

# GRANDSTANDING AMIDST DECAY

The Architecture of Distraction in Issaias Afewerki's  
35th Independence Day Address



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TRILLION**

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# **Grandstanding Amidst Decay: The Architecture of Distraction in Issaias Afeworki's 35th Independence Day Address**

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## ***Preface: A Reluctant Reflection***

*I generally make it a point to avoid the televised addresses of Issaias Afeworki. To me, these speeches are more than just political theater; they are visceral, toxic experiences that I find difficult to stomach. For decades, my research into the “rapacious regime” has led me to a firm conclusion: Issaias is a leader who operates by a calculated design to undermine the Eritrean people and sabotage our national interest. Because he relies on a stagnant cycle of extraction and repression, one rarely finds any new substance in his rhetoric. It is almost always a regurgitation of the same tired themes - a performance of “evil” and “stupid” statecraft that I find personally and intellectually painful to witness.*

*However, following the 35th Independence Day celebrations, one of my closest friends approached me with a simple question: “Did you watch the speech?” When I told him I had not - and explained my reasons for refusing to subject myself to the same predictable lies - we entered into a spirited discussion. I maintained that since Issaias never offers anything new, and since his words are intended to cause harm, there was no value in watching. My friend, however, persisted. He believed that despite my reservations, I would find something within those 22 minutes that needed to be documented and analyzed for the public record.*

*Out of respect for my friend and his persistent encouragement, I relented. I watched the speech, and as he predicted, the experience sparked a realization that went beyond the usual tropes of the regime. The sheer quantitative neglect of the domestic agenda - relegated to a mere four-minute afterthought - provided a stark data point for the ongoing collapse of the state.*

*The following article is a direct result of that viewing. I wish to give full credit to my friend; without his nudge, I would have avoided this toxic display altogether. Instead, his encouragement allowed me to distill Issaias Afeworki's latest performance into the critique provided below, highlighting the “architecture of distraction” that continues to hold our nation hostage.*

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On May 24, 2026, as Eritrea marked its 35th year of formal independence, the nation was once again subjected to a rhetorical performance by President Issaias Afewerki that was as predictable as it was perilous. Rather than presenting a roadmap for domestic recovery or addressing the dire humanitarian realities facing the Eritrean people, Issaias Afewerki reverted to a familiar script: projecting global geopolitical analysis as a substitute for governance. For decades, I have documented the systematic dismantling of the Eritrean state under a regime that thrives on crisis, extraction, and total societal subjugation. In my previous research – notably the series



*Unmasking the Rapacious Regime* and my more recent work, *The Vicious Cycle of Criminality* – I have argued that the regime’s survival depends on maintaining a perpetual state of emergency and manufacturing external enemies (Gebremariam 2018a; Gebremariam 2025). The 2026 Independence Day address, centered on a critique of U.S. national debt and a supposed collapse of Western systems, is merely the latest manifestation of this grand strategy of distraction.

### **The Geopolitical Smokescreen: Scapegoating as Statecraft**

Issaias Afewerki’s speech pivoted away from Eritrea’s catastrophic domestic conditions – marked by acute shortages of water, electricity, food security, and healthcare – to lecture the world on American fiscal policy. He claimed that the U.S. national debt surged from \$30 trillion last year to \$40 trillion this year, portraying the United States as a failing state. This rhetorical maneuver serves a calculated purpose:

to gloss over domestic failures and manipulate public perception by embedding Eritrea's suffering within a supposedly global systemic collapse (Gebremariam 2025, 4). Such framing cultivates a "misery-loves-company" psychology, encouraging Eritreans to accept deprivation as inevitable in a turbulent world rather than as the direct outcome of governance failure.

However, this argument collapses under scrutiny. As highlighted in the *OECD Global Debt Report 2026*, economic health is accurately measured by debt-to-GDP ratios and debt-servicing capacity – metrics in which the United States, despite its challenges, remains structurally robust compared to Eritrea's stagnant and extractive economy (OECD 2026). Furthermore, Issaias Afeworki's critique constitutes a flagrant interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign country, which is illegal under international law. It is particularly irrational given that it occurs at a time when there are discussions to improve relations and lift sanctions.

### **Chronometric Neglect: Four Minutes of Wishful Thinking**

As I analyzed the structure of this year's address, the quantitative disparity in Issaias Afeworki's focus was jarring. In a speech spanning approximately 22 minutes, the



President devoted a mere four minutes – positioned as a cursory afterthought at the very end – to domestic issues. This 18-minute preoccupation with global “analyses” at the expense of national concerns is not merely a matter of poor speechwriting; it is a profound reflection of the regime's priorities.

Even within those brief four minutes, Issaias Afeworki failed to offer any substantive or real-world programs. Instead, he simply regurgitated his usual “wishful promises” – the same tired refrains of “we will do this” and “we will build that” that have characterized his rhetoric for decades without ever coming to fruition. Crucially, the President once again refused to take responsibility for the non-delivery of previous years' promises. This is a hallmark of his leadership: if he addresses domestic issues at all, he promises a future prosperity that never arrives, while simultaneously

blaming the current “world order” or external factors for his own administration's paralysis. This refusal to accept accountability is a core mechanism of the “vicious cycle” I have described, where the failure to deliver is perpetually offloaded onto a hostile world (Gebremariam 2025, 7).

### **The Rapacious Regime and the Extractive Economy**

The deeper crisis lies within the structure of the Eritrean state itself. My research characterizes the ruling PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) as a “rapacious regime,” sustained by what I term an “extractive economy” (Gebremariam 2018b). This system does not merely fail to generate growth – it actively dismantles productive capacity to maintain political control. Under indefinite national service, Eritrean youth are transformed into a permanent labor force, deprived of wages, mobility, and autonomy. This institutionalized forced labor eliminates incentives for innovation and production, ensuring total dependency on the regime (Gebremariam 2018a, 12).

The result is a hollowed-out state characterized by a lack of a functional constitution, the absence of elections, and a complete failure to provide basic public services. As I outlined in *Unmasking the Rapacious Regime*, the government operates through institutionalized lawlessness, where legality itself becomes a tool of repression (Gebremariam 2018b, 4). Economic life is replaced by extraction, and social life is regulated through coercion. The only “export” that flourishes is human capital, as the country becomes a leading producer of refugees fleeing systemic hopelessness.

### **Domestic Failure Masked by Global Posturing**

Issaias Afewerki's “debt analysis” also ignores a critical irony: much of U.S. fiscal expenditure supports social safety nets and transfer payments. The very systems he



derides provide a lifeline for Eritrean families through diaspora remittances. Eritrea has effectively become a “remittance society,” where survival depends not on domestic productivity – which the regime has stifled – but on external

support derived from the same Western economies the regime vilifies (Gebremariam

2018b, 7). By insulting these systems while simultaneously relying on them to feed the people under his grip, Issaias Afeworki is engaging in diplomatic arson.



While he analyzes Washington’s fiscal policy, Eritreans contend daily with the absence of essential services. My report on the *Vicious Cycle of Criminality* underscores how the regime perpetuates control by weaponizing law and sustaining a climate of emergency (Gebremariam 2025, 12). External threats are invoked to justify indefinite military conscription and the suppression of civil liberties. This cycle reinforces itself: policy failure necessitates external blame – scapegoating – which in turn rationalizes further repression. Issaias Afeworki speaks of global debt because he cannot address Eritrean growth; he warns of Western collapse because he cannot explain the Eritrean exodus.

### **Diplomatic Sabotage and the Erosion of Sovereignty**

Perhaps most alarming is the regime’s growing disregard for Eritrea’s sovereignty and diplomatic standing. Issaias Afeworki’s repeated interference in international affairs – including overt support for Russian expansionism and constant antagonism toward the American administration – violates longstanding norms of state conduct. Such actions narrow Eritrea’s already limited diplomatic space and alienate potential partners at a time when constructive engagement is desperately needed.

Even more troubling is his post-2018 rhetoric regarding Ethiopia. By asserting that Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples are “one” and downplaying sovereign distinctions, he undermines the very independence Eritreans fought to secure. What is presented as

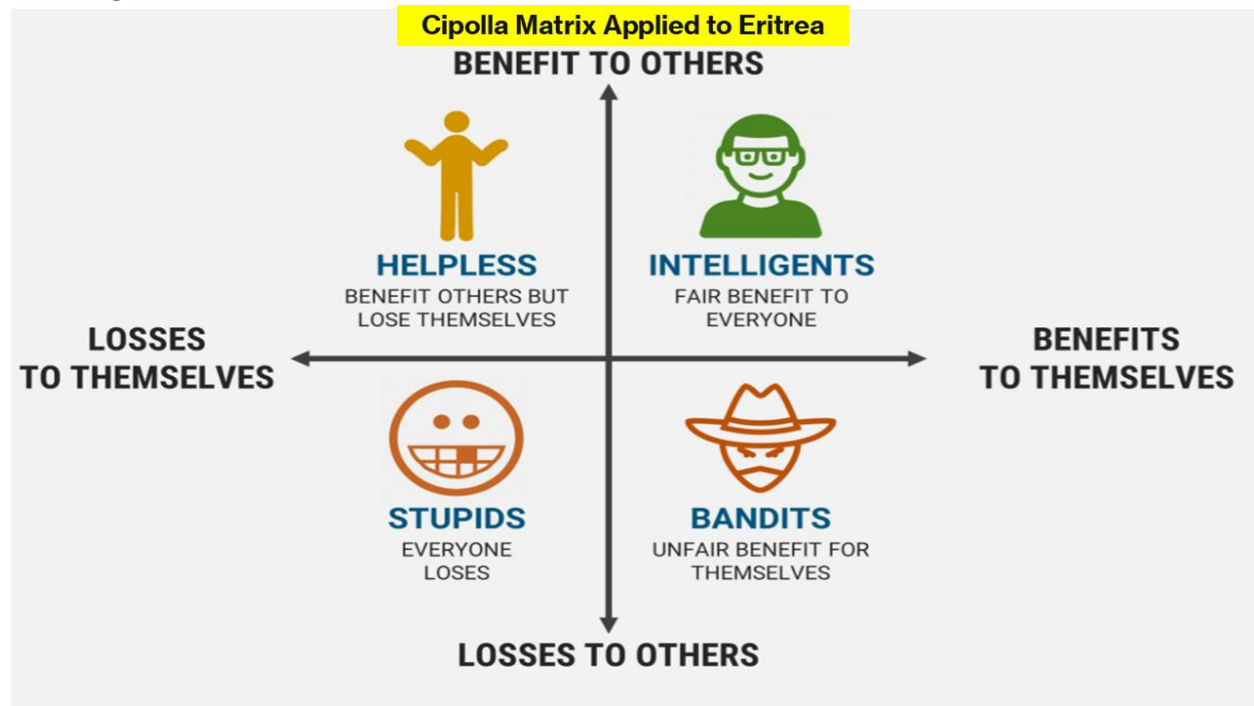
regional cooperation increasingly resembles a strategic alliance between autocrats that marginalizes Eritrean national interests and dilutes national identity (Gebremariam 2025, 9). For many, this blurring of sovereignty approaches national betrayal – a sacrifice of hard-won independence in pursuit of opaque political ambitions.

### The Vicious Cycle of Criminality

The 2026 Independence Day address confirms that Eritrea remains trapped in a self-perpetuating system: domestic failure produces collapse; external scapegoating reframes that failure as a global inevitability; heightened tensions justify further repression; and that repression deepens the failure (Gebremariam 2025, 15). This is the “Vicious Cycle of Criminality” – a governance model in which crisis is not an accident but a necessity for survival. Issaias Afeworki’s global lectures are not signs of leadership; they are symptoms of a leader who has run out of excuses and substituted rhetoric for results.

### The Actor – Victim Dynamic Through Cipolla’s Theory of Human Stupidity

To further illuminate the structural dynamics underpinning Eritrea’s governance crisis, I find that Carlo M. Cipolla’s theory of human behavior provides a powerful analytical lens. In *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity*, Cipolla (1988) classifies human actions into four categories based on their outcomes for oneself and others: **Intelligent, Helpless, Bandit, and Stupid**. When applied to the Eritrean context, this



framework reveals a dual characterization of the ruling regime's behavior and the structurally constrained, tragic position of the Eritrean people.

At its core, the governance system I have documented for decades exhibits strong features of **Bandit** behavior – that is, actions that benefit the actor while harming others. As I demonstrated in *Unmasking the Rapacious Regime* (Gebremariam 2018a; 2018b), the Eritrean state operates as a purely extractive system. The institutionalization of indefinite national service, the suppression of private economic initiative, and the total reliance on diaspora remittances enable the regime to consolidate political control while inflicting profound economic and social harm on the population. In Cipolla's terms, this reflects a “predatory equilibrium”: the regime survives by systematically transferring all costs to society while siphoning all benefits to a small elite.

However, I believe this classification alone is no longer sufficient to describe our current reality. Increasingly, the regime's behavior aligns with Cipolla's most dangerous category: **Stupidity**. In this framework, “stupidity” is defined as actions that harm others while simultaneously undermining the actor's own long-term interests. As I argued in *The Vicious Cycle of Criminality* (Gebremariam 2025), persistent diplomatic antagonism, self-imposed isolation, the erosion of sovereign clarity, and the destruction of domestic human capital reflect something more than mere exploitation; they reflect self-destructive governance. These actions weaken the structural viability of the state itself, thereby transforming calculated banditry into a trajectory of systemic decline that eventually consumes the ruler as well as the ruled.

Within this framework, the Eritrean people occupy a position analogous to Cipolla's **Helpless** category – those whose actions benefit others while harming themselves. While this is not a voluntary condition, the regime's structure of coercion, repression, and the absence of institutional alternatives forces citizens into roles that sustain the very apparatus that oppresses them. Their labor within indefinite national service, their compliance under restrictive governance, and their reliance on diaspora networks collectively reproduce a system that does not serve their interests (Gebremariam 2018a; 2025).

The interaction of these roles produces a closed loop of dysfunction. Extractive policies generate crisis; crisis is reframed through external narratives and geopolitical posturing; such narratives justify further repression; and repression prevents the very reform that might save the state. This cyclical dynamic corresponds directly to my conceptualization of the **Vicious Cycle of Criminality** (Gebremariam 2025). Cipolla's central insight – that systems dominated by “stupid” actors generate cumulative losses for everyone – finds a tragic resonance here. The Eritrean case

illustrates how governance can evolve from rational exploitation into a mutually destructive stagnation where the distinction between self-interest and self-harm collapses. What emerges is not merely an authoritarian system, but a self-undermining political order in which both the actor and the victim are trapped in a terminal trajectory of decline.

### **Conclusion: Beyond Deflection toward a Self-Undermining Order**

The 35th Independence Day address was more than a missed opportunity; it was a definitive exposure of a regime that has transitioned from rational exploitation into a terminal phase of systemic decline. By dedicating eighteen minutes to a critique of global fiscal policy while relegating the domestic survival of the nation to a four-minute afterthought, Isaias Afwerki provided a vivid demonstration of the Cipolla framework in action. The speech offered no path forward – only a continuation of the same deflection and antagonism that have characterized his tenure.

As my analysis suggests, Eritrea today is defined by a convergence of roles that ensures stagnation. The regime's evolution from "banditry" to "stupidity" – where it harms the population while simultaneously destroying its own long-term structural viability – is reflected in every unprovoked diplomatic insult and every year of failed domestic promises. Under this "stupid" governance, the Eritrean people remain trapped in a "helpless" state, forced by a "Vicious Cycle of Criminality" to sustain a system that actively erodes their future. The reliance on diaspora remittances and the export of human capital are not merely economic side effects; they are the symptoms of a self-undermining political order.

Afwerki's attempt to frame Eritrea's condition as a byproduct of a collapsing global order is a final act of evasion. The real crisis is not found in the national debt of the United States or the shifting alliances of the East; it is internal, structural, and sustained by the deliberate policy choices of a leader who has abandoned the national interest for the sake of geopolitical theater.

True independence is not measured by the ability to criticize global powers from a podium; it is measured by the capacity of a state to provide for its citizens, uphold the rule of law, and respect the sovereignty of both the nation and the individual. As long as the leadership remains fixated on the perceived failures of others while ignoring its fundamental obligations at home, Eritrea will remain a nation in captivity. The "stupidity" of the current order is that it burns the very house it seeks to rule, leaving behind a legacy of hollowed-out institutions and a people waiting for a liberation that was promised thirty-five years ago but has yet to arrive.

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