

The Process of Nation Building and State Construction under Arrest in Eritrea: Unmasking the Evils of the Rapacious Regime

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Part I



There is a common, yet grave, mistake that Eritreans make these days. They tend to equate the Rapacious Regime (PFDJ Regime) in Eritrea with the EPLF as if they were one and the same. The Rapacious Regime is an illegal and illegitimate entity that has been ruling Eritrea by force (without the expressed consent of the Eritrean people) since 1997. The regime has not only been a scalawag entity but also a “backfriend” of the Eritrean people. Whereas, the EPLF was a vanguard of the Eritrean people. As a liberation movement organization, it created an efficient fighting force that finally liberated Eritrea by defeating the Ethiopian occupying army in May 1991. The EPLF also prepared the ground work for the free and fair referendum which was conducted from 23 to 25 April 1993 under international and regional organizations’ observation and monitoring. A 99.8 per cent in favor of sovereign nationhood led to the ushering in of the birth of Eritrea as an independent sovereign state with all the rights and duties of sovereignty. The EPLF, as an organization, came to an end in its third and last congress in 1994. The PFDJ that came after it, and itself that came to an end as an organization in 2001, is a totally different animal and hence it did not reflect the legacy of the EPLF in any shape or form. Leaders of the Rapacious Regime have roots in PFDJ and they are destroying the Eritrean Identity – the Identity that the EPLF played a major and decisive role to create. Hence, the current Eritrean regime is the anti-thesis of not only the EPLF but also the “Eritrean Cause”. How so?

As we all know, Eritrean is a shared identity that has been shaped by a common long history of social, economic, and political struggle of the people, who today constitute the State of Eritrea. This shared identity has been particularly forged and solidified during the war of liberation where Eritreans of all ethnicities, nationalities, and social groups coalesced into one entity in search of freedom, liberty and national sovereignty. With no variation, during the 30 years of armed struggle for independence, all Eritreans suffered loss and paid heavy sacrifices, which were finally capped with precious success- the achievement of the Eritrean independence in 1991. Therefore, attaining a sovereign Eritrea is an expression of the shared Eritrean Identity. Not only the prices Eritreans paid during the 30 years active armed struggle was high, but also the loss and suffering that successive Eritrean generations incurred both before the liberation era and after our independence in search of their

nationhood was unparalleled by any account. Sovereign Eritrea is not just a country to an Eritrean, but rather it is the result of the sacrifices of each and every Eritrean family. Each Eritrean family knows how many sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces... etc were paid in realizing a sovereign and independent Eritrea. Eritrea is a precious gift to every living Eritrean family from its martyrs. Thus, Eritrea not only belongs to Eritreans collectively but also to every Eritrean family individually.

Independence, however, was not an aim in itself but a means to an end - liberated and democratic Eritrea. That is, independence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberated and democratic Eritrea. Unfortunately, a ruthless homegrown dictator hijacked the process of liberating Eritrea. One can revisit to what has happened to Eritrea in all aspects of life during the last 20+ years under the Rapacious Regime. First, at the international level, during its 20+ years in power, the regime managed to destroy our country's reputation inasmuch as Eritrea today is perceived not as a peacemaker but rather as a regional destabilizing force led by a totally reckless and erratic regime. This continues to undermine Eritrea's long-term status as a State and its roles in creating, maintaining, and preserving international and regional peace and security, particularly considering its strategic location in the most vital international waterways. This latent but potent dynamic force poses a greater danger both to the survival of Eritrea as a State and to the collective identity that makes up Eritrea as a whole, encompassing its culture, religion...etc.

Second, at the domestic level, there is a 'failed state phenomenon' where the regime has miserably failed in its political, educational, cultural and socio-economic policies. It is common knowledge that each society functions with a set of economic and political rules created and enforced by the state and the citizens collectively. Economic institutions shape economic incentives; the incentive to become educated, to save and invest, to innovate and adopt new technologies; and so on. It is the political process that determines what economic institutions people live under, and it is the political institutions that determined how this process works. Political and economic institutions can be inclusive and encourage economic growth. Or they can be extractive and become impediments to economic growth. History attests that nations fail when they have extractive economic institutions, supported by extractive political institutions that impede and even block economic growth. That is exactly what happened to Eritrea under the Rapacious Regime of Issaias Afeworki.

From the get go, Issaias tried to create absolutist and extractive political and economic institutions. Instead of calling for national reconciliation and inclusion, he declared ".... from now onwards, there is no space for political pluralism in Eritrea" in his first address to the Eritrean people in 1991. The process of suffocating the political space in Eritrea has been continuing to date and Issaias has eliminated many political figures, including internal dissents, such as the group dubbed "G15", who called for political pluralism in Eritrea. He has declared the 1997 Constitution as dead before it was promulgated in his 2015 New Year speech and has denied the Eritrean people its right to have a constitutional government, rule of law, and economic prosperity.

Instead, Issaias has created absolutist and extractive political institutions, which have given him an absolute power to set up extractive economic institutions to enrich himself and his cronies and augment his power at the expense of the Eritrean society. Under the extractive economic institutions of the Rapacious Regime, property rights are not secured, system of laws are biased, and the provision of public services that could have provided a level playing field in which Eritreans could have exchanged and contracted are almost nonexistent in today's Eritrea.

The basic economic resources, such as land, labor, capital and natural resources, are mainly under the control of the dictatorial regime in Eritrea. The vast parastatals of the regime, such as construction companies, financial enterprises (insurance, banks, foreign exchange bureaus, smuggling networks, etc.), and trading firms, such as Red Sea Trading Company, are mainly dependent on "forced labor". Issaias determines who has power in Eritrea and to what ends that power can be used. Hence, for the last two plus decades, Issaias presided over an extreme set of extractive institutions and run Eritrea as his own private property; hands over favors and patronage and ruthlessly punishing lack of loyalty. There are no formal institutions that place restrictions on politicians' actions and make them accountable to citizens. Instead, the regime has pursued inefficient policies that transfer resources from the population to the ruling group. This small group controls and runs the State of Eritrea and uses its power to transfer a larger fraction of the Eritrean society's resources to themselves.

Besides, accepting bribes for even doing your supposedly public duties, and from people who want to evade indefinite military services; human trafficking; smuggling goods and people; practicing favoritism for financial rewards; selling public prosperities, including land; using free and unpaid labor on military and Rapacious Regime's run farms, shops and construction firms; and working as the regime's spy as well as intimidating private citizens for ransom have become some of the illegitimate means of self-enrichment pursued by this group. Extractive economic institutions thus naturally accompany extractive political institutions and there is a strong synergy between the two. Furthermore, this synergetic relationship introduces a strong feedback loop: political institutions enable the regime elites controlling political power to choose economic institutions with few constraints or opposing forces. They also enable regime elites to structure future political institutions and their evolution. Extractive economic institutions, in turn, enrich regime elites, and their economic power and wealth help consolidate their political power and dominance. Eritrea has suffered heavily under this kind of vicious cycle for the last 20+ years.

Consequently, the inner-societal stability is highly deteriorated. Chaos and degree of entropy has been increasing with lasting and drastic impacts on the fabric of society, making individuals unable to fulfill long-established expected social roles – founding a family by following the traditional rituals, supporting or providing for one's family, pursuing quality education and engaging in meaningful employment opportunity, etc.