

# The Battalion State

Securitization  
and Nation-Building  
in Eritrea

Christian Bundegaard

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## **Preface**

Christian Bundegaard's study on nation-building in Eritrea, the second in this year's Occasional Paper series, continues the central aim of the PSIS of catering to both academics and the policy-making community. The paper not only represents a contribution to current debates in the field of security studies, but also highlights the importance of insights gained from the case study of Eritrea for pragmatic decision-making in the international arena.

Recent developments in the International Relations literature have focused on the discursive aspects of concepts central to the field. Following trends in linguistics and philosophy that may broadly be placed under the heading of the "linguistic turn", social constructivist and critical approaches have turned their attention to the way in which decision-making processes are embedded in the norms and practices shaped through discourse. In the area of security studies, perhaps the most prominent of these new approaches is the theory of securitization developed by the Copenhagen School. As part of the call to both broaden and deepen the security agenda, the securitization approach employs language theory in an attempt to consider security as a speech act. The utterance of the word security already moves a par-

ticular political discourse into a specific direction, and thus securitizes an issue.

This Occasional Paper endeavours to demonstrate the value-added of such an approach. Using his on-the-ground knowledge of the African Horn, Christian Bundegaard shows to what extent the nation-building process of the newly independent Eritrean state is embedded in a narrative of securitization, and that this discourse actually hinders development. Drawing in particular upon the work of Mohammed Ayob and Charles Tilly, Bundegaard links what Ayob calls the “obsession with security” of Third World elites with Eritrea’s move from the state of war to the post-war state. Arguing that the Eritrean leadership makes excessive use of an alleged collective identity based on the “unity” derived from “the struggle” to gain independence, together with an “ideology of self-reliance”, Bundegaard shows how all matters of national importance are framed in terms of security. This narrative, hardened by the recent war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000, not only serves as an excuse to uphold authoritarian measures of government, but also structures Eritrean society through what is effectively a continued militarization of it.

An awareness of this government policy of covering up structural weaknesses of the state apparatus by prioritizing security before development and democracy, seems vital for the efforts of the international community to be successful. If donors, NGOs, and UN agencies do not understand the dynamics behind the securitization discourse of the Eritrean leadership, all attempts at promoting good governance there might well result in failure. Capacity-building in Eritrea requires demilitarizing civil society, legitimizing state institutions through a freely

elected government, and ensuring the protection of human rights. Yet arriving in the field with a set of “civilizational” aims is in itself not enough. Rather, what Christian Bundegaard’s study highlights is the importance of collaborating with local actors not just in terms of the implementation process, but first and foremost in order to gauge the specificity of each case. Only once the local circumstances have been fully apprehended, and only once external actors have demonstrated an awareness of the features specific to the region and a willingness to act accordingly, can the international community assist in working toward peaceful development in the African Horn.

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## The author

Christian Bundegaard is the former Literary Director of the Danish publishing house Gyldendal, and has previously worked for the National Danish Broadcast and as a Consultant for UNICEF. His academic interests include philosophical aspects of international relations, the concept of human security, discourses of politics, and international humanitarian law. He is currently a Research Fellow at the Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies (PSIS).

Christian Bundegaard studied the history of ideas at the University of Aarhus, as well as architecture at the School of Architecture there. He also read linguistics at the University of Copenhagen. As well as having published several articles on aesthetics, political philosophy and literature, he is the author of three collections of poetry and a collection of essays, *At fiske I himlen* (Copenhagen, 1998). He regularly writes about international issues in the Danish weekly newspaper *Weekendavisen*.

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# 1

## **Introduction**

The building of nations, which most Western countries would conceive of as a passed historical phase, has once again become a challenge – and this time, it seems, a global issue. During the decolonization process in the 1950s and early 1960s, the term “nation-building” was widely used to designate the task confronting the newly independent states of the Third World. In these states, nationhood, and a collective, national identity have since been perceived as something that needed to be deliberately constructed to establish unity.

While it has been much discussed whether the Western nation-state may or may not be experiencing a crisis due to the effects of globalization and a certain “metal fatigue” of the old democracies, there can be no doubt about the increasing engagement of the international community, as well as individual states, in what would earlier be considered as other states’ “internal affairs”. In recent years, an increasingly stronger notion of cross-border responsibility to try to prevent gross and systematic violations of human rights has come to the fore in the international arena. This “obligation to care” might be one of the primary characteristics of the post-Cold War world order.

In the aftermath of what according to this measure was to be considered as “the scandal of Rwanda”, this new type of involvement began in Kosovo, was consolidated with the United Nations (UN) administration and subsequent handover in East Timor, and has perhaps reached a level of functional maturity with the peacekeeping operations in West Africa. There are, of course, many complex reasons for this new form of engagement – not least an increased global awareness of world affairs, thanks to the continuous news stream that exposes the conflicts and thereby begs both response and responsibility.

This awareness, facilitated by the strengthened universalist stance of a defence of human rights and democracy, is making a stand for a new kind of less ideological, pragmatic, but nonetheless ethical approach to international relations. Knowing but doing nothing is increasingly becoming a *faux pas*. Based partly on a so-called “war against terrorism”, every foreign intervention is accompanied by an alleged effort to defend the peoples and nations in question against themselves. This involves the full-scale restructuring of post-conflict societies to meet political, legislative, and administrative standards, standards that are perceived as fundamental to democratic rule. From being the stuff of International Relations (IR) scholars and UN experts, subtle questions, such as the timetables for local governance to take over from peacekeeping forces, are discussed by the person in the street. Nation-building is on the agenda of civil discourse.

Nation-building efforts, and public discussions of them, proceed somewhat undisturbed by the fact

that it is far from clear what a nation actually is.<sup>1</sup> After dispassionately rejecting several definitions one by one, Ernest Renan, in his classic address of 1882, answered the question “*Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?*” by combining “*un riche legs de souvenirs*” from the past with a present “*désir de vivre ensemble*” to obtain “*une âme, un principe spirituel*”.<sup>2</sup> This spiritual aspect of the nation points to the questions of nationhood, national identity, nationalism, and other derivations of the narratives and myths that grow from the basic notion of “belonging”, as reflected in the rather blunt definition of a nation in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “A nation is the same people living in the same place”. The idea of sameness and unity that qualifies the notion of the “home” is perhaps precisely such a narrative, a story that has to be explicit and retold time and again. Benedict Anderson’s account of nations as “imagined communities” thus seems quite applicable, not only because it emphasizes the linking of fellow nationals who will never meet in person, but also because it suggests that nations are (also) mental arte-

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the vast literature on the subject admits to the elusiveness of the phenomenon, and scholars seem to agree that a satisfactory definition of the nation has yet to be derived. Eric Hobsbawm describes this “cloudiness” pretty well: “What is a (or the) nation? ... [are we] trying to fit historically novel, emerging, changing and, even today, far from universal entities into a framework of permanence and universality? Moreover, the criteria used for this purpose – language, ethnicity or whatever – are themselves fuzzy, shifting and ambiguous and as useless for purposes of the traveller’s orientation as cloud-shapes are compared to landmarks”, Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Renan, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une Nation’ [1882], in *Qu’est-ce qu’une Nation? et autres écrits politiques* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1996), 221-243, at 240.

facts.<sup>3</sup> Such an approach is, finally, well in line with the pragmatic (and polemically anti-nationalist) view expressed by Eric Hobsbawm, namely that any sufficiently large body of people, whose members regard themselves as members of a nation, could be treated as such. A nation could hence be defined anthropologically as a narration of loyalty to a group. Nations stem from political-economic state-making processes, but they are made up of individuals who believe they share a common heritage, incorporating elements of history, language, ethnicity, and culture.

The word “state”, by contrast, is generally used as a political and legal term, referring to the legal jurisdiction within which a state apparatus claims exclusivity, *de facto* control of territory, and diplomatic recognition by other states. The compound term “nation-state” thus most often refers to a state in which a single nation is dominant.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the process of nation-building may be seen as generally following (though at times preceding) the process of

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Some nation-states, however – with Switzerland being the classic example – are constituted of multiple linguistic, religious or ethnic groups, without any one having clear dominance over the others. According to Ulrich Beck, modern “cosmopolitan” states, or “open world states”, are based on the principle of the state’s national indifference. Open world states provide for “border-crossing closeness” of ethnic, national, and religious identities through constitutional tolerance: “In a manner similar to the way in which the Westphalian peace ended the confessionally charged civil wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> century through the separation of state and religion, the global (civil) war of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ... is answered by a separation of state and nation”. Ulrich Beck, “‘The Silence of Words’: On Terror and War”, *Security Dialogue*, 34:3 (September 2003), 255-267, at 266.

state formation as a conscious, political effort to create unity and loyalty within a state.

In his analysis of the role of the state in Third World development, Mohammed Ayoob claims that Third World state behaviour is determined to a great extent by an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability and insecurity emanating from a lack of “adequate state-ness”.<sup>5</sup> Thus, when leaders of the young states of the Third World appear to be obsessed with security, as Ayoob says, it derives from their perception of their state as being weak, vulnerable, and insecure. In their effort to impose order and unity, and create a state along the lines of the strong Western nation-state, Third World political elites will prioritize the “primitive accumulation of power in the hands of the state over the creation of popular consensus”. Not disposing of the three hundred years that was granted the making of the European nation-states, these “state makers in a hurry” attempt to replicate this process “on a ridiculously short timetable and with a predetermined set of goals”.<sup>6</sup> It is under this kind of stress that leaders tend to justify their often highly coercive conduct “in the guise of the imposition of national consciousness from above, by persuasion if possible and by force if necessary”.<sup>7</sup>

This paper aims to outline the problem of transition from the state of war to the post-war state, exempli-

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<sup>5</sup> Adequate state-ness defined as a balance of coercive capacity, infrastructural power, and unconditional legitimacy. Mohammed Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament – State Making, Regional Conflicts, and the International System* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995), 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

fied by the case of Eritrea. Although Eritrea in many ways differs from the prototypical Third World state, the Eritrean leadership has increasingly found itself in the hot water of state-making and nation-building “in a hurry”. While state sovereignty may be attained under dramatic circumstances, played out on the stage of world history, the craft of state-making and nation-building is often of a less heroic and even dull, bureaucratic nature. Hence, what the leadership of the victorious party in a post-conflict situation may perceive as the continuation of the struggle, could in reality be something quite different. “Strong politics” and a steadfast nationalist approach will often result in the obstruction of the creation of a civil, participating, accountable, democratic culture.

While the main challenge of most post-colonial independent African states was the legacy of colonial geography, administration and dependency-structure, Eritrea, having liberated itself from Ethiopia as late as 1991, rather faced the challenge of transforming the legacy of its liberation struggle into a functioning democracy. On one hand, this process had to take off from a very difficult starting point. The new state was one of the poorest countries in the world, devastated by years of civil war, and with large parts of the population displaced and dependent on food aid. On the other hand, Eritrea was more fortunate than many former colonies, some of which indeed ending up as failed states. The victorious Eritrean liberation movement came out of the struggle supported by a great majority of the population, which shared with it a strong belief in the virtues of self-reliance, not least because during the war it had succeeded in creating a functioning underground society. When now most observers consider the Eritrean “miracle” to have turned into a disappointing example of a militarized

police state where development has come to a standstill, there is of course not just one reason to point at.

If, however, Ayoob is right in asserting that Third World state elites' "obsession with security" frames especially the early stages of nation-building, the Eritrean government's increasingly coercive policy could be seen as acts of "securitization". This concept, developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver *et al.* designates an issue "presented as an existential threat, requiring measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure."<sup>8</sup> This paper will argue that the stalled Eritrean nation-building process suffers from an obsessive securitization of the economic, social, and political development of the country.

External and internal, real and perceived threats continue to play an important role in the Eritrean nation-building process. If this had not been evident before, it certainly became so with the war against Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000, a conflict that has yet to be resolved. In the following section of the paper, the classic subject of the relation between war and state formation – from the perspective of post-colonial Africa in general and the African Horn in particular – will thus first be outlined. The Eritrean leadership makes excessive use of an alleged Eritrean collective identity, the "unity" stemming from the struggle for independence. An almost "Hoxha-Albanian" perception of the necessity of being self-reliant permeates government policies. Section three deals with how the interpretation of the legacy of conflict impregnates Eritrean society. Eritrea is still a country fa-

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<sup>8</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security – A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 24.

mous for its high level of mobilization and participation, and its low corruption and crime. This fact, together with the government's reluctance to become independent of foreign aid, made Eritrea a "donor darling" during the 1990s. In section four, the structural reforms and the strategies that made Eritrea famous as the hope of the African renaissance are accounted for. Revolutionary movements generally have problems activating the very principle of popular participation and choice that they claim to represent. The fine principles tend to be submerged in the perpetual rule of the revolutionaries themselves. Section five concerns the difficulties that arise when a "revolution" such as that in Eritrea becomes institutionalized. State without society is an authoritarian nightmare. On the other hand, a focused state development policy combined with widespread local participation can be a very effective remedy in the nation-building process. Both elements can potentially be found in the Eritrean case.

# 2

## War and State in the Horn of Africa

Many have reflected on the uniqueness of the Eritrean state and of the extraordinary history of its becoming. Peter Worthington bluntly claims that Eritrea is “the most unusual [country] in Africa, if not the world”, and calls it “the democratic hope of the continent”.<sup>9</sup> Robert D. Kaplan speaks of “Eritrea’s clarified sense of nationhood, rare in a world of nation-states rent by tribalism and globalization”;<sup>10</sup> Dan Connell emphasizes how Eritrea has accomplished an “integration of ethnic and religious minorities, the elevation of the status of women, the successful suppression of crime and economic corruption ... unique not only for a post-conflict situation but on the African continent”;<sup>11</sup> and Christopher Clapham asserts that “Eritrea represents one of the most extraordinary examples of war and state formation in the modern era”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Worthington, ‘Menace of Foreign Aid’, *Toronto Sun*, 27 December 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, ‘A Tale of Two Colonies’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 2003, 46-53.

<sup>11</sup> Dan Connell, ‘Enough! A Critique of Eritrea’s Post-liberation Politics’, available at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200311060876.html> (5 February 2004)

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Clapham, ‘War and state formation in Ethiopia and Eritrea’, paper presented at the colloquium: *La guerre entre*

Although some have recently contested treating Eritrea as an “exotic specimen”,<sup>13</sup> Clapham’s perspective seems nonetheless to be of great importance. Not just in Eritrea, but in the whole region of the Horn of Africa has the question of nation-building been inseparable from the classic question in international theory of the relation between war and state formation. The region is notoriously conflict-ridden, with Somalia, Ethiopia and the Sudan all having had their share of internal conflicts. Ethiopia and Somalia, and Eritrea and Ethiopia, have also fought full-scale wars with each other. Conflicts in the Horn have to some extent followed the unfortunate “pattern of mutual intervention” in which “each government sought to deal with its own internal conflicts by some degree of support for insurgencies in neighbouring states”.<sup>14</sup> In Sudan, one of the few ongoing civil wars in the world is still devastating the country, and in the completely fractured Somali Republic, the Horn “provides Africa’s clearest example of state collapse”.<sup>15</sup> Two of the conflicts have re-

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*le local et le global*, Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Paris, 29-30 May 2000, 9; see also his *Africa and the International System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> See Sara Rich Dorman, ‘Eritrea’s Nation and State-building: Re-assessing the Impact of “The Struggle”’ (London: QEH Working Paper Series 105, 2003). Dorman, 2, suggests that Eritrea is perhaps not “as isolated and marginal” as conveyed and that “its development agenda and state-building project” is not “that divergent from elsewhere”.

<sup>14</sup> Clapham, ‘War and state formation in Ethiopia and Eritrea’, 4. For the Somali case of state collapse see Ken Menkhaus, ‘Somalia: State Collapse and the Threat of Terrorism’, *Adelphi Paper* 364 (March 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Lionel Cliffe, ‘Regional Dimensions of Conflict in the Horn of Africa’, *Third World Quarterly* 20:1 (February 1999), 89-111, at 89.

sulted in the creating of new states, Eritrea and the Republic of Somaliland, which both established *de facto* independence in 1991.

The idea that war makes states has, as Anna Leander puts it, “become IR folklore”: the literature is extensive, the canonical text being Charles Tilly’s *Coercion, Capital and European states, AD 990-1992*.<sup>16</sup> According to Tilly, the numerous and endless conflicts between European principalities forced them to develop entities by which they could defend themselves against rivals, who had to create similar entities in turn. Wars tended to concentrate power in the hands of central governments at the expense of the minor vassals, because of the need to eliminate or at least neutralize rivals inside the territory. A systematic use of coercive power demanded an effective conscription. This again led to the creation of bureaucracies through which conscription, taxation and administration could be organized. With the imposition of order on the contested territories and the developing bureaucracies to maintain this order, wars, and the administration of wars, became the state-making generator. Thus, states were produced as an almost unintended consequence by the competition

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1992* (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). See also Anna Leander, ‘Wars and the Un-Making of States’, in Stefano Guzzini and Dietrich Jung (eds.), *Contemporary Security Analysis and Copenhagen Peace Research* (London: Routledge, 2003), 69-80; Kalevi J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 115-136; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society Since A.D. 1000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-states: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

among “wielders of coercion”. The Westphalian peace in 1648, which concluded the Thirty Years’ War between many tiny principalities, is indeed seen as the modern nation-state demarcation line.

While the experience of warfare played an essential role in state formation in Europe, the inadequacies of state formation in Africa could be ascribed to the fact that contemporary African states did not have a similar experience. Although modern Africa has not exactly missed out on conflicts, the creation and survival of African states has been assured by the norms of a juridical sovereignty provided by the international system. According to this view, conflicts did not force them to build up domestic state capacities, and African states may thus, in general, be said to “have had it too easy”, to use Clapham’s words.<sup>17</sup>

With the end of the Cold War, however, the international agenda moved beyond the Westphalian framework, and Tilly himself points out how

The Third World of the twentieth century does not greatly resemble Europe of the sixteenth or seventeenth century. In no simple sense can we read the future of Third World countries from the pasts of European countries.<sup>18</sup>

Evoking the contemporary “globalized” context, Leander similarly claims that the argument that war makes states no longer holds, because the central processes have been altered.<sup>19</sup> This is reflected in the ways in which wars are explained. As Kalevi J. Holsti

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<sup>17</sup> Clapham, ‘War and state formation’, 4.

<sup>18</sup> See Charles Tilly, ‘War Making and State Making as Organized Crime’, in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol (eds.), *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 161-191, at 169.

<sup>19</sup> Leander, ‘Wars and the Un-Making of States’, 69.

writes, “War since 1945 has become de-institutionalized”,<sup>20</sup> and thus European-based norms and styles of warfare have not come to be duplicated as before. Of course, it is as important for contemporary Third World states as it was for the early European ones to control the means of coercion. In general, however, the best means of achieving this aim has changed. As Leander says, rulers

increasingly seem to broker between and bargain with armed forces and local strong men with various degrees of independence. Under these conditions, wars do not lead to leaps forward in centralisation.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, such conditions only make it more difficult to control the means of violence, which leads one to conclude that when Third World states consolidate their power by resorting to violent means, they cause resistance and often war, which just further weakens them. Wars certainly do not enhance civil society, and they do not even prompt strong centralized structures.

As already suggested, however, Eritrea does not easily fit into this common picture. Until now, it is the only state in post-colonial Africa to have emerged from secession,<sup>22</sup> and the creation of the Eritrean

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<sup>20</sup> Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Leander, ‘Wars and the Un-Making of States’, 74.

<sup>22</sup> The only other example, Somaliland, has not achieved recognition. Although the Eritrean highlands are believed to be one of the earliest regions of human habitation, it was the Italians colonizers who named the area Eritrea, after the Romans, who took it from the Greek word for the Red Sea, *Erytha Thalassa*. Situated with a long coastline to the Red Sea, with Yemen on the other side and bordering Sudan to the north and west, and Djibouti and Ethiopia to the south, Eritrea is placed at the edge of the African continent, close to the Arab world. Prior to Italian colonization, the territory that would become Eritrea

state might in fact provide a modern case for war as state-making. With the successful establishment of sovereignty, the Eritrean leadership has, to a considerable degree, been able to deploy the legacy of the independence struggle in centralizing power, bureaucracy, and the means of coercion. Emphasizing difference *vis-à-vis* its neighbours, and focusing on isolation and even alienation from regional and international influences, the official account of Eritrean collective identity is grounded in the struggle for independence, and thus in war. The necessity of starting from scratch, surrounded by what was (and still is) perceived as at best an indifferent, at worst a hostile world community, provided the Eritrean nation-builders with an effective rhetorical tool. In 1948, the London Fabian Society wrote:

Looking further ahead, Eritrea is almost certainly not a viable unit on its own. If we are to think in terms of eventual independence, its people can stand no chance unless they link themselves to bigger and more viable neighbours.<sup>23</sup>

After successfully having fought for independence against the “more viable” neighbour of Ethiopia for three decades, however, Eritrean modern history was

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had for many centuries been subject to waves of migration from the Ethiopian plateau and the Arabian Peninsula. This migration of people with different languages and religions has produced a complex regional pattern of ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. Ethnicity is counted in nine so-called “nationalities”, whereas in terms of religion, according to official accounts, the Eritrean population nowadays consists of mainly two equally sized groups, a Moslem and a Christian. For a short and “neutral” account of Eritrean history, see Eyassu Gayim, *The Eritrean Question* (Uppsala: Justus Förlag, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Fabian Society, *The Fate of Italy's Colonies* (London: Fabian Society, 1948), 89.

prone to be written in very self-conscious terms that would make a mockery of such hasty predictions. Not surprisingly, the right interpretations of history play an important role in current official Eritrean efforts to establish an independent identity as a nation.

The current official Eritrean view thus differs from that of independent observers concerning the actual support of the solution found after the Second World War, when Eritrea was granted to Ethiopia. Eritrea was colonized by Italy in the 1890s, and using Eritrea as a stepping stone, the Italians proceeded to invade Ethiopia in 1935. Like Ethiopia, Eritrea was subsequently liberated by the British military campaign in 1941. When Ethiopia was handed back to the Emperor Haile Selassie, however, Eritrea was run by a British administration until 1951, with first a special commission and later the UN trying to find a solution regarding its disposal. Among the superpowers, the Soviet Union opted for Eritrea's independence, while the USA, finding in Haile Selassie a somewhat remotely placed ally in the Korean War, was inclined to let the Ethiopians have their way and annex Eritrea. Britain, in turn, favoured a partition between Sudan and Ethiopia. In September 1952, the UN decided that Eritrea was to be an autonomous area united in a federal relationship with Ethiopia.<sup>24</sup>

This decision certainly suited Ethiopia, which had continued to claim that it had a right to Eritrea, a claim based on the assertion of a common past. Indeed, the Christian half of the Eritrean population historically had tight bonds with Ethiopia, while Muslims had “generally come under no more than

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<sup>24</sup> Constitutionally, this was an arrangement similar to that between the governments of Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and to that of the union of Zanzibar with mainland Tanganyika.

intermittent Ethiopian control”.<sup>25</sup> Contrary to the official Eritrean account, Clapham asserts that there was “substantial support for a reunification with Ethiopia”.<sup>26</sup> At the time, separatists claimed that they were the one group of colonized people in Africa that had been denied any self-determination in the process of decolonization, and that the disposal of the territory in a federation was done without formal consultations of the people.

Although Ethiopians may have accepted the autonomous status of Eritrea, the government in Addis Ababa seemed to have been working on the destruction of the federal system (in favour of their outright assimilation) right from the start. During the 1950s, political parties and trade unions were dissolved, the relative free press was suspended, and the economy was run down – in part due to the emigra-

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<sup>25</sup> Clapham, ‘War and state formation’, 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* The separatists asserted that Eritrea’s ex-colonial status meant that theirs was not a case of “secession”, and did not infringe the principle of the inviolability of colonial boundaries espoused by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Rather, their position should be seen as an exact parallel to that of the ex-Spanish colony of Western Sahara, whose annexation by Morocco (and earlier Mauritania) was challenged by the OAU and the UN. These arguments could be given some substantiation by the fact that the UN had recognized the Eritreans as a “people” with a consequent claim to self-determination. Tekeste Negash finds that, at the time, the Eritreans generally opted for a union with Ethiopia. The official Eritrean interpretation claims that the gathering of opinion was the result of extensive manipulation by emissaries and officials from Addis Ababa and the Orthodox Church. See Tekeste Negash, *No Medicine for the Bite of a White Snake: Notes on Nationalism and Resistance in Eritrea, 1890-1940* (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 1986). For the opposite view see Okbazghi Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pann in World Politics* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991) and Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1989).

tion of businessmen and technicians, particularly Italians, and the loss of their capital and expertise. The army and police were used to intimidate Eritrean nationalists, especially during elections to the Eritrean assembly. In 1956, the Ethiopian Amharic replaced the Eritrean Tigrinya and Arabic languages as the official language. In 1958, the Eritrean flag was lowered and replaced by the Ethiopian flag. Finally in 1962, Eritrea was annexed to Ethiopia and became an ordinary province. That the autonomous status could be undermined in this way without the world noticing was apparently largely a function of Ethiopia's links to the West and particularly the United States. Be that as it may, it did not take long after Ethiopia had decreed the revocation of the federation, for the armed resistance to begin, a resistance that would last for 30 years.

# 3

## **The Legacy of a National Identity: “The Struggle”**

The Eritrean armed resistance has been called “one of the strongest insurgent movements of the modern era, not just in Africa but in the entire world”.<sup>27</sup> This insurgence, now known in the Eritrean self-consciousness simply as “the struggle”, continues, as Martin Doornbos says, to be highly important “to the composition and orientation of Eritrea’s political leadership”, and can “hardly be overestimated”.<sup>28</sup> The identity it shaped constitutes the core of the self-determination and self-reliance to which all government politics refers. As Dorman points out:

It is difficult to capture how deeply the ethos of the liberation struggle and the EPLF [Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front] appears to have penetrated Eritrean society – the streets

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<sup>27</sup> Clapham, ‘War and state formation’, 10. For accounts of the struggle see, for instance, Dan Connell, *Against All Odds* (New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1993); Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>28</sup> Martin Doornbos, ‘The war torn societies project in Eritrea: an introduction’ in Martin Doornbos and Alemseged Tesfai (eds.) *Post Conflict Eritrea: Prospects for Reconstruction and Development* (New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1999), 1-23, at 9.

of the capital Asmara are marked by the struggle, not just in renamed streets and official art and sculpture, but also the names of shops and businesses. Similarly, children born during the struggle were given names like ‘Harnet’ (Liberation/Freedom). The multiplicity of challenges to Eritrea’s nationhood – from the UN, the OAU, neighbouring states, and world powers – meant that the Eritrean struggle for self-determination has a particular potency. It is constitutive of Eritrean identity and citizenship, as well as of nationhood”.<sup>29</sup>

At times, commentators even use the word “revolution” to describe what the resistance movement and its political heir has achieved. Thus Cirino Hiteng Ofuho encourages us to study “how the Eritreans made the revolution and how the revolution made them in turn”.<sup>30</sup> It is apparent that this meticulous construction of a new society was already evident during the struggle. Looking back, Dan Connell, a long-time observer of the country who travelled with the guerrillas, concludes that what was going on

was far more than a war of national liberation. It was a revolution: thoroughly restruc-

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<sup>29</sup> Dorman, ‘Eritrea’s Nation and State-building’, 4. A sign of the special Eritrean approach to their nationhood is the absence of portraits of the President in public offices, which is somewhat of an obligation elsewhere in the Third World. The official celebration of the liberation is often subtle and refreshingly understated. An expressive example of this is the monument for the struggle in central Asmara, which simply consists simply of a cast-iron sculpture picturing an oversized pair of recycled tire rubber sandals that fighters were wearing (and still are).

<sup>30</sup> Cirino Hiteng Ofuho, ‘Discourses on Liberation and Democracy’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Kent, 1997), 90; cited in Dorman, ‘Eritrea’s Nation and State-building’, 4.

turing the power relations of a complex society onto a far more inclusive, egalitarian basis. This was nation-building in its most profoundly democratic sense: tackling the great social divides of clan, ethnicity, religion, gender and class and knitting together a common identity as Eritreans.<sup>31</sup>

In this sense, the Eritrean resistance movement and its nation-building effort might be seen as a child of its time: it was in many ways the Afro-revolutionary trend of the late 1960s and the 1970s that formed the world view and the approach of the young freedom fighters.

The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) was shaped in the early 1970s after a split in the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) that had been formed in exile in 1960, when it became clear that the Ethiopian government intended to annex Eritrea. The Christian dominated EPLF developed from a bitter internal fight in the more Muslim ELF, when, according to Christopher Clapham, a number of Christians united with other alienated members of the ELF.<sup>32</sup> Part of the EPLF's success was its ability to bridge not only this religious divide in the movement, but religious, ethnic and political divides in the underground society that was developing. The leadership of the EPLF, which soon centred around a young officer who had been in a training camp in

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<sup>31</sup> Connell, 'Enough! A Critique of Eritrea's Post-liberation Politics'.

<sup>32</sup> Clapham claims that "the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), was heavily Moslem in membership and orientation, and its promotion of an 'Arab Eritrea', though useful as a source of external support, could only alienate Christian Eritreans". See Clapham, 'War and state formation', 10.

China, Isaias Afewerki,<sup>33</sup> emphasized secularity and a Marxist ideology – the latter notwithstanding the fact that the opposition from 1974 onwards was at least a nominally Marxist Ethiopian government.

From a more Maoist starting point opposed to the Ethiopian military dictatorship under Mengistu Haile Mariam, Eritrean Marxism transformed into the direct-democratic nationalist ideology that persists today. In his 2003 article ‘A Tale of Two Colonies’, Robert Kaplan cites one Eritrean official as saying that the movement “didn’t need Marxist ideology to achieve a high stage of communalism”, and explaining this with the fact that Eritrea at no time had “feudal structures, sheikhs, or warlords. Villages were commonly owned and were governed by councils, or *baitos*, of elders”. Therefore it was not, the official said, “a society deferential to individual authority”.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps Kaplan actually describes EPLF pretty much to the point, when he talks of “an almost Maoist degree of mobilization and an almost Albanian degree of xenophobia - but without the epic scale of repression and ideological indoctrination that once characterized China and Albania”.<sup>35</sup> During the

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<sup>33</sup> Or, to be more precise, simply “Isaias”, as Eritreans only have one name. The “last name” is the name of the father, added, as one government official told this author, “in order just to satisfy Westerners”. Isaias later became, and still is, the Eritrean President, (and Head of Government, Head of the State Council, and Head of the National Assembly).

<sup>34</sup> Robert Kaplan in conversation with Yemane Ghebremeskel, the director of President Afewerki’s office, in Kaplan, ‘A Tale of Two Colonies’.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* Judging from accounts given to the present author by former freedom fighters concerning the methods of “persuasion” used in mobilization during the struggle, as well as from the quality of the current official information from the Eritrean government, Kaplan’s assertion that Eritrea does without the “epic scale of repression and ideological indoctrination that

1970s and 1980s, the ELF/EPLF slowly gained control over virtually all rural Eritrea, and for periods kept the Soviet-backed Ethiopian military regime with its much better equipped army on its heels.

As Sara Rich Dorman observes, the Eritrean liberation fighters

were rightly celebrated for their innovativeness and resilience ... [they] constructed positive relations with local populations, bringing them medicine and education, and sharing their meagre rations with them rather than extracting resources from the impoverished communities.<sup>36</sup>

Accounts of how a complete underground society with hospitals, schools and workshops surfaced after dawn when Ethiopian air bombings stopped, are truly impressive. The organisational capacity that made this possible, and the effect it had in return on its social and cultural base, helps to explain how the extraordinary Eritrean identity was established.

Prior to the 1960s, according to Clapham, Eritreans had very little conception of their own identity, with “their experiences under Italian rule and the subsequent mobilisation of opinions on the future of the territory from the 1940s onwards” having “merely accentuated their divisions”:

One of the primary achievements of the EPLF was to bring about a bonding, in opposition to the Ethiopian “significant other”, that was sufficient to sustain the long and ex-

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once characterized China and Albania” might be too hasty a conclusion.

<sup>36</sup> Dorman, ‘Eritrea’s Nation and State-building’, 3.

tremely costly conflict that eventually resulted in victory.<sup>37</sup>

Here the national discourse of unity helped to bridge the ethnic and religious divisions of society. The promotion of what might be considered a national myth, based on this ideology of unity, was intensively inculcated into the cadres. The strength of the collective identity was partly due to identity formation at the individual level made possible by the EPLF's penetration of the underground society. Indeed, during a conversation in Asmara, a former freedom fighter who wanted to stay anonymous told this author how cadres would recruit new fighters by "finding their weak spot" and then making use of that in the process of persuasion. A highly disciplined, centralized hierarchy of command and "the continuous presence of the leadership in the battle zone, rather than in the distant comfort of exile" made the bonding effect of the "unity" strategy very strong.<sup>38</sup>

Another vital component of the EPLF's success was its ability to mobilize the diaspora. Like any other insurgency, the prolonged war generated a refugee population, but the diaspora was not limited to refugee camps in the Sudan. It encompassed – and continues to encompass – large and well-educated communities in Europe and North America. A social network linked Eritreans throughout the world, and a taxation system required exiled Eritreans to contribute two percent of their gross income to the cause – and many gave more.

With the coup in 1974, the enemy of the Eritrean liberation movement changed from Haile Selassie's monarchist dictatorship to the Soviet-style

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<sup>37</sup> Clapham, 'War and state formation', 10.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Marxist military dictatorship of the so-called Derg, “the invisible”, a central committee of officers led by a lieutenant colonel, Mengistu Haile Mariam. Even though the Eritreans had to fight a superpower – the Soviet Union was actively supporting Mengistu – it seems that in the end they actually benefited from this change of regime. In a study of Ethiopian economics, Paul Henze points out that

Ethiopia’s encounter with Soviet-style Marxist socialism devastated the country. The ideological base on which Mengistu built his people’s republic was shallow and shaky. Mengistu had little interest in political or economic theory. Neither did most of his Derg associates ... on top of that the Derg sacrificed hundreds of thousands of lives and squandered billions of dollars’ worth of military equipment in the more and more futile civil war against the Eritreans.<sup>39</sup>

Actually, Henze emphasizes that the Ethiopian government fell victim to the Soviet Union’s willingness to supply arms to fight the Eritreans and its inability to provide economic assistance or effective economic advice. Joining forces with the Ethiopian insurgency against Mengistu, the EPLF was even able to take part in the eventual victorious entry into the Ethiopian capital after Mengistu fled in May 1991.

Although there is “no automatic connection between war and state formation”, because the “dedication which ... characterises the struggle cannot by any means automatically be replicated after it is over”,<sup>40</sup> in the case of Eritrea, a nationalist narrative, the

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Henze, ‘The Primacy of Economics for the Future of the Horn of Africa’, in Charles Gurdon (ed.), *The Horn of Africa* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 18-24, at 19.

<sup>40</sup> Clapham, ‘War and state formation’, 11.

“unity”, derived from the reality of war, continues to define the quite different reality of politics: <sup>41</sup> “Liberation and self-determination”, were, as Dorman observes, “not simply goals achieved with the EPLF’s victory in 1991; they continue to structure political discourse, debate and national policies”<sup>42</sup> – to the point, in fact, where this narrative hinders the process of nation-building.

The ideology that was born out of the struggle’s notion of “unity” has, after independence, been given a political framework that promotes a strong sense of nationhood and identity. Just as the EPLF transformed into its party-political version, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the struggle for liberation, understood as a struggle for sovereignty, turned into one understood as self-reliant development. “In the minds of the Eritreans”, Kaplan observes,

they had fought and won a three-decade struggle against a state ten times as populous, with no help from either of the superpowers or anyone else in the outside world. They now feel that they owe nothing to anybody, and they are filled with disdain for international opinion.<sup>43</sup>

The question now is how long will there continue to be real popular support behind the proclaimed unity. As decision-making powers are concentrated in a tiny core of political and military leaders, and politics

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<sup>41</sup> Thus the members of the National Assembly swearing to uphold the Constitution would not do so in the name of God but “in the name of Eritrean martyrs”. This, according to the Chairman of the Constitutional Commission, Bereket Hapte Selassie, in the BBC, 17 September 1996.

<sup>42</sup> Dorman, ‘Eritrea’s Nation and State-building’, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Kaplan, ‘A Tale of Two Colonies’.

consists of an increasing tendency to securitize every important issue, the economic as well as the political climate is suffering.

Although the regime is extremely closed, and almost no reliable uncensored information can be obtained, it is clear that especially young people are crossing the border to Ethiopia in great numbers to avoid conscription. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the comprehensive drafting for national service has become the main cause of the flight of Eritrean asylum seekers.<sup>44</sup> A number of Eritrean refugees are returning, but some of these are just crossing the border to receive an emergency aid package before returning to Sudan. Living conditions are becoming increasingly harsh, especially in the rural areas, as Eritrea experienced the worst drought in ten years in 2003. Concern has moreover been rising about the possibility of a fifth consecutive year of drought, due to rainfall again being below normal in 2004. An estimated 66% of the population lives below the poverty level. Domestic food production is a very small fraction of total consumption requirements. 1.9 million Eritreans (more than half the country's population) rely on humanitarian assistance.<sup>45</sup>

There is no sign that Eritrea will be able to change any of this on its own in the near future, as the country's economy is heavily strained. According to the IMF, Eritrea has minimal foreign exchange

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<sup>44</sup> UNHCR, "Position on Return of Rejected Asylum Seekers to Eritrea", Geneva, January 2004.

<sup>45</sup> See the United Nations Organization for Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), *Donor Information Update, Eritrea*, Issue 12, March-April 2004.

reserves and the GDP is declining.<sup>46</sup> Taken as a whole, the situation suggests that there is an urgent need for effective, pragmatic cooperation with donors and international organizations. If the Eritrean leadership perceives its self-reliance policy as something opposed to this cooperation, it might face difficulties in upholding the narrative of unity based on a notion of self-reliance that may in turn become mere ideology.

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<sup>46</sup> International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Eritrea: Selected Issues and Statistical Appendix*, Country Report No. 03/166, 18 June 2003.

# 4

## Self-reliance or Stubbornness?

*De facto* independence of Eritrea came in September 1991. It was, Gérard Prunier writes,

almost officially sanctioned by the United States, ... discreetly backed by the Arab countries and evoked widespread sympathy in Europe which created a powerful regional precedent. A nearly bankrupt OAU could do almost nothing against it.<sup>47</sup>

Following a UN-sponsored referendum in April 1993, Eritrea finally received its *de jure* independence on 24 May 1993, and the problems this new country had to face were, of course, enormous. Already among the poorest countries of the world,<sup>48</sup> it had to deal with the integration of more than one hundred thousand human beings (of a population of just three and a half million) who had either fled or had been

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<sup>47</sup> As mentioned earlier, the OAU (now the African Union, AU) was, for obvious reasons, against an opening up of a discussion of the frontiers of colonization. Gérard Prunier, 'Somaliland: birth of a new country?' in Charles Gurdon (ed.), *The Horn of Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 61-75, at 73.

<sup>48</sup> UNDP's *Human Development Index* ranked Eritrea 167th out of 174 countries in 1994. In 2004, Eritrea had moved up a few places to number 156 out of 177.

internally displaced. In the mid-1990s, two-thirds of all households were dependent on food aid.<sup>49</sup> The economy was in ruins, as the Derg had nationalized all assets according to its highly centralized Soviet style command economy.<sup>50</sup> During the years 1993-96, however, according to a study by Göte Hansson, the government undertook “major reconstruction expenditures”. These included the resettlement of refugees, the demobilization of 54,000 ex-combatants, support to martyrs’ families, and infrastructure reconstruction.<sup>51</sup> The government also managed to expand its foreign relations in Africa, Europe, the Near East and Asia, and the economy recovered, achieving an annual GDP growth rate of 6.8%.<sup>52</sup>

In many ways, the new government tried to do things differently, very aware of the well-known traps most Third World countries end up finding themselves in. This different approach included the avoidance of being heavily in debt through loans from the World Bank, the development of a multiparty, political system based on a constitution much like that of post-apartheid South Africa, a toughness on any corruption, and the securing of a social stability that

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<sup>49</sup> World Bank, ‘Eritrea: Poverty Assessment’ (Washington D.C.: World Bank Report No. 155595-ER, 1996).

<sup>50</sup> Göte Hansson, *Building New States: Lessons from Eritrea* (Lund: UNU/WIDER, 2001), 3.

<sup>51</sup> See Gaim Kibreab, ‘Displaced Communities and the Reconstruction of Livelihoods in Eritrea’ (Helsinki: UNU/WIDER Discussion Paper 23, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> Göte Hansson, *Building New States: Lessons from Eritrea*, 3. During the war with Ethiopia, growth dropped from 8% in 1997 to 3% in 1998, World Bank, *Eritrea: Country Status Report* (Washington DC: World Bank, 1999). According to the recent World Bank figures, annual growth in GDP 1992-02 has been 4,3 %; available at [http://www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/aag/eri\\_aag.pdf](http://www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/aag/eri_aag.pdf)

kept the rate of crime significantly lower than in many other Third World countries. One could (and still can) walk the streets of the Eritrean capital undisturbed and feel safe at any hour of the day or night.

Hopes were high, in any event, among both Eritreans and external observers, not least because of the promising attitude of the leadership of the new state. As Paul Henze wrote in 1994:

What in actuality seems most characteristic of ... the PGE (Provisional Government of Eritrea) leaders is their lack of rigidity and their readiness to examine issues, consult the people and evolve approaches that may differ fundamentally from the principles they advocated when they were guerrillas in the field.<sup>53</sup>

As will be outlined in more detail below, however, it would be precisely the fact that attempts were made to develop approaches different from those deployed on the battlefield that would turn out to be the weakness of this government – as is the case in many post-conflict states.

According to Hansson, “the 1990s saw trade and exchange reform, as well as fiscal reform, privatization, regulatory decontrol, and other sector reforms” – reforms that were even more challenging as the government of Eritrea, unlike Angola, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, or Mozambique, “had to create completely new economic institutions from scratch”.<sup>54</sup> And perhaps it was precisely this rare opportunity to build a nation from scratch that was so enchanting to many, and led Eritrea to be seen almost as a role model for

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<sup>53</sup> Henze, ‘The Primacy of Economics’, 23.

<sup>54</sup> Hansson, *Building New States: Lessons from Eritrea*, 6.

the developing world. As Nicholas D. Kristof wrote in the *International Herald Tribune* in May 2003, looking back on the glory days of the mid-1990s,

This charming nation was hailed ... as one of Africa's brightest hopes, a symbol of an African renaissance. Its economy boomed, and Hillary Clinton dropped by.<sup>55</sup>

These economic reforms of the early years, executed with a will to avoid dependency, point to an important element in the different “Eritrean way”, namely a strong belief in “self-reliance”,<sup>56</sup> a government policy the EPLF leadership imported directly from the struggle. This is well in line with the alleged “Maoist” discipline and mobilization, and the “Albanian” xenophobia developed during the years of isolated fighting. The process of transforming the mode of resistance into pragmatic relations with the outside world, however, has proven to be a serious challenge for the Eritrean government.

At the outset, the Eritrean insistence on self-reliance was seen as a promising sign of responsibility, and as such a refreshingly different attitude in a Third World government. True independence was not really perceived as something acquired just by international acknowledgement and by having one's own stamps. After numerous serious conflicts with donor countries and NGOs – in several instances leading to the government's ousting of NGOs (the

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<sup>55</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, ‘End of honeymoon’, *International Herald Tribune*, 28 May 2003.

<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, Ruth Iyob, ‘The Eritrean Experiment: A Cautious Pragmatism?’ *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 35: 4 (1997) 647-673; also Göte Hansson, *Building New States: Lessons from Eritrea*; and Peter Worthington, ‘Menace of Foreign Aid’.

first occurred in 1996) and at one point all the ambassadors of the EU-countries (in 2001) – perception has somewhat changed, however. The “partners”, as the Eritrean government insists on calling them, have *sotto voce* criticized what they see as both a lack of diplomatic skill, and, even worse, have come to question the very open-mindedness of the leadership that had earlier been so highly praised. As a consequence, according to UN officials in Asmara, national (government controlled) media are not supposed to mention that development projects are carried out or supported by international organizations.

The government, by contrast, claims to be guided by its fear of dependence. According to President Isaias, the problem is two-fold: In an interview he explains, on the one hand, how “disabling” and “dehumanizing” it is to be dependent on foreign aid, as “it does not motivate human beings to be active”. On the other hand, however, those “who provide aid also become dependent”: they develop a “donor psychosis”, acquire “a highhanded approach which soon becomes a way of life”, and soon claim to be

acting on behalf of the citizens as if no government existed. There are some enlightened exceptions, of course. But some of the UN agencies can become a liability as well; they behave like substitutes for government, with their luxurious offices and big salaries. In Eritrea, everybody recognises that aid of that kind is a form of counterattack against the state.<sup>57</sup>

This is widely recognized as a fair concern, by donor governments as well as by humanitarian agencies.

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<sup>57</sup> President Isaias in an interview with Neil Ascherson, *Independent on Sunday*, 22 December 1996.

There is no doubt, however, that the problems of cooperation in relations between donors, agencies, and the Eritrean government stem, to a great extent, from the Eritrean leadership's deployment of a securitization discourse in which, for example, the question of "food security" is being staged as a question of "national security". Thus, in his speech at the celebration of the 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence, Isaias said, "we hope that relief aid would be forthcoming to relieve us from dependency, and not to hold us hostage as dependents on food handouts or even to use food aid as a tool for hidden political agendas".<sup>58</sup> The President even disclosed what sort of agenda he was thinking of, namely "democracy and human rights". In the same speech, he said:

At a time when democracy and human rights are often misconstrued to weaken nations and peoples, to recruit agents, to install puppet governments, and when citizens' votes are bought with money as any other commodity, it is important to underline that consolidating democracy in our country is part and parcel of our indispensable responsibility to build a united and modern nation. It should not, otherwise, be pursued for public relations purposes through external pressure.

Consistent with their ideology, the Eritrean leadership has followed an "unusually careful and effective economic strategy" in which "foreign investment, international borrowing, and aid is very cautiously managed".<sup>59</sup> During the 1990s, this paid in terms of growth, and there were fewer unsustainable

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<sup>58</sup> Isaias in a speech celebrating the 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence, 23 May 2004, available on the PFDJ website <http://www.shaebia.org/artman/publish/index.html>

<sup>59</sup> Hansson, *Building New States: Lessons from Eritrea*, 4.

projects than elsewhere in developing countries. Because of the careful management of international loans, it is indeed a fact that remittances by the diaspora have been more important than loans and foreign assistance, so that private transfers have exceeded official transfers in every year since independence.<sup>60</sup> Notwithstanding this and other advantages (a “clean slate” and social solidarity making up for a lack of resources), the concern now must be that the self-reliance ideology and the continued securitization of policies will lead to a slowing down of the nation-building process, possibly resulting in a complete stop.

Although it is clear that the coherence of the government’s strategy in the early years after independence “facilitated reconstruction” – a coherence that is in stark contrast to the lack of development strategies in several other African post-conflict states – it has also entailed costs. A strong emphasis on “ownership” of development projects has not only made relations with donors difficult, but has also led to a reluctance to use foreign expatriates, a move that has the expected consequences in a poor country short of professional skills.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the low level of education and high adult illiteracy rate (close to 60% for women) is a major constraint. An ambitious program to rehabilitate and expand the health sector, agricultural sector projects such as help to war-widows, and donor support in the enforcement of juridical institutions have all suffered from the government’s unviable relations with foreign expertise. Too often,

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Hansson observes that “[t]here is a thin top layer of highly qualified staff in government, but the quality of skills quickly tails off as one moves down the organizational pyramid”. *Ibid.*, 5. See also Kibreab, ‘Displaced Communities’.

projects have been stalled because the government insisted that funds should be transferred to ministries, which restricted the activities of NGOs, and resisted to any kind of conditionality. In addition, the private sector has been heavily regulated and business initiatives strongly restricted. Moreover, it is highly relevant for a transition economy to establish legal institutions and commercial laws in order to protect private property rights and thereby encourage private investment, for instance. Due partly to the postponed implementation of the constitution, these institutions are still lacking. It seems that despite an apparent government interest in the private sector, privatization has, in practice, often merely meant a new manifestation of EPLF entrepreneurial activities, and has enabled the party to dominate the private sector in the Eritrean economy. According to sources this author talked to in Asmara, there are several instances of business people who, perceived to be a little too successful, have, from a mixture of ideological rigidity and simple jealousy, been harassed, and thrown into jail for weeks without prosecution.

Economic aspects aside, an important part of any nation-building process is the encouragement of a transparent democracy, including a free, public debate. This in itself ensures participation and is an important part of the legitimization of government policy in the long term. However, as suggested, the value of this is something the Eritrean government in its securitizing efforts and its steadfast “know-it-all” approach seems to have seriously underestimated. Difficulties in handling relations with the outside world, because one’s partners are perceived as going on a “counter-attack against the state”, reflects the Eritrean leadership’s desire to maintain a strict con-

trol of expenditure and initiatives. In this sense, the ideology of self-reliance may be seen as a bridge between sovereignty and nationalism.

The whole situation deteriorated further after the war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000,<sup>62</sup> but the reluctance of the leadership to compromise whenever the nationalist ideology of self-reliance and the top-down control with development is questioned, seems to have been an obstacle all along. Searching for an answer to the question why, after the promising beginnings, things took a wrong turn – into “a thuggish little dictatorship”<sup>63</sup> – Dan Connell, a long-time supporter of the regime, cites in a highly critical 2003 article a quotation by President Afewerki from the time of the struggle. To Connell, the EPLF leader said, “When I am challenged, I become more stubborn – more and more rigid. I am very emotional.”<sup>64</sup>

It is precisely this rigid stubbornness and government-by-emotion that some would fear has become the centre of gravity for the self-reliance ideology, thus emptying the former responsible and coherent nation-building strategy. Even where the experienced solidarity, unity, and self-reliance of the struggle actually helped facilitate post-independence development, this has not necessarily strengthened democracy. The Ethiopian and the Eritrean insurgent movements faced the same problem of adaptation,

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<sup>62</sup> For the Eritrean economy, the loss of the important Ethiopian market has been devastating.

<sup>63</sup> Kristof, ‘End of honeymoon’.

<sup>64</sup> Connell, ‘Enough! A Critique of Eritrea’s Post-liberation Politics’. This stubbornness, the Director of the President’s office assured this author during a conversation in September 2003, “certainly does not only characterize the President of Eritrea, but is a characteristic part of the Eritrean national identity”.

and this was undoubtedly part of the reason for their reversion to war in 1998. To some extent, the Eritrean government's assessment of Eritrea's vulnerability can be justified. Whoever was responsible for the outbreak of war, relations with Ethiopia had to be conceived as a grave security issue. The question is whether the nation-building process in Eritrea had, by necessity, to be one heavily infected by security measures taken to meet these perceived threats, or whether the securitization of the Eritrean society was rather a form of recourse to known fields by a leadership that feared losing control. As Christopher Clapham says,

In a manner characteristic of victorious insurgencies, the liberation movement became the vanguard party that guided the conduct of the state, and the habits of centralised command inherited from the struggle were carried over into the conduct of peacetime administration.<sup>65</sup>

With hundreds of thousands of the younger generation stuck in the national service – some of them since 1998 – many families are left to their own devices (some to the point of starvation), with the sole provider being away. One estimate is that as many as 400,000 people, or one third of the labour force, are enlisted. Thus, in effect, security concerns have stalled the development of the country.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Clapham, 'War and state formation', 12.

<sup>66</sup> Eritrea is among an exclusive group of countries (the others are Oman, Syria, Burma, Sudan, Pakistan, and Burundi) that spends more on the military than on health and education combined. See the UNDP's *Human Development Report 2003* (New York: UNDP, 2003), Indicator #9: Priorities in Public Spending.

# 5

## **Soldiers in the Civil Service**

On 6 May 1998, fighting broke out between Eritrean and Ethiopian forces in a disputed border area around the town of Badme. The reasons for the war between two governments that had come to power as brother-in-arms are still not clear, and it was soon to be called “absurd” by commentators.<sup>67</sup> After successive cease-fires and unsuccessful peace plans, a final truce came about in June 2000. Ostensibly, the war began over 390 km<sup>2</sup> of barren desert and mountain, though economic considerations may also have played a role.<sup>68</sup> In the period leading up to May 1998, evidence pointed to serious rifts in the relationship. The first was the adoption by Eritrea in November 1997 of its own independent currency, the nakfa (named after the battlefield where the Eritreans had their most famous victory over the Ethiopian Army), which led Ethiopia to require the settlement of all its trade with Eritrea in hard currency. Furthermore, Eritrea’s independence left disputed areas along the 1,000 km Eritrean-Ethiopian border. Neither country felt an urgent need to resolve the issue, as the bor-

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<sup>67</sup> See, for instance, Jean-Louis Péninou, ‘Guerre absurde entre l’Ethiopie et l’Erythrée’, *Review of African Political Economy* 25:77 (September 1998), 504-525.

<sup>68</sup> See Hansson, *Building New States: Lessons from Eritrea*, 11.

der's existence meant little to economic life in either country given the currency union and the scale of bilateral trade. The introduction of the nakfa, however, "turned the border into a real trade barrier".<sup>69</sup>

Secondly, Eritrea's independence left Ethiopia landlocked. Whereas a free trade pact at first established the port of Assab as a free Red Sea port for Ethiopia, the crisis over the nakfa meant that Ethiopia now had to pay in dollars for the use of the port, and this, together with disagreements over the port's administration, led Ethiopia to divert an increasing amount of trade through Djibouti. This hit Eritrean revenues from port fees and charges.

Eritrea claimed that the initial act of aggression was the Ethiopian killing of members of an Eritrean patrol in the border area, and that this was followed by a period of ongoing harassment by the Ethiopian police of Eritreans crossing the border. The Ethiopians then perceived what the Eritreans claimed to be a necessary "reaction" as an "invasion" of what they considered their territory. Hence the already soured relationship affected the conflict in such a way that it quickly rose to a level from which neither side felt able to back away without loss of face. Any concessions to the foreign enemy were inevitably seen as signs of weakness by internal forces willing to challenge the current leaders.

Not surprisingly, domestic policy in both countries became heavily securitized by the war. President Isaias claimed "that he could bring Ethiopia to a standstill". That remark was interpreted by the Ethiopians as indicating the presence of an Eritrean "fifth column" within Ethiopia, as several EPLF people had taken up sensitive positions in Addis Ababa during the period when relations were still

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

good. Ethiopia answered by expelling close to everyone who could be perceived as Eritrean.<sup>70</sup>

The effect of the war between two countries, both of which were chronically dependent on food aid, was, of course, devastating. Contrary to the notion of “new wars” applied to most of the recent conflicts in Africa,<sup>71</sup> this war was fought in the manner of old-fashioned trench warfare, though with the most modern weaponry, and by June 2000, casualties on both sides had topped 100,000. About 250,000 Eritreans (and 300,000 Ethiopians) were internally displaced, and the number of expelled Eritreans from Ethiopia ran, according to Eritrean figures, to over 60,000. Those who were displaced lost their livestock and stored grains, which just added to the already grave need for humanitarian aid. Because of the war, however, foreign aid and investment dropped, and public and social infrastructure was destroyed.

To many observers, the conflict was rather incomprehensible: the leaderships of Eritrea and Ethiopia were, after all, former allies. Even though the contested territories and the question of access to the harbour of Assab certainly constituted problems that had to be resolved, the uncompromising stance both sides took, the lack of mediation efforts, and the fast escalation of the conflict remained puzzling. In December 2000, a peace agreement was reached and an international boundary commission set up. Its ruling, which granted Eritrea the symbolic and contested town of Badme, was rejected by Ethiopia, and the actual demarcation of the border was suspended.

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<sup>70</sup> Clapham, ‘War and state formation’, 14.

<sup>71</sup> See Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

Several factors suggest that the roots of the war should be sought in domestic politics – or, rather, in the way certain ideological features of domestic politics (unity, self-reliance, xenophobia) led to a securitization of foreign relations. At least in the case of Eritrea, this again goes back to the stalled nation-building process, which, together with the securitization of all vital issues of domestic politics that hinder the process, thereby creates a vicious circle. With the lack of a mature and functioning state apparatus, a free press and an informed public, political decision-making becomes liable to ideology, subjectivism, and emotions. Thus Lionel Cliffe observes that

the decision-making mechanisms of both governments and a certain democratic deficiency together with the absence of adequate institutional arrangements for dialogue and conflict resolution ... precipitated a massive escalation of a minor containable conflict.<sup>72</sup>

Along the same lines, Ruth Iyob argues that the relationship between the two countries was “under-institutionalized”,<sup>73</sup> and as such prone to misunderstandings and conflicts.

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<sup>72</sup> Lionel Cliffe, ‘Eritrea: Prospects for Self-Determination’, in Peter Woodward and Murray Forsyth (eds.) *Conflict and Peace in the Horn of Africa* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1994), 52-69, at 63. In her study, Sara Rich Dorman contests the account of Eritrean nationalism as grounded in the struggle, and based on new research on land, gender issues, the diaspora and the question of globalization, she instead suggests to view “Eritrea’s myths of unity and self-reliance” as “not just constructed to strengthen the liberation movement, but to advance the very existence of the putative nation”; Dorman, ‘Eritrea’s Nation and State-building’, 18.

<sup>73</sup> Ruth Iyob, ‘The Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict: diasporic vs. hegemonic states in the Horn of Africa, 1991-2000’ *Journal of Modern African Studies* 38: 4 (2000), 659-682, at 671.

As has already been suggested, there might not be an automatic connection between war and state formation. If, however, this connection is sought to be upheld through an emphasis of the existential threats to the sovereignty of the state, these threats, *qua* existential, will set the agenda for domestic politics. This, of course, has consequences for vital parts of the nation-building process, such as the development of a democratic participation culture. Most often security issues prompted by existential threats are not something to be discussed in public. In this way, securitization makes the securitized issue “untouchable”. Demobilization, for example, which might be unwanted by the government for other reasons, can be postponed with reference to the danger of an attack by a foreign power. In today’s Eritrea, concern over Ethiopian aggression legitimizes a securitization of, for instance, education – as school children in their last year, according to the United Nations Children’s Fund’s (UNICEF) office in Asmara, are being transferred to military camps.<sup>74</sup>

But securitization not only distorts democratization and hinders development, it also strengthens the ideological side of politics at the expense of more pragmatic problem-solving approaches. In what Clapham terms the “repeated narrative of national mythology”,<sup>75</sup> the celebrated Eritrean “unity” can be called upon as long as matters of “security” require special measures in politics and continued sacrifices of the population. This is reflected in the rhetoric of

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<sup>74</sup> BBC News, ‘Eritrea rapped for “military” schooling’, 11 February 2004. A further negative consequence is that not only boys, but recently (spring 2004) also girls are taken to the camps, which has prompted many parents to keep their daughters from school, thereby depriving them of education.

<sup>75</sup> Clapham, ‘War and state formation’, 11.

the leadership, with Isaias still speaking, four years after the ceasefire, of “spiteful glances from the TPLF regime and the hovering threat of war clouds”.<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, in the same speech he also accuses the Ethiopians of securitizing in order to cover up their problems, claiming that “according to the philosophy of the TPLF, and its unchanging character, it is understood that war is used as an escape route from its political problems”. This remark, however, may be returned to sender, as the speech in which it was made almost coincided with yet another Amnesty International (AI) report on the Eritrean government’s “political problems”. In this report, AI asserts that

the government’s refusal of openness and accountability about its human rights practices is contrary to human rights safeguards in the Eritrean Constitution and laws, and the international human rights treaties Eritrea has ratified ... calling on the Government of Eritrea to release all prisoners of conscience, take steps to eradicate the use of torture, bring all prisoners within a proper system of impartial justice and humane treatment in custody, and guarantee the rights to freedom of expression of peaceful opinion and religious belief and the freedom of the press.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> The Eritrean President does not speak of the “Ethiopian government”. He uses the name of the Ethiopian resistance movement parallel to EPLF, the TPLF. “The TPLF’s intention, today as always, is to drag us backwards under any pretext.” Isaias, 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence speech, 23 May 2004.

<sup>77</sup> Amnesty International, *Press Release* 19 May 2004. All media in Eritrea is controlled by the government. The last foreign journalist in the country, a correspondent from the BBC, was expelled in September 2004.

Contrary to the explicit intentions of the Eritrean constitution, the collective identity – the “soul” of the nation-building process – is, as Kjetil Tronvoll observes, increasingly being imposed from above, and not constructed from below.<sup>78</sup> On the formal level, the deservedly much praised constitution draft process, with wide ranging participation all over the country, is overshadowed by the fact that the constitution has never been implemented. The draft speaks of the principles of “nationalism”, “secularism” and “democracy”.<sup>79</sup> The idea of nationalism is referring to national “unity” and “development”, secularism to the separation of religion from government, and democracy to the need to “ensure equal participation of all members of Eritrean society without any exception”.

All this is well reflected in a statement issued by the PFDJ on the occasion of the annual celebration of “Bahti Meskerem”, September 1, 2004, the day the liberation struggle is said to have been launched. The statement speaks of the need for keeping the “spirit of self-sacrifice” of the struggle intact, emphasizing that it is “these same qualities that would ensure success in the nation-building process”.<sup>80</sup> But the encouragement of self-sacrifice rings badly with the absence of a real democracy, where sacrifices can be awarded with influence on the shape the continued “struggle” should take.

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<sup>78</sup> See Kjetil Tronvoll, “The process of nation-building in post-war Eritrea: created from below or directed from above?”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36:3 (September 1998), 461-482.

<sup>79</sup> Constitutional Commission of Eritrea, *Constitutional Proposals for Public Debate* (Asmara: Constitutional Commission of Eritrea, 1995), 7.

<sup>80</sup> The State of Eritrea – webpage of the Ministry of Information, [http://www.shabait.com/articles-new/publish/article\\_2297.html](http://www.shabait.com/articles-new/publish/article_2297.html) (2/11/04).

It is difficult to see how modern nations, which have to function in international society as well as internally, can escape the basic legitimizing structures and values of democracy. It is commonly agreed among observers that the post-independent Eritrean state is characterized by a high degree of centralized control. Typical of a centralized administration, it obviously claims the opposite, and in most official statements the importance of local community participation is indeed emphasized. Top-down administration, however, prevails in any matter of importance, and close to all initiatives stem from the state or are strictly monitored by it. The impressive mobilization of human resources during the struggle continues to constitute and structure activities at all level of society. The advantage of this is that as long as something only requires an official decree and sheer manpower, everything seems to be possible in Eritrea. The major drawback, however, is that such a deeply militarized society seems to be unfit for democratic procedures and informal capacity-building: no functioning civil society seems to develop. The state is everywhere and the PFDJ, being the only legal political party, is hardly distinguishable from the state.

Although until the nineteenth century the notion of civil society was virtually synonymous with that of the state, it is today taken to refer to the opposite, namely that which is outside the state. The first to distinguish civil society from the state was Hegel, who perceived the latter as the regulating institution that made possible the operation of the former. In Western societies, a lot of hope for the revitalization of democracy is invested in the existence of a well-educated *Öffentlichkeit*, which participates in public debate and constitutes the “low” politics of NGOs,

community-based groups and other forms of loosely organized entities – in short, the civil society. The left as well as the right of the political spectrum have embraced civil society, acknowledging the importance of showing decision-making to be closer to common people than is the case with modern state bureaucracy. With the alleged “crisis” of the modern state, this relationship seems to be turned around. Civil society has the power to legitimize the operations of the state.

As the concept of civil society and bottom-up approaches are fashionable in the Western donor community, this lack of genuine activities at the sub-state level is an unfortunate deficit for an Eritrea that wishes to attract foreign aid assistance. The motivation of government to uphold a strong element of control can easily be found in previous African experiences of state formation, and it is thus not coincidental that “good governance” is the general demand to African states by observers and donors alike. In their effort to provide the necessary basic accountability in administration and prevent corruption and nepotism, the Eritrean leadership has thus pursued an almost morally legitimized kind of policy. Restraint goes all the way up to the President, whose non-pretentious appearance has been widely praised. Without trust in the civic structures of society, however, this “Calvinism” becomes a deadlock for initiative, creativity, and motivation.

A genuine participation culture is probably an indispensable factor in the democratic nation-building process. When the Eritrean government deploys its rhetoric of “unity” and the repeated assurance of the importance of listening to “the people” in a way that echoes most post-colonial states’ narratives of nation-building, it is important to clarify whether this

is just another way of expressing the will of the centralized state. While the state should be trusted to establish security and the rule of law, lasting stability is a civil responsibility. When people do not trust each other, there is nothing to glue a society together.

While the liberation struggle targeted a specific goal supposedly lying straight ahead, this goal, independence as sovereignty, must be distinguished from a completely different one – the attainment of which, moreover, is a much less straightforward affair. As David Carment says, “the development of political capacity, legitimacy and authority, all essential features of state building, is not a linear process”,<sup>81</sup> with “linear” here denoting both a development process over time as well as to the way initiatives are taken and policy is implemented. A vital component of non-linear functioning is precisely the free space for non-state actors, whereas the lack of civic political culture causes an insufficient level of civil participation and responsibility that furthermore strengthens tendencies towards tribalism and nepotism. In a well-functioning state, private sector actors such as traders and local entrepreneurs may play an important role as dynamic forces. The same goes for the diaspora, which in the case of Eritrea has been a source of both capital and expertise. When foreign trade is scarce, development aid programmes may to some extent function in a somewhat similar way. Thus, without the goodwill of the donor community, Eritrea is definitely on its own.

The suspicious attitude towards foreign assistance is explicitly stated:

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<sup>81</sup> David Carment, ‘Assessing state failure: implications for theory and policy’, *Third World Quarterly* 24:3 (June 2003), 407–427.

We Eritreans are engaged in creating our own government for the first time in our history. ... If we can create a strong government that is free from corruption and manipulation by foreign interests, and that has at its disposal effective institutions, it will be a decisive instrument in our nation building and development efforts.<sup>82</sup>

The intended multi-party system has never been realized, promised elections never been held, and even though the government claims that the existing direct-democratic *baito* system ensures a much higher participation and a real democracy by focusing on local issues, in reality, without having financial autonomy and by remaining subordinate to administrators appointed by the central government, these local people's assemblies have almost no bearing at all.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, in 2002 all regional administrators were replaced with military generals, and much talked about elections in 2003 did not seem to have decreased the pattern of increased centralization either.

On the contrary, critics find a widening gap between party and people, with the PDJF sitting heavily on every detail in the administration. This is excused by the continued existence of external and internal threats, which justify an increasing repression and coercion in the political sphere, and reliance on centralism in economics – all in all, they claim, the preservation of the state, detached from its social base, is turning into an end itself. Recent accusations (May 2004) by the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs of

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<sup>82</sup> Constitutional Commission of Eritrea, *Constitutional Proposals for Public Debate*, 10.

<sup>83</sup> See Asmerom Zerie, 'The role of baito in the development process: a case study of Zoba Maakel' (Asmara: Senior Research Paper, Department of Political Science, University of Asmara, 2002), 31.

how the UN peacekeeping force (UNMEE), deployed at the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia is “housing criminals”, “making pornography”, and “using the national currency as toilet paper”, are probably the signs of frustration. On the other hand, these allegations are apparently a part of the securitization discourse. Hence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs concluded in its statement that UNMEE had become a “grave danger” to the “peace and stability of the people and government of Eritrea, as well as the security and stability of our region”.<sup>84</sup> The absence of independent media, the restricting of autonomous civil society institutions, and the exile or imprisonment without trial of government critics are all measures justified by the government on the grounds of national security.

As Barry Schutz observes on the basis of a study of the legacy of the struggle for independence in Mozambique, states that have been formed through armed resistance against oppressive rule share the legacy of revolutionary legitimacy. They also, however, share what he calls “the curse of relative deprivation”,<sup>85</sup> and thus more than other new regimes, they have to “sustain the glory and romance of heroic commitment”. Governments of people’s revolutions and national liberation movements must satisfy more people with greater expectations than governments that have come to power through non-revolutionary means, by election or transfer of

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<sup>84</sup> BBC News, ‘UN-Eritrea row sinks to new low’, 8 May 2004.

<sup>85</sup> Barry Schutz, ‘The Heritage of Revolution and the Struggle for Governmental Legitimacy in Mozambique’, in William Zartman (ed.), *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienne Publishers, 1995), 96-118, at 97.

power. They also face the task of transforming their revolutionary legitimacy into governmental or civic legitimacy. How this is accomplished depends on circumstances of history, culture, ideology, and geographic context.

Revolutionary movements succeed primarily on the basis of their effectiveness in combating illegitimate regimes. They are not prepared for the problem of transforming revolutionary movement legitimacy into the more permanent condition of civic or governmental legitimacy, however. Revolutions may emerge as deliverers of popular and legitimate government, but their principles then tend, as Schutz says, to be “submerged by the expectation of perpetual rule by the revolutionaries themselves”.<sup>86</sup> The transformation process itself, the revolution, therefore becomes institutionalized and eventually memorialized as the system to end all systems. The problem is that revolutions generally fail to install or activate the very principle of popular participation and choice that they claim to represent:

Instead, the revolutionary government becomes responsible for all subsequent events in the society and, by its monopolization of responsibility in their name, prevents the people from joining that responsibility.<sup>87</sup>

As political legitimacy has to do with a popular perception of the state as being something that ought to be obeyed, good governance relies on the capacity of the leadership to acknowledge different views and views different from its own. In overall terms, what frames good governance is the extent to which soci-

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

ety is allowed to shape the state, and not just the ability of the state to structure society.

In Eritrea, the leadership acts according to the military culture that was impregnated during the struggle, and which was revived in the Eritrean-Ethiopian war. It seems to confuse “regime security”<sup>88</sup> with state security. If the government is to achieve legitimacy in a normative sense, where public opinion considers that “it ought to be obeyed”<sup>89</sup> (and not just in the legal sense), the authoritarian legacy of the war(s) must be substituted for the encouragement of a participatory culture. A revolutionary movement-turned-government tends to perceive the post-conflict transition period as unstable in the sense that if it “chooses a commitment to elections and democracy immediately, it runs the risk of losing power”.<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, if it retrenches, it may forfeit its claims to legitimacy. At the same time it has to deliver economic goods and encourage public participation.

Thus the cardinal point in the transition is the fragility of revolutionary or post-insurgency governments. Despite their legitimate foundations, they cannot achieve legitimacy without altering their self-perception of legitimate authority. As the post-insurgency government itself has to interpret the foundations of its own power base, it is important that it is able to renew its legitimacy by legacy. Without the legal, constitutional part, it will have to run the country on the nationalist narrative alone. The regime can

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<sup>88</sup> See Stephen David, ‘Explaining Third World Alignment’, *World Politics* 43: 2 (1991), 233-256.

<sup>89</sup> Ian Hurd, ‘Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics’, *International Organization* 53: 2 (1999), 379-408, at 381.

<sup>90</sup> Schutz, ‘The Heritage of Revolution’, 99.

only build a legitimate government; it cannot become one by “self-pollination”.

This corresponds to what Mathias Stiefel observes about how the advent of peace tends to bring “unrealistically high expectations by the people”, which will be in contrast with “the low capacity of the state” to deliver.<sup>91</sup> As this is likely to lead to disillusionment, it in turn diminishes the credibility of the state. The transition from resistance to governance has shown to be devastatingly difficult for any of the insurgencies that came to power in the decolonization period, and the “late” Eritrean decolonization process has not been any easier, even with the changed world order following the end of the Cold War.<sup>92</sup>

Dan Connell ends up blaming the stalled nation-building process on the consolidation of power under President Isaias, who, unchallenged as leader of Eritrea, allegedly rules alone with a few advisors and a still smaller core of entrusted key figures. However, while it might look as if the present leadership has become entangled in the logic of its own securitization narrative, and the President “justifies his extended stay in office by the fragility of the nation over which he presides”,<sup>93</sup> this is not necessarily a

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<sup>91</sup> Mathias Stiefel, *Rebuilding after war: a summary report of the war-torn societies project* (Geneva: UNRISD, 1999), 9.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> Connell, ‘Enough! A Critique of Eritrea’s Post-liberation Politics’, 3. Connell mentions as a proof of the centralization of power the “sadly known practice of a democratically insufficient state” – the expansion of the President’s Office. By establishing within the President’s Office “specialized departments on economic and political policy that duplicated (and effectively out-ranked) similar cabinet ministries”, and staffing these departments “with loyal individuals who reported to no one but him”, the President himself contributes to the under-

sign of lack of support among the population. Until recently at least, a common remark among observers would be that Isaias did not have to fear the voice of the people if he chose to give in to external criticism and hold elections. He would probably become re-elected with a safe margin anyway. The problem is that with the current level of repression, and the consequent lack of public debate, it is almost impossible to say anything substantial concerning his support.

If the intentions of the present leadership are not just to be reduced to a mere effort of staying in power, the securitization of the nation-building process must be viewed as a measure to make up for the “structural” weakness of the state in transition. Broadly speaking, security comes first, democracy last, and development somewhere in between. Although it could be argued (and the Eritrean leadership certainly does) that this is exactly the historical mode of Western state formation, this order prompts criticism from abroad. Western observers will consider the threats to the Eritrean state as problems to be dealt with by a politically legitimate, i.e. genuinely democratic, government. Questioning the legitimacy of the government is, of course, not the way to initiate a dialogue. On the other hand, as some of the donor countries and UN officials argue, it is not feasible to discuss good governance without a common denominator of legitimacy.

When talking to people in Eritrea, one gets at least a tentative impression of the problem with the “hedgehog” attitude of the leadership. Even some

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mining of constitutional maturation and development. With a serious lack of a separation of powers, parliament never has become anything but a shadow, and the same goes for the Cabinet, which Connell calls “a clearinghouse for policies hammered out elsewhere”.

former freedom fighters complained to this author that a critical dialogue is becoming increasingly difficult. As quite a few people have spent time in jail in recent years, this is hardly an exaggeration. Thus a grave consequence of interpreting the legacy of the struggle as a duty to securitize national unity is that any dialogue with critics becomes impossible. Critics are labelled traitors and pro-Ethiopian, and any opinion contesting the narrative of national unity is construed as threatening Eritrea's existence.

On 25 November 2004, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told parliament that his government had "in principle" accepted the decision of the international boundary commission that ruled on the demarcation of the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea. He insisted, however, that the ruling was still "illegal and unjust", and that any attempt to implement it "might lead to a serious escalation of the tension between the two countries and thereby undermine the peace". In response, Eritrea's information ministry said that the boundary commission's original decision was "final and binding", and dismissed Ethiopia's proposals as "aimed at promoting public relations exercises and buying more time".<sup>94</sup>

As mentioned above, one of the most devastating consequences of the militarization of the Eritrean society is that highly prioritized national service keeps young people out of the education system and the labour market for years. Most of those mobilized at the outbreak of war in May 1998 are still serving either in the army or in civilian jobs. As a result, many attempt to evade conscription, which is very difficult with the state's strict control of population movements. Rumours of nightly trucks picking up

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<sup>94</sup> BBC News, 'Ethiopia backs down over border', 25 November 2004.

young people in the streets of Asmara and taking them to camps are circulating. Many are hiding, fleeing to Ethiopia, Yemen and the Sudan, or forging exit visas.

In the eyes of the Eritrean leadership, however, Eritrea, with its patiently disciplined population, resembles a hardened battalion of stubborn soldiers. One might be inclined to perceive the country as one of the last instances of the “vanguard politics” of the revolutionary projects of the 20th century, with the Eritrean nation-building process seemingly suffering from one of the state’s common “child diseases”: democratic deficiency. Eritrea might, as some have suggested, be “war-born” and not “war-torn”, but the child is growing up to become a full-time soldier.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> This was perhaps already significant in its disputes with neighbours – Sudan, Yemen and Djibouti – in the mid-1990s. Eritrea’s relations with Sudan have all along been soured by Asmara’s outspoken support for the Christian resistance in south Sudan to the government in Khartoum. Rumours of even more substantial military support of the South Sudanese insurgency have created fears of new conflicts in the Horn.

# 6

## Conclusion

The experience of warfare has played almost as decisive a role in the making of independent Eritrea as it did in state formation in Europe. The successful war of liberation, and the social structure achieved during the struggle, have provided the post-independence government with a unity and solidarity among people that still constitutes the collective identity on which the building of a nation is founded. Challenges to the young state are still overwhelming, and without foreign assistance, the extremely difficult living conditions for people – especially in rural areas – will not improve. The Eritrean leadership’s insistence on pursuing their ideology of “self-reliance” may thus turn out to be at best counter-productive, and at worst disastrous. The government simply cannot afford to scare away donors, NGOs, and UN agencies (not to mention foreign investors) by adhering to a nationalist narrative based on “stubbornness”.

Most political issues in Eritrea are securitized by the government with reference to the existential threat to the state posed by its enemies, especially Ethiopia. This may be justified, to some extent, as relations between the two countries continue to be tense. On the other hand, the militarization of the society has severe consequences for the nation-

building process. First, of course, resources that are dearly needed in other sectors are used to keep the military and great parts of society in a general state of alert. Secondly, the securitization itself prevents the securitized political issues from being subject to open discussions. Thirdly, democratization is postponed with reference to the circumstances, which are set by securitization.

As suggested above, the feeling of vulnerability may in reality emanate from inadequate “stateness”. Continuously repeating the national narrative of unity and the ideology of self-reliance cannot make up for the establishment of necessary institutional structures. Likewise, a strong state apparatus may not be the best instrument to secure public support and participation. Nation-building is about legitimacy. A state still in formation may be perceived as weak, but in the case of Eritrea, this weakness stems as much from a lack of political legitimacy as from the perceived external and domestic threats. It could be argued that the Eritrean leadership confuses regime security with state security. The question is, to what extent is it the regime and not the state that is actually threatened?

The Eritrean state, understood as a sovereign entity, was created through war. Now, however, war seems to have become a constraint to the development of an Eritrean nation meant to take on the form of a modern democracy. The ethos of the independence struggle produced a national narrative of unity, a strong feeling of self-consciousness, and a self-reliance ideology that, together with the imperatives of a strong state apparatus, keep Eritrea from falling apart. But without the demilitarization of society, without proper institutionalization of the state, without democratization, without ensured human

rights, and without the development of a civil society, this entity will become a hollow shell: the strong Eritrean state lacks the political integration of society. Instead, it deadlocks itself in the dilemma Michael C. Williams speaks of, “where states can become the primary threat to their own societies”.<sup>96</sup>

It may seem as if the former fighters in government simply have “failed to transform into politicians and civil servants”; that they are “better at controlling than setting up democratic procedures, including elections and securing freedom of speech”.<sup>97</sup> Naturally there is not just this one explanation, but according to Clapham, their success might paradoxically be seen as part of it. Thus he claims that

The defeated are notoriously far better able than the victorious to respond to the demands of peace. While the victors are hardened in their belief in the rightness of their cause and the virtue of their leaders and institutions, the losers have to assess what went wrong, and look for ways to remedy it.<sup>98</sup>

Whatever the reasons for the present conundrum, the Eritrean government must acknowledge that there is no way out but collaboration. On their side, the UN and the donor countries have to be persistent in their sincere interest in peaceful development in the Horn. First of all, the peace agreement with Ethiopia must be fully implemented. Currently there is no real dialogue between the parties, as Ethiopia seems determined not to cede any territory to Eritrea after having allowed its independence, and the Eri-

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<sup>96</sup> Michael C. Williams, ‘Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics’, *International Studies Quarterly* 47:4 (December 2003), 511-531, at 513.

<sup>97</sup> Dorman, ‘Eritrea’s Nation and State-building’, 14.

<sup>98</sup> Clapham, ‘War and state formation’, 11.

treans fear the threat of encroachment by Ethiopia on their hard-won sovereignty. Although neither of the parties want to return to combat, a loss of the contested town of Badme is hard to justify given the background of the sacrifices during the war. To many Ethiopians, the loss of Badme is emblematic of the loss of Eritrea. Without a solution to this problem, however, any demilitarization will hardly be in sight. It is necessary, therefore, to seek ways to facilitate implementation of the boundary commission's decision. Pressure must be put on the Ethiopian government to endorse the implementation, while at the same time negotiating initiatives must also aim at preventing further conflict and reducing humanitarian impacts. In return, the Eritrean leadership has to resume collaboration with the UN special envoy, with which talks have been interrupted with reference to the stalemate.

In parallel to initiatives to help both sides in de-securitizing their relations, donor commitment to development aid programmes should be ensured, and matched by an open and pragmatic attitude in the Eritrean government. Eritrean development goals should be recognized, while at the same time tuning goals and measures to recommendations and programme specifications of the expert community. Agencies, NGOs, and donor countries already present in Eritrea must make a renewed effort to find common ground. Humanitarian aid, targeted at the provision of "food security" and the return of refugees, has high priority. Donor pledges should be made on condition that the government immediately takes democratization initiatives, starting with the ensuring of human rights, the re-establishing of independent media, implementation of the constitution and elections at all levels. A renewed effort to gener-

ate capacity-building and good governance, to strengthen judiciary institutions and encourage civil society initiatives and participation are keynotes. In return for continued and expanded substantial aid in the education sector, the government should commit itself to real and prompt demobilization. This process should be monitored and ensured by an enlargement of the UNMEE force already present, with the purpose of providing security during the demarcation process and restarting negotiations with the Ethiopians.

The overall aim must be to create an enabling environment for development in Eritrea, while at the same time furthering the democratization process that can recover the legitimacy and credibility of the government. The current leadership is tough on principles, and their partners in development must be as well. To this end, an extended diplomatic effort, together with help to de-securitize, is indispensable. Demobilization and education of the youth must have urgent priority, so that precious human resources are not lost and the legacy of unity and solidarity from the struggle can be put to constructive use.

As the particularity of the state of war (and the state *at* war) keeps defining the national identity of Eritrea, this not only prolongs internal tension but also affects the stability of the whole region. As in other parts of Africa, a spill-over of conflicts and a pattern of mutual intervention is a major destabilizing factor in the Horn. Hence the war and the continuing tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia can be seen as a result of an unfortunate combination of a lack of a mature state with a functioning diplomacy, and a conscious use of a securitization narrative to uphold national unity. Using the conditions of war-

fare to promote nation-building is a risky business. Not only will the solidarity attained be of short duration, the strengthening of an internal unity paid with hostility from the outside demands a centralization of power that small states are only able to uphold using measures foreign to democracy.

When confronted with democracy demands, Third World leaders often point out that it took three hundred years for the Western nation-state to develop – a process, they might add, characterized by wars and heavy dependence on all kinds of securitizing measures. The problem with establishing viable political structures is, as Richard Rose remarked, the last line in the recipe: “Then allow to simmer gently for several centuries”.<sup>99</sup> So why cannot we just give them a break?

The answer is that any idea of violence as the midwife of history will be used by authoritarian regimes to excuse the violation of human rights. Regimes of any kind tend to portray threats to the regime as threats to the state. If dealing with these threats becomes the whole purpose of the state, it will not be able to develop and build itself. Parallel to the development of the Western nation-state, the Enlightenment rooted the values of standards of rights that constitute the foundations of democracy. These are increasingly internationally known, and also accepted. Emphasis on these values contests the idea of war as state-making and violence as the midwife of history, and they can hardly be ignored by

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<sup>99</sup> Richard Rose, ‘Dynamic Tendencies in the Authority of Regimes’, *World Politics* 21:4 (July 1969), 602–628, at 627; cited in William Maley, “Twelve Theses on the Impact of Humanitarian Intervention”, *Security Dialogue* 33:3 (September 2002), 266–278, at 271.

any government that wants international legitimacy. With globalization, such an international legitimacy is increasingly a reflection of domestic legitimacy.

Nation-building undoubtedly takes time, but it also takes the courage to trust in the parallel enlightenment of the people building the nation. In daily life, this is called capacity-building and the development of a participation culture. National unity is not a bad thing in this process. One lesson learnt from the Eritrean case, however, is that national unity can be bought at too high a price.

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