The Journal of Modern African Studies, 35, 4 (1997), pp. 647–673
Printed in the United Kingdom © 1997 Cambridge University Press

The Eritrean Experiment: a Cautious Pragmatism?

by RUTH IYOB*

THIS is an attempt to assess Eritrea's democratic prospects in light of its political experience since 1993 as a sovereign state. I readily concede that it is too early to make a definitive assessment; yet, just as a child's first few years are extraordinarily critical in helping to determine its subsequent intellectual, physical, and moral development, so can a new nation cumulate experiences that help set it firmly on its feet and give it the capacity for yet more positive growth. Further, there is no denying the force of genetic and environmental factors in the development of both children and states: what they inherit from the past, as well as the circumstances of their creation, and experiences of infancy, all contribute to what they will become. I have no wish to stretch the metaphor further; my point is that a detached analysis of Eritrea's political inheritance and the forces and key events since its formal independence can give, at least, a preliminary reading on its prospects. Thus, I intend to argue that these first five years have been marked by pragmatic policy-formation and decision-making which, taken as a whole, warrant a cautious optimism about the country's democratic future.

PROLOGUE: SURPRISES AND PRINCIPLES

Politics in the new Eritrea is full of surprises, although these are the norm rather than the exception in this part of the Horn of Africa. Eritrea's 30-year war of independence was expected to end in a grand face-off between the Ethiopian *Dergue*'s huge army and the Eritrean *tegadelti* or 'combatants', including the corollary destruction of Asmara. Instead, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) took over the capital city in broad daylight without a single shot being fired. To the amazement of the besieged residents, the *Dergue*'s demoralised soldiers

* Assistant Professor of Political Science and Fellow, Center for International Studies, University of Missouri, St Louis.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

left their garrisons with their Kalashinkovs pointed downwards, while the EPLF's tanks and regiments marched in past abandoned checkpoints, to take on a devastated economy and an impoverished population accustomed to rule by fear.

During the two years that followed Eritrea's *harnet* (the Tigrigna term for liberation) and the downfall of the *Dergue* in Ethiopia, the doomsday prophesies of further bloodshed and violence never materialised. Instead, to the chagrin of Greater Ethiopia nationalists and other opponents of Eritrean independence, a surprisingly cordial relationship emerged between the newly established Provisional Government of Eritrea (PGE/EPLF) and the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). During the interim period, 1991–3, both the PGE and the TGE focused on their mutual needs and interests, thus opening up a new chapter of co-operation and interdependence.[1]

In April 1993, a UN-sponsored referendum was held in which the reported 99·805 per cent vote for independence was declared free and fair by international and regional observers,[2] and the following month the PGE announced the establishment of a four-year transitional régime to administer the country pending the drafting of a constitution.[3] Eritrea declared its *natznet* or independence formally on 24 May 1993, and from then onwards the transitional régime, operating under a mandate to establish the foundations for democratic governance, has administered the new nation-state.

The guiding principles of Eritrea, as enunciated by its leaders, are unity, secularism, nationalism, self-reliance, and pragmatism. The unity forged during 30 years of war is the cornerstone. A half century ago, in the 1940s, attempts at solidarity organised by the young, anti-colonial nationalists failed because of the absence of a shared vision.[4] Social, economic, and political policies are now being formulated with an eye to their impact on the fragile unity of the diverse sectors of Eritrean society. For example, affirmative policies intended to transform traditional ethnic and gender relations are accompanied by laws and decrees introducing a separation between state and religion.

The new Government, although viewed by some, according to President Issaias Afewerki, as afflicted by the 'over-confidence of

[1] Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE), *Principles of Cooperation Between the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and the Provisional Government of Eritrea* (Addis Ababa, 1991).

[2] Report of the Referendum Commissioner of Eritrea (RCE), 'Referendum '93 Tzebtzab Commissioner, Nehase 1992'.

[3] Provisional Government of Eritrea (PGE) Proclamation No. 37 of 1993.

[4] Ruth Iyob *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: domination, resistance, nationalism, 1941–1993* (Cambridge, 1995).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

adolescence',[5] has withstood military, political, economic, and social challenges to its rule. In 1993, an army revolt was put down peacefully, and bloodshed was averted through a dialogue led by the Head of State. In 1994, soldiers forcefully ended a demonstration by disabled veterans, resulting in the deaths of three people, a tragedy that admittedly could have been averted through better communication. In 1995, the régime attacked Islamic fundamentalists in border areas of the Sudan as well as their safe-houses in urban centres; and in 1996, Eritrea mourned its first war casualties since the armed struggle, fallen in the dispute with Yemen over the contested Hanish islands.[6]

Since declaring its independence Eritrea has been viewed by some as a bright model for development and democracy. For one thing, it has survived without resort to isolationism or international tutelage. The country, surprisingly, has been relatively successful at mobilising its human resources, and with its potential of rich natural resources, may be able to chart its own course forward. The creativity of the people and the pragmatism of their Government are extolled in major international publications. Its policies of self-reliance and industriousness have been praised as a blueprint for Africa, and the refusal of its leaders to accept International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank conditionalities caused them to be labelled as 'arrogant' and 'control-freaks'.

Nevertheless, Eritrea continues to inspire, on the one hand, a certain awe and a concomitant indulgence of its maverick path to democracy, and on the other, raised eyebrows among scholars and irritation among some policy-makers. The Eritreans insist on reserving the right to define the nature of their democracy, to determine its scope, and to establish their own time-frame. This extends to the economic sphere since the Government regards development as a prerequisite to good governance and democracy.

VIEWS ON DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

The concepts of democracy and development have long been subjects of debate, disagreement, and discussion; and there is no consensus on either definitions or policy paths. Suffice it to state that

[5] Broadcast interview given by President Issaias Afewerki on National Public Radio, Washington, DC, 30 July 1996.

[6] Eritrean casualties were 12 dead, which included a member of the National Service Programme. Although there were no figures on Yemeni casualties, 47 officers and 148 rank-and-file were reportedly captured. See 'Remains of Hanish Martyrs Laid to Rest', in *Eritrea Profile* (Asmara), 2, 41, 23 December 1995.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

there are those who give priority to democratisation over development, while some insist that without development there can be no sustainable democracy. Yet many affirm that both processes are inter-related and that one cannot make progress without the other.[7] The post-independence Eritrean régime subscribes to the latter view.[8] This perspective on democracy is an outgrowth of the EPLF's strategy of *akay'da gobi'ye*[9] – literally 'the tortoise's pace' – which, in practice, translates into a predilection for deliberate and detailed preparation for action: slow and steady wins the race. Here are some representative views that make the point:

On development aid
[Donor] support must be worked out as a stop-gap measure designed to help the beneficiaries stand on their own two feet, rather than perpetuating the vicious cycle of dependence.[10]

On the future
We should not compare ourselves with those who have failed … those who are bad examples … We should compare our achievements and our goals with those who have succeeded … To be able to compete on an equal level with the successful ones … we need to remember that we have a long and hard road to travel.[11]

On education
… we insist on owning our own projects. Too often we find that African universities have become the junk-yards for non-compatible equipment.[12]

On the economy
We do not have all the resources but we are the owners of our economy; we do not exclude outside support, but it must fit in with our programmes. Even inexperienced experts try to prescribe solutions for us, but they don't understand out situation.[13]

On government and people
That this government is regarded as a country-side government is a sign that it has strong bonds with its people.[14]

[7] See, for example, Samuel Decalo, 'Africa: toward the twenty-first century', in Tatu Vanhanen (ed.), *Strategies of Democratization* (Washington, DC, 1992), pp. 130–40, and Claude Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa* (Washington, DC, 1996), pp. 124–39.

[8] See *Hadas Ertra* (Asmara), 1993–7, as well as government documents.

[9] This phrase is attributed to Issaias Afewerki, who has repeatedly referred to Aesop's fable in which the cautious, slow-moving tortoise eventually won the race against the over-confident hare.

[10] Issaias Afewerki, in World Bank, *Africa Recovery* (Washington, DC), May 1996, p. 27.

[11] President's speech on the fourth anniversary of liberation, in *Hadas Ertra*, 72, 27 May 1995, p. 2, my translation.

[12] President of the University of Asmara, interviewed by Colin Legum, 'A Model of Third World University', in *Third World Reports* (Sharpthorne, Sussex), 20 December 1995.

[13] Jeannie Street, 'The Power of Self-Reliance', interview with the former Minister of Finance, Haile Woldetensae, in *African Business* (London), May 1997, p. 36.

[14] '*Gem'gaam Hade Medrekh*', 'Discussion with President Issaias', in *Hedri* (Asmara), June 1996, p. 14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

How is democracy defined by the Eritreans? According to the most widely circulated newspaper in the post-independence political arena, the bi-weekly Tigrigna-edition, *Hadas Ertra* (Asmara):

> We need to address the needs of the 20,000 disabled (the majority of whom are ex-combatants); provide assistance to the families of the martyrs, orphans; facilitate the return of half a million refugees from the Sudan... We hope to make... Eritrea a place where peace and prosperity prevail; where democratic culture and tradition flourish; where the rule of law reigns and a democratic system is established.[15]

The challenges facing the Government are immense but the commitment to democratisation does exist, as do the institutions established to implement this process. What comes across in this editorial is the mind-set that certain prerequisites have to be met before the procedural aspects of democracy are set in place.

How is Eritrea seen by the outside world? A typical view is provided in the *Financial Times* (London):

> Proud, principled and impoverished, Eritrea is virtually without peer in Africa as it pursues its own model of development and vision of democracy ... Energetic septuagenarians... government ministers who shun pomp and ceremony... a capital whose streets are safe to walk at night... no beggars on the street.[16]

The task of building a new Eritrean polity which accommodates the different needs of its communities, while ensuring that justice and democracy are exercised, requires the nurturing of a national identity with a unified sense of vision in peace-time as well as in war. Will the first five years of civic education and consensus-building result in the emergence of a democratic Eritrean political culture and a sustainable economy?

The Eritreans announced their commitment to political pluralism and the creation of a multi-party system in 1987 at the EPLF's Second Congress.[17] By 1990, the leadership had clearly indicated that its support was not a mere statement of 'fashion', and that the proliferation of parties or newspapers is not necessarily a condition for a democratic system.[18] In numerous statements to the international

[15] *Hadas Ertra*, 27 May 1995, my translation.

[16] Michael Holman and Michaela Wrong, 'Eritrea: proud, principled, impoverished', in *Financial Times* (London), 18 January 1996.

[17] Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), 'Political Report and National Democratic Programme Adopted at the Second and Unity Congress of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and the Eritrean Liberation Front (Central Committee)', Eritrea, 19 March 1987.

[18] EPLF, *Melsitat Wana T'zehafi n'Hetotat Hezbi'n Tegadelti'n*, 'Responses of the Secretary-General to Questions from the People and Combatants', in *Sagem* (Eritrea), Special Edition, 2, 10, October 1990, p. 13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

media, the President and other high-ranking members of the Government have made it abundantly clear that democracy is to proceed in tandem with development, and that both will be defined by Eritreans themselves.[19] This insistence in formulating their own definitions and setting their own pace of democratisation is epitomised in their motto of '*akay'da gobi'ye*'. What is clear is that since independence the country has embarked upon a pragmatic experiment of self-rule with the goals of eradicating poverty, ensuring social justice, and nurturing a national identity. From this starting point, say the warriors of the recent past and statesmen of the present, the road to democracy may not be too long.

THE POLITICS OF TRANSITION, 1993–7

Eritrea's emergence as a sovereign state towards the turn of the century endows it with certain privileges and opportunities as well as some constraints. Its late arrival enables the young nation to learn both from the cumulative experience of others and its own, having suffered through a cold war gestation and being born during the eclipse of the bipolar global system. It is now participating in the recasting of relationships among sub-regional, regional, and international powers.[20]

Internally, the Government has had to make efforts to 'civilianise' its mode of operations, thus taking the first steps in what is hoped will be the transition from the 'command' mode to consensual politics. The path to democracy promises to be even more difficult and messier than the fictional *Road to Asmara* portrayed by Thomas Keaneally, the Australian writer.[21] Nevertheless, the sense of drama in independent Eritrea is as engaging as that in his novel. Efforts to secularise the nation go hand-in-hand with sightings of *Jihadists* in border areas;[22] the prohibition of ethnic and regional parties is accompanied by a flourishing of cultural troupes and exhibitions celebrating the mosaic diversity of Eritrean society; free market economics co-exists with

[19] EPLF, *Hagerawi Charter*, 'National Charter', Report of the EPLF's Third Congress, 1994.

[20] President Issaias Afewerki's speech at the Sixth Summit of the Intergovernmental Agency for Drought and Development, Asmara, 25 November 1996.

[21] Thomas Keaneally, *The Road to Asmara* (Trenton, NJ, 1988), where the goal was 'to make it' on the road to freedom, which was fraught with harsh physical and economic obstacles, betrayals of principles, and immense sacrifices for those who would succeed in achieving independence.

[22] Eritreans use the term '*Jihadists*' to refer to members of the Eritrean Jihad Movement (EJM), the most recent splinter group from the ELF. The EJM opposes the secular policies of the current Government and is supported by the Sudanese National Islamic Front (NIF). Refer to *Al-Nifar*, a desk-top publication distributed overseas, for information about the EJM's political objectives. See *Hadas Ertra*, 25 and 28 June, and 2 July 1997, for details of joint NIF-EJM missions, including plots to assassinate the Eritrean President.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ownership of land by the state; and in contrast to the rise of tribalism elsewhere in recent years, multi-ethnic districts are being created through a policy of 'ethnic scrambling'.[23]

Eritrean society is still highly militarised although the demonstrated prowess of EPLF soldiers is not on conspicuous display, since they are hardly visible. In July 1993 the Government initiated a 'Two-Phase Project for the Demobilisation and Reintegration' of its 95,000 military personnel. *Mit'iyas* – as the Department of Reintegration for Demobilised Fighters is known – was established to oversee the return of soldiers to civilian life, and to demonstrate the régime's commitment to them. During the first phase, which started immediately, 26,000 combatants were demobilised, the majority of whom had been recruited since 1990, and they received 1,000–5,000 *birr* and food rations. In the second phase, which began in 1994, a further 22,000 EPLF veterans were demobilised, each being given 10,000 *birr* and food rations for one year.[24]

Security risks posed by marauding soldiers – similar to those which helped to destabilise Somalia, Mozambique, Angola, and Zaïre – are minimal in Eritrea. The risks of using weapons as a means of livelihood may result in a modern adaptation of the tradition of banditry, a phenomenon which has reappeared since the end of the cold war in the former Eastern bloc and Africa.[25] Disarmament without providing soldiers with training, as well as help in finding alternative means of livelihood, leads to instability and internal crises. These in turn increase regional tensions as economic relations suffer due to the disruption of established commercial networks, and as movements of refugees result in a spillover of conflicts across national borders. A 1995 study of post-war Eritrea conducted by the German Development Institute argues that demobilisation and reintegration present both risks and potentials:

> Demobilization, however, offers a new potential also … A war-torn society can find new ways to solve arising conflicts. Dedication to reconstruction and recovery can help to pave the way to a better life. The reduction of military expenditure can form part of a peace-dividend which the government can invest e.g. social services. Reducing the significance of the military is also a confidence and security building measure for a whole region.[26]

[23] David E. Apter, 'Democracy for Uganda: a case for comparison', in *Daedalus* (Cambridge, MA), 124, 3, Summer 1995, p. 164.

[24] The *birr*'s rate of exchange during 1993–6 was U.S.$1.00 to 7.20 *birr*.

[25] For a historical overview, see Donald Crummey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (London, 1986).

[26] German Development Institute, 'Promoting the Reintegration of Former Female and Male Combatants in Eritrea: possible contributions of development cooperation to the reintegration program', Berlin, May 1995, pp. 6–7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In Eritrea, swift disarmament and gradual demobilisation lessened security risks in the immediate post-war years. However, assistance is still needed to clear large areas of arable land of an estimated one million mines,[27] even though bilateral agreements with the United States were reached in 1995 to begin a process of systematic clearance. American aid was also forthcoming to help train Eritrean police in international security regulations and criminal investigation procedures. Additional specialised courses on refugees and immigration laws were provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. By 1996, new security job descriptions, and the attendant titles and uniforms, had been distributed. Dispelling the war-time legacy of distrust and corruption, which stems from a period when 'justice' was sold to the highest bidder, is another matter. Current crimes range from the theft of water containers (a valuable commodity in Eritrea) and trade in contraband goods to the illegal transportation of would-be émigrés to the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas.[28]

One of the major domestic challenges for law enforcement offices and intelligence units has been the continuing fight against bribery and corruption, frequently decried as 'un-Eritrean'.[29] The EPLF's wartime tradition of egalitarianism discouraged such 'human failings' which became manifest in a few people seeking privileges or 'excesses'.[30] In 1995, employees of the customs house at Asmara airport were tried for depriving the state of revenues exceeding 100,000 *birr*.[31] In recent times, anti-corruption campaigns in Eritrea exposed the existence of a lucrative network of illegal transactions involving not only civilians but also some 90 persons employed by the Government. These investigations took approximately two years, and the jailing of the accused served to demonstrate to the public that those who violate the law

[27] UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Assistance in Mine Clearance: report of the Secretary-General', June 1995, p. 5, issued as Document A/49/357, September 1996, Forty-Ninth Session of the General Assembly, New York.

[28] The bi-weekly *Hadas Ertra* carries a column entitled *Hizb'n Police'n*, 'People and Police', where legal violations are reported ranging from the mundane to the hilarious apprehension of young men attempting to leave the country illegally dressed in wigs and western feminine attire. In February 1997 as many as 70 died in a ship that capsized when carrying excess passengers across the Red Sea.

[29] This labelling of corruption as alien to Eritrean tradition is evident in the refrain '*ay'bahli'nan!!*', 'it is not our culture!!'. Although during the war Eritreans were encouraged to fight against the Ethiopian régime by using every means at their disposal – including running black markets, paying bribes to officials, and sending spies to gather intelligence – with the establishment of a government of 'one's own', these techniques are considered not only illegal, but also offensive to national sensibilities.

[30] Issaias Afewerki, 'Press Conference: 29 May 1993', broadcast on ERI-TV.

[31] *Hedri*, 1, May 1995, p. 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would be held accountable.[32] The rule of law in post-independence Eritrea is not without its bureaucratic lapses, but it has worked well enough to become a beacon of light for citizens seeking justice – particularly after so many years of injustice and tyranny under Ethiopian rule.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF POST-WAR ERITREAN POLITICS

The blueprint of the Eritrean nation-state had been on the drawing boards since 1991, some even say for decades before liberation. The pillars upon which the new entity rests are unity, self-reliance, and nationalism, all conjoined by the overarching pragmatism that characterised the emergence, survival, and final victory of the EPLF.[33] The following is a partial list of the legal-institutional steps taken since 1991 to give substance to the future structures of the state, and they reveal that some important initiatives have already been implemented.

1. *Banning political parties based on ethnicity and/or religion*. The country's leaders viewed this as a pre-emptive move to counter any threats to the 'national unity' brought about during the long years of struggle. In light of the polarisation of Eritrean political and social groups that took place along ethnic and religious lines (as in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s), this prohibition appears to be based on both a social consensus on the issue, and the threat posed by the militant Eritrean *Jihadists* sponsored by neighbouring Sudan.

2. *State ownership of all land*.[34] This was designed to pre-empt conflicts over land ownership, which, if serious enough, could deter investors.[35] Exacerbated by extended periods of alien rule, such disputes have been varied and enduring, and their costly, unresolved continuation is viewed as a barrier to plans to use the country's mineral resources – oil, gold, diamonds, and natural gas – to meet developmental goals.

3. *Re-drawing provincial lines*. The 10 provinces or *awrajas* have been replaced by six zones, which means that jurisdictions have been reformed. This has reduced redundancy and administrative costs while creating ethnically-mixed districts. This 'ethnic scrambling' may not eliminate such animosities as exist, but it is hoped that they can forestall segregationist tendencies and, coupled with the régime's socio-economic initiatives, redirect ethnic energies to national construction.

[32] Those accused of corruption, as well as abuse of power and resources, are currently in prison awaiting court dates. They include the head of the Red Sea Corporation, wealthy merchants, and a number of mid-level bureaucrats as well as clerical workers. Concurrently, similar anti-corruption investigations in Ethiopia led to the dismissal and indictment of the former Prime Minister, Tamrat Layne.

[33] PLF, 'Our Struggle and Our Objectives', Eritrea, 1971.

[34] Individuals do not 'own' land in the Western sense, but enjoy usufructuary rights thereto. These only allot the 'fruits' of the land to the user.

[35] Government of Eritrea Proclamation No. 58 of 1994.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

4. *Supporting families of deceased veterans and impoverished citizens*. This demonstration of the continuity of the EPLF's concern for grassroots solidarity and social justice has enhanced the legitimacy of the régime, not least by seeking to contain resentment that could lead to confrontations between society and state.

5. *Down-sizing the civil service*. Several measures have reduced the size of the administrative corps, and introduced merit and competence as new criteria to replace seniority and/or nepotism as guiding principles in personnel matters. Such streamlining was, to a large extent, a political-technocratic exercise to avoid the creation of bloated bureaucracies which, as often happens in new states, drain scarce national resources and result in ineffective institutions.

6. *Launching a three-year consultative period for the drafting of a constitution*. Hence the rejection of the 'Lancaster House' model,[36] and the emphasis on a process of constitution-making based on recognition of the 'givens' of Eritrean society and history, as well as extensive popular consultation. Indeed, in May 1995 it was reported that more than 1,100 public seminars and civic education classes had been arranged.[37] Independent Eritrea's constitution was ratified in May 1997, inaugurating a new era.

7. *Introducing the National Service Programme* (NSP). All citizens above the age of 18 are now required to undergo six months of military training, followed by 12 months of *Maa'etot*, or 'production activities'. The NSP introduces post-war Eritrean youths to military discipline, provides a source of labour for reconstruction projects, and is intended to bridge the gap between the *tegadelti* and future generations. Equally important, it creates an arena for the continued interaction of young Eritrean men and women of different ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds.[38]

It should be noted that each of these steps was taken as a pragmatic experiment, and that their ongoing success depends on the goodwill of the Eritreans themselves. Initiated as decrees or the result of consultations, they assume continuation of a democratic environment, not to speak of the growth of a new political culture.

TO 'PARTY' OR 'NOT TO PARTY': IS THAT THE QUESTION?

Eritrea is beginning to emerge as the epitome of peace, stability, and the locus for challenges to the status quo in the Horn of Africa. Indeed, it is touted by many outsiders as a driving force for the region's political and economic transformation. Delegations of Eritrean diplomats,

[36] This refers to the fact that most of Britain's African colonies negotiated for their independence at Lancaster House in London. The Eritreans rejected options of adopting previously existing constitutional texts from their past or from their neighbours.

[37] *Hadas Ertra*, 72, 10 May 1995, p. 1.

[38] The scheme combines national military service, found in many countries, with national civilian service, increasingly popular around the world. It may be that one model is Israel, which has long used its armed forces to bridge ethnic, religious, and gender differences.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

proudly presenting passports embossed with the figure of the indefatigable camel, are seen in various capitals ranging from Washington, London, and Brussels, to Dakar and Kampala. Less visible but equally crucial to the sharp-edged foreign policy of the Government are the various consultants dispatched to support Rwanda and to help the rebels in former Zaïre and neighbouring Sudan. Sightings of Eritrean advisers have been reported from Togan, Ngoma, and Kigali.[39] It was also interesting to note that the Eritrean President was one of the first visitors to the renamed Democratic Republic of Congo.[40]

Eritrea as a young nation of approximately three million inhabitants has indeed come a long way from the years of regional exclusion. How has this transformation been possible? What kind of institutions exist to enable Eritrea to define its own terms for national development, and to occupy the 'front line' in the construction of a new post-cold war regional order?[41]

The question of how contemporary Eritrea is ruled remains far from clear. The demonstrated pragmatism of the leadership and its successes speak to the existence of competent mechanisms of governance, an ideology in-the-making, and a disciplined cadre of officials. Is a political party emerging within the reconstituted but still monolithic EPLF? If not, then what is the nature of the organisation which spearheads Eritrea's newly acquired fame as a model for African development in the next century? Is it possible to envision a democratic future without political parties? The constitution provides the formal and legal framework for governance, but the informal and 'virtual' discourse circumscribing political activity has blurred the lines of demarcation between government, front, and party. The culture of silence that prevails in transitional Eritrea makes it necessary to look to the distant and recent past in order to deconstruct the entangled narratives of factionalism, sectarianism, and nationalism, as well as the lessons learned from the past, since these all shape the vision of the new political order.

The 'coyness' of Eritrean officials when asked if there is an EPLF party may be exceptionally unsettling, but the rejection of pluralist political organisations as agents of democratisation is not new. So,

[39] See 'Sudan: body of evidence', in *Africa Confidential* (London), 9 May 1997, p. 8, and Sam Kiley, 'Rebels Overrun Zaire Army Bases', in *The Times* (London), 7 February 1997.

[40] *Hadas Ertra*, 85, 25 June 1997.

[41] 'Eritrea: in the front line again', in *Africa Confidential*, 3 January 1977, p. 3, and 'Africa's New Generation of Leaders', in *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 May 1997.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it is instructive to look at Yoweri Museveni's concept of a 'no party democracy' in Uganda led by the National Reform Movement (NRM).[42] Following the reconstitution of the EPLF in 1994 as a mass organisation called *Hezbawi Genbar n' Fethi'n Democraci*, the 'People's Front for Democracy and Justice' (PFDJ), the Afewerki régime in Eritrea has taken pains to portray this as a *politicawi m'en'ks'kas*, a 'political movement' that is committed to a multi-party system in the future, while at the same time expressing a disdainful distrust of parties. Both Uganda and Eritrea share similar experiences: societies fragmented along ethnic and religious lines, alternative political systems devised and refined during years of guerrilla warfare, and rejection of the dogma that the only or main mechanisms of participatory democracy have to be political parties. A fundamental difference is that their rôle in Uganda is clearly circumscribed, while in Eritrea there is continuing uncertainty as to whether the PFDJ serves as a screen for a ruling party, or whether there is a new political phenomenon – neither party nor government – which propels the nation.

On the one hand, observation and common sense suggest that the PFDJ is creating structures and acting as if it were in fact a ruling party. On the other, it calls itself 'the Front' and denies partisan aspirations. Which is it? Reality is masked, as the Horn's 'wax and gold' tradition almost dictates,[43] and can only be reached by peeling off layers of historical context and discordant discourse.

The first layer to be removed is an acquired political habit. Life before independence in Eritrea was marked by clandestinity and an endemic culture of public silence. Many supporters of the liberation struggle who were caught in the Ethiopian security network suffered and died to protect their comrades, while those outside the prisons lived under the shadow of fear. Fatalism and silence were respected modes of survival during the long war. In peace, however, the 'culture of silence' – namely, the general unwillingness to express political views openly to outsiders – is suspect.[44] Its continuation sows confusion in 'the here and now', and engenders disengagement and dissent in the long term.

[42] For a detailed account of the rôle of the National Reform Movement (NRM) organisations, see Kyambadde Samuel Ssenyonga, 'Grassroots Participation in Development. Possibilities and Constraints: the case of Uganda', Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, 1995. For a critical perspective, see J. Oloka-Onyango, 'Uganda's ''Benevolent'' Dictatorship', in *Current History* (Philadelphia, PA), May 1997, pp. 212–16.

[43] The phrase 'wax and gold' was used to describe the hidden meanings of words in the Ethiopian tradition. See Donald N. Levine, *Wax and Gold: tradition and innovation in Ethiopian culture* (Chicago and London, 1974).

[44] Although the term 'culture of silence' has not been used by others when describing the situation in Eritrea, some scholars have referred to 'tacit censure' and the uneasiness about being regarded as 'impolite' or presumptious if 'politically charged' or 'delicate' topics arise. See Craig

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Government is trying to overcome this barrier through 'town meetings', widely publicised by the media, often featuring prominent participation by the Head of State and Ministers, and by a concerted effort to both inform and engage the public in civic projects.

The second layer is the ambiguous residue of painful experience. What the Government has yet to do, in any case, is to foster the growth of parties, often seen in the West as the *sine qua non* of democratic rule. The highly competitive political organisations that were a feature of Eritrea's first transition during decolonisation in the 1940s are remembered not for dynamism but for factionalism – dividing society along religious, ethnic, and linguistic lines. Thus, any debate within the ranks of the EPLF about political parties during the armed struggle is conspicuously absent, although the existence of a Labour Party (LP) within the ELF was an open secret in the 1970s. Given that the EPLF's youthful political cadres included those who had been exposed to Maoist China, Castro's Cuba, and the Soviet Russia, as well as home-grown humanist Marxists,[45] it might not be wide of the mark to suggest that the ideological tenor of the Front's written and spoken messages attest to a well-organised political machine operating in accordance with socialist principles. So did the EPLF's administrative decrees in the liberated areas, such as nationalising land, empowering peasants and women, advocating secular nationalism, and eradicating religious and ethnic symbols. The Front's propaganda pamphlets, translated into local languages, revealed that their writers had been inspired by Chinese, Cuban, and Soviet ideologues.[46]

However, the most important factor indicating the presence of an organised party within the EPLF is the *systematic* and *disciplined*

Calhoun and Pamela Delargy's timely essay, 'Rights After Liberation: a report from Eritrea', in *Dissent* (New York), Summer 1996, p. 129, and Fouad Makki, 'Nationalism, State Formation and the Public Sphere: Eritrea, 1991–96', in *Review of African Political Economy* (Abingdon), 23, 70, December 1996, p. 482.

[45] Eritrea's youthful rebels offered rich variations on the theme of a Marxism heavily influenced by pan-Africanism, and they reasserted Eritrea's African-ness in the PLF's first manifesto, 'We and Our Objectives', proclaimed in 1971. Such an outlook challenged the 'domesticated' version used by the Organisation of African Unity to justify inter-African violence and the disenfranchisement of post-colonial peoples by home-grown dictators. At the OAU's 1991 summit in Cairo, Eritrea's first President reasserted his nation's commitment to African solidarity and development, but unequivocally stated that the OAU's vision of continental solidarity was in dire need of reform.

[46] The translations of Maoist texts reflected an adaptation of the tactics and strategies of the 'People's War', as well as the introduction of *nekefeta & r'essae nekefeta*, 'criticism and self-criticism' sessions, which were an integral feature of EPLF units. One of the early pamphlets distributed was known as *Mahta* or 'Spark', which was an adaptation of the Soviet *Iskra*. Cuban defiance against US hegemony was commemorated in early references by the EPLF to its areas of refuge as the *Sierra Maestra*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nurturing of a socio-economic and political culture that embraced the different communities under the banner of a future socialist Eritrea.[47] The existence of a powerful but clandestine 'vanguard' within the inner circle of the EPLF until the early 1980s was belatedly disclosed at the Third Congress held in Nakfa in February 1994,[48] which also served as its epitaph. Given that this organisation had operated for two decades while shrouded in silence, it is not surprising that opponents as well as observers find it difficult to be persuaded that such a shadow party no longer exists. In 1994, the same Congress which announced its demise proclaimed both the fulfilment of the EPLF's mandate as a liberation front and the latter's irrelevance in the politics of independent Eritrea.

The third layer is that of discourse: opaque, ambiguous, contradictory, and in the end, unresolved. Since the dissolution of the EPLF some Eritreans have referred to the PFDJ as a *selfi*, or party, rather than a front. This habit has become so pervasive that the term is used as a synonym for the PFDJ by international organisations working inside Eritrea, as well as media reporting post-independence developments. Indeed, an article recently published in *African Business* goes as far as to refer to the PFDJ as 'the ruling and only legal party'.[49] The political rumour mill, termed *bela'belew* by the government press, provides some grist to the 'virtual' debates over party politics in Eritrea, all of which makes the task of identifying key actors even more difficult.

Leaders of the PFDJ have invoked the negative example of the Ethiopian Worker's Party (EWP), which had formulated all the major decisions taken by the *Dergue*, and they have criticised the multi-party systems of the West for playing a symbolic rôle as regards popular participation, rather than serving as agencies of continuous and

[47] EPLF documents discuss the importance of a 'vanguard' party, the significance of the peasantry and the proletariat, and the realisation of *mahberawinet* as a goal. Thus, although the existence of a socialist party was not officially announced, its *de facto* existence was not contested during the evolution of the PLF from a small guerrilla band to a national organisation. From its early beginnings, the *Hezbawi Serawit Selfi Ertra*, the 'Popular Forces Party of Eritrea', spread its influence to all levels of the Front. By the early 1980s it came to be known as *Mahbernetawit Selfi Ertra*, the 'Socialist Party of Eritrea', with an expanded membership which continued to operate clandestinely. A careful reading of the EPLF's ideological publications reveals a commitment to the principle of a 'vanguard' party, but the war-time discipline of not breaching confidentiality continues to be upheld, which means that its former members remain silent about their now 'defunct' organisation.

[48] See Medhanie Tesfatzion, *Eritrea: the dynamics of a national question* (Amsterdam, 1986), for information about the opposition to the EPLF and details of what he called the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party.

[49] Jennie Street, 'Eritrea: the making of a nation', in *African Business*, May 1997, p. 31.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dynamic interaction between the governed and government. In its first publication, the PFDJ declared the Front's separate identity, describing it as *sefih hagerawi m'en'ks'kas*, 'a broad national movement':

> [In the current period of transition] the relationship between the Government and the Front can be described as complementary. The Government [serves] as the structure providing a top-to-bottom linkage while the Front links the people to the top. Both these two structures provide a comprehensive entity – a national political system – at the service of nation-building, guaranteeing peace, stability and development… Although the Government and the Front interface in many aspects it is important to know the boundaries of the two entities. It is important that the Front formulates its own policies and implements its programmes separate from the Government in order to fulfil its mission as a political movement.[50]

This demarcation between the Front and the Government was maintained not only in domestic affairs, but also in policies relating to the country's foreign relations. After the Eritrean Government had severed diplomatic relations with the Bashir-Turabi régime in the Sudan in 1994, it was the PFDJ which hosted the first meeting of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the Sudanese opposition, in the Eritrean capital in June 1995. The political affairs head of the PFDJ, Al-Amin Mohamed Said, was asked to explain why the Front and not the Government had hosted the meeting of the NDA. His response was to re-affirm the existence of two separate spheres of operation:

> As affirmed at the Third Congress the Front has its autonomous existence and separate tasks. It has the duty and the right to take steps that serve Eritrean interests. Although both the Government and the Front work to serve Eritrean interests, they each have their own programmes.[51]

This statement reflected the officially-described distinctions between the Government and the PFDJ which were maintained until 1996.

It is interesting to note that during a recent interview disseminated on the electronic Eritrean website *Dehai*, another PFDJ official was asked to explain why the organisation continues to call itself a front while appearing to function as a political party. Yemane Gebreab, an experienced spokesman, was uncharacteristically humble about his knowledge of political terminology, and his answer is worth quoting at some length:

> I really don't understand the difference between using the word front and political party myself. You could call the PFDJ a party or you could call it a

[50] '*Hezbawi Genbar'n Mengisti Ertra'n: Entay Aynet Zemdena*', in *Hedri*, 1, May 1995, p. 13, my translation.

[51] 'Interview with Ato Al-Amin Mohamed Said', in ibid. 2, September 1995, p. 32, my translation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

front. I really don't think it makes a difference… Why don't we have political parties in Eritrea? I think you have to go back into the… history of the Eritrean struggle… laden with lots of events relating to maintaining Eritrean unity and effective leadership… I believe that there is a consensus among the Eritrean population at the present time. It is not a question of trying to discourage the formation of political parties. If you want to form a political party you have to go to the society, and the questions you are going to meet are 'Who are you?' 'Where were you?' 'What was your rôle in the Eritrean struggle?'… I think it will take several years before we will see the emergence of political parties in Eritrea. And that is not because the Front doesn't want to or is creating obstacles towards those issues. The draft constitution has made it clear that Eritreans have the right to form political organisations. Even when that constitution is ratified I don't think you will immediately see a credible political party emerging apart from the PFDJ… It is my understanding that the social, economic development in Eritrea has to evolve before we see a flourishing of major parties.[52]

Gebreab reiterated that the constitution would provide people with the opportunity to establish political parties as long as they were not based on ethnicity or religion. He also noted that the 'democratic experiment' being conducted in Eritrea is rooted in the history of the country, and the desire of the population to keep the hard-earned peace. He aptly noted that the Front welcomes 'a very serious and very sound opposition… that also helps… in terms of looking at itself more critically', and indicated that the absence of well-organised opposition groups with secular and nationalist platforms could result in complacency.

The current ambiguity about whether the PFDJ is or is not a 'political party' does not address the question of whether the organisation is indeed serving as a 'front' for yet another clandestine group. Semantic exchanges and assorted interpretations by spin-doctors only serve to fuel distrust of public officials and immerse the citizenry in a defensive silence. Yet there is another side to the equation: Eritrean party politics in the 1940s and 1970s – legally-sanctioned as well as clandestine – can provide both positive and negative lessons that would be invaluable for the construction of a democratic polity. Although the parties during the 1940s were fragmented along ethnic and religious cleavages, they introduced the population to electoral rules which guided the interaction of parties and constituents, and engendered a culture of participation in public affairs.[53] On the negative side, of course, were the corrosive effects of

[52] *Dehai* website, 'Interview with Yemane Gebreab, Part I', 1997.

[53] A look at different party newspapers from October 1946 to April 1950 reveals the existence of engaged nationals who expressed their opinions openly – both in writing and in speeches. See

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

parochialism in the task of creating a national identity and purpose. However, the experience of the 1970s and early 1980s demonstrates the key rôle that can be played by political parties in articulating a shared vision, and in formulating and implementing policies intended to achieve stated objectives.

Contemporary Eritrean politics seems to be firmly grounded on the demonstrated effectiveness of the single-party system with a commitment to making the transition to a multi-party system after approximately a decade. Whereas the Labour Party succumbed to the parochialism endemic to the ELF, the similarly covert Socialist Party of Eritrea (SPE) effectively upheld the secularism of the EPLF and used ideology as a building block for the construction of a modern Eritrean nationalism. From what is known about the history of the armed struggle since 1991, the emerging scenario is that the clandestine SPE was founded and led by intellectuals committed to principles of collective welfare and social justice. New members were inducted on the basis of demonstrated ideological correctness and leadership skills. Democratic centralism, a structure of hierarchy that lends itself well to the needs of guerrilla organisations, also served to camouflage the activities of this shadow party. Although the SPE's demise occurred in the 1980s, the value placed on collective welfare, social justice, and solidarity – the foundation of the party's ideological tenets – have survived well into the post-independence period. So has the silence that was a requisite for membership.

In light of this legacy of secrecy, then, it is no surprise that the discourse about parties is subject to self-censorship and ambiguity. The history of organisational politics – other than the rivalry between liberation movements during the struggle for independence – needs to be re-examined. In the larger context, however, the admission by Eritrean leaders that opposition is crucial to prevent the ossification of political organisations is quite refreshing in light of the experience of other African states. Nevertheless, although this on-going dialogue indicated the latest spin on the interface between Front and Government, it did not clear up the existing confusion about whether the PFDJ constitutes a political party or not.

The relationship of the Government and the PFDJ will be clarified by the Transitional National Assembly that is charged with the task of

---

Nai Ertra Semunawi Gazeta, *Ityopia*, *Sout Arrabita al Islamiya al Eritrea*, *Natznet Eritra*, and *Eritrea Nuova*, for reports of meetings, opinion columns, commentaries, and articles dealing with key issues of the period. Also, Lloyd Ellingson, 'The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941–1950', in *The Journal of African History* (Cambridge), 18, 2, 1977, pp. 261–81.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

overseeing Eritrea's transition to constitutional rule and national elections scheduled for 1998.[54] Despite recent predictions that the 'Eritrean government has gone cold about multi-party politics as it prepares to endorse a new constitution',[55] the commitment to multi-party politics and constitutional rule was reaffirmed by President Afewerki during the sixth anniversary celebrations of Eritrea's liberation:

> Our constitution allows for multi-partyism. These parties must be real and grow out of Eritrean realities for we would not like to establish cosmetic parties. We will not permit the existence of parties driven by external forces and which serve as a political camouflage for others... In my opinion, our constitution will provide a conducive atmosphere for the emergence of political parties... Once again, I would like to reiterate that we do not want to establish political parties in order to please external powers. Let me say with all certainty that *political parties will emerge in Eritrea... as a natural outcome of the engagement of our society*.[56]

Thus, half a decade after liberation the Eritrean commitment to pluralism appears to be strong at one level while reflective of a discordant discourse not easily comprehensible to external observers. What remains is putting to rest the 'ghost' of the clandestine party, a spectre that seems to haunt multi-party proponents who tend to see its shadowy form lurking in every statement. However, the silence about the future party as conceived by the PFDJ and the current leadership has been broken: its location has been identified and it will emerge out of the Front. The ratification of the Constitution on 23 May 1997 has set the rules of the game that will apply equally to all citizens. The fulfilment of the mandate of the Constitutional Commission of Eritrea to present a 'living document' based on consensus of all the peoples of Eritrea, means that the experiment may be nearing the completion of its first stage, and that the time has arrived to assess the variations on the theme of pragmatism.

[54] Established by the Constituent Assembly at its meeting in Asmara, 21–23 May 1997, the Transitional National Assembly (TNA) was entrusted with the task of overseeing national elections and the transition to constitutional rule. The TNA has 150 members: 75 from the central committee of the PFDJ, 60 representatives of regional assemblies, and 15 representatives from Eritreans residing abroad. For more details, refer to '*Bae'khouri Qwam Natza Ertra Tzediku*', 'The First Eritrean Constitution Has Been Ratified', in *Hadas Ertra*, 24 May 1997.

[55] Dan Bellamy, 'Eritrea: end of the honeymoon', in *New African* (London), May 1997, p. 23.

[56] *Hadas Ertra*, 24 May 1997, p. 5, my emphasis and translation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

FROM THE POLITICS OF EXCLUSION TO THE POLITICS OF INCLUSION?

Despite polemical assertions to the contrary, Eritrea's political history does not reflect democratic traditions.[57] The traditional path to power (with few exceptions) was through the elimination of rivals. In a political milieu where survival depended upon strength and the ability to outmanoeuvre competitors, it is not surprising that the politics of exclusion has been practised more frequently than that of inclusion. The initial Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), 1958–65, was eliminated by its rival the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), 1960–81, which was first marginalised and then ousted from the political arena by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which had split from it in 1971. At the time of liberation in 1991, the EPLF was the only political and military entity waging war against Menghistu's Soviet-backed régime.

Independence did not result in the reconciliation of the different ELF splinters. The leaders in exile sought to maintain the identities of their groups and to preserve the right to speak for the hundreds of their members scattered throughout the Sudan, the Middle East, Europe, and North America. The EPLF asked members of the ELF to 'join' on the condition that they arrived as nationalists willing to work together for the political agenda defined by the victor. Some interpreted this as the politics of assimilation rather than inclusion, and thus stayed in exile, while others returned and were given positions in the Provisional Government of Eritrea during 1991–3. Exiled ELF leaders, depending on their place of asylum, organised border incursions, recruited fundamentalists into their ranks, engaged in public relations activities, and even launched debates in cyberspace.[58] Newsletters ranging from the polemical to the prophetic reported 'decimating enemy troops', only this time the enemy was not the *Dergue* but the Eritrean Government. The more mainstream *Eritrean Newsletter* was circulated

[57] With the notable exception of the matrilineal Kunamas, the majority of Eritrea's indigenous systems of administration are patriarchal and quite repressive of the feminine half of society. During the long years of the war for independence, traditional institutions of governance and courts have been pressured by the EPLF to allow 'under-represented' elements of society to participate in the *baitos*, or 'village assemblies'. See Yohannes Habteselassie Adhanom, '*Democraciawi Bae'taa'tat He'ghi Enda'Abba: Tzelwai'ou Dehri Nai Mee'ti Amet Bae'daawi Meg'zae'ti*', 'Democratic Elements in Traditional Patriarchal Legal Systems: their influences after one hundred years of alien rule', Asmara, 7 July 1992.

[58] *The Eritrean Newsletter* at <http://home.erols.com/meskerem/> provides the political programmes and communiqués of the ELF-RC, the ELF-Central Command-*Sagem*, the ELF-Abdallah Idris Group, and the EDM. Edition No. 70, April–May 1996, is a special 20-years issue.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the Diaspora, as was *Al Nifar*, a bulletin published by the Eritrean Jihad Movement (EJM), itself a relative newcomer to the opposition camp.

The emergence of the EJM, which has the overt support of the Sudan's ruling party, the National Islamic Front (NIF), led to strains in Eritrean-Sudanese relations culminating in the severance of diplomatic ties. The alignment of political opponents such as the ELF with the *Jihadists* resulted in the erosion of respect for the ELF, but re-introduced religion as a political factor in areas where it had remained inactive during the war for independence. 'Bringing God' back into the political arena reinforced a not uncommon perception that 'Christians and Muslims… live not together, but side by side'.[59] A recent attack in the Sudan on the EJM's camp known as *Tamkeen*, or 'entrenchment of Islam', by a combined force of Eritrean commandos and Sudanese opposition forces, led to the discovery of documents with names, internal structures, and EJM links with the NIF.[60]

The politicisation of religion and ethnicity has caused immense suffering and fragmentation among Eritrea's people. In 1946, the nationalists who had previously worked together for the common goal of ousting Italian colonialism split into three camps: (i) Christian highlanders supporting union with Ethiopia, (ii) Muslim lowlanders opposing any affiliation with Ethiopia, and (iii) secularists who urged the separation of religion from politics but became entrapped in ethno-regional divisions. In the late 1960s, the strategy of the ELF leadership heightened existing religious and ethno-regional antipathies, and instituted practices that discriminated against Christian highlanders.

This pattern was broken by the establishment of the EPLF which espoused secular and pan-African values. A result has been an aversion to politicising ethnicity and religion, as demonstrated by the current Eritrean Government. There is also a perception that opposition groups will fall back into the pattern of the past, which gave primacy to sectarian interests, rather than articulating commonly shared national aspirations.[61] The absence of opposition groups in transitional Eritrea, other than those representing the fragmented ELF or religious

[59] Oswald Iteen, 'Ethiopia and Eritrea: the fruits of division', in *Swiss Review of World Affairs* (Zurich), September 1995, p. 8.

[60] 'Sudan: body of evidence', in *Africa Confidential*, 9 May 1997. For an understanding of the defiance of the pro-NIF Sudanese population, see 'No Surrender', in *BBC Focus on Africa* (London), April–June 1997, pp. 12–15.

[61] Fears that former ELF members in exile would finance sectarian parties were publicised in cartoons that depicted them hatching plots to establish cafés using foreign funds. See *Sagem*, 2, 10, October 1990, p. 13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fundamental groups, has had the effect of delegitimising expressions of dissent against the existing secular régime, which means that the only active opposition operates outside the country. That fact, coupled with the Government's open discouragment of internal opposition in the name of unity, opens the EPLF to the temptations of single-party rule.

The Government's prohibition of ethnic and religious parties, although viewed by some opponents and external analysts as obstacles to puralism, is based on the concrete experiences of the past and the casualties of recent months. 'Opposition to the Government' – which includes the various fragments of the ELF as well as the EJM – has resulted in the loss of Eritrean lives and destruction of property. After a war of three decades, burying the corpses of those killed in ambush is a bitter reminder of the past when fratricidal hostilities kept Eritreans from achieving independence.[62] The spectre of religious fundamentalism is one which the young nation cannot afford to ignore as it embarks on its experiment with democratising the values and institutions of a society emerging from war. The current opposition organisations, with their mix of ethno-regional, ideological, and religious platforms, certainly do not now appear to be likely candidates for inclusion into a system which they seek to destroy. A legal ban on such parties appears to be a pragmatic and cautious step to avoid the possibly destructive replay of the ethnic and religious conflicts that are tearing apart Algeria, Somalia, the Sudan, Burundi, and possibly Rwanda.

WHITHER THE TORTOISE?

The post-1991 Eritrean régime's record has been remarkable. The land which had witnessed the longest war in Africa has come to symbolise stability, discipline, and pragmatism. The policies of this sovereign nation, as well as its cultural symbols, reflect a pragmatism tinged with a defiance of established political and economic conventions. Having declared its commitment to a multi-party system in 1987, before the heyday of 'democratisation programmes', the Eritrean Government has placed restrictions on religious and ethnic political parties, and has insisted on establishing a timetable for the announcement of multi-partyism in the early years of the new millennium.

While some are quick to point out that the Government is not interested in a pluralist political system, others are willing to concede

[62] Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle Over Eritrea, 1962–1978: war and revolution in the Horn of Africa* (Stanford, 1983).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that it may take more time to build a viable political and economic system.[63] The slow and steady approach – which has been a characteristic of Eritrean policy-makers – is captured in the adaptation of *akay'da gobi'ye*, 'the tortoise's pace', as the path to development and democracy. Cynicism about the régime's commitment to democracy is fuelled by the increase in bilateral agreements with newly industrialising countries (NICs) such as South Korea and Singapore.[64]

The Eritrean credo of development has as its objective the creation of an egalitarian, democratic, and just society based on national unity. Speaking a year before liberation, Afewerki, then secretary-general of the EPLF, clearly articulated what has now emerged as the new nation's paradigm of development – a disdain for donor-driven programmes, and a commitment to political accountability and self-reliance:

> There are also those well-intentioned developmentalists whose projects… result in more economic crises. We, in Eritrea, hope to avoid such problems.… [Our] political system, is envisioned as a bridge to economic growth, a means to attain prosperity for the people. Thus, we will ensure that the obstacles to an unhealthy political system – theft, embezzlements, bribes – will be removed in order to avoid economic crises.[65]

In keeping with these principles, the régime has kept its word about 'removing' obstacles to its development plans, going as far as to expel representatives of certain international and regional organisations.[66]

In the political arena, the Government established the foundations for consensual governance by embarking upon a three-year (April 1994 to May 1997) process of drafting a constitution based on popular consultation. Administrative policies have also altered traditional ethnic and religious configurations by re-drawing district and provincial boundaries, introducing a new internal map of Eritrea

[63] Dan Bellamy, 'End of the Honeymoon', in *New African*, 352, May 1997, p. 23, laments that the 'Eritrean government has gone cold about multi-party politics and that… [the country] is rapidly sliding into a one party state', and declares that the ratification of the constitution indicated an 'end of the honeymoon' rather than a beginning of constitutional rule. By way of contrast, Street, loc. cit. p. 31, reports that the country is engaged in a challenge to 'create a modern, progressive nation-state', and that 'the same single-minded determination that saw the Eritrean people successfully through their harrowing war is now being applied to the economic, social and political imperatives of peacetime'.

[64] In the first half of 1997 a high-level Eritrean delegation led by President Afewerki visited South Korea, Singapore, and Peking. For more information, see *The Korea Herald* (Seoul), *The Straits Times* (Singapore), and *Hadas Ertra*, April 1997.

[65] *Sagem*, p. 23, my translation.

[66] A number of agency heads have been expelled from Eritrea by the Government since 1994 due to either 'misunderstandings', 'misinterpretations', or 'failure to abide by agreed upon rules of partnership' by donor agencies. The most recent incident was the expulsion of UNHCR staff for reasons explained by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in *Hadas Ertra*, 3 May 1997.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

divided into six socio-economically integrated zones. This was complemented with an organisational restructuring of governmental agencies and the creation of a 'lean and competent' civil service. These administrative and policy changes were carried out in tandem with far-reaching economic and social reforms in line with the Government's declaration that all land belonged to the state and that all citizens had only usufructory rights. The result was a fundamental transformation of traditional politics based on land-ownership, ethnicity, and religious affiliation.

The old symbols were not only systematically dismantled but replaced by new pan-Eritrean socialising processes designed to consolidate national unity and nurture socio-cultural diversity. These new values were transmitted through the National Service Programme which has trained approximately 100,000 recruits who have pledged allegiance to safeguard the new nation and the objectives for which it stands. The NSP has served to socialise these young men and women from different ethnic communities and of different religious faiths into the philosophy of pan-Eritrean nationalism.

In addition to banning ethnic and religious-based political parties, the Government has promoted multi-culturalism by officially encouraging the use of the 'mother-tongue' as a medium for primary education.[67] This led to criticisms from those who preferred using international languages even at the risk of losing their cultural heritage. Some of the debates in which the choice of 'national' languages was discussed publicly and privately appeared to carry a sub-textual residue of resistance to the ban on religious and ethnic parties. In a refreshing demonstration of candour, President Afewerki, during one of the televised 'town meetings',[68] remonstrated against such veiled discourse and urged citizens to be more 'nation-centred'.[69] At the very

[67] Eritrea's language policy can be described as 'endoglossic' because it offers equal opportunities for the development of all existing languages. See Mehret Eyob-Teklu, '*Policy Qua'n'qua ab Teh'tae-Sahara Hagerat Africa*', 'Language Policies in Sub-Saharan African Countries', First Congress on Eritrean Languages, Asmara, 16–18 August 1996, pp. 9–11.

[68] The EPLF held 'town meetings' before independence when leaders would respond to questions from the rank-and-file, inhabitants of the liberated areas, and members of the Diaspora. The Transitional Government has continued this tradition, and every September the President responds to thousands of questions mailed in advance. Excerpts of these sessions are also printed in the multilingual newspapers.

[69] *Zemed Kristos wey Zemed Mohamed iye z'b'l inte alo … Addu Ye'nadi*, translated by the author who viewed the televised session. Afewerki's exasperation with the nuances of veiled discourse was evident when he declared, with characteristically refreshing candour, that those 'who identify themselves as having a closer relationship to either Christ or Mohammed [rather than the nation] should then not be surprised if they are asked to find that ''nation'''. But newspaper editors chose not to print this statement in what appears to be an attempt to avoid offending religious sensitivities.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

least, all this seems to indicate that the culture of public silence has yet to be overcome.

Gender equality is a new feature of Eritrean society, not least since women have earned their right to equal citizenship.[70] Nevertheless, traditional obstacles to their social equality keep resurfacing, albeit cloaked by customary or religious rituals. For example, although the EPLF had prohibited any form of genital mutilation long before liberation, traditional families have persisted in arranging female circumcisions, asserting that failure to do so made their daughters 'unmarriageable'. Government sanctions against dowries have also met with passive resistance, and these are continued surreptitiously, without much of the fanfare that traditionally accompanied the announcement of the 'bride price'. All this means that Eritrean women must persevere in the struggle against informal barriers and demonstrate their willingness to pursue political and economic opportunities, despite societal consensus that it is 'unwomanly' to challenge the patriarchal system.[71]

As Eritrea's citizens celebrated the sixth anniversary of independence in May 1997 they also marked the end of the transition period. The Constitution of Eritrea provides for a unitary state, a presidential and multi-party system, and embodies a philosophy which eclectically combines an appreciation for traditional 'respect for elders' together with an affirmation of gender equality. Article 22 states that 'children have the right and duty to respect their parents and to sustain them in old age'.[72] Although this may be a well-intentioned attempt to forestall problems dealing with the welfare of children and the elderly in industrialising societies, it remains far from clear how 'right' will be differentiated from 'duty' in this particular context. The Constitution reiterates the key principles of modern Eritrea as 'unity in diversity', 'broad and active participation' by citizens, and 'fulfilment of [their]

[70] For a critical appraisal of the rôle of Eritrean women in the post-liberation era, see Sylvia Perez-Vitoria, '*Les Femmes d'Erythree ne désarment pas*', in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Paris), January 1997, p. 10.

[71] The Constitution of Eritrea conspicuously omits to guarantee rights to women. Rather Article 14 states that 'All persons are equal before the law'. According to the Preamble, para 6, 'the fact that the Eritrean women's heroic participation in the struggle for independence and solidarity based on equality and mutual respect generated by such struggle will serve as an unshakable foundation for our commitment and struggle to create a society in which women and men shall interact on the bases of mutual respect, fraternity and equality'. It is interesting to note that the English version uses the word 'fraternity' rather than a gender-neutral term such as 'solidarity', once again indicating the disdain of Eritreans for what they term 'cosmetic changes in the portrayal of gender discourses'. See *Constitution of Eritrea*, CCE, Asmara, May 1997.

[72] Ibid. Ch. 3, Article 22, p. 20.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rights to social justice and economic development'.[73] Whether this long experiment with governance will succeed in paving the way to a democracy remains to be seen when Eritrea holds its first and subsequent elections.

Will Eritrea's adherence to the slow but steady course of its *akay'da gobi'ye* paradigm lead to the predicted Aesopian victory? Can the Government deliver on its promises to bring about economic development as well as democracy and social justice?[74] As impressive as the record has been despite so many difficulties since independence, the emergence of an Eritrean political culture capable of nurturing the drive towards democracy and development has yet to be demonstrated.

CONCLUSION: SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE?

Eritrea's difficult transition from a war-torn society into a constitutionally-sanctioned unitary state has been remarkable.[75] During phase 1, 1991–3, the country exercised de facto independence but was not juridically recognised as a sovereign state until after a UN-sponsored referendum and the formal declaration of independence. Thereafter, phase 2, 1993–7, was a four-year period during which the first post-independence Government implemented administrative/institutional reforms and launched the constitution-making process.

By the end of 1997, the proto-democratic institutions and rules of interaction between the governing body and the citizenry were in place.[76] Although it would be unrealistic to classify Eritrea as a

[73] Ibid. Ch. 2, Article 6, 'National Unity and Stability'; Article 7, 'Democratic Principles'; and Article 10, 'Economic and Social Development'.

[74] Ragnhild Ek, 'Africa's Youngest State Charts a New Course', in *Africa Today*, 44, 2, May–June 1997, pp. 30–31, briefly demonstrates that the particular circumstances accompanying the birth of the new Eritrean nation-state endow it with the capability to chart an independent economic course for development, not least because of rich mineral resources and lack of debts.

[75] The Eritrean régime's successes are remarkable because they have been achieved with little or no bloodshed since the end of the liberation struggle. Foreign policy analysts continue to be surprised despite the fact that the majority of polices implemented in the transition period had been formulated well in advance of independence. Political, economic, and social policies on development, democracy, and multi-partyism had all been discussed within the leadership and disseminated to the rank-and-file, as well as the population at large, through the radio *Dimtzi Hafash* and EPLF journals. The surprising factor is that unlike most liberation movements the post-war leadership actually implemented its vision.

[76] The term 'proto-democratic' is used by Robert A. Dahl, 'The Newer Democracies: from the time of triumph to the time of troubles', in Daniel N. Nelson (ed.), *After Authoritarianism: democracy or disorder?* (Westport, CT, 1995), p. 8, to describe countries which have not achieved full democracy but have begun establishing the institutional mechanisms and guarantees. Most are confronted with the challenge required of 'achieving national integration in the face of existing and often ancient linguistic, ethnic, religious, or regional conflicts, which are sometimes compounded by ideological differences'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

democracy at this stage, the 'requirements' for such a system, as outlined by Robert Dahl, are present, albeit with some restrictions.[77] The limitations on political competition that constrain the relatively unimpaired opportunities which characterise Western liberal democracies are unabashedly justified by pointing to Eritrea's history of fragmentation on religious and ethno-regional lines in which political parties (1946–50) and liberation fronts (1958–81) were pitted against each other at the expense of unity and common resistance to Ethiopian rule.

The absence of credible opposition forces capable of challenging the current régime's legitimacy without resorting to religious fundamentalism or ethnic-based mobilisation, has buttressed the stand taken by the EPLF leadership. *Jihadist* incursions from the Sudan, internecine clan wars in Somalia, escalating violence from Algeria, sporadic unrest from Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, all serve to enhance the Eritrean Government's pragmatic decision to bottle up the religious and ethnic demons that have traditionally ravaged the country. The question remains whether the emergent pan-Eritrean civic culture will gradually exorcise these genies or merely contain them temporarily through decrees and laws.

International readiness to accept political and economic stability in Eritrea as a precursor to democracy (however defined) has provided an 'oasis of civility' with which to dazzle foreign observers and analysts.[78] Corruption is punished rather than glorified, there are no armed soldiers on the streets of the capital, and the stereotypical image of the African state as incompetent and dependent has been proven wrong for almost a decade. Eritrea, which was a virtual pariah in both the African and international arenas, is now featured as the new hope for the second coming of independence.[79] Afewerki has been included in the 'formidable troika' of African nationalists who have established a regional network of complex agreements,[80] which include pooling their

[77] Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy : participation and opposition* (New Haven and London, 1971), argued that in order for a democracy to exist the government must be responsive to the preferences of citizens, who in turn must have opportunities (i) to formulate their preferences, (ii) to signify these to their fellow citizens and the government by individual and collective action, and (iii) to have their preferences weighted equally in the conduct of government, that is, with no discrimination because of their content or source.

[78] Daniel Pearl, 'Eritrea Emerges as America's Newest Ally: tiny nation seen as bulwark against Sudanese-backed terror', in *Wall Street Journal* (New York), 4 March 1997.

[79] For details, see Iyob, op. cit. pp. 29–58.

[80] *Indian Ocean Newsletter* (Paris), 656, 28 January 1995, p. 2, attributes the concept of a 'formidable troika' to a former US Ambassador to Eritrea, Robert Houdek. This has become a 'quintet' consisting of Museveni of Uganda, Zenawi of Ethiopia, Afewerki of Eritrea, Kagame of Rwanda, and, more recently, Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press

military, logistical, and economic resources in the battle against dictatorship and fundamentalism. The emergence of Eritrea as the vanguard against the spillover of Islamic fundamentalism has resulted in the strengthening of alliances with the United States and Israel – formerly opponents of the EPLF's demand for self-determination.[81]

Will the painstakingly pragmatic policy-makers of contemporary Eritrea nurture a culture of active dialogue, a healthy respect for the untidiness of democratic engagments, and a continued commitment to justice? Will future governments continue to be responsive to the needs of their people, and will they permit the governed to exercise the right to hold elected officials accountable for their actions? Will the culture of silence that has prevailed for so long carry over beyond the millennium? Time will tell, but if any group of leaders on the continent can be said to have put time to good use, it is the Eritreans with their experience of 30 years of war, and close to a decade of peaceful transition. In view of these achievements even the most cynical of observers express a cautious optimism about both the systematic preparation for development and democracy, as well as an emerging consensus on a vision for the future.

[81] Jennie Street, 'Shalom Eritrea', in *New African*, February 1997, p. 25. See also, Pearl, loc. cit.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X97002498 Published online by Cambridge University Press