

From Liberation to Governance: The Eritrean Experience

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This presentation was delivered by Yemane Ghebremeskel, Director, Office of the President of Eritrea, and is intended to elaborate and highlight Eritrea's views and perspectives on the putative controversies or conjectures that surround the central theme of the workshop, "From Liberation Movements to Government – Past legacies and the challenges of transition in Africa" jointly organized by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, in cooperation with the South African think-tank, the Brenthurst Foundation in 2012. In light of the many narratives presented about Eritrea, its people and government by Ethiopia and its surrogates in the Eritrean Quislings League (EQL), some western anthropologists, NGO networks and the media, on the issue of governance and liberation movements, it is this author's opinion that we ought to defer to those with first hand knowledge and experience.

By [Yemane Ghebremeskel](#),

ONE vexing question that we have to address at the outset is whether standardized benchmarks and templates can be employed to assess and synthesize the individual experiences and perspectives so as to infer or formulate a generalized, even if approximated, theory.

I personally believe that the distinct historical and societal realities under which the various liberation movements were conceived and had to operate; the profound variations in the depth, maturity and relevance of the philosophical precepts that they espoused; the disparate dynamics of their internal political landscapes; as well as the specific and at times epochal external environments that influenced their trajectories both during and after liberation render the

formulation of any generalized, approximated, theory an elusive task indeed.

To come back to the Eritrean experience, I will focus and describe, in the first part, the principal variables and attributes that characterized the liberation struggle. In the second part, I will try to gauge whether these parameters, and the values, social mores and institutions that they gave rise to, facilitated the transition process or acted as negative forces of inertia to confound the daunting tasks and challenges of nation-building and good governance. I will now briefly discuss the five critical, and in my view, most relevant parameters that define the liberation struggle.

1) A Primarily Nationalist versus a Social Revolution:

The Eritrean liberation struggle was not primarily a social revolution that pitted contending internal political forces or segments of the society against each other due to irreconcilable political values, interests, visions and objectives.

The original and overriding objective of the armed struggle was *to oust Ethiopian colonial occupation and to ascertain Eritrea's right of self-determination and political independence.*

Armed struggle itself was seen as the option of last resort since legal petitions and other representations to the UN failed to produce any tangible results even when Ethiopia unilaterally abrogated the UN-imposed Federal Act and annexed Eritrea in 1961.

As I will elaborate later, the liberation fronts soon adopted, with varying degrees of intensity and clarity, political agendas of social change (eradication of remnants of the feudal land-

holding system etc.) and leftist or progressive ideologies that underpinned and rationalized them. However, antagonistic class cleavages were de-emphasized while the objectives of galvanizing broad national unity were pursued with utmost vigor. In the event, the political praxis and traditions engendered by these dispositions were tilted towards compromise and consensus building; pragmatism rather than ideological rigour and dogma. The liberation fronts suffered periodic schisms and were at loggerheads with each other due to unbridgeable differences on military strategy and other fundamental aspects of the protracted struggle. At times, these differences provoked costly internecine clashes. But the pronounced and dominant political platforms were for dialogue to resolve these differences and for the formation of a broad united front on a minimum nationalist programme that would optimize their cooperation in pursuing the war of national liberation while not papering over their differences in political outlook. Primacy to forging a common front against the external threat and non-maximalist, not winner takes all, coalition political arrangement was thus the dominant political culture that was cultivated during the three decades of armed struggle.

2) External Isolation and its Ramifications:

The stigmatization of the Eritrean liberation struggle as a “*secessionist movement*”; the heightened geopolitical importance of the Horn of Africa, southern Red Sea region that enabled Ethiopia to obtain first US and later Soviet substantial military, political and economic support in the context of the Cold War; and, emphasis on Arab nationalism and greater Arab unity by potentially supportive governments and progressive movements in the north African and/or Middle Eastern neighborhood entailed an almost total regional

and international isolation of the Eritrean liberation movements.

I shall skip the onerous costs incurred on the liberation struggle because of these factors. But on the positive side, these realities prompted the EPLF to pursue a policy of self-reliance through the full and effective mobilization of its internal/national constituencies; i.e. Eritreans at home and in the Diaspora. It also reinforced its inclinations for ideological pragmatism and the pursuit of an independent political line.

The EPLF broadly defined the liberation movements and the socialist camp at its natural allies. But it was never embroiled in the ideological schisms and alliances of the broad left. The EPLF's second congress, held in 1987, openly advocated for a pluralist Eritrea and mixed economy.

3) A strong culture of grass roots/stakeholder communication and accountability:

Extensive and open communication with its base members was a hallmark of the EPLF's political culture. *All strategic decisions: negotiations with the ELF, the strategic withdrawals, referendum proposal of 1980, etc. were discussed and debated at all levels of the Front's active combatants as well as the mass associations.* Frequent and extensive meetings at platoon, battalion etc. levels ensured almost detailed and minute accountability through scathing sessions of criticism and self-criticism.

Hence by necessity and also design, the EPLF was fully wedded to a participatory or stakeholder approach and strict accountability from the outset.

4) A Progressive and Egalitarian Social Agenda:

The EPLF introduced *equitable land redistribution* in the liberated areas; eradicated the remnants of feudal land tenure system in the few areas where this existed; advocated for equality of women in all spheres of life and abolished arranged and child marriages. The EPLF also conducted intensive sensitization programmes to eliminate the ethnic/religious cleavages and prohibit associations and polarizations that revolved around those tendencies. Within the members of the Front, it practiced almost idealistic and puritanical egalitarianism. Military and other hierarchies in the combatant and service rendering Departments were very lean and did not include tangible privileges, entitlement or perks.

5) The Protracted Nature of the War:

The original power imbalance inherent in liberation wars of this nature coupled with the international isolation of the Eritrean liberation movements meant that military strategy to vanquish the occupying force would be predicated on a piecemeal liberation of the people and country in a prolonged, protracted, people's war. The cost in human life that the 30-year protracted war exacted was enormous indeed. The martyrdom of **65,000** combatants, in addition to the tens of thousands more of civilian deaths and casualties, in the context of a very small population was enormous by any standards. But very painful as this was, it nurtured the social ethos and qualities of unparalleled resilience, patience, and selflessness hinged on the primacy of the well-being of the community over that of the individual. And in this sense, it also invigorated the fervent nationalism as literally every family had paid in the life of a son, daughter, sister or brother for the national cause. The protracted war further diluted the innate urgency of time.

Indeed, in a subliminal way, what becomes paramount in accomplishing a national task is not necessarily its timeline, but the certainty of the process, the assurances of attaining the ultimate objective. In my view, understanding this psychological disposition will be important for the second part of our discussion; all the more so since it is often overlooked by external observers and analysts of the Eritrean experience.

Before I go further, let me emphasize that the narrative of the liberation struggle in the manner described above may seem too simplified and rather romanticized to the audience here. I am aware of these limitations. The defining processes of the liberation struggle did not, and could not, occur in a neat and clinical manner. The blueprints of political and military strategy were not drawn in cozy board rooms, academic institutions or conference rooms. Indeed, as we all know, revolutions are invariably messy affairs. But I have omitted the costly reversals, the avoidable errors, the darkest moments of emotional and physical anguish as they have little relevance to the topic under discussion.

Let me now proceed to the second part to gauge whether these defining parameters – in their ideological, institutional, cultural, and attitudinal dimensions – served as catalysts to mitigate and overcome the challenges of good governance in the post independence period or became antiquated, obstructive tools and ideological baggage that were incompatible with, and not suited to, the new reality. I maintain that these variables paved the way and accelerated the tasks of nation-building and good political and economic governance in independent Eritrea. To corroborate this contention, I will employ the following six benchmarks:

1) Processes of Legitimization and Institution Building:

The EPLF did not proclaim national independence when it liberated the country on 24 May 1991. For reasons of international legitimization and internal consensus, it announced that political independence would be determined and declared after conducting an internationally supervised referendum that would be held within the interim period of two years. To put on hold the formal declaration of independence after so much sacrifice and tortuous struggle of three decades underscores, in my view, three pivotal dispositions:

i) the EPLF's stance on the primacy of law and legality; ii) its emphasis on participatory politics and consensus building; and iii) its inclination to subordinate the urgency of time to the reliability of process and ultimate outcome.

The referendum was resoundingly successful in showcasing the institutional capability and efficiency of the Front, although that was not the intention, and to secure instantaneous international recognition of independent Eritrea. All these were operational strategies and approaches cemented during the period of struggle. Building the institutions of the State was also approached in the same deliberate way. The Independence of the Judiciary was upheld from the outset and the Transitional Penal, Civil, Commercial Codes and Procedural Guidelines, most of which were revised by the legal department of the EPLF in the field, were published in the Gazette in 1991. The transitional legislative body was formed with 150 members, 75 of which came from the legislative body of the EPLF while the other 75 members were directly elected from the six Administrative Zones. The civil service was adopted as is with the juxtaposition of senior combatants at higher echelons of the institution. Phased demobilization programmes that reduced the liberation, now national, army from 100,000 to 35,000,

moral recognition and financial compensation for families of the 60,000 combatants and other major milestones were similarly implemented relatively smoothly.

2) The Constitutional Process:

The transitional assembly formed in the manner described above had full legislative powers to pass and enact new laws as well as to approve the annual budget. The necessity of a written constitution was nonetheless recognized from the outset and in 1995, the Government formed a 52-member Constitution Drafting body from legal experts, elders, all ethnic/language groups with proportional representation of women. And in the best traditions of the Front, the draft Constitution, which enshrined fundamental human rights and liberties, was widely discussed, through open seminars, at all levels of the society through the width and breadth of the country as well as in the Diaspora. These debates were also preceded by extensive seminars on civic education. The Constitution was finally approved in 1998 through a representative Constituent Assembly. It has not been fully implemented for reasons that I will describe later. But again in this vital process, the best traditions of stakeholder consultation, intensive grassroots communication, and protracted approaches nurtured during the liberation struggle were invoked for optimal outcomes.

3) Economic Development Policies:

In July 1991, the Provisional Government of Eritrea convened a three-day conference where experts where economic and business experts from the country, the Diaspora and foreign friends of Eritrea too part. In 1993, the Government launched a month-long open ended brain storming session where the President, Cabinet Members and selected experts outside the

Government took part to discuss detailed development options in all the sectors. The liberal Investment codes, the Macro Policy document and other critical policy precepts were thus articulated through lengthy participatory processes. The basic policy objectives were to channel public investment towards infrastructure and human resources capacity building and essential services while creating conducive environment for domestic and foreign capital in the other sectors. Earlier on in 1992, the government had enacted the Housing law to reverse the nationalization policy of the Dergue regime and return the property to its private owners. Later on, the Government enacted divestment laws to sell all public enterprises and factories to private citizens. Here again, pragmatism prevailed over ideological dogma. Of course, this was also tempered by corrective policies of social justice as I will elaborate later.

4) Policies of social justice:

The Third Congress of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (the new appellation for the Eritrean People's Liberation Front) emphasized social justice as one of its core policy commitments. In practice this has been translated into: channeling more government budgets to deprived areas; equality of opportunity in education (which is free including the tertiary segment) and health; affirmative action for women and other disadvantaged groups. These indexes illustrate the achievements in this regard: life expectancy has grown from 49 years in 1991 to 63 years now; child mortality and

5) Ethnic/religious polarization, urban/rural divide, concepts of egalitarianism:

The Egalitarianism that was practiced in the EPLF and was a critical element of motivation could not be sustained in the new reality. Nonetheless, the government salary scales that

were introduced in 1994 and revised in 1997 ensured that the ratio between the highest and lowest rungs was not more than 5:1. The Government has pursued policies of even development, in as much as this is practically possible, to narrow the urban/rural divide. For ethnic/religious harmony, the State is secular and there is no official language with primary education taught in many areas in the mother's vernacular tongue.

6) Regional and International Relations:

This is probably the Achilles' heel that has and continues to hamper the smooth transition process in a rather disproportionate way. In spite of the early hopes harbored, efforts exerted and achievements gained in the first seven years after liberation, Eritrea and Ethiopia were plunged into a costly war. They remain embroiled to date in a destructive relationship of belligerency. Eritrea had also faced border problems with Yemen although this was resolved through a reasonably speedy arbitration process that both sides dutifully respected. But the border war with Ethiopia has reignited old animosities with negative implications to the transition process that Eritrea had embarked on with earnestness and deliberation. While massive demobilization was carried out in the aftermath of independence, the new reality dictated the extension of the National Military Service beyond the legal limitations of 18 months. The timelines for the full implementation of the Constitution and associated laws on political parties were extended as primary focus revolved around the exigencies of national security and preservation of the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The regional climate of tension and disharmony was further compounded by US priorities and policy choices in the region. US preoccupation with the "war on terrorism" that literally subordinated other strategic issues to this singular

objective; developments in Somalia in which Eritrea's principled views and stance were not in tune with that of the United States and Ethiopia have only aggravated the situation. Indeed, since December 2009, Eritrea continues to face intensive pressure through UN Security Council sanctions that were primarily conceived and pushed by the United States.

Conclusion:

As I pointed out earlier, the ideological orientations, institutional set-ups, and overall value system cultivated during the liberation struggle were catalytic in promoting the challenges of transition and good governance. And if the task still remains unfinished after 20 years, or is work in progress, it is primarily due reversal imposed by the externalities of regional dynamics and international developments.