though there are many questions about how this should work.*

Isaias Afwerki<sup>1</sup>

*[T]here must be the seeds of difference in this broad-based movement. It will be constructive as long as it allows the free discussion of different political opinions, as long as it creates a political culture of tolerance. Otherwise, if there is a suffocation of this process, there will be a reaction outside it and the appearance of destructive options.*

Haile Woldetensae<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Over the past twenty-seven years, I have written hundreds of articles on the Eritrean Revolution: on the bold experiments with radical social transformation underway in 1976, on the near defeat of Ethiopia's American-backed army in 1977, on the intervention of the Soviet Union and the liberation movement's strategic retreat in 1978, on the famine that swept the region in the mid-1980s, on the final Eritrean victory in 1991, on the effort to reconstruct and develop the war-ravaged new state later in that decade, on the renewal of war with Ethiopia in 1998-2000, and on the economic and political reverses that followed and flowed out of this latest conflict. There is much to be learned from this experience, particularly the liberation phase.

However, the past three years have witnessed dramatic and far-reaching turnabouts in the postwar political situation that contradict these magnificent achievements – steps that undermine the popular democracy project that underlay the fight for independence. As unique as Eritrea's accomplishments are, the country's current trajectory follows a familiar path, one often termed the "crisis of the postcolonial African state": the concentration of power within the executive branch of government, the marginalization of nominally independent parliaments and judiciaries, the imprisonment or exile of vocal critics, the sharp restriction of independent media and autonomous civil society institutions, the outlawing of rival political parties, and, through this, the consolidation of power under a single leader who justifies his extended stay in office by the fragility of the nation over which he presides.

This paper explores these events and their relation to the movement's earlier achievements.

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Dan Connell is a lecturer in journalism and African politics at Simmons College, Boston. He is the author of *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Red Sea Press,

1997), *Rethinking Revolution: New Strategies for Democracy & Social Justice: The Experiences of Eritrea, South Africa, Palestine & Nicaragua* (Red Sea Press, 2002), *Eritrea: A Country Handbook* (Ministry of Information [Asmara], 2002), *Taking on the Superpowers: Collected Articles on the Eritrean Revolution (1976-83)*, vol. 1 (Red Sea Press, 2003), and *Building a New Nation: Collected Articles on the Eritrean Revolution (1984-2002)*, vol. 2 (Red Sea Press, forthcoming in 2004). This paper is adapted from *Collected Articles*.

## **Introduction**

In April 1976, I slipped into Eritrea's besieged capital, Asmara, where I witnessed the assassination of a high-ranking Ethiopian official and its bloody aftermath – the summary execution of dozens of innocent civilians. My eyewitness account of the massacre appeared on the front page of *The Washington Post*, breaking Ethiopia's long-standing blockade of information on the war for Eritrea's independence, then in its fifteenth year. Soon afterward, I flew to Sudan, contacted the two liberation fronts through their offices in Khartoum, and traveled into guerrilla-held Eritrea to see the conflict from the other side. What I found, particularly with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), moved me deeply: not just their military strength, though it was certainly impressive, but rather their wide-ranging efforts to unify and transform Eritrea's diverse society as they were liberating it.

This was far more than a war of national liberation. It was a revolution: thoroughly restructuring the power relations of a complex society onto a far more inclusive, egalitarian basis. This was nation-building in its most profoundly democratic sense: tackling the great social divides of clan, ethnicity, religion, gender and class and knitting together a common identity as Eritreans.

Over the next twenty-seven years, I wrote hundreds of articles on the Eritrean Revolution – on the bold experiments with radical social transformation underway in 1976, on the near defeat of Ethiopia's American-backed army in 1977, on the intervention of the Soviet Union and the liberation movement's strategic retreat in 1978, on the famine that swept the region in the mid-1980s, on the final Eritrean victory in 1991, on the effort to reconstruct and develop the war-ravaged new state later in that decade, on the renewal of war with Ethiopia in 1998-2000, and on the economic and political reverses that followed and flowed out of this latest conflict.

There is much to be learned from the Eritrean experience. The EPLF united its diverse society – half Christian, half Muslim, from nine distinct ethnic groups – into a highly-motivated, well-disciplined national movement that was able, with almost no outside support, to bring successive U.S.- and Soviet-backed Ethiopian governments to their knees. This was in itself a remarkable achievement – the more so when contrasted with the dismal experience of nation-building among Eritrea's neighbors. At the same time, the front worked to liberate women, workers and peasant farmers from centuries of grinding poverty, chronic hunger and unspeakable oppression. In fact, it was experiments with land and marriage reform and the provision of services like agricultural extension, primary education, adult literacy and village-level public health in the liberated areas, implemented in a highly participatory manner, that motivated such large numbers of peasant farmers, workers, women and youth to join the struggle. The synergy between these two projects – national liberation and social transformation – is the most important lesson to take from the Eritrean experience.

However, dramatic and far-reaching changes in the postwar political situation in Eritrea have undermined the very popular democracy project that drew me into Eritrea so tightly and for so long. Prominent among them have been the closing of public political space, the shutdown of the private press, the arrest and indefinite detention of key figures from the liberation struggle, and the imposition of a coercive regime on the population at large. These changes transformed me from a stalwart supporter of more than a quarter century to a reluctant but determined critic.

As unique as Eritrea's accomplishments have been up to this point — the integration of ethnic and religious minorities, the elevation of women's status, the suppression of crime and economic corruption — the country's current trajectory follows a familiar path, what is often termed the "crisis of the postcolonial African state:" the concentration of power within the executive branch of government, the marginalization of nominally independent parliaments and judiciaries, the imprisonment or exile of vocal critics, the sharp restriction of independent media and autonomous civil society institutions, the outlawing of rival political parties, and, through this, the consolidation of power under a single leader who justifies his extended stay in office by the fragility of the nation over which he presides. In short, the corruption of the political process and, with it, faith in the institutional foundation of the society itself.

This pattern, unfolding within Eritrea more than a decade after it was discredited elsewhere on the continent, represents a giant step backward for the objectives, the values, and the vision that I chronicled in my news articles throughout the liberation struggle and that I so strongly argued for in my analytic writing in the post-independence period. It is precisely this rich legacy that makes complacency about the current situation untenable.

Like many of those involved in this movement over the past several decades, I held off as long as I could from such a decision, with all its implications and consequences. But it has become impossible to stand apart from these events. Why it took so long to get to this is another matter — partly political, partly personal, and all the more difficult because the two were so thoroughly intertwined.

I can only echo what many EPLF veterans have said when they, too, became public critics of the movement they helped to build: that the promise was so great, the achievements so impressive, the possibilities so humbling that it took an enormous act of will to face the fact that the Revolution was in jeopardy, that silence in the face of this was complicity, and that open criticism was the only option. But it was also deeply personal.

I have been in the trenches under withering enemy fire with people on both sides of this divide — remarkable, courageous individuals who risked everything to free their nation and whom I loved and respected as my own family, whatever they did or said to each other. Breaking with any of them was like cutting off a part of myself.

The tangle traces back to three political activists who met in Kassala, Sudan, in 1965 to share their disillusionment with the parochial, deeply corrupt liberation army they found there — the Eritrean Liberation Front — and to dedicate themselves to the creation of a truly revolutionary nationalist movement, whatever the cost. To cement their commitment, each carved an "E" in his upper arm and took a blood oath. Today,

Mussie Tesfamikael is dead, Isaias Afwerki is Eritrea's president, and Haile "DruE" Woldetensae languishes in prison.

I never knew Mussie; he was killed in questionable circumstances before I became involved in Eritrea. But Isaias was a friend and mentor to me through much of the liberation struggle. He danced at my wedding. Haile, who ran the EPLF's political program, sat with me for hours upon hours to explicate the front's political evolution during and after the liberation struggle. We always laughed about the morning we careened out of Keren together, hours ahead of Ethiopia's reoccupation of the city — Eritrea's second largest — in 1978. I last saw him three weeks before he was arrested in September 2001. The same is true with others now in detention and with the PFDJ officials who prepared the ground for their arrest — foes now but heroes of the Revolution and personal friends to me only yesterday.

Nor does it stop there.

The Eritrean Revolution has defined me for most of my adult life. At times, this has entailed personal sacrifice. Also risk. But it has been an enormously enriching experience, too, in terms other than monetary — not least for showing me (and through me, others) the sheer power of the human spirit and the capacity of entire societies once conscious and organized to change themselves for the better. I have drawn on this experience to compare, understand, and analyze other revolutions, and I have broadcast the Eritrean experience as widely as I could in the hope that people of good will, revolutionary or not, would learn from and support it.

How hard then to say: Enough! This movement is no longer what it was, nor what I hoped it would become, and it is taking down too many others — along with the dream — to stay silent.

Once I reached this conclusion, however, I had also to admit that there were disquieting signs for some time.

I recall that I was taken aback upon my first postwar visit in October 1991 to learn of the dismantling of the entire popular political apparatus as the front transformed itself into a government — the EPLF's Department of Mass Administration with its corps of cadre who lived and worked among the people was folded into an Asmara-bound Ministry of Local Government; the dynamic mass organizations of women, youth, peasants, and workers were at that time either dormant or reduced to service providers; the EPLF itself was virtually absent as a political force until reorganized and renamed the PFDJ in early 1994. I thought this hiatus in grassroots mobilization a mistake, and said so many times, but I was swayed by those who insisted they would revive the bottom-up popular movement once the institutional framework for the new state was in place.

The government's forced closure of the country's first nongovernmental organization in 1993 — the Regional Centre for Human Rights and Development, which had overnight attracted generous start-up funding from donors eager to work with anyone not affiliated with the state or the party — was also disturbing. But the argument that this was not the time for such an initiative when the front's mass organizations were struggling to establish themselves as self-financing, autonomous social movements won me over.

An alarm I could no longer ignore sounded several years later when I learned that the popularly elected village assemblies — a hallmark of the movement since the

1970s — had been replaced by a system of party appointees who presided over village forums that no longer had political power of their own. The announcement shocked me, as I had been writing for years that this was an essential building block for the new popular democracy.

Village self-government was where the people learned how to express themselves, identify their interests, make decisions, choose and hold accountable their leaders, and much more. This was the country's school for democracy, where the mechanisms of popular governance would be developed and tested and out of which a genuinely democratic national culture could grow. Told that these assemblies were not functioning "efficiently" enough, I nearly gagged. The argument that the people are not suited to govern themselves is as old as Plato. And what it leads to — rule from the top, whether by one man or a few, in the name of the people or not — is well documented.

On the other hand, there was the uniquely participatory constitution-making process that drew in most of the Eritrean population at home and abroad from 1995 into 1997. The document that came out of this extended national seminar, though tilted too heavily toward executive power, was an impressive and promising start. Yet the failure to implement it upon ratification — fully a year before war broke out with Ethiopia — was the clearest sign yet that the regime's commitment to democratization was compromised.

On the positive side, though, there was the evidence everywhere of the continuing commitment to egalitarian social and economic development — the new schools, the training centers for women, the village health stations, the new rural roads, and much more. Material life was improving for large numbers of people, and structural social inequities were being continually challenged, if not wholly overcome.

Eritrea was (and remains) a contradictory reality. But it was the renewed conflict with Ethiopia that brought these contradictions to the fore.

Throughout 1996 and 1997, relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia grew steadily more strained over economic and political issues — terms of trade, access to the ports, currency regimes, and more. They were further aggravated by a series of Ethiopian incursions into Eritrean territory and by the November 1997 publication in Tigray of new maps that claimed significant areas of Eritrea. Later, both sides would cite such issues — Ethiopia had its own version of these events — to demonstrate that the war was the other side's fault. But to parse the proximate causes is to miss the forest for the trees: Tigrayan nationalists were spoiling for a fight, and the Eritreans rose to the bait. The result was a war whose cost to both countries will be felt for generations.

Eritrea survived with its governing structure intact and its borders largely reaffirmed, allowing the leadership to claim victory, but the price was astounding, not only in the easily quantifiable spheres of lives lost and material resources expended (or destroyed), but in the intangibles that had always distinguished Eritrea — its remarkable spirit and its strong national consensus. The war also squandered the country's reservoir of international good will and foreclosed the possibility of integrated regional development. It was not only Eritrea's present that paid the price, but also its future.

In the aftermath of this terrible — many said "senseless" — war, the questions for Eritrea's leaders were many: could this have been foreseen? If anticipated, could it have been avoided? Once underway, could it have been brought to a halt sooner? If not,

could Eritrea have prevented the devastating losses that came with the last round of fighting?

This was a confrontation unlike any that had come before, not merely in the scale of the combat – which was truly staggering – but in the complex overlays of state vs. state, movement vs. movement, party vs. party and personality vs. personality that infused (and confused) every detail, every nuance of the confrontation. Commentators asked incredulously: how could former allies – people so closely related to one another – do this, missing the point that this is precisely what amplified the dispute and made it so deadly. This was “domestic violence” on a grand scale.

But how to explain why Eritrea’s leaders started and ended the war with such shocking intelligence failures, miscalculated the character and capacity of their foe throughout, lost nearly every round in the diplomatic arena, and suffered crushing military setbacks in the last round of fighting – setbacks that the president assured the people could never happen. These sorts of lapses had never occurred before – certainly not of this magnitude, not of this consistency, not with anything near these consequences. Why now?

Among the many questions to be asked is this: What had happened to the visionary popular liberation movement to put it so thoroughly out of touch with its surroundings that it neither saw this conflict coming, nor grasped the nature and dimensions of the challenge as it was unfolding? What blinkered vision prevented the leadership from recognizing that this was not the TPLF of the mid-1980s? That it was instead a Tigrayan-led Ethiopia with enormous human and material resources at its disposal, a considerable edge in the international sphere, and an experience of guerrilla warfare that would produce a very different battlefield strategy than its predecessor’s?

No one has yet been held accountable for these failures of judgment. Instead, the outcomes they produced are touted as “successes” in a twist of logic that would make Orwell blush. In fact, the only people to pay a price for this misleadership are those who raised these very questions and who sought to avert the catastrophe that resulted from the president’s personal miscalculations.

I was in the U.S. when war broke out with Ethiopia in May 1998 and was as taken by surprise as anyone. I had just co-authored an article in the journal *Foreign Affairs* touting the prospects for regional development under Eritrean and Ethiopian leadership.<sup>3</sup> I had interviewed party leaders and cabinet members who gave no hint that trouble was brewing. When the fighting started, I was shocked but also angry that I had been misled. Yet I rallied, as I always had.

I went to Eritrea that July and August, soon after the shooting stopped. Over the next three weeks, I met with party and state officials, members of the mass organizations, NGO representatives, diplomats, and private citizens. I toured the frontlines at Zalembasa with the Eritrean Defense Forces, where some of the worst fighting had taken place. Wherever I went, I was told that everyone was as surprised by the war as I was. No one had seen this coming.

“Why?” I quietly wondered. “How is it possible that they didn’t anticipate it?”

But few were asking this question. Instead, people were flinging bitter recriminations at the Tigrayans for being innately duplicitous, at the international community for being pro-Ethiopia, at the media for being hopelessly biased against Eritrea. While understandable at a popular level, this excused Eritrea’s leaders from any

culpability and cloaked the entire crisis in such a fog of fatalism that there seemed nothing to do to mitigate it once it was in motion. Throughout the lull after the first round, as both sides scrambled to enhance their armaments and mobilize ever larger ground forces, it was obvious to everyone there would be more combat. The only question was when.

By an unplanned coincidence, I was back in Eritrea in February 1999 when the second round of war broke out. Eritrea's new MiG-29s screamed over Asmara on an almost hourly basis. Hastily camouflaged, mud-smearred cars and trucks rolled in and out of the city carrying troops and supplies. Young people were almost entirely absent from the streets, either conscripted to the frontlines or hiding from the MPs that patrolled the city looking for them. During a break in the fighting, I toured the trenches in Tserona, where I found myself thinking this was *déjà vu* — I had been here, exactly here, before.

Only I hadn't.

This was a new situation that only partially resembled the independence war, and the main players — the EPLF and the TPLF — were not the same liberation fronts operating in the same territories or behaving by the same principles and constraints as they had been a decade earlier, however much each asserted this in its schoolyard tirades toward the other. The failure to understand or acknowledge this was a big reason that Eritrea took such a hit in the last round in May 2000. The failure to examine and publicly critique these events and those that flowed from them later is the central reason Eritrea is in crisis today.

So what do we know about how and why this happened?

Discrete diplomatic efforts failed to defuse this crisis as it was building up in 1997-98. After a series of armed incidents during which several Eritrean officials were murdered near the disputed village of Badme, the Eritrean army rolled into the area with a large mechanized force and took the village. Shortly afterward, Ethiopia, claiming it had been invaded, declared "total war" on Eritrea and mobilized its armed forces for a full-scale assault.

Three rounds of combat in 1998-2000 produced tens of thousands of casualties. This was accompanied by a mass Ethiopian expulsion of Eritreans and Ethiopians of Eritrean origin, creating a severe social crisis on top of that caused by the war itself. The last round of fighting, launched in May 2000, started with an Ethiopian surprise attack after a forced march over mountains that Eritrean strategists thought were impassable for such an army. When Eritrean defenses were overrun, the Ethiopians quickly occupied nearly one-fourth of the country, displacing some 600,000 civilians and inflicting enormous damage to Eritrea's infrastructure. The Eritreans retreated to defensible positions, as they had done in 1978, and halted the advance. Ethiopia agreed to a ceasefire in mid-June, and fighting ended.

On December 12, 2000, Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Algiers, assisted by mediators from the U.S., the European Union, and the Organization of African Unity. Under its terms, a twenty-five-kilometer-wide Temporary Security Zone was established within Eritrea to be patrolled by UN peacekeeping forces, while an international Boundary Commission, whose members were approved in advance by both sides, delimited the contested border. A separate

commission was to investigate civilian compensation claims, and there was to be a comprehensive report on the causes of the conflict.

The Boundary Commission issued its findings in April 2002, giving a little to each side but confirming that Badme was in Eritrea. Both parties initially accepted the outcome, though Ethiopia voiced continuing objections over Badme, which had become the symbolic rationale for the war itself. As a result of this and other reasons (de-mining delays, among them), the actual demarcation dragged on for months, as Eritrea tried to refocus its attention on the reintegration of the many war-displaced civilians, expellees from Ethiopia, and returning refugees from Sudan and to the phased demobilization of combatants.

The slow and uneven implementation of the accord kept tensions high, however, and much of Eritrea's youth remained on active military duty throughout this period — one often characterized as “no-war, no-peace.” As a result, postwar reconstruction went slowly, dissatisfaction among young people intensified, coercive measures became increasingly common to hold them in their posts, and the economy remained stagnant. There were notable achievements, as always in Eritrea, but the main sources of revenue keeping the country afloat continued to be the diaspora and the donor community.

That is one narrative. There was, however, a political subtext unfolding within Eritrea's intensely secretive inner circles: a power struggle that was to redraw the country's political landscape in directions and to degrees that few — including this writer — had foreseen and that has yet to run its course.

Questions about the war *were* raised — how Eritrea got drawn into it, how it was waged, how to get out of it — but in a form and setting that could not yield constructive outcomes. Such exchanges as did occur took place on an informal basis among individuals in the top echelons of the state and party leadership — not during official meetings — and they were for the most part hostile and accusatory with little semblance of the consensus-building of the liberation-war era.

The first polarizing issue was the four-point peace plan forwarded by U.S. and Rwandan mediators in June 1998, which Isaias accepted one day and rejected the next. (How and by whom the decision was made to send a mechanized force into Badme on May 12, 1998, triggering the war, and why the decision to accept the peace plan was reversed remain to be explained.) The tug-of-war continued through 1999 into 2000 — over military tactics, diplomatic initiatives, negotiating postures, and more — with Isaias making all the big decisions himself.

These tensions came to a head in the third round of fighting, as the Ethiopians were steamrolling through Eritrean defenses at Barentu and the command structure in Asmara was breaking down. Some critics claim that Isaias panicked and issued orders for the evacuation of Assab and a general pullback to Asmara — orders that field commanders declined to follow. Others present an almost opposite position — that Isaias insisted on defending Barentu at any cost, and that it was field commanders who gave the order to pull back to defensible positions, halting the Ethiopian advance. Whatever the precise nature and sequence of events, everyone agrees that there was a serious confrontation between Isaias and other military and political leaders in the midst of this crisis.

Haile Wold'ensae says that amidst the chaos, he and others raised the issue of Isaias stepping down as one among many military and political options.<sup>4</sup> The



president's supporters embellish this with the charge that these officials passed an offer to remove him to Ethiopia through American and Italian intermediaries, though no one suggests there was an actual coup attempt. Nevertheless, this as yet unsubstantiated charge is the basis for implications that Isaias's critics are traitors. The actual details of what transpired during those terrible days are known only to those who were there – most of whom are now in prison – so, absent a trial or a public inquiry, it is impossible to know the truth, as is the case with so much of what currently roils the Eritrean community.

Major differences within the leadership resurfaced during a closed session of the PFDJ Central Council in August 2000, barely two months after the ceasefire with Ethiopia was reached. They erupted again in a raucous session of the National Assembly in September, also closed to the public (and the media), at which Isaias came under withering criticism for his performance during the war and for his resistance to the democratization process prior to and after the fighting. Before this meeting was over, he was forced to accept the establishment of separate commissions to assess the political, military and diplomatic experience during the war and to set the guidelines for multiparty national elections. However, neither the PFDJ Central Council nor the National Assembly met again until early 2002, as Isaias refused to call the bodies back into session until his critics were silenced.

The president's counteroffensive got underway in January 2001.

Acting through trusted lieutenants in the PFDJ central office, Isaias organized seminars for mid-level cadres and second-tier government officials to discredit his attackers, most of whom were cabinet ministers, generals or other high-level officials to which those in the assemblage reported. For those excluded from these sessions – his critics – the writing was on the wall.

This tactic echoed one Isaias had used in the 1980s to elevate his own stature while weakening that of others, when he led a campaign against what he termed "the three privileges" – a Cultural Revolution-style crusade in which he appealed to mid-level cadres to heap shame on their leaders for drinking, womanizing, and using their positions to secure material advantages. Not long after this campaign, he brought three generals into the front's core leadership (adding a fourth later) to dilute the strength of his political rivals while ensuring the loyalty of the army. (Today, these men command the army's main operational theaters, making them the most powerful people in Eritrea, after the president.)

As part of this shake-up, Isaias took formal control of the EPLF at its second congress in 1987, replacing Romedan Mohamed Nur as the front's secretary general. (Isaias forced Romedan to retire from the leadership altogether in the early 1990s.) He then froze the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the secret party that had run the EPLF since its earliest days. This positioned him both to assume the presidency in the postwar transition and to make the state the dominant institutional apparatus in an independent Eritrea.

At the EPLF's third congress in 1994, when it morphed into the PFDJ, Isaias convinced many veterans to step aside from the leadership in order to bring new blood into the political movement. Afterward, however, he rarely used the front's newly elected bodies to decide issues. Instead, the PFDJ's 19-member executive council spent most of its time discussing how to implement policies determined elsewhere. In this

respect, the front mimicked the EPLF's operational forms during the liberation struggle, when the clandestine People's Party had "guided" the organization — setting its priorities in advance of larger meetings, preparing candidate slates for elections, and so on. But there was a singular difference in this new period: there was no organized party providing the guidance, no collective body, however limited, however secret, operating behind the scenes. There was only the president and his personally selected advisors.

The same was true of the state itself. Though the new government had the appearance of a separation of powers — an executive office with a cabinet of ministers, an interim parliament (pending the first national elections) and a nominally independent judiciary — it was an illusion. The cabinet did not provide a forum for serious debate or decision-making. It, too, served mainly as a clearinghouse to determine how policies hammered out elsewhere would be put into practice. The key question is where (and who) was this "elsewhere"?

Throughout the 1990s, Isaias expanded and strengthened the President's Office with specialized departments on economic and political policy that duplicated (and effectively out-ranked) similar cabinet ministries. He staffed these departments with loyal individuals who reported to no one but him. Ministerial portfolios were frequently shuffled to keep rivals from developing power bases of their own. When ministers or other government officials contested new appointments or criticized policies, they were routinely "frozen" — removed from their posts but kept on salary and prevented from taking other jobs, inside or out of government. This process, known as *midiskal*, was derived from the Chinese practice of taking offending government or party officials out of circulation for long periods while they are either rehabilitated or rendered mute. It was applied to dozens of EPLF veterans through the first decade of Eritrea's independence when they ran afoul of the president.

Nor did the National Assembly play an initiating role in policy or legislation during the post-independence transition — at least not until after the second war with Ethiopia. When it tried to do so in September 2000, the president refused to call it back into session until he had changed its membership and cowed the dissidents. Even members of the judiciary were moved about to meet presidential needs — and when that was not sufficient, Isaias set up a system of personally appointed "special courts" to hear sensitive cases.

This was government by highly concentrated personal authority even within the executive branch of the state and the leadership of the political movement. The people with the most access to the president were either those in the PFDJ's central office or those in the president's own office, plus the top echelons of the army. But it all came down to a single individual — Isaias — who, like the Wizard of Oz, pulled all the strings from behind a curtain of opaque but absolute authority. The result was a system of informal and structurally unaccountable power — a far cry from the collective leadership of the earlier era.

The tensions building within the EPLF/PFDJ leadership came to a head in 2001, as the power struggle inside the front and the state spilled into public view, but Isaias had already outflanked his critics.

The challengers coalesced around Haile "DruE" Woldetensae and other liberation front commanders and political heavy-weights who had been with Isaias since the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, they were unable to convince more than

nineteen to sign their names to a letter they sent to the president protesting his closure of political debate. In May, with rumors swirling about Asmara and in the diaspora of unresolved internal divisions and with Isaias unwilling to engage his critics directly, the group, now down to fifteen (and subsequently identified as the G-15), put its critique on the internet in an "Open Letter to the PFDJ."

Eritrea's new private press picked up the controversy with a vengeance, running news stories and lengthy interviews with prominent government critics on the hot-button issues of the day, often accompanied by highly opinionated commentaries. Many Asmarinos started their mornings by reading two, three, or more newspapers to pick up the latest gibes and jabs. With the added dimension of the internet, these publications reached Eritreans throughout the diaspora as well.

A July 2001 conference of the Eritrean Studies Association, held for the first time in Eritrea, drew hundreds of Eritrean scholars and activists from around the world. It, too, became a venue for the debate, with many panels taking up the hottest controversies and with the informal hallway discussions dominated by them. At one forum on legal and constitutional issues, the chief justice of Eritrea's High Court blasted Isaias for interfering with the judiciary and for continuing to maintain the highly secretive "special courts." Set up in 1996 to deal with high-level corruption, these courts were staffed by presidential appointees — mostly military officers — with no legal training, and they were not required to adhere to established judicial procedure or due process. They had the power to overturn the decisions of other courts, but there was no appeal from their decisions. (The judge who publicly criticized these courts, Teame Beyene, was ousted from his post shortly after making his public remarks.)

Throughout these months, it was impossible to sit in a café or a downtown restaurant without taking up such issues. The city was abuzz. It felt like Eritrea's 'Prague Spring.' But the government and the party were studiously silent. To anyone who asked, the official response was that these were inappropriate subjects for public discussion. Few people doubted what this presaged.

In July, the heel came down.

The first to be arrested, perhaps because of the volatility of his constituency, was University of Asmara Student Union president Semere Kesete, the valedictorian of the senior class. Semere had publicly criticized the president of the university and the government over the mandatory summer work program. He spoke for students who were demanding larger allowances and other privileges for their work on state projects. For this, he was carted off to prison (though he later escaped), and the offending students were forcibly rounded up and bussed to a blistering hot work camp in the Danakil desert, where several died before the summer was over. Some parents who protested were roughed up; a few were detained. As this was taking place, the PFDJ central office convened another round of seminars for the party's mid-level cadre in the town of Embatkala — pointedly excluding those in what was now called "the opposition" — to prepare them for the coming crackdown.

The main blow came in September 2001, following al-Qaeda's attacks in New York and Washington and after the Bush administration's declaration of a "War on Terrorism." With the world's attention thus diverted, Isaias ordered the arrest of the G-15, the closure of the country's entire private press, and the detention of the offending media's leading editors and reporters. Days later, two Eritreans who had translated

press clippings for the American embassy were taken, sparking a controversy with Washington that has yet to be resolved. In the months that followed, there were less-publicized arrests — several respected elders who had sought to mediate on behalf of the detainees, more journalists associated both with the private press and the state media, mid-level officials critical of the leadership, businessmen and other civilian critics, and others.

Some were held for short periods and discharged; others — like the G-15 and the journalists — were held indefinitely with no charges leveled and no visitors allowed. A few who were taken and released described mistreatment verging on torture — forced to kneel for long periods with arms and legs shackled, beaten with fists and blunt instruments, kept awake for days on end before and during interrogations — but there were no known executions. Still, the impact was immediate and pervasive.

As no clear red lines had been drawn, it was impossible to know precisely where or when one was crossing them. There was an arrest here, an arrest there, then a sudden release — sometimes without even an interrogation. What had the person done? One could not be sure. People began to act and speak with great restraint. Conversations in public places were muted. Few would raise or respond to a political topic on the phone. Rumors flew that all internet communication was monitored. Who knew what was accurate, and what was not? Which was precisely the point.

And the arrests continue.

Government and party officials still claim there are no political prisoners in Eritrea, that the various detainees are “criminals.” But no charges have been brought against any of those arrested — the G-15 or others — and no trials have been conducted to back up these allegations, not even sham trials before the super-secret “special courts.” In fact, the government/party has done little more than broadcast unsubstantiated accusations and engage in character assassination to shore up its internal constituency, while stonewalling the international community in the expectation it would lose interest.

Few are fooled by this subterfuge — but many are silenced.

As I look at these events now, from the perspective of more than a quarter-century of involvement in Eritrea, I can only conclude that the radical experiment in popular democracy that I chronicled through these many years is at risk today not from external sources but from its own leaders, despite the fact that commitments to social and economic egalitarianism persist under the regime’s paternalistic stewardship.

The schools and clinics for all Eritreans, the roads and bridges that link the most remote areas of this diverse country, the new dams, the millions of freshly-planted tree seedlings, the extension of electrification, the construction of new industries and agricultural schemes — all this and more make magnificent monuments to the liberation ethos that powered this movement for decades. But that is all they will be — monuments — if the fundamental respect for the people who nurtured this ethos is lost, if the conviction that it is the people who drive this revolution is reduced to a hollow slogan.

During the decade since independence, the president and his closest allies have squeezed the “liberty” out of liberation and left only the seductive shell of a top-down egalitarian development project. Even this may not survive long without deep roots among the people such as those so carefully cultivated during the liberation struggle.

The coercive regime that now rules Eritrea is severing those roots. As a consequence, the country and the movement that liberated it will never be the same.

One would expect a protracted war to foster an authoritarian political culture that would carry over to some extent into a postwar environment and interfere with the transition to democracy. The phenomenon is so common as to be a political cliché. But what is happening in Eritrea today is different – and more serious. A political movement that had an unusually high degree of shared authority and interactive decision-making is becoming more and more centralized in peacetime, and the formerly collective leadership is narrowing to unvarnished one-man rule. This is not carryover – it is reversal. Under these circumstances, the man himself has become the issue, though he – like all such demagogues before him – cloaks himself in the national flag to mask it.

I recall an agonizing encounter I had with the charismatic EPLF field commander in November 1978, a day after we evacuated the city of Keren during the front's Strategic Retreat and hours after Ethiopian jets strafed a column of war-refugees fleeing north toward the Sudan border. "The face of the war has changed," Isaias said to me with fierce determination. "Whatever their intentions, whatever their interests, we will continue to fight."

Much later, when I asked him how he had maintained his resolve at that disheartening moment, he said to me: "When I am challenged, I become more stubborn – more and more rigid. I'm very emotional."<sup>5</sup>

But where Isaias's personal strength and single-mindedness were virtues during the protracted liberation struggle, they have turned into barriers to Eritrea's maturation and development and no longer serve the interests of the nation. It is time for him to move on, and it is long past time for the PFDJ to detach itself from the state and contend for power and influence with other political forces in an open, transparent environment.

What happened to the Eritrean Revolution at the dawn of the twenty-first century is a tragedy, but it does not cancel the remarkable advances made in the years that led to this turnaround. Nor does it foreclose the possibility that the Revolution will revive and blossom under new leadership.

What then to do?

The answer is deceptively simple: Trust the people – now, as before.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Interview with the author, Asmara, November 1992, quoted in *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 199, 7), p. 272

<sup>2</sup> Interview with the author, Asmara, March 2000, quoted in *Rethinking Revolution: New Strategies for Democracy & Social Justice* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2002), p.375.

<sup>3</sup> "Africa's New Bloc," *Foreign Affairs*, March 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the author, Asmara, August 13, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> *Against All Odds*, p. 173.