

# From resistance to governance

## How the EPLF/PFDJ experience shapes Eritrea's regional strategy

By Dan Connell\*

Power in Eritrea is exercised through layers that are increasingly opaque as one approaches the center, like a set of Russian *matryoshka* dolls, nesting one inside the other. An exploration of this phenomenon as it developed within the circle that now rules Eritrea sheds light on the way the country's "acting" but unelected president, former guerrilla commander Isaias Afwerki, governs and helps us to understand the way he and his circle act to extend Eritrea's influence across the Horn of Africa.<sup>1</sup> The two are intimately linked and reflect a sophisticated approach to force multiplication that uses small, disciplined "cores" to manipulate larger, more loosely organized bodies to achieve political ends. Organization, not ideology, is the governing principle and effectiveness the determining value—a feature that is often misunderstood and mischaracterized by observers.

Though it is clear that ultimate authority in all political matters within Eritrea today rests with President Isaias himself (Eritreans go by first names and do not use inherited surnames), it is hard to pin down how specific decisions are made, even if one is on the inside of the ruling liberation movement, once known as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) but now calling itself the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Part of the difficulty is that the conduits through which power is exercised change from one to another, as Isaias shifts among instrumentalities and individuals to carry out particular tasks and policies. It is also complicated by his propensity for moving people from position to position within both the People's Front, as the EPLF/PFDJ is known in Eritrea, and the state, much as Haile Selassie did with the Ethiopian nobility in the 1950s and 1960s, or by removing officials from active duty by "freezing" them in a peculiar status where they continue to be paid but are not permitted to do their former jobs or to seek alternative work. These practices are designed to prevent the accumulation of power not only in particular individuals but also in geographical or institutional bases.

But the main problem in charting the exercise of power in post-independence Eritrea is that Isaias operates through nesting organizational and political mechanisms that are hidden from sight. This chapter will retrace the development of this pattern—Isaias's *modus operandi*—as it is present in nearly every political relationship or project in which he is engaged. It will then apply this pattern to Eritrea's regional relations in order to demonstrate that the country's foreign policy, as erratic as it may sometimes seem to the uninitiated observer, is guided by identifiable principles and predictable outcomes.

### Liberation: The Formative Years

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Isaias has worked through front organizations from his earliest involvement in politics at secondary school in Asmara in the 1960s, where he was part of an illegal, underground group set up to nurture and promote Eritrean culture, then banned by the Emperor's provincial administrators. Ethiopian authorities knew about the organization but tolerated it, as they viewed it more as a minor irritant than a threat. However, the semi-underground cultural organization housed a secret cell dedicated to building a militant nationalist movement—a structure that provided a protective buffer between the political core and the authorities (Connell, 2004: 25-68).

His political involvement at Haile Selassie University in Addis Abba followed the same pattern, as Isaias and others who had come south from Asmara participated in the quasi-legal student movement there but maintained strict secrecy and discipline in a clandestine party that operated inside the larger movement. He carried this approach with him when he joined the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1965 with a plan to challenge that organization's ethnic and regional warlord structure from within, and he took it to the new Popular Liberation Forces—the precursor of the EPLF—when he and others broke with the ELF in 1969, not long after he returned from China where one of the most important lessons he took from his political training was the centrality for any revolutionary project of a vanguard party. Certainly he was not alone in this—nor always the one in front of it—as the threat to political activists in these environments was very real and the secrecy they practiced was adaptive. But whatever the rationale, the experience was seminal in shaping the organizational and political strategy he brought to the independence movement in the 1970s.

In fact, the EPLF's consolidation as a unified coherent political and military force at the start of that decade—stitched together out of three breakaway groups from the ELF, each of widely differing political orientation—took place under the direct guidance of a newly formed clandestine party, the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), launched in 1971 by Isaias and a handful of his closest comrades and later, in the 1980s, renamed the Eritrean Socialist Party. It was the EPRP that ran the EPLF throughout its existence up to the point where the front seized power in Eritrea in 1991 and began a transition from resistance to governance. This experience is seminal to Isaias's political development; understanding it is key to grasping how he rules (Connell, 2004: 139-169).

The employment of onion-like layers of organizational disguise was the mechanism through which Isaias and his cohort unified the three former ELF fractions into the Eritrean People's Liberation Forces and then, after their 1977 organizational congress, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. They accomplished this through the consolidation of the leadership, which at its core was simply the leadership of the EPRP without identifying itself as such, and through the development of ideological unity among the fighters via an intensive political indoctrination process led by clandestine party cadre operating within the new force. Those who held out were eliminated or arrested—some held for years in primitive prisons similar to those in use for dissidents today—during two major purges prior to the congress. The first was targeted at critics from the left

identified as the *menqa* (Tigrinya for bats, those who move about at night), the second at those coming from the right who were called *yamin* (Arabic for right).

This mix of infiltration and indoctrination from below was the strategy the EPRP intended to use in a protracted merger they proposed to the ELF in the late 1970s, which ELF leaders no doubt grasped, as they had a secret party of their own, the Eritrean Labor Party, and therefore resisted in that form. The result of this standoff was renewed civil war in 1980-81 in which the ELF itself was eliminated as a force within Eritrea, though it and its various offshoots lived on outside.

The EPRP went on to guide the EPLF throughout the 1970s and most of the 1980s, managing the visible structures of the front, both its non-military departments and its fighting units, through a network of disciplined cadre and a hidden leadership. The EPRP Central Committee was the EPLF Politburo, with a single exception (the late Mohammed Siad Barre). EPRP congresses were convened secretly ahead of the two EPLF congresses (1977 and 1987) so that programs could be drafted and slates drawn up for the leadership in advance of the open sessions. In fact, all major policy decisions throughout this period were imposed on the front after being taken by the party, which was under Isaias's direct control even as he acted the part of the second in command of the front in public behind EPLF General Secretary Romedan Mohammed Nur, who was for all practical purposes a figurehead.

There was a major power struggle within the party and the front in the mid-1980s carried out under the rubric of the "Three Privileges Campaign." This was a Cultural Revolution-style crusade in which Isaias appealed to mid-level cadres to heap shame on their leaders for drinking, womanizing, and using their positions to secure material advantages. After weakening his political rivals, he brought three generals into the party and front leadership, installing them on the EPRP's Central Committee and, as a direct consequence, adding them to an expanded EPLF Politburo that was finally under Isaias's explicit leadership. Today, they are among the most powerful people in the country. But in terms of behavioral patterns, what is illuminating here is that the campaign itself was a dress rehearsal for the 2001 purge that was conducted along more or less the same lines and that completed Isaias's seizure of unchallenged power within both the PFDJ and the state. In this respect, it was the first phase of a two-part *coup d'état* from above.

The restructuring of the EPLF at the end of the 1980s and the introduction of large-scale military conscription signified the start of the transition from resistance to governance. It got underway in earnest after the dramatic EPLF battlefield victory at Afabet in March 1988 and gathered momentum through the final battle outside Asmara in April 1991. During this time, the EPLF's armed forces grew exponentially to nearly 100,000 men and women, even as the content of the political indoctrination shifted from egalitarian internationalist to fervently nationalist (Connell, 1997: 321-324, 331-333). This was also the point where Isaias unilaterally froze the operations of the clandestine party—then calling itself the Eritrean Socialist Part—though he continued to meet with its top leadership in secret up to the front's transitional 1994 congress. Meanwhile, the EPLF's non-military departments were reorganized in preparation for their absorption into the new state, officials were moved

around, and the mass organizations of women, workers, peasant farmers and youth and students were suspended. This last, coupled with the acceleration of military conscription, was done mainly to focus the front's energy, attention, and resources on ending the war, but it also provided a means to deconstruct the front's internal political structures ahead of the effort to rebuild them in new forms and under a restructured leadership within new state—that is to say, to marginalize Isaias's rivals and position a new generation to take their place.

### **From Resistance to Governance**

From this point forward, the state became the main instrument of rule, with a restructured front, now called the PFDJ, reduced to the role of an implementing body with specialized functions, particularly in the economy but also in monitoring capacity and behavior at the base of the society. In this regard, it became more a mechanism of social control than the EPLF had been, while the state took on many of the functions the front had had during the war years. However, there were parallel channels within state and front that offered Isaias options for implementing political decisions or mobilizing public opinion and action and for checking each institutional body's influence and power in the society at large.

Today, Eritrea appears to lack a structured party-within-a-party but that in itself proves little, as the party that ran the liberation front throughout the 1970s and 1980s was not obvious either. Instead, what one sees from the outside are the effects of organized, clandestine decision-making from which one can extrapolate that now, as then, there is an organized force managing both the PFDJ and the state. It may or not be a formal, named party with tiered internal leadership structures, periodic congresses and a body of trained, like-minded cadre, but it is obvious that the nested exercise of power is still the rule and that the visible political institutions in Eritrea are little more than a façade.

The formal structure of the state is built an executive branch with its various ministries and departments, a legislative branch centered on the National Assembly but having its counterpart at the regional and local levels, and a judiciary consisting of an elaborate tiered court system topped off by the High Court in Asmara. This is paralleled in the ruling PFDJ in a pyramid-style power structure whose upper levels are ostensibly elected by and accountable to the tiers just below them—and ultimately to the general population. Much as was the case with the EPLF during the independence war, the party convenes periodic congresses that elect a Central Council to act between congresses on behalf of the whole, and it in turn elects an Executive Committee to manage the party's day-to-day affairs. But, as had been the case in the EPLF, this organizational chart has proven to be little more than decoration, as decisions have consistently flowed downward through these tiers rather than upward from the base. And for that matter, the PFDJ has not even feigned a democratic process by convening a congress since February 1994 when it was first installed. In reality these institutions have never functioned as seats of power in the sense of originating decisions or policies or holding others accountable for decisions or policies. Their function instead has been as implementers and enforcers of decisions made elsewhere.

What counts in post-independence Eritrea are the informal channels. Among the most important are:

- Appointees in the President's Office.
- Leaders of the armed forces (the four theater operation generals and a handful of other top officers, but not the Minister of Defense who is a figurehead with little power or influence).
- Leaders of the security services, particularly those grouped around National Security chief Abraha Kassa.
- Department heads in the PFDJ Secretariat, who control the heights of the economy and serve as key political advisors to Isaias.
- Individual rising stars scattered among other institutions, such as Information Minister Ali Abdu.

The first of these, the President's Office, constitutes a structure parallel to that of the Council of Ministers on critical matters of policy and includes advisers who meet privately with Isaias to hammer out critical decisions and who do not report to anyone else. The ministries are apprised of these decisions and asked to implement them. Nothing of what this office does is on the public record. The core leadership of the PFDJ constitutes another such instrumentality, affording Isaias options for designing and implementing programs without scrutiny and for monitoring the outlook and behavior of the general population.<sup>2</sup> And the top tier of the armed forces, particularly the theater operation commanders who trump civil authorities throughout the country—provides yet another one, though their role is primarily that of enforcement and security. (Both the commanders and the civilian *zoba*, or regional, governors are appointed by Isaias.)<sup>3</sup>

The president uses all of these individuals and offices at different times, sometimes in overlapping assignments and in some cases—notably the generals, the civilian administrators, and the cabinet ministers—moves them from one post or geographical area of responsibility to another with little warning or consultation and no public discussion. As noted above, one reason for this is to keep them off balance and to avoid investing control in a single institution or region. However, this may also reflect the fact that a secret party or party-like network is practicing a division of labor as opportunities present themselves, much as happened during the liberation war, without regard for the public institutions through which it acts. With or without such a party, though, the institutions themselves simply do not matter, and the offices are largely ceremonial, unless Isaias personally invests those who hold them with authority.

Independence-war hero Petros Solomon, a charter member of the EPRP's central committee and the front's politburo, illustrated this in an anecdote he told me about his tenure as Foreign Minister in the mid-1990s. After mentioning that Isaias broke relations with Sudan at the end of 1994 without telling him until afterward, he described learning about the conflict with Yemen over the Hamish Islands a year later in a casual phone call well after the fighting was well underway. "You know they called our ministry the 'fire brigade,'" Petros told me. "We always said, 'The President throws a bomb past us, and then we have to move in and put out the fire.'"

He said he was not consulted on the situation but rather given instructions on what he was to do for damage control. This, he said, was typical. His job as a minister was not policy-making but public relations, a key reason he decided to resign his ministerial post. However, when he voiced his concerns, Isaias declined to permit him to leave government service—or to get out from under control by the party—and instead shifted him to the Ministry of Fisheries, whose administrative offices were out of the capital but not out of view of the president’s security apparatus (Connell, 2004: 128-130).

### **Cracks in the Facade**

Throughout the period between Eritrea’s wars with Ethiopia, 1991-1998, there were two trends contending under the old EPLF umbrella for the shape and the structure of the post-liberation political landscape—one more democratic than the other, though both had roots in the same authoritarian culture of the EPRP/EPLF.

Isaias and his inner circle were committed to what they called “guided democracy,” a highly centralized form of control through which they proposed to reconstruct and develop the economy and unify and transform the society before relinquishing the reins of power. Democracy in this view had more to do with participation (voluntary or not) than accountability and, in the tradition of state-centered authoritarian socialism, a hierarchy of values that relegated political democracy to the status of a luxury. For those wedded to this concept, the answer to all queries about civic or human rights was: The time is not right.

Up against this outlook—to which many latter day critics had once subscribed, or at least to which they had passively acquiesced—was what one might loosely call a or rights-based trend. This sphere of belief if not activity—for it was not a self-identified movement until long past this interim period—included people, organizations and spontaneous expressions of all sorts, many of whom never talked with one another, let alone worked together. There were the critics within the EPLF/PFDJ leadership, such as those identified with the former liberation front leaders and high level government officials known as the Group of 15 (G15). There were members of rival nationalist organizations, all of which were banned by the EPLF from operating publicly. There were the new institutions of Eritrea’s fragile civil society, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the private newspapers that sprang up prior to and in the early years of the border war. There were prominent individuals associated with the process of organizing and drafting the new constitution, as well as artists, entrepreneurs, and others who had tasted liberty in their personal or political lives and believed in its creative power without having a fully formed ideology based upon this. However, though many people subscribing to it were in effect traveling in the same direction, they were not organized, they had no clear strategy (or at least no effective one), and they were thoroughly isolated from one another. As a result, those that popped up to challenge the emerging dictatorship were easily targeted and quickly crushed.

Key milestones in the consolidation of autocracy through the 1990s included:

- The failure to permit the rival ELF to return to Eritrea in 1991 to participate in reconstruction and nation-building.
- The defusing of a major protest in May 1993 by rank and file EPLF fighters and the subsequent arrest of protest leaders over the forced extension of their terms of service at subsistence levels.
- The violent response to a disabled veterans protest in 1994.
- The restructuring of elected village assemblies to a system of party-appointed leaders at the start of the decade.
- The closure of domestic NGOs in the mid-1990s.
- The sharp restriction of foreign NGOs in the same period and the subsequent expulsion of many of them.
- The restructuring of the armed forces as a purely nationalist force lacking the political culture of the liberation era (Kebreab, 2009).

Then came the return to a permanent war-footing when fighting broke out with Ethiopia in May 1998 after a series of incidents along the as-yet-undemarcated border—what amounted to an indefinite though undeclared state of emergency that has since been used to suppress all independent organizing or expressions of dissent and to justify the open-ended extension of conscripted national service. The conflict itself capped a series of military set-tos between Eritrea and its neighbors, confrontations which to this day Eritrean officials explain away as each having its own distinctive characteristics without seeming to reflect on the pattern of the Eritrean response, which is invariably a resort to military force rather than negotiation. In this respect and others, Isaias still behaves as if he is the commander of a liberation army and not the head of a state. But the conflict with Ethiopia dwarfed those with Sudan, Yemen, and Djibouti that preceded it—and it has shaped Eritrea’s role in the region ever since. The fighting itself, erupting three times between mid-1998 and mid-2000, also provided an arena for a climactic confrontation between the two contesting political trends within the leadership and for what amounted to a coup from above.

Most accounts of Isaias’s brutal consolidation of power during and after the “border war” focus on the public political struggle that broke out in 2001 when mass arrests of critics were carried out and all public discussion of political issues was effectively squelched, but the contest at the leadership level had already come to a head in 2000. In fact, it first surfaced among top party and state officials at an informal level in June 1998 when Isaias refused to go along with a U.S.-Rwanda proposal for disengagement during several rounds of shuttle diplomacy between Asmara and Addis Ababa (Connell, 2004: 103-124). It began to build momentum in a series of secret meetings among top-ranking critics in 1999, particularly after round two of the war with Ethiopia in February and March when Isaias was forced to concede control of the disputed village of Badme and accept what was in effect precisely the terms of a truce he had rejected several months earlier when presented them by the mediators. But he did so only after losing actual control of the disputed village and after suffering embarrassing losses in the field. By this time Ethiopia had forwarded a new set of demands for Eritrean withdrawal from other disputed territory, some of which had been seized by Eritrean forces in the first round of fighting, which Isaias summarily dismissed, leaving the two sides more or less where they had been prior

to this round, except with different flashpoints to bicker over. The result was eminently predictable—diplomatic stalemate and renewed mobilization for yet another round of fighting.

During the third round of fighting when Ethiopian forces overpowered the Eritreans and very nearly broke through to Asmara, the leaders of this slowly evolving challenge are reported to have raised the question of whether Isaias should consider stepping down from his post voluntarily in order to facilitate a negotiated end to the combat. He refused to entertain the notion and would later use it to accuse his critics of treason, claiming they acted not on their own but at the behest of the U.S. and Italy, which then represented the European Union in Eritrea. Peace itself thus became treasonous if it involved questioning Isaias's authority or competence, much as would later be the case in Mugabe's Zimbabwe.

Meanwhile, many party and state leaders in Eritrea were beginning to question the president's judgment as each round of fighting produced an outcome opposite to that he had predicted. They voiced their criticisms directly to him at a closed session of the PFDJ leadership in January 2000, five months before the last round of fighting, and they took them up again with greater force in an August 2000 PFDJ executive council meeting, after the disastrous battlefield losses in May and June. They did so a third time in the National Assembly session in September, at which they mobilized a large majority to call for commissions to assess the country's conduct in the war and to produce guidelines for multiparty national elections. (This was the last time Isaias permitted either the party leadership or the National Assembly to meet until it was purged of his critics in 2001.) At the same time, critics within the party were reaching out to allies in the emerging civil society movement, a movement that had already produced a strong letter of criticism delivered to Isaias in October 2000.

This letter, which came to be known as the "Berlin Manifesto," called for greater transparency in Eritrea's institutions and greater freedom of expression, and it questioned the causes of what it called "this tragic war." It went on to declare that Eritrea was at a "crossroads" and insisted that "the military threat posed by Ethiopia cannot be dealt with separately from the political and economic challenges that confront us as a new nation." It was signed by thirteen prominent civic leaders and academics, including the former head of the Constitution Commission, Dr. Bereket Habte Selassie. Once its contents were leaked to the Eritrean press and published on the internet, its authors were dubbed the Group of 13 or G13. For his part, Isaias dismissed them out of hand, meeting with two of them and berating them harshly while refusing to respond to any of their concerns. The letter's publication marked a sharp escalation of the challenge to him and the first time it had spilled into the public sphere. The confrontation escalated steadily from then on.

### **The Consolidation of Dictatorship**

A limited public political debate had been tolerated up to this point and had gained momentum with appearance of a vigorous and critical if small private press. But the public exchanges became increasingly vitriolic in the first six months of 2001, as the PFDJ began convening seminars for its mid-level cadre to prepare the ground for a move



against Isaias's higher level critics—seminars to which the ministers, generals and other top leaders who had criticized his behavior privately were systematically excluded. No one doubted where this was headed.

With Isaias also blocking efforts to reconvene both the PFDJ's executive council and the National Assembly, all avenues for private debate had been slammed shut, so the critics from within the ruling party went public with an Open Letter chastising Isaias for his anti-democratic behavior and calling for structural reforms of the party and the state, as well as a full and open assessment of the war with Ethiopia. They were quickly nicknamed the Group of 15 (G15) for the number of signers, who included former ministers of defense, foreign affairs, trade and industry, and others, several of whom had roots in the origins of the EPLF itself. A handful of the most prominent also gave highly critical interviews to the private press, and for several months, it was nearly impossible to buy a daily newspaper in Asmara after 10 a.m, for they sold out as soon as they hit the newsstands. Then came a conference of the International Eritrean Studies Association in July, the first ever in Asmara, at which local activists and academics discussed Eritrea's democratic future with visiting scholars in packed panels and plenaries at the Intercontinental Hotel. One session included a passionate exchange between High Court Chief Justice Teame Beyene and top presidential advisor and PFDJ Political Affairs head Yemane Gebreab over the issue of Isaias's interference in judicial independence. (Teame was fired a week later.)

But what amounted to Eritrea's version of "Prague Spring" came to a crushing halt in the summer and fall of 2001 with a wave of high-profile arrests, starting with University of Asmara student union president Semere Kesete, jailed at the end of July for criticizing the university president and the government in his valedictory address. Six weeks later, signers of the Open Letter who were in the country at the time together with members of the private press were swept up in a massive crackdown on 18 and 19 September; hundreds more were arrested, often for indeterminate periods, in the weeks and months that followed. The continuing hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea then provided the Isaias government a rationale for indefinitely suspending moves toward democratization and for suppressing all public criticism of the regime. Soon after this crackdown, the government began carrying out house-to-house round-ups of young people who were accused of avoiding national service and often beaten in public places before being crammed into military trucks and taken away for service with no opportunity to contact family members and nothing with them but the clothes on their backs.

People who questioned the policies of the regime or refused service to it simply disappeared. No charges were brought against them, and no one had access to them once they were imprisoned (even their families). The lack of clarity on what would get one arrested engendered a pervasive terror of the authorities and a growing mistrust of friends, neighbors, co-workers and others within the general population. Many dissidents and critics, particularly members of the military, were incarcerated in unfurnished shipping containers in the desert lowlands along the Red Sea coast and on offshore islands in the Dahlak Archipelago where they were often beaten and held for long periods with inadequate water and food. This led to a significant number of deaths, according to

sources among those who later escaped or were released, though it is impossible to know how many as the government routinely denies the practice, and no neutral party has been granted access to these prisoners, whose numbers are thought to run to the thousands.

Former prisoners and escapees from the armed forces tell disturbingly similar stories about a wide range of commonly used torture techniques used against dissenters, including the “helicopter” in which the victim is stripped of his clothing, tied with his arms behind his back and either laid on the ground face down or hung from a tree branch and left in this position for several days and nights in succession. In one well-documented and widely publicized incident in November 2004 dozens of young conscripts were killed at a prison camp at Adi Abieto when they protested their treatment. In its 2006 human rights assessment for Eritrea, the U.S. State Department noted reports that more than 160 conscripts were executed in 2006 when they tried to flee the infamous Wia army camp in the blistering Massawa coastal lowlands ([www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78733.htm](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78733.htm)).

### **Eritrea’s Regional Relations**

The ruling circle’s experiences during the liberation struggle and through their first decade of governance repeatedly showcase the pattern by which they gained and then exercised power. If we turn to the region for an examination of how the new country behaves toward its neighbors, we will find similar patterns at work where Isaias has used nesting organizations within regional opposition formations to both disguise and multiply his circle’s impact and influence and as they have reflexively fallen back on force and coercion when their subterfuges failed to sustain the results they sought. If such actions appear “irrational” to observers, it is only because those trying to decipher them are not reading the code correctly. To start with, Eritrea’s regional strategy is driven by two overlapping concerns:

- 1.) A long-range view that as a small, vulnerable state with extremely limited resources but a vision of itself as a major player in the region, Eritrea needs to keep its larger neighbors either in its thrall or internally divided in order to compromise their ability to govern and therefore to project power in the region. The most effective vehicle for this is insurgent forces that challenge them from within, support for whom will yield leverage over those regimes and over other powers with interests in the region.
- 2.) In the short and medium-term, a view that the best defense of Eritrea’s own borders against hostile acts by neighboring states or by oppositional groups based in them is the construction and support of effective insurgent forces that will, as a *quid pro quo*, assist it in patrolling its borders—acting as buffers as well as levers.

The EPLF’s approach to Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s models the Asmara government’s current behavior and should be carefully scrutinized. After the Emperor was deposed in 1974 by a military junta calling itself the *derg* (Amharic for committee), the EPLF invested heavily in the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP, not to be confused with the Eritrean party of the same initials) as a vehicle for replacing the new regime with one disposed to accept the former colony’s independence and to recognize

the EPLF as its rightful ruler. Initially, it looked to a party with common ideological and political roots, as well as personal relationships.<sup>4</sup> However, with the Ethiopian EPRP's decline as a significant force less than three bloody years after the coup—taking with it the option of an all-Ethiopia alternative to the ruling Derg—the EPLF redirected its primary support toward a medley of ethnic opposition forces that included the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), among others. At the same time, the EPLF began to assert pressure on the TPLF to abandon its ethnic nationalism and build an integrated, national (that is, all-Ethiopian) alternative to the derg, an approach that contributed to the falling out between EPLF and TPLF in the mid-1980s and that was a continuing source of tension once they reconstituted their tactical alliance at the end of that decade, as the TPLF, itself torn between regional and national ambitions, chafed under Eritrea's insistent interference in its political life (Connell, 1998B).

Both this strategic outlook and the pattern of behavior toward allied movements (treating them as subordinates, rather than partners) informed the approach of the EPLF's successor, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), toward Sudan throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Among the groups the Eritreans supported there were a small force to the left of the Sudanese Communist Party in the 1980s that had grown out of the trade union movement and later merged into the Sudan Alliance Forces (SAF); the SPLM/A starting in the early 1990s; the Free Officers Movement, which became the dominant trend in the SAF, in the mid-to-late 1990s; and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) as a whole from 1995 onward, after assisting it to come together out of the moribund condition it was in prior to that. However, when these successive investments proved ineffective as national alternatives to the sitting regime, Eritrea stepped up its support for regional forces in Darfur, the northeast and elsewhere, while taking advantage of several of these armed groups (then based in or just across the border from western Eritrea) to strengthen its own border defenses against Sudan-backed jihadists. This included the provision of food supplies, uniforms and other goods, repair and maintenance of vehicles, military advice and training, and political direction in the form of lengthy seminars at the remote, mountainous rebel base area at Belasid.

Acting mainly through the PFDJ under the guidance of Organizational Affairs head Abdella Jaber, they built a caucus within NDA out of small regional and ethnic forces they thought they could control as a counterforce to both the large, traditional sect-based parties and the alliance's main military force, the SPLM/A. They also sought to influence, if not manage, the SPLM within an overall effort to manipulate the NDA, though they were less successful at this. And they promoted Democratic Unionist Party head Mohammed Osman Mirghani as the alliance's nominal front man, as Isaias had done with Romedan Mohamed Nur in EPLF up to 1987, as I described earlier.

When this investment of attention and resources, too, failed to generate an effective, sustained opposition on a national level and as the SPLM, under intense U.S. pressure, entered substantive negotiations with Khartoum to reach a truce to end the north-south conflict and then to pull its forces out of other regional theaters, Eritrea stepped up investment in Darfur and the northeast, where it worked with the Beja Congress and the

Rashaida Free Lions to form yet another regional alliance called the Eastern Front. This retrenchment from national to regional forces echoed its earlier repositioning in Ethiopia, though it was driven by different externalities. In doing so, it reflected a consistency in strategy and tactics toward the region, as the Eritreans adapted to changing opportunities without regard for ideological or cultural affinity or, for that matter, anything but a pragmatic assessment of where and through whom it could exercise leverage.

Simultaneously and with the same logic, Eritrea was investing in opposition movements within Ethiopia and developing allies in Somalia, a process with roots well before this conflict in the historic relationship between the EPLF and political figures and organizations in both Ethiopia and Somalia. Among the forces it has supported in Ethiopia with training, strategic advice and logistical assistance are the Oromo Liberation Front, the Ogaden National Liberation Front, the Tigray People's Democratic Movement, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement and armed groups from the Sidamo and Beni Shangul regions of southern Ethiopia. But its most significant—and effective—assets have been the Somali groups challenging the Ethiopian-backed Transitional National Government there.

These investments paid off dramatically in 2006 when the Islamic Courts Union, acting with Eritrean logistical support and military advice (if not the thousands of boots on the ground claimed by some critics at the time), seized control of Mogadishu and presided over the first period of relative stability the shattered society had experienced in more than fifteen years. But the ICU quickly overreached and, as happened to the Eritreans in Badme in May 1998, they were baited into a confrontation that provided Ethiopia with an excuse to invade, which it promptly did. This was not the first Ethiopian incursion into Somalia, but it was far the largest, and it was done with direct American collaboration in the planning and execution, a fact that reverberated throughout the region after the U.S. also carried out air raids targeted at al Qaeda operatives reported to be in southern Somalia.

The Eritreans, not surprisingly, saw this as a joint U.S.-Ethiopian operation that provided the final proof of the alliance against them that Isaias and others had been railing about for months. But the rapid Ethiopian drive to Mogadishu was, like the American push to Bagdad in 2004, quickly followed by the onset of a fierce and apparently unexpected insurgency in which Eritrea was deeply implicated, both for the dimensions of the fighting and for its sophisticated strategy and tactics. To give this a greater level of political coherence—and to institutionalize its own influence—Eritrea then invited all anti-Ethiopian forces to come to Asmara to establish an NDA-style coalition. In the event, the Somalis did so and created the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (the ARS), another broad front aimed at draining the resources and fighting capacity of its main foe, Ethiopia, and another example of the Isaias circle's strategy of force multiplication through the layering of political organizations, onion-style, around a core they hoped to use to steer the larger bodies.

Here again, Isaias demonstrated that he would support whatever group appears to advance Eritrea's interests within the region. If the tide was running toward Islamists, as

it appeared to be doing in Somalia, Isaias and his circle would ride the wave. Were it secular nationalists, they would also do so, for these were instrumentalities, not ends. This does not in any way suggest an ideological shift for a state built on principles of radical secularism and which itself faces a threat from Eritrean Islamists—just an extension of their long-standing strategic goal of weakening Ethiopia from as many directions as possible until they achieve a balance of forces favorable to a direct confrontation. And they will do so through nested organizations within broader alliances, as they have done in Eritrea itself, in Ethiopia and in Sudan, whatever the apparent ideological orientation, as they have become convinced through their own experience of the transience of ideology and the pre-eminence of national interest.

Such transparently self-serving stratagems can also—and often do—backfire, however, as others have interests, not always coincident with those of Eritrea. The most obvious case in point is the relationship with the TPLF, treated in the 1980s like a junior partner even to the extent of being called into service in Eritrea to help crush other Eritrean nationalist groups, as happened in the EPLF/ELF civil war in 1981, only to emerge at the head of a large, powerful and proud state, Ethiopia in the 1990s and no longer in a mood to be pushed around. Two incidents that I learned about on visits to the Eastern Front at the start of this decade demonstrate Eritrea's penchant for offending its "junior partners" even as they suggest the possibility of another such rupture in the future.

In 1999, Ahmed Bitai, the brother of a prominent Beja religious figure—Sheikh Sulieman—broke with the Beja Congress over internal differences and announced that he was taking his following to join NSB.<sup>5</sup> The Eritrean response was decisive and swift: In August in a scene with eerie echoes of Badme only one year earlier, they sent a large armed force supported by armor and infantry into the NDA base to demand that Bitai be turned over to them. The ensuing confrontation lasted three days, after which a humiliated NDA (SPLA included) acceded to Eritrean demands. Bitai was reportedly held for six months before being turned over to the Beja Congress and eventually released. At this point, the angry Bitai defected to Khartoum from which vantage point he worked to deepen divisions among the Sudanese Beja and to open avenues through Beja areas for Eritrean jihadists to infiltrate across the border, heightening the security threat to government and party installations throughout northern and coastal Eritrea.<sup>6</sup>

Later that year, after its devastating losses in the third round of war with Ethiopia and newly eager to protect its western flank, Eritrea launched a diplomatic initiative that brought Isaias and his foreign minister, the late Ali Said Abdella, to Khartoum in October to thaw relations between the two countries. But a few weeks after these meetings, SPLA commander Pagan Amum led a surprise attack on Kassala in without seeking prior approval from his Eritrean handlers, as was the standard operating procedure for all NDA military operations.<sup>7</sup> Cmdr. Amum later told me that the SPLM feared the Eritreans were losing faith in the NDA and might sell them out for a tactical advantage. For this reason, he said, the NDA needed to demonstrate its strength with a dramatic move that would, as a byproduct, undercut the Sudan-Eritrea rapprochement. Before he acted, he secured John Garang's personal okay, as well as Mirghani's approval, but none breathed a word of it to their Eritrean counterparts. In the event, a 2,000-strong joint SPLA/DUP/Beja force

captured the government garrison at Kassala and held it for nearly 48 hours, after which Khartoum's relations with Asmara quickly soured.

Both incidents illustrate the manner in which the Isaias circle seeks to control and direct the actions of their allies and proxies in the region and how such behavior can generate a backlash, as former allies build resentment over the use made of them and the absence of honest give-and-take among them. One can see in the latter incident the seeds of a rift between the SPLM/A and Asmara along the same lines as that between the EPLF and the TPLF, and it is likely the same will be true down the road with other Sudanese allies, as well as allies in Somalia, a phenomenon those disturbed at Eritrea's seemingly rogue behavior need to keep in mind in assessing the substance of such alliances and anticipating future outcomes.

### **Method to the Madness**

Some analysts have suggested that Eritrea's leadership, disillusioned with its early Marxist orientation, has undergone an ideological shift and somehow slipped into the Islamist camp, if in fact there is such a thing, which is an argument for another day. Others have charged that Eritrea is "out of control" and either implied that this reflected a loss of mental balance on the part of Isaias, whom they suggest is flailing about without rhyme or reason. But there is method to this apparent madness, as I have tried to demonstrate. The Isaias circle's ideology is and has always been one of radical nationalism distorted of late, perhaps, by the intensifying megalomania of their leader, but nevertheless quite consistent. In fact, the basic mode of action of the state is the same as it ever was for the liberation movement and for the party that guided it—and is eminently predictable.

The Isaias approach starts with the premise, drawn from long experience of manipulation and betrayal, that if you trust no one, you can ally with anyone. There are no bad allies, only ineffective ones. This holds true inside country and in the region as a whole—throughout the world, for that matter. Such a crass Machiavellian formulation is, of course, a variation on the enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend approach to foreign relations, but it runs deeper than that, for it posits that there are no reliable "friends" anywhere, only tactical allies. Thus, when former friends turn against Eritrea, as the TPLF did, this only proves the premise: They were not genuine friends in the first place. Paranoid? Perhaps. But Isaias has history on his side in this argument, and many Eritreans share this outlook, making it relatively easy to convince them that yesterday's partner is today's adversary.

Another key tenet of the Isaias circle's approach to regional relations drawn from the liberation movement's experience is the firm conviction that ideology is ephemeral—that it is a mobilizing tool arising from current conditions (local and global) and that it can and should be adapted or even jettisoned when those conditions change (as was Marxism-Leninism within the EPRP/EPLF experience). Nationalism is the first principle, with all else subordinated to it. And it is the liberation movement's experience that is decisive in shaping how this nationalism is conceptualized and practiced, for in many respects the

new and yet fragile state of Eritrea functions as an enlargement of the guerrilla base area from which Isaias operated for decades in which precise borders do not matter as much as they appear to, unless they provide leverage for mobilizing the nation and for extending its influence outward.

History demonstrates again and again that Eritrea will aggressively pursue its interests on the basis of convictions and via mechanisms that the Isaias circle—ever changing in its make-up but for the man at the center—has used from its earliest days. So long as its interests are substantively threatened, as they are now by a hostile Ethiopia, the Eritreans under Isaias will find ways to escalate the pressures on their foe through proxies and allies, using the devices and interlocking relationships described above. But, though stirring up trouble among their neighbors, injecting themselves into existing conflicts, and pulling disparate political forces together to increase their impact can exacerbate already existing problems, the Eritrean's penchant for (and skill at) multi-tiered regional engagement also creates avenues for conflict resolution by their very capacity to influence the positions and negotiating stances of conflicting parties, as we saw with the Eastern Front in 2006 when it suited Eritrea to defuse tensions with Sudan. Similar possibilities exist in Darfur and in Somalia, though they seemed in the latter case too distasteful to the Bush administration to make use of. And this is precisely Eritrea's intent: to be a player in regional politics that local and global powers ignore at their peril.

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**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Isaias assumed his present position as head of state when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, which he commanded, seized control of the country in 1991. He was confirmed by a transitional National Assembly set up in the mid-1990s out of the liberation front's 75-member central council and a similar number of party-designated representatives from regional assemblies, but national elections yet to be held, the ruling front has itself not had a congress since February 1994, and there has been no move to reconfirm Isaias's appointment by any other institutional body.

<sup>2</sup> Among the most important are PFDJ General Secretary Alamin Mohammed Said, the last of the EPRP's founding members to remain in Eritrea's current leadership, apart from Isaias himself; Political Affairs head Yemane Gebreab a "special advisor" to Isaias; Economic Affairs head Hagos Gebrehiwot, who manages the PFDJ's extensive holdings through the Red Sea Corporation; Organizational Affairs head Abdella Jaber, responsible for managing Eritrea's regional proxies; and former ELF cadre Zemhret Yohannes, who is responsible for information and culture for the PFDJ.

<sup>3</sup> The Zonal Commanders include Brig. General "Manjus" Tekle Kiflai, Major General Philipos Weldeyohannes, Major General "China" Haile Samuel, and Major General "Wuchu" Grezgher Andemariam. The Commander of the Air Force, Major General Teklai Habteselassie, is also in this elite circle.

<sup>4</sup> The similarity in the names of the two revolutionary parties was hardly a coincidence. Both took shape within the student movement at Haile Selassie University in the early 1970s. The particular formulation of a "people's revolutionary party" is one that shows up often among Maoist parties of that era.

<sup>5</sup> Author interview with the ranking SPLA Political-Military Officer, Belasid, Sudan, 2 February 2001.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Eritrea's involvement with the Eastern Front, see Dan Connell, "War and Peace in Sudan: The Case of the Bejas," Crisis in the Horn of Africa, SSRC Web forum (available at <http://hornofafrica.ssrc.org/Connell>).

<sup>7</sup> Author interview with SPLA Cmdr. Pagan Amum, Asmara, 19 January 2001.