Personal Rule in Africa: The Case of Eritrea

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Abstract: Notwithstanding the on-going struggles for democratic transformation, many African countries still lack rudimentary principles of the rule of law and legitimate political institutions. Contemporary Eritrea exemplifies this type of situation in which personal rule is the embodiment of the political system. The article argues that the perpetuation of personal rule in Eritrea is explained by the political strategy of unleashing sheer coercive force against citizens by the military whose loyalty is bought off by providing its top echelons control over substantial state economic resources. This is facilitated by a culture of impunity fostered by a legacy of three decades of guerrilla conflict, and by deliberately keeping the rest of society off-balance in an economic situation characterized by rampant poverty. The regimenting of civil-society institutions within the power structures and chapters of party-controlled organizations has reduced them into instruments of social control in order to diffuse any form of organized resistance. Finally, the party and the bureaucracy as agents of the state function to accentuate the symbolic dimensions of socio-economic activities to which the entire society is mobilized in order to wedge the immense legitimacy gap and make the system appear popular. [1]

Introduction

In the 1990s, the promising transition in many African countries from dictatorship and authoritarianism to democracy seemed to be echoed in the apparent commitment of Eritrea to a similar transformation. The paradigm shift from dictatorship to democracy in African states led some scholars to refer to 1989 as a "landmark" and others to describe developments in terms of "waves," "foundations," and "experiments" in the history of African politics.[2] It was a time of "the opening wide of the electoral floodgates."[3]

Indeed, there was an explosion of political parties and countless elections were held almost everywhere in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, the elections conducted between 1990 and 1994, showed that more than thirty-eight out of a total of forty-seven sub-Saharan countries involved rival political contenders.[4] It is particularly important to note that out of these elections, thirty-five countries had larger opposition party representation in legislative seats.[5] Domestic and international political and economic factors played, in varying degrees of interpretation, of course, a major role in the transition process of the early 1990s from authoritarianism, personal rule and military despotism to a fledgling democratic government.[6]

This was also the reasonable expectation of many Eritreans inside the country as well as in the Diaspora who witnessed Eritrea become an independent nation and set about formulating and adopting a constitution. In the aftermath of independence, people held extraordinary hope of a democratic change once Eritrea had extricated itself from the oppressive rule of Ethiopia's

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Mengistu Haile Mariam. Indeed, the citizenry fervently believed, albeit sanguinely, that their now civilian-turned leaders would not betray the trust of the Eritrean people once they had taken over the reins of power. After all, these were the same leaders who three decades earlier had established a front so popular that it was joined by Eritreans from all walks of life. Sadly, it wasn't to be. The socio-economic and political situation regressed from the monarchical regime of Haile Sellassie and even the communist rule of Mengistu Haile Mariam.

The equally held belief by foreign statesmen, diplomats, and commentators during the brief period of relative peace in the mid 90s that Isaias Afewerki was part of the "new generation of African leaders" was subsequently shown to be illusory. No sooner had Isaias Afewerki won independence through waging a protracted insurgency against the repressive military regime of Mengistu Haile-Mariam, than he, ironically, proceeded to establish a regime which repeated the oppression of his predecessor and indeed raised it to a new level. As Eritrea has finally come to a virtual standstill and desperation seizes large segments of the population, people, especially the younger generation, have entirely become estranged from both polity and the state. The end result is that those who feel their life is in danger decide to flee their country of origin to become refugees in neighboring countries with the goal of reaching their final destination—often Western Europe—at a very high cost to their lives. Those who remain suffer the consequences of a failed state.

The article argues that personal tyranny and its correlative, polarization of the state characterises the relationship between the state and civil society in Eritrea. Despite the dynamic phenomenon of personal rule and its manifestation in combination with other less formal and extra-legal procedures, not to mention the use of various expressions and terminologies by political scientists to describe similar political developments, personal rule as a model of analysis still remains valid in explaining the political system of many sub-Saharan African regimes.[7] It is argued here that Eritrea fits into the paradigm of personal rule. By utilizing the theoretical framework of personal rule, the article explores the political institutional elements—structures, strategies, and processes, including the ways by which society is politically mobilized and the symbolic issues of legitimacy are framed—and, hence, the way personal rule works and is perpetuated.

Personal Rule in Africa

The concept of personal rule became popular with the publication in 1982 of an influential book by Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant*. Ever since, the concept has attracted a fairly large amount of commentary, critique and synthesis by many scholars of African politics and students alike. For example, Goran Hyden summarized and synthesised the phenomenon of personal rule with other aspects of political systems in contemporary Africa.[8] While admitting that the framework is useful, others have pointed out to its lack of being "adept at explaining where the dynamics it describes come from and how they are sustained over the long term."[9]

According to Jackson and Rosberg, personal rule is defined as "a distinctive type of political system in which the rivalries and struggles of powerful and wilful men, rather than impersonal institutions, ideologies, public policies, or class interest, are fundamental in shaping political life."[10] The political dynamics of personal rule, by nature, promotes personalized state-society relationships rather than institution-based practices of governance. This is simply because personal rule is based on loyalty to the president as opposed to institutions, which are constantly monitored and controlled to ensure that they will not achieve any balance of power that could threaten the system. The political system of personal rule is "shaped less by institutions or impersonal social forces than by personal authorities and power."[11] As such, institutions, by definition, are not governed exclusively by the formal rules as they are often flouted whenever and wherever they

come into conflict with the interests of the ruler.[12]

In personalist regimes, political institutionalization largely emanates not from the legally sanctioned institutions of law—whether constitutional or civic—but as a result of the personal wishes and whims of those who happen to hold the reins of power.[13] Larry Diamond could not agree more when he contended that "the political struggle in Africa remains very much a conflict between the rule of law and the rule of a person."[14] David Leonard and Scott Straus analyse the inherent structural weaknesses of personal rule as an inherited legacy of colonialism where personal decisions take precedence over formal institutions mainly due to lack of distinction between personal rulers and their formal institutions.[15]

In the absence of an institutional constitutional framework, the political system of state-society interaction and exchange in personalist regimes operates around specifically designed institutions and agencies of coercion. At the very essence of the problem of personal rule thus lies the monopolization of political power.[16] This phenomenon has particularly been well captured by George Ayittey, who combined personal rule with the system of what he calls "political sultanism" as the natural embodiment of the monopolization of power at the heart of Africa's political crisis.[17] The phenomenon of personal rule is directly linked with the "the monopolization of political power by one individual, the grotesque forms being president-for-life and military dictatorship coupled with state hegemony in the economy and the direction of economic activity."[18] The phenomenon of sultanism or state hegemony operates within a "defective economic system of statism," that is the monopoly of enormous power in the hands of a single individual, which is achieved by such devices as price controls, legislative acts, regulations, state ownership of the means of production, and the operation of state enterprises.[19] The result is heavy intervention of the state in economic and social programs that is "backed up by a coercive military and judicial force."[20]

The phenomenon of state repression is similarly captured by Seyoum Hameso who noted that "any expression of dissatisfaction or 'grievance' with the state is not tolerated as it is equated with a direct assault on the political elite or the President, who, in power, built his personality cult using state-owned and controlled mass media, in particular, radio and television."[21] The political history of many African independence and contemporary leaders has shown that they equated the practice of unrestrained power with state sovereignty. In this way, as Christopher Clapham noted, "even the most muted criticism of the internal autocracy of other African states was virtually non-existent."[22] This subsequently eroded state legitimacy and alienated the majority of the African society from taking active participation in the socio-economic and political life, which would in turn create a polarized state-society relationship, leading to a vicious circle of violence and repression.

In order for coercion to be effective, however, personal rulers often combine coercion with other less formal and extra-legal procedures, such as personal appeal, personal will-power and wiliness, connections and loyalties, social prestige, charisma and oratorical skill, all together meticulously applied in varying degrees.[23] The preservation of the unchallenged and near-total control of the machinery of government by one individual entails necessarily the provision of favours to the hitherto specially designed coercive institutions of the state, such as the military, the police and the secret services. To this end, all state funds, opportunities, and other resources, including government bureaucracy are used as strategic centres of enrichment and reward for such loyal clients. These clients preserve the system through the use of sheer force.

Taking a cue from Ernest Bramstedt, personal rulers do also establish a specific pattern of reasoning, thinking and acting and attempt to impose the same on the whole society in order to "personify the substance of national reason."[24] Personal rule as a system, therefore, does not encourage independent thinking and reasoning. Neither do personal rulers promote public

rationality. In fact, personal rulers do their utmost to deny society individually and collectively the "capacity to act intelligently" by using their own reason and intellectual insight, independent from the orders and rules that flow from the presidential palace all the way down the hierarchy of loyal military or bureaucratic personnel and their agents.[25] As a political strategy, personal rulers want to supplant general reason with the leader's individual reason, conventional wisdom with his individual wisdom, and collective rationality with his own "rationality." It is no surprise when Gerald Scott noted the tendency by many African leaders to reject or simply ignore conventional economic advice.[26] This is largely because the agenda of personal rulers "is not economic development or political democratization but rather simple survival and longevity in the uncertain and hostile political arena."[27]

The result is that common sense and rationality is substituted by "personal loyalty and fear … wrapped in a patina of familial political symbols and traditionally respected practices."[28] Personal rulers also use total devotion from the masses to the person of the leader as a litmus test to assess society and in particular, for those whom personal rulers put in their service, of their loyalty or lack thereof. Loyalty in this sense should not be bestowed to an overriding societal reason or goal but to the personal ruler's pattern of reasoning, including his ideals, wishes and decrees. Similarly, since recruitment to any key or even lower military or civil service office is from within the single political party, promotions are given to only those who proved loyal to the person of the leader in the already established clientelistic networks.[29]

In assessing the long-term viability of personal rulers many issues come to mind. For instance, in light of the cost of maintaining the system of personal rule, especially in cases where the system fails to connect to public will and aspirations, including the key ingredients for legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary citizens of social and moral values, personal rulers are far from rational actors. In their attempt to continue to hold on to power by exacting obedience and submission, personal rulers often devise radical political courses, portray themselves as sagacious and give unrealistic promises and indulge themselves in "mission complex."[30] However, when the masses, sooner or later, become unconvinced of the legitimacy of the ruler, and particularly when the long-anticipated promises of economic well-being fail to materialize, the masses become even further frustrated and disfranchised. Personal rulers not only fail to perceive the ideals and aspirations of the population but also make colossal miscalculations as in such cases as when they end up angering the whole population. Despite the futile attempts of personal rulers to reassure their people through various mechanisms that range from finding scapegoats for past failures and undertaking phantom socio-economic reforms, such "artificial attempts seldom bear any fruit, often invoking negative reactions by those who see through the manipulations and are angered by them."[31]

Secondly, the very lack of political will and commitment to institutionalize formal rules and bureaucratic norms is a structural malaise, which only the system of personal rule could have created in the first place. As personal rule becomes deeply embedded in the political system, personal rulers could too become captives of their own web of powerful vested interests, such as the party, army, and police, which simply do not allow any institutional change that calls for the abolishing of such networks to take place. Within the context of personal rule, George Ayittey describes how the political system of many African leaders has degenerated into "environmental defects" characterised by political malaises of "political instability, chaos, corruption, abuse of power and incompetent leadership."[32] These political defects coupled with the factors of time horizon and the legacies of the past, including wars of attrition, conflicts and human rights abuses, further trap personal rulers in a permanent siege mentality.[33] This makes the political system of personal rule as "a world of uncertainty, suspicion, rumour, agitation, intrigue, and sometimes fear, as well as of stratagem, diplomacy, conspiracy, dependency, reward and threat."[34] Put in

perspective, although the structural anomalies of personal rule could be considered "as shortcomings in the endeavour to establish modern social politics and policy government in Black Africa…. they nevertheless have become something more than can adequately be described in terms merely of the absence of rationalist characteristics.…Personal rule and its distinctive practices are the reality of what they have become."[35]

Eritrea: The State of the State

Eritrea is a dictatorial state that emerged from a thirty year war of liberation and formed itself on a cult of personality surrounding the liberation movement leader, Isaias Afewerki, who is the incumbent president. This state is based on a nexus of the military and the sole political party, the Peoples' Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).[36] The party, which consists of a very tight inner-circle, accords legitimacy to the president by rationalizing and implementing his policies of social mobilization. It has four departments: political, organizational, economic, and cultural affairs. Together they are ultimately responsible for political and cultural indoctrination, which is accomplished by appealing to nationalistic pride and symbols of national unity. Both the political and cultural affairs departments of the PFDJ, in particular, are considered to be the "brain box" of the government. They are ultimately responsible for the centrally directed mobilization of the sanctioned civil society organizations and groups, such as youth, women, workers, urban neighbourhoods, and various professional associations.

Party officials tightly monitor and control the organization, operation, finances, and personnel of these organizations. Thus, for example, these seemingly civil society organizations are not permitted by the authorities to engage in any policy activism or advocacy matters. In a country where the state is distrustful of its own population, it severely restricts the movements of tourists, foreign journalists, and foreign diplomats as well as expatriates who head the few remaining international agencies, such as the United Nations. Similarly, local associations and organizations, such as women's, youth and students, workers, and professional associations are strictly monitored and prohibited from making unilateral initiatives to forge any contacts with foreign counterparts, organizations, or agencies. State-controlled as they are, all aspects of their administration and organization, both structural and functional, including, their policies and priorities, financial, recruitment, and leadership positions, are determined by the PFDJ, of which the President's Office is at the helm. In fact, these organizations often come up with the sort of "decisions that only need to be rubber-stamped by a periodic meeting of organizational congresses."[37] The tight control of their operation by the representatives of the respective departments of the party has also meant that they are not allowed to receive any funding from foreign donors without the prior approval of the party.[38]

The organizational affairs department is mainly concerned with recruitment of membership in the party, which is compulsory as well as the collection of contribution fees from members. Its activities could also extend to include foreign intelligence, fund raising, and overseeing Eritrean diaspora communities. For this purpose, it employs overseas Eritrean embassies and consulates, which themselves are under the constant watch of the party. Finally, the economic affairs department is the financial arm of the party. It not only controls all the state-owned enterprises, but it is also engaged in a wide variety of economic activities, including service, agriculture, and manufacturing industries. While the major state-controlled service industries include trade, foreign exchange, banking, communications, transport, and shipping, the manufacturing sector is dominated by metal-working, auto-repair, road-surfacing, well-drilling, and building construction. Initially, most of these companies were privately owned businesses until "they were forced by the government to enter into joint ventures with the party in which the latter holds majority stakes, profits and other compulsory payments in return for the government supplied free national service

labour force."[39]

Similarly, the sedentary, agro-pastoralist, and pastoralist agricultural systems upon which over 80 percent of the population is dependent is the single most important economic sector of the state. The state cannot defer the tremendous potential gain to be made from the production of cash crops, including horticulture for both domestic and foreign markets. The state forcibly seized control of a vast extent of fertile farming land, mainly in the low lands but also in the southern and more recently the north-eastern parts of the Eritrean highlands. Last but not least is the state's involvement in various franchises and joint ventures such as mining and the beverage and brewing industries that involve foreign investment. While the state staunchly argues in favor of heavy government intervention in order to expedite the war ravaged economic situation of the country, in reality the ultimate goal of these economic activities is "to realize political ends through political and economic means."[40] Moreover, the operations of almost all of these party-owned businesses, be it agriculture, manufacturing, or construction, heavily rely for manpower on communist-style labor camps and compulsory national-service recruits supplied by the military.

The military with its hierarchy of regional military generals is under the direct control and leadership of the president. It is a superstructure that is imposed upon practically all segments of public and civilian life. Since 2003, the inherited regional administrative structure, which consisted of six provinces, has been reduced to four "operation zones." The former guerrilla fighters who were re-commissioned to civilian administration as governors and deputies for the regions have now been subordinated to four powerful military generals who supervise and oversee the political, economic, and administrative processes of their respective regions. The military generals have a considerable discretionary power at their disposal and they are accountable only to the president. This takes place outside the formal military bureaucratic channels as the generals and their staffs normally bypass the Ministry of Defence whose minister is considered less powerful and insignificant member of the cabinet due to his short-lived affiliation with the group of reformers, who in 2001 formally requested the president to hand over power to the public. In fact, the minister retracted his allegiance and soon turned against his former colleagues before they were summarily detained in an undisclosed prison location in the same year. As a result, he is less highly esteemed among the ranks of military generals and even colonels, not to speak of the president who is notorious for his contemptuous treatment of his subordinates.

Characteristic Features of Personal Rule in Eritrea

An intrinsic feature of any dictatorship is that first and foremost it serves political ends. The relationship between state and society in Eritrea is not a positive one because it is based upon the preservation of personal power of the president through the extreme use of the coercive apparatus of the state. In an atmosphere of virtual absence of a tradition of tolerance, the impact of such a heavy-handed political influence over citizen-subjects has always been direct and powerful. Isaias Afewerki has long nurtured the cult of state power, which is reflected in the near-total control of almost all facets of national life, including the economy and other institutions of government, such as the judiciary and the national assembly. Although in the mid-1990s there were initial steps at nation-building with an apparent commitment to democratization, such as the macro-economic policy reform, land reform, and constitution formulation, they were solely aimed at strengthening the legitimacy of the ruling class and its political organization, the PFDJ. For example, Bereket Habte Sellasie, the former Commissioner of the Eritrean Constitution Commission, noted "it seems to me [that] the rule of law has gone to the dogs in Eritrea. There was a very good beginning, a very promising beginning. We all hailed Isaias Afewerki and his colleagues in creating an enabling environment to lead to democracy and we were waiting for that when he and his group—in my view—hijacked the constitution."[41]

Debessay Hedru echoes similar expressions of shattered hopes and promises when he noted that "Isaias Afewerki, the popularly revered leader of the EPLF, was often heard to say that the western model of liberal democracy is not suitable for his country, and speculated vaguely about a system rooted in local tradition and customs. Such statements were taken on faith by a public that was not ready to question [his] motives….In retrospect, the constitution-making process was a public relations exercise. And not a very successful one at that, because it did excite the political imagination of many Eritreans who were to be bitterly disappointed before long."[42] As such, the promise and prospect to a democratic transition turned out to be a mirage. The process of nation-building and the concomitant reforms were indeed based on nationalistic rhetoric and a carefully controlled political exercise, embodied in a presidential decree rather than directly deriving from legitimate, independent and legally sanctioned institutions of law which are more predictable in guiding and establishing socially and politically acceptable forms of state-society exchange and interaction.[43] The institutional reform process, which was more of window dressing than a substantive democratic change, vanished away and in its stead has grown up specifically designed extra-legal institutions of coercion. In what follows, we will analyse these institutions, such as the president and the president's office, the military and the political party, including their roles, structures, processes, and policy strategies by which personal rule is perpetuated in Eritrea.

The President as Personal Ruler

Besides being the President of the State of Eritrea, Isaias Afewerki is head of government, chairman of the National Parliament, Commander in Chief of the army, and Chancellor of the now-closed University of Asmara, the only university in the whole country. He convenes at will and presides over all meetings of the party's central council, the National Assembly, the cabinet council, and regional administrator and military council meetings. Dan Connell aptly summed up when he noted that "the overriding problem in Eritrea today is the concentration of power in the hands of one man… President Isaias and the PFDJ maintain an absolute monopoly on all forms of political and economic power."[44]

In its 2001 report, Human Rights Watch noted that "decision-making in Eritrea remains tightly controlled within the governing People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)…since the country formally became independent in 1993."[45] Almost a decade later, the same human rights organization asserted that "in less than two decades of independence, the government of President Isaias Afewerki has established a totalitarian grip on Eritrea."[46] Isaias Afewerki personally appoints cabinet ministers, regional administrators, national and regional court judges, the auditor-general, the governor of the national bank, new ambassadors, top military commanders, and many mid-level officials and civil authorities.[47] Although political institutions that are vital for democratic governance, such as the constitution, the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the judiciary, may appear to exist in Eritrea, they are largely illusions.[48] For example, a few days after the President of the High Court declared in a conference that was held in 2001—the year in which a group of reformers, described below, demanded the president to hand over power—that he had been subject to incessant government interferences, he received a telephone call from the Minister of Justice who was instructed by the president to order him to resign effective immediately.[49]

The president can also make individual or summary dismissals of ambassadors or regional administrators, with practically no institutional restraints of government behavior existing.[50] As a matter of fact, the regime has a long history of unlawfully dismissing people from work, locally known as *midiskal* (literally, to freeze). In order to create a reservoir of a populist form of rabid nationalistic sentiments, Isaias Afewerki had also to unleash conflicts with practically all the

neighboring countries. Dan Connell observes that the war situation in Eritrea is not an accident but it is deliberately designed in order to justify Isaias Afewerki's near-total monopoly of power.[51] The regional wars and conflicts are, therefore, designed to keep the citizenry under a constant siege mentality, and as such, have to be prolonged by closing all avenues of negotiated conflict resolution with neighbouring countries. Eritrea is now "a nation in a perpetual state of emergency, under siege by its own leaders, with a population denied the most basic freedoms of speech, assembly, press, and religious practice."[52] Needless to say, any individual who does not give an unquestioning obedience to the dictates of the president and his military officials is destined to be portrayed as unpatriotic, which often means treasonous. And anyone who dares to stand in the regime's way can hardly escape imprisonment or being sent to the labor camps.

The border wars and conflicts with the Sudan, Djibouti, Yemen, and Ethiopia provide a typical example of how Isaias Afewerki uses conflict as a means to keep an iron grip on power. In the wake of the border war with Ethiopia, for instance, the regime adopted what could best be described as an undeclared state of emergency, which put an end to the fledgling free press by arresting all the private journalists, and prohibiting any public critique of the president and his policies, including demands for the implementation of the already ratified constitution.[53] It finally resulted in a clampdown on former ministers and high ranking party-members, a dissadent group, commonly referred to as the G-15. Shortly after the signing of the Algiers Agreement in March 2001 that ended the two-year border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, this group of reformers signed a letter that criticized the president for endangering Eritrean national sovereignty by keeping Eritrea on a constant war footing and called for the convening of the long overdue national assembly meeting and the implementation of the ratified constitution.

The president put off all their demands and the reformers began to write and give interviews to the private media throughout the months leading up to 18th September on which they were summarily arrested and have been held ever since without charge. A number of them, including journalists have been reported to have died of maltreatment and harsh prison conditions.[54] The regime further went on closing churches, imprisoning Christians and imposed a near-total restriction of freedom of movement inside and outside the country to such an extent that citizens are prohibited from gathering together in numbers larger than seven. In an attempt to curb the number of people fleeing the county, citizens below the age of forty are also not allowed to acquire a passport. The end result is that the president and the party he chairs "have fenced off the population from the outside world while fostering a xenophobic hostility to foreigners to distract the citizenry from the privations of daily life and the persistent denial of basic rights and liberties"[55]

In order to understand the political dynamics of Eritrea, it is important to put in perspective Isaias Afewerki's long political career. As a leader of the guerilla movement for over two decades and almost another two decades since independence as a civilian leader, Isaias Afewerki had to overcome political power struggles, especially during the formative years of the guerrilla movement, by employing cunning subterfuges and brutal repression against political rivals, sowing in the process what Gaim Kibreab called the "seeds of dictatorship in Eritrea."[56] For example, the creation by Isaias Afewerki of a secret "party within a party" known as the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) whose formal structures and roles Dan Connell attempted to explore was "more an instrument of control than one of leadership."[57] In fact, this secret party, which was composed of an inner-circle of select individuals operating in a violent and hidden manner, "guaranteed the ubiquity of internal repression of dissent, unmistakably putting the trajectory of the liberation struggle on the classic road to dictatorship."[58]

Many opposition groups and veterans of the liberation movement who now live in exile openly speak of what hitherto have been hushed-up secrets of the brutal killings and murder of

hundreds of people, possibly thousands, mainly those who resisted and challenged Isaias Afewerki during the early stages of the Eritrean military movement.[59] The infamous security apparatus of the time, known as the *halewa saura* (literally, the revolutionary guard) used to confine suspects in bug-infested traditional cottages and makeshift cells fettered by a rope made of rawhide as they awaited execution. The so-called political prisoners were inadequately fed and were made to recline on mud floors. As part of the torture technique, prisoners were not allowed to make any physical movement such as to scratch oneself because of an itch caused by lice or making a change of position on the ground. Doing these things in the absence of authorization would lead to the prisoner being beaten with a stick as a punishment. The result was that prisoners often asked for permission to do these trivial things by saying: "Guard could you please allow me to scratch my back?"; or "Guard, could I please change my sleeping position?"[60] The legacy of brutality has outlasted the war of independence, giving rise to the current political climate of fear in Eritrea. This legacy and its attendant repressive structures and anomalies meant that tyranny was fine-tuned so that it could be repeated in an independent Eritrea.

Personal Rule and the Use of Military Force

Many commentators describe the Eritrean political situation as illustrative of the sub-Saharan African reality in which the state is directly involved in coercion aimed to intimidate, suppress, and stamp out any real or imaginary threat to its power.[61] One of the recurrent features of the military in Eritrea is that it is designed to target individuals or groups across the board who are supposed to be a threat to "national security." The Eritrean military is characterized by its direct, widespread, systematic, and ferocious assault on multiple social institutions. The president and his office wield heavy clout in running the military. The ultimate goal of the president, his office of loyal allies, and the party he chairs is to stifle pluralism by imposing a single shared sense of identity based on the rhetoric of nationalism and patriotism. This forced identity is always accompanied by an attitude of belligerence, coercion, and repression against anyone who does not express loyalty to the memoirs of a unified body politic. It is important to remember at this stage the fact that the Eritrean military machine's success over the extremely violent regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam was secured after thirty years of protracted guerrilla fighting by maintaining a Marxist revolutionary mindset.

In post-independent Eritrea, this would, small wonder, mean that the Eritrean military is more habituated and hence strongly disposed to apply a level of ruthlessness that outmatches the level of brute force and violence, including security and intelligence tactics of their predecessors. Eritrea is now primarily what George Gagnon described "a giant prison" needing to "account for hundreds of disappeared prisoners and open its jail to independent scrutiny."[62] The *Guardian*, in its editorial titled: "Eritrea: the World's Biggest Prison" described Eritrea as "a country whose government inflicts extraordinary horror on its people."[63] According to Terrence Lyons of the United States Council on Foreign Relations, "all the major international human rights groups, monitors of religious persecution, and media watchdogs place Eritrea among the most repressive regimes in the world."[64]

Eritrea is indeed a country with the highest number of political prisoners in Africa. For example, the Oslo-based Centre for Peace and Human Rights, in its recent special report on Eritrea, estimated that between 10,000 and 30,000 political prisoners are held in a country of about five million people.[65] Out of this number, some 3,000 prisoners are from the various Christian denominations.[66] It is worth noting that the jailing of prisoners is arbitrarily decided by the military commanders who run and control their own makeshift prisons and detention centres that they themselves set up in their respective jurisdiction. According to Kjetil Tronvoll, "like a chain of islands, the Eritrean political prisons, detention centres, and labour camps are scattered

throughout the country…under the control of the military or the internal security service.[67] Apart from the traditional police-station prisons that are mainly located in the urban centres, there have been hundreds of newly established prisons, which comprise secret underground prisons, villas, housing units and storehouses-turned prisons, and military camp prisons built of corrugated iron as well as metal shipping containers. Most of the newly established labor camps—located in hostile climate regions of Eritrea, such as Gedeb, Wia, Assab, and Dahlak—double as prisons.[68] Moreover, the former Eritrean Institute of Management at Embatkala, 35 km. east of Asmara, was turned into prison in September 2001 under the instructions of President Isaias Afewerki to accommodate the former government officials before they were relocated in June 2003 to a newly purpose-built prison in the forbiddingly hot desert-village of Eira'eiro.[69]

It is difficult to know the exact number of these secret military prisons. According to Human Rights Watch, "each operation (command zone) has its own prisons and security and each level of operations has its own prisons. There's the headquarters prison at operational level, then a division central prison, brigade prisons, battalion prisons...for nine divisions there may be more than 50 prisons."[70] A joint report by the Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Human Rights Concern, however, put the total number of prisons in Eritrea at 300.[71] The forms and methods of torture include techniques called, *torch*, *otto*, *almaz,* and *helicopter.*[72] These forms of torture are always accompanied by wanton beatings of victims and sexual assault of women prisoners. There are also numerous accounts of abduction, mysterious disappearances of individuals as well as extra-judicial killing of innocent civilians and national service recruits.[73]

Military coercion in Eritrea is also accompanied by "purges and rehabilitation" in what Tom Young observed are "among the most common practices in personal rule" systems in sub-Saharan Africa. As forms of enforcing compliance, they involve various tactics.[74] For example, in Eritrea mysterious lethal force in which the victims would be reported to have committed suicide or died accidentally as a result of food-poisoning is common. In this way, the state outrightly eliminates opponents whom it considers to be a threat to the survival of the president. Alternately, those members of civilian groups whom it considers to be less dangerous—e.g., mothers in the urban centers to know who demand to know the whereabouts of their children or village elders who resist land grabs by the military—are summarily detained for a few months in makeshift semi-open prison structures before they are released on bail.

The level of repression against young people, especially students in the urban centers whom the regime faults for "unruly behavior" and "unlawful acts," is gratuitously cruel.[75] For example, when, in 2001 around 2000 university students refused to accept the terms and conditions laid down by the president of the University of Asmara to conduct a nation-wide survey research for the World Bank, the regime summarily detained them in Asmara Stadium in what some commentators then likened the situation to similar developments in Chile during the reign of General Augusto Pinochet. The students were eventually forced to mount trucks and were taken to the inhospitably infamous, makeshift military-camp of Wia to undertake what the government called "rehabilitation." As a punishment, the students were forced to undertake heavy construction work under such extreme heat. As a result, many students suffered ill health while two students died of dehydration and heat stroke.[76]

Alternately, if those whom the regime suspects in the least way of being disloyal happen to be former comrade-in-arms or "party-family members" as the regime wants to call them, they are more likely to be demoted, or frozen from their post for some extended period of time before they are again reinstated into a different post. Influential businessmen or women can also be haunted by suspicion of being disloyal. In such situations, their businesses would simply be co-opted or they would otherwise be dispossessed of their business assets altogether. The result of such extreme political measures, including arrests, dispossessions, purges, and rehabilitations—also

widely applied in many sub-Saharan Africa—is "the decline of political pluralism and the rise of political monopoly."[77]

Common to all personal dictatorships is also the establishment and masterminding of a well-structured secret police force or its equivalent to dispense arbitrary power.[78] The very existence of such a terror structure with all its dynamics and sophistication becomes, in turn, the cause for the escalation of more "situational and purposive terror campaigns."[79] The Eritrean security apparatus is made up of a wide range of security forces, such as the police, the armed forces, military police (MP), the National Security Office, Battalion Seventy-Two, the Office of the President, and other overlapping secret military agencies, all with their own well-elaborated web of secret detention centers at all territorial levels.[80] In a country where military rank, political office and promotions have more to do with political favors than ability, the secret police often seek to appear more loyal to the regime and hence increase their status by displaying ruthlessness in their torturing of political suspects and detainees.

Many top-level generals and colonels also vie with each other to extract what they can from impoverished citizens by resorting to various methods, including confiscation of personal effects of prisoners, imposing at will "financial penalties" on the same as a condition for release, granting exemption to national service recruits, and issuing leave permissions and movement cards in return for large sums of money.[81] Other military commanders, in cahoots with local administrators also extort money by the threat of a ban on licenses and closure orders. The military is often bestowed with favors by the state, such as residential villas, farm land, luxurious cars and other financial and material rewards aimed at buying off their loyalty. Past experience seems to indicate that the more the military officers received favours from the state, the more they were poised to make further demands upon it, especially in the light of rampant poverty, and the war-mediated insecurity of the government as well as the growing competing power relations among them.

As such, the political ties between the military and the president are maintained through clientelistic networks of financial and material incentives. For example, it is common for the core military generals and commanders to serve, apart from their role as the security apparatus of the regime, as members of the ministerial cabinet and some even run academic institutions, serve as sports commissioners, and manage party-owned public enterprises as a reward for their loyalty. In this way, the social, political, and economic life of the people is so deeply penetrated and structured to create "a more homogenous and malleable political and economic space, which is to be more closely controlled."[82] It is within this political context that one can get a clear picture of the primary political purpose of the military and the ruling party in Eritrea and how the system is deeply embedded and perpetuated in order to ensure the security of the president. With unrestrained military coercion, the president and his political aids have accomplished the near-total control of the socio-political and economic life of the nation.

Personal Rule and Civil Society Associations

Drawing from the Marxist notion of social reform, the party had been, since the period of the guerrilla conflict, setting up a military and political strategy of creating mass organizations of various sorts, including women and peasants. The initial aim was to mobilize the rural and peripheral urban population for the war of liberation. After independence, these organizations, which also carry a semblance of a civil society, have been reorganized within the power structures and chapters of party-controlled organizations. They were indeed inherited from the liberation war era and are now, as it were, co-opted under new management, with their number supplemented by a couple of urban-based associations left over from the period of Ethiopian administration of Eritrea. Today, they operate as channels of state mobilization and control. Participation in these organisations implies a total integration into the sole political party. An

academically relevant question here is the extent to which it is valid to leave unquestioned assertions about the "popular" nature of such associations during the period of the struggle for independence and their potential to become the future civil societies of Eritrea "providing a point of entry for social and political activism."[83]

After independence, the near-total control of the state was practically reinforced by the president and his cadres, who espoused, for reasons of political expediency rather than ideology, though, Gramscian social reform approaches.[84] These approaches are aimed to counteract what Antonio Gramsci called the "cultural and ideological hegemony" of the "associational realm," such as the church, trade unions, schools, families, and other civil societies and their institutions through which the state perpetuates its hegemony of the moral economic and political order.[85] Following this tradition, the state is expected to employ all its resources and coercive powers to neuter and undo such institutions which, if left unchallenged, have the potential to resist state power through again what Gramsci called "earthworks and buttresses."[86] In an interview with Dan Connell, the head of the Cultural Affairs Department of the PFDJ, Zemhret Yohannes, an ardent proponent of Gramscian reform, noted that "the question of class is not important in Eritrea today. There are other interests, that are more important – ethnicity, religion, uneven development from one region to another. Our priority now is to create a *viable political order* in which we can address the economic interests of all people [emphasis added]."[87]

Claude Ake noted that any economic development program in many African countries is not often anchored in some form of nationalist project.[88] In fact, "the ideology of development was exploited as a means of reproducing political hegemony; it got limited attention and served hardly any purpose as a framework for economic transformation."[89] Personal rulers are characterized not only by their lack of strong institutions with reliable rules and structures but also a development ideology that transcends loyalty.[90] Similarly, George Ayittey asserts that "ideology is not particularly relevant in the analysis of Africa's crisis. Regardless of their professed ideologies, most African regimes have been statist."[91] Indeed, in their attempt to hang on to power in the worst way, many African leaders have become hindrances to development.[92]

The domination of the political scene by a single party in Eritrean politics also means that there is no such thing as power sharing as there is no opposition party. Therefore, issues of tenure of office and continuity are foregone conclusions. As experience has shown even in countries where political parties are allowed to operate, their existence is intended to justify an apparent rather than real democratization process.[93] In fact, the likelihood of them being accused of treason or security risk still remains high.[94] Many political analysts note that Eritrea is reasserting its absolutist and hegemonic tendencies, characterised by extremely centralized and domineering government structures.[95]

Personal Rule and Social Mobilization

In a dictatorship, the state-society relationship can be understood through the idea of legitimacy between the ruler and the ruled. If dictators do not have enough legitimacy to rule, then they rely on sheer military power to stay in office while at the same time they never give up soliciting public compliance and cooperation from the masses by forging emotional and psychological bonds with them.[96] As a response to the declining legitimacy of the Eritrean president, the regime attempts to score social and economic achievements, hence government effectiveness, in order to generate public compliance and cooperation. Social mobilization in Eritrea can thus be understood as a response to the legitimacy crisis that the Eritrean president faces today.

Since the independence of Eritrea, a number of radical policies have been put in place with the ultimate goal of subjugating the Eritrean population to the rule of Isaias Afewerki. One such policy area is national service. In what can be described as an arbitrary proclamation, national service was

decreed by the president himself in the early 1990s. The apparent aim of national military service was to inculcate the ideals of the revolution into the minds of the younger generation. The state expressed its vehement distaste of what it called the inherited civilian culture of "indolence and slothfulness" and wanted now to replace them with such values as national unity, work ethic, camaraderie, cooperation, and sacrifice – a set of values the state claimed were the hallmarks of the liberation movement and helped achieve independence. But in reality, it is a ploy designed to cow society into giving in to the demands of the president and his coercive army.

The national service policy was succeeded by another similar policy, the *Wefri Warsay-Yikaalo* ("a campaign of the new generation") that Isaias Afewerki set up soon after the end of the war with Ethiopia in 2000. This most infamous and draconian proclamation, like its predecessor, had little to do with national development and everything to do with empowering and enriching his cadres and generals in exchange for their loyalty. As in many parts of Africa, buying the loyalty of influential military figures is an ordinary aspect of state formation and the strengthening of the ruling class, especially in moments of war and economic turmoil such as Eritrea currently faces. Most of the national service conscripts are forced to provide free labor for the army generals in various personal services. While the men are employed in house construction, women often work as cleaners, cooks, and wood/water fetchers and all, indefinitely, in the name of national service.[97]

The concept of "self-reliance," which encapsulates the ethos of the government, is yet another one in a series of radical policies directly linked to the government's efforts to build its legitimacy. In fact, the policy of self-reliance from the very outset has been portrayed by many internal and external commentators as a myth.[98] For example, a *Washington Post* reporter observed that, "while striving to be egalitarian, self-reliant utopia, Eritrea has become the most unapologetically repressive country on Earth."[99] Other major world media outlets, such as the BBC described Eritrea as one of the world's poor countries with critical food shortages in which the government "is deliberately rejecting help in the name of self-reliance" by insisting that it is best qualified to look after its own people and accuses the UN of seeking to distract attention from its own failures.[100]

In Eritrea most foreign NGOs and aid organizations have long been ousted after they were accused of being "Trojan horses" for foreign interests.[101] Even well-conceived and planned NGO development projects in the rural areas and in Asmara had to be terminated while the food supplies that the aid agencies had been supplying for many years were put on sale in the market by the Party.[102] Now, ordinary citizens have less than little likelihood of finding such staples as bread and sugar. The daily struggle and long queues to buy such basic necessities as bread, sugar, vegetables and cooking oil—commodities scarcely available even in the government-run stalls— are manifestations of a crisis so profound that the very fabric of urban and rural society is beginning to unravel. For example, the government recently placed a total ban on trade in grain, cereals, and livestock. People have been forced to obtain their monthly rations of grain exclusively from the party-owned shops. The regime has set up checkpoints all over the country to control the transport, selling, and buying of grain. In the villages, a network of military surveillance has been established covering every field that is ready to harvest. On the instructions of the military, farmers are obliged to report to the local military officers prior to harvesting their fields. The military will then send local party and military representatives who will decide on how much is left in the farmer's possession, which is often less than 100 kgs. per farmer. The rest of the harvested grain is bought by the government at a nominal price. According to a recent report by a BBC journalist quoting an Eritrean refugee who fled to northern Ethiopia, "farmers from Eritrea said the government had seized their harvest, paying them as little as 8 percent of the market value ….they [the government] have been confiscating the food and what the farmers have grown."[103]

The draconian trade ban has devastated farmers economically, especially since they have no alternative sources of income to compensate for the reduction in farm generated income. Private

grain shops have been ordered to close and people found selling grain informally on the street have their stock confiscated. To avoid confiscation people try to outsmart the security police by turning grain into flour or dough so as to lessen the chances of detection. Such is the current level of desperation in Eritrea that people speak bitterly about how grain has become "a rarity, and even when available" it is like a "prohibited contraband item that has to be smuggled in."[104] It is possible to argue that the seizing of farm produce and the total ban on rural-urban grain exchange reflects a naive confidence in the ability of the regime to override drought conditions and food shortages through its monopoly of food redistribution. However, in a wider sense, it is also an indication of the regime's paranoia about potential enemies and the need to subjugate them. It is within this context that one can understand why the government-controlled propaganda machine often broadcasts TV programs that paint a fantasy of everyday life where Eritrea is making exemplary strides towards self-sufficiency but at the same time lamenting "the famine ravaged continent of Africa."

The government even has the audacity to claim that there is no food shortage or crisis the kind witnessed in Zimbabwe or the riots witnessed in Egypt. Of course, the government never wants to be reminded of the political space for dissent that exists in countries such as Egypt where in 2008 many people took to the streets to complain about the massive shortage of bread and price rises. However, the regime in Eritrea can hardly feel secure that its attempts to maintain control through misinformation will prove to be successful, mindful as it must be that similar miscalculations at the height of the Ethiopian famine triggered the unrest that swept from power the regimes of both Haile Sellassie and Mengistu.

The irony of dictatorships is that the more they accumulate power the less they feel secure that their attempts to maintain power through their domestically-oriented military will prove successful. This contributes to the tendency, as has been demonstrated by Isaias Afewerki, to generate international tensions by designing an externally-oriented military imbued with notions of external threat. Since the border war with Ethiopia, Isaias Afewerki continued to raise the spectre of the West, particularly what he called the "subversive interference of the US and its allies," including international organizations such as the UN and foreign NGOs, menacing Eritrea's statehood and sabotaging its "reputable policy of self-reliance."[105] The end result is that Isaias Afewerki has practically sealed off Eritrea from the international community. And yet, the regime continues to exonerate itself from any blame for the socio-economic and political crises its policies have brought about. Of course, these crises need to be rationalised and this is achieved by attributing the causes to others. The list of scapegoats is a long one: from the Sudan in the early 90s to Ethiopia, the African Union, and the international community (particularly the US) at the present time. Nor is the blame solely attached to outsiders as is demonstrated by references to Eritreans who "collaborate with the CIA."[106] The attempt to apportion blame for the malfunctioning of the socio-economic and political system can sometimes become surreal such as when the whole Eritrean population is found culpable of becoming "too spoiled."[107]

Conclusion

The East African nation of Eritrea is a typical case of personal tyranny where political repression against the ordinary Eritreans has seemed much worse than the situation under both the Ethiopian monarchy of Haile Selassie and the communist rule of Mengistu Haile Mariam. The political culture of conflict and violence has indeed eroded established norms of behavior, further dragging Eritrea into a perpetual cycle of war, poverty, and backwardness. By using the typology of personal rule, the article examined the political system of Eritrea, including its institutions, structures, processes, and strategies for the past nineteen years. Central to understanding the phenomenon of personal rule in Eritrea are the various specifically designed institutions of coercion, such as the

army, including a myriad of extra-legal and less formal clandestine networks of police and the secret service as well as the political party, the bureaucracy, and above-imposed civil society organizations, which have become centers of mobilization and indoctrination of current and future generations.

Needless to say, there is a sheer disregard for the need to build autonomous state and economic institutions, such as the legislative, the courts, political parties, and an independent media. The result is that personalities rule, as it were, over political principle; sentiments supersede formal institutions; expediency circumvents hierarchies; and loyal ex-combatants head administrative operations in preference to skilled civilians. All the wider societal issues of socio-economic and political development are overshadowed by the overriding objective of preserving the president and his interests. In short, the Eritrean state has not only ceased to be the vanguard of development but has outgrown its purpose and turned into a liability.

As all avenues to development under the government's experiment in the last two decades have become exhausted, this political project has eventually brought about economic, political, and social collapse. The situation on the ground is now characterised by what Dan Connell aptly noted as the "resentment of a quiet population that is seething underneath."[108] When coupled with the recent targeted sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council, which involve arms embargo, assets freeze, and a travel ban on Eritrea's political and military leadership, as a response to the regime's role in Somalia and Djibouti, it is likely that the regime will not be able to sustain its closed autarchic tightly controlled rule for too long. Especially in the light of the dwindling loyalty and irreconcilable competition for rewards within the top echelons of the military, incessant stream of youth desertion, de-urbanization, declining legitimacy in the eyes of the masses, dwindling state services and virtual economic standstill, the regime is definitely showing signs of breaking up and is on the verge of rapidly disintegrating.

All these warning signals have not been able to secure the system, nor in the face of such a bleak prognosis does the regime appear to have any corrective mechanisms. The regime continues to rely on brute force, applied for the most part by the military. The military generals, who are driven by rivalry and personal gain, are held together by accommodation. This, in turn, may imply that the regime is in danger of losing control over the instruments of coercion as its application tends to be contingent on reward to military generals who operate as war-lords over their respective geographic areas. This may as well indicate that the military is inherently brittle than outward appearances would seem to suggest and, hence liable to violent and sudden break-down. Similarly, the repercussions of the creation of a huge unsustainable army composed of disenchanted and impoverished national service recruits who are held indefinitely only seems to aggravate popular discontent and even trigger massive social unrest that could imperil the political life of the personal ruler, Isaias Afewerki.

Epilogue

Since the completion and acceptance of this article for publication in December 2010, many countries in North Africa and the Middle East have witnessed radical political developments. In light of this piece on personal rule in Eritrea, it is appropriate to discuss the relevance of these events for Eritrea. However, given the fact that they are now "ex post facto" to the article at hand, not to mention the magnitude of these revolutions in terms of geography and the divergent political contexts within which they have occurred, the author can only provide a brief epilogue on the direct and indirect influences that these waves of change may have on Eritrea.

From the day a popular uprising broke out in Tunisia, on January 14, leading to the ouster of Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali from power, a chain reaction of political upheavals has engulfed countries

in North Africa and the Middle East. Egypt's President Mubarak resigned less than a month after the Tunisian outbreak (thus contradicting the immediate political prognosis that "Egypt is not Tunisia"); Yemen's President Saleh has faced continual demonstrations; Bahrain's ruler is under great pressure; a bloody civil war has erupted in Libya; and Algeria, Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, and Sudan have witnessed anti-government protests of varying degrees. Even Saudi Arabia has felt the heat of the popular uprising, which some commentators have dubbed the "Arab Spring" Revolution.

As the unprecedented uprisings continue to have a domino effect over a large swath of the Arab world, citizens in many sub-Saharan African cities are, as one might expect, wondering whether they will see similar spill over effects in the political landscape of their respective countries. The worry and uneasiness that these revolutions may have unleashed on authoritarian leaders in Africa, in general, and Eritrea, in particular, cannot be underestimated. After the events in Tunisia and Egypt, a month or so passed, and yet the Eritrean regime had the audacity to maintain a total news blackout on such drastic events that otherwise have continued to grip the attention of news media outlets the world over. As time moved on, however, the regime realized that it could not continue to conceal political developments of such a magnitude from the public. In what amounts to a proclamation, it suddenly came up with what it called "Explanation of the Eritrean Government on Current Events in North Africa and the Middle East." The government controlled TV and radio announced a series of programs, and the public was accordingly advised to tune in.

People inside and outside Eritrea were reportedly dumbfounded, even a little sarcastic to learn what the regime would have to say. The broadcasts began with a so-called analysis titled "Popular Uprising: Eve of the End of Era of Domination and Transition to New World Order." A succession of broadcasts, which all shared the same above-mentioned title, has continued for eleven days on end at the time of writing this epilogue. By way of introduction, the government stated that it had deliberately kept quiet on the unravelling events in order to get a full picture of the situation, including determining who was behind these uprisings, how they would shape the future politics of the respective countries, and what would be their impact on the region and the world political stage at large.

Of course, this so-called analysis consisted of nothing but the usual diatribes and accusations employed, as suited circumstances, to apportion blame on the ''US and Western Capitalist greed.'' The regime even went so far as to rationalize the events in a self-satisfying way by putting the blame on the leaders of the affected countries for failing to anticipate the storm and thus create what the regime called its own harmonious society, self-reliant economy, and independent political path—values that it claims have given Eritrea the edge over the North African and Middle Eastern countries. For ordinary citizens, this too, is indeed a face-saving exercise by a regime already humiliated by its embarrassingly deafening silence following its failed cover up attempt. Behind the façade, though, the regime did not waste time in taking drastic precautionary measures by ordering the reshuffle of the military and further tightening control on its freedom of movement, including the relocation of "nonessential" military personnel out of the capital, Asmara, to the suburbs, some 20-30 kilometres away. Some Eritrean media groups in the diaspora have already noted that there has been some dissatisfaction, if not outright agitation, with the redeployment, especially among the heads of the affected military commands, reportedly raising questions as to the urgency of the reshuffle in the absence of military deployment, not least the inconvenience that would ensue from the reshuffle.

From political, diplomatic, military, and economic perspectives, the revolutions in Libya and Egypt, in particular, have an ironic twist for Eritrea. Libya's Colonel Muammar Gaddafi has been a very close ally of Eritrea's Isaias Afewerki, who has paid him frequent visits even in contravention

of the UN-imposed air embargo on Libya in the 1990s for the Lockerbie bombing. Libya, on its part, was the only member county of the Security Council to vote against UN sanctions on Eritrea in 2009. Moreover, Gaddafi is widely believed to have provided oil as well as military and financial support to Isaias Afewerki. Though it is too difficult to gauge the validity of the alleged presence of Eritrean mercenaries in Libya, there are unconfirmed reports that show that Eritrea has indeed sent military commandos to aid the now embattled Gaddafi, who is fighting for his political life with the help of mercenaries. Some are already known to have come from Chad, Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Niger, and the Sudan. What is certain, though, is that, having lost Hosni Mubarak of Egypt first and most likely now Gaddafi, Isaias Afewerki has day by day become an increasingly isolated leader with few if any political allies remaining in the region.

Similarly, with Eritrea's lack of success in tipping the balance of power in war-ravaged Somalia and its past attempts to create cordial relations with Mubarak as a proxy against Ethiopia, the threat to Ethiopia's interests both in forging some sort of political stability in Somalia as well as its efforts to renegotiate the Nile river treaty may now seem, with the ouster of Mubarak, thwarted, at least in the short term. Moreover, the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea has not yet been resolved due to Eritrea's intransigence and, hence, Ethiopia's lack of faith in the merit of border demarcation absent a negotiated settlement. As such, Eritrea still continues to pose a threat to Ethiopia by maintaining a huge army near its borders and by continuing to arm numerous north- as well as south-based Ethiopian rebel factions. Moreover, as the domestic repression against Eritrean citizens heightens, leading to thousands of Eritrean refugees flooding into Ethiopia, the cumulative effects of such long standing regional grievances and provocations would mean that Ethiopia may not be willing to put up with Eritrea much longer, especially in the light of what has happened in the region. In fact, recent sources from Ethiopia seem to indicate that it is only a matter of time before Ethiopia moves to effect regime change in Eritrea, one way or another.

Finally, enter the Eritrean opposition groups in the diaspora. These political parties, which may be likened to mutating mushrooms, are characterized by division, rivalry, and disunity due to religious, ethnic, and parochial local sentiments. In fact, many of them were the creation of the liberation era, where an almost surreal absence of a tradition of tolerance and accommodation had often meant recourse to armed conflict as the ultimate method of resolving differences. The emergence of civil society based political groups in the Eritrean diaspora, however, including human rights organizations, associations of lawyers, journalists, research groups, and, not least, several media outlets means that they may play a major role in advocacy, political activism, and raising an awareness of current issues. By organizing demonstrations in various European and North American cities as well as forging political solidarity among different groups, many of these civic associations have indeed attempted to mobilize people in the diaspora to take active participation in the political life of Eritrea. In reaction to the upheavals in North Africa and Middle East, these diaspora organizations have heightened their call and activism for political change inside Eritrea.

Given the fact that internet and social media in Eritrea is deliberately kept on a tight rein and the regime's attempts to empty the cities and urban centers of youth by creating a highly militarized society, together with the inherent tendency of many Eritreans at home to favor the exit option rather than sheer confrontation, civil-society-led collective action inside Eritrea remains feeble, at best. It would be wrong, though, to rule out the possibility for the kind of revolutions that North Africa and the Middle East countries have witnessed occurring in Eritrea, especially when considering the common threads that run through these revolutions. The ubiquity of social strain, frustration, deprivation, corruption, and repression—mobilization factors which exist even more conspicuously in Eritrea than anywhere else in the region—indeed make popular uprising in Eritrea more likely if not certain. After all, it was the seemingly "small scale" and "contingent"

catalyst events that set off the North Africa and the Middle East uprisings that subsequently ushered in a "large scale" social transformation.

Notes:

1   This study is based on the author's PhD thesis on Eritrea, with research conducted 2001-2006 in Eritrea and the Netherlands. He is a former lecturer in public administration, University of Asmara, Eritrea. As a former lecturer and trainer for students and civil service officials and ex-combatants, the author has acquired extensive first-hand experience on the current social, economic, and political developments in Eritrea. He lived for most of his life inside Eritrea and has thus "participated as an expert witness," which can be considered as the classical methodology of participant observation, broadened considerably. Particularly, for the purpose of this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews supplemented by in depth dialogic discussions with former students, colleagues, and ex-combatants who recently fled Eritrea to the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Western Europe. Moreover, the information obtained through interviews and discussions have been cross-checked and corroborated by open-sources gathered from international human rights organizations, UN agencies, and governmental and non-governmental human rights organizations as well as news and analysis by media organizations around the world.

2   Hyden 1992; Huntington 1991; Wiseman 1996; Bratton and de Walle 1997, p. 104; Brown 2001; Hyden, Michael, and Ogundimu 2003:41; Ibrahim 2006.

3   Rabb and Suleiman 2003, p. 186.

4   Rabb and Suleiman 2003, p. 186; Diouf 1998, p. 5.

5   Rabb and Suleiman 2003, p. 186.

6   Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Clapham 1996; Joseph cited in Diamond and Plattner 1999, p. 10; Odhiambo-Mbai cited in Oyugi et al. 2003.

7   Since the 1980s and much earlier, many scholars on African politics, including Hollnsteiner 1982; Bugnicourt 1982; De Graaf 1986; Bayart 1993; Ayittey 1999; Bratton and van der Walle 1997:63; Leonard and Strause 2003:2; Oyugi et al, 2003:51, to mention but a few, have used various terminologies such as the "Big Man" syndrome, patrimonialism, neopatrimonialism, prebendalism, sultanism, autocracy, or "politics of the belly" to describe African leaders and their political styles.

8   Hyden 2006, p. 98.

9   Leonard and Straus 2003, p. 1.

10   Jackson and Rosberg 1984, p. 421.

11   Jackson and Rosberg 1984, p. 438.

12   Ibid.

13   Kamrava 1993:6.

14   Diamond 2008, p. 14.

15   Leonard and Straus 2003, pp. 5, 104.

16   Reno 1997; Ayittey 1999; Davidson 1993.

17   Ayittey 1999, p. 49.

18   Ibid.

19   Ibid.

20   Ibid.

21   Hameso 2002, p. 6.

22   Clapham 1996, p. 187.

23 Kamrava 1993, p. 15.

24 Bramstedt 2003, p. 2.

25 Ibid., p. 3.

26 Scott 1998.

27 Kamrava 1993, p. 18.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Bramstedt 2003:3; Kamrava 1993, p. 17.

31 Kamrava 1993, p. 17.

32 Ayittey 1999, p. 25.

33 Ake 1996, p. 116.

34 Jackson and Rosberg 1984, p. 421.

35 Young 2003, p. 28.

36 The Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF) later became the Peoples' Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the only political party in Eritrea.

37 Connell in Kelly et al. 2007, p. 287.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., p. 291.

40 Ibid., p. 274.

41 Bereket Habte-Selassie's interview with Charles Cobb, Jr, for Africa Action, 5 Oct. 2001: Accessible at < http://www.africaaction.org/docs01/erit0110.htm >

42 Hedru 2004, p. 437.

43 Garcetti and Gruber 2000.

44 Connell in Repucci and Walker 2005, p. 235.

45 Human Rights Watch 2001.

46 Human Rights Watch 2009.

47 Connell in Kelly et al. 2007, pp. 275-76.

48 Ibid., p. 276.

49 Ogbazghi 2006.

50 Ibid.

51 Connell in Kelly et al. 2007, p. 274.

52 Ibid., p. 275.

53 The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Amnesty International and the US State Department reported the arrest of dissenters, journalists and the widespread use of torture, disappearances and extra-judicial killings. For example, the CPJ notes "with at least 19 journalists behind bars, Eritrea by far leads the list of shame of African nations that imprison journalists. Eritrea holds this dubious distinction since 2001 …the government has refused to confirm if the detainees are still alive, even when unconfirmed online reports suggest that three journalists have died in detention." See CPJ Annual Prison Census 2009: Accessible at < http://www.cpj.org/reports/2009/12/freelance-journalists-in-prison-cpj-2009-census.php >

54 CPJ. "Truth about jailed journalists is locked away in Eritrea." 9 April 2010. Accessible at < http://www.cpj.org/blog/2010/04/truth-about-jailed-journalists-is-locked-away-in-e.php. >

55 Connell in Repucci and Walker 2005, p. 235.

56 Kibreab 2008, p. 277.

57 Connell 2001, p. 363.

58 Mengisteab and Yohannes cited in Tronvoll 2009, p. 48.

59   Since 2001, former veterans of the liberation war who fled to the West have been writing extensively and giving interviews to various diaspora opposition and international human rights organizations concerning the disappearance, murder, and extra-judicial killing of their former colleagues.

60   Discussion with a senior veteran of the EPLF, September, 2003, Asmara, Eritrea.

61   Wilkinson 2007, p. 35; Ihonvbere and Mbaku, 2003, pp. 9, 30.

62   Human Rights Watch 2009.

63   "Eritrea – the World's biggest prison." The Guardian, 17 April 2009. Accessible at <
     http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/17/eritrea-human-rights>

64   Lyons 2006, p. 12. See also Karatnycky 1998, p. 44; Rotberg 2005, p. 89; Karlekar 2008; Tronvoll 2009.

65   Tronvoll 2009, p. 11.

66   Human Rights Watch 2009.

67   Tronvoll 2009, p. 11.

68   Ibid., p. 67.

69   UNHCR-Refworld 2010.

70   Human Rights Watch, 2009.

71   Christian Solidarity Worldwide, CSW and Human Rights Concern - Eritrea 2009.

72   These torture techniques involve the tying of the arms and legs of the prisoner on the ground face down and then suspending the prisoner in the air from a tree with the arms and legs tied behind the back.

73   Tronvoll 2009, pp. 76-88.

74   Young 2003, p. 28.

75   Tronvoll 2009, p. 65.

76   Amnesty International 2002, p. 8.

77   Young 2003, p. 30.

78   Dallin and Breslauer 1970, p. 40.

79   Ibid.

80   Tronvoll 2009, pp. 11, 20.

81   Ogbazghi 2006; Tronvoll 2009.

82   Lemarchand 1992, p. 184.

83   Connell 2001, p. 359.

84   In September 2001 a national conference was held in Asmara, Eritrea where PFDJ representatives advocated for greater state intervention to counteract what they called "increasing sub-national sentiments in the population."

85   Gramsci 1971, p. 238.

86   Ibid.

87   Connell 2001, p. 351.

88   Ake 1996.

89   Ibid., p. 9.

90   Rosberg and Jackson 1982; Sandbrook 1986.

91   Ayittey 1999, p. 163.

92   Ake 1996, p. 116.

93   Hameso 2002, p. 5.

94   Hameso 2002, p. 5; Connell in Kelly et al. 2007, p. 282.

95   Karatnycky 2002: 227-29; Connell 2007: 274.

96   Kamrava 1993.
97   Ogbazghi 2006.
98   "Eritrea – A Myth of Self Reliance." *The Economist* 29 April 2006.
99   McCrummen 2009.
100 Harris 2006.
101 Connell 2001.
102 Ogbazghi 2006, p. 244.
103 Harter 2009.
104 This information is obtained from various diaspora Eritrean news websites. The researcher has been able to confirm the authenticity of this information independently.
105 Lyons 2006 noted "The Eritrean government became highly repressive and isolationist, arresting two Eritreans working for the U.S. embassy in 2001, expelling the United States Agency for International Development in 2005 and nearly all international humanitarian organizations in 2006."
106 Freedom House in a news release on 30 June 2009 entitled "Shadow Over the Horn" noted that the Eritrean President, in an interview with a Swedish journalist, accused the jailed private journalist as having been "funded by the CIA."
107 In an interview with the national media in January 2009, Isaias Afewerki asserted that people had become "spoiled brats who need to exercise restraint in the type and amount of food they consume."
108 Dan Connell interview with *New York Times* correspondent Jeffrey Gettleman. Gettleman 2007.

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