

Crafting a Family Dynasty: The Dialectics of “Father-Son” Political Transition in Eritrea

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Issaias Afeworki has been grooming his eldest son, Abraham Issaias, to succeed him as the president of Eritrea upon his departure (due to death or incapacitation). Over the last three decades or so, he has been trying to create a perfect condition to craft a family dynasty in Eritrea. As we all know, Issaias came to power through revolution

on the shoulders of Eritrean revolutionaries and he exploited the unique circumstances and the critical juncture that occurred in post-independent Eritrea. To put it differently, the fatigue of 30 years of destructive war and the subsequent euphoria of independence let the Eritrean people’s guard down and helped Issaias to lay the foundation of his absolutist and extractive political, economic, and social institutions. In a regrettable and deadly historical mistake, the Eritrean people entrusted Issaias with their public space, their fundamental freedoms, their power of citizenry and sovereignty, and their revolution that they achieved in the decades before independence. Using such an opportunity or call it the magnanimity of Eritrean people, Issaias went on consolidating his dictatorial regime by engaging in a scheme of depriving all political rights and atomizing the Eritrean society by introducing a series of draconian measures that overtime brought the breakdown of our families and communities, erosion of our cultural values and freedoms, and the destruction of Eritrea’s patriotism, harmony, courage, unity, religious life, and perseverance, which we know such values are the foundation of Eritrean people that helped them withstood all enemies and foreign occupiers, and values that cemented their unity in the last century.

Consequently, the Eritrean Nuclear Family has been destroyed as a unit of function and structure of the Eritrean society. Eritreans in general and the youth in particular have been leaving the country for good in exodus to such an extent that today many Eritrean villages and towns are almost empty and at the verge of extinction. Simultaneously, Issaias has been engaging in “Identity Cleansing” by eliminating Eritreans with political gravitas (those who put the national

interest of Eritrea first and who have the gut to say no to his dictatorial rule) through a combination of purging, freezing, incommunicado imprisonment, extra judicial killings etc. from his administration. In this manner, not only has Issaias been able to effectively eliminate any potential resistance from “inside” but also deprived Eritrea of the necessary and sufficient conditions for democratic transition. Instead, he has created a perfect political and socio-economic domestic conditions for a “Father-Son Political Transition” in Eritrea.

To make what would be his “Family Dynasty” permanent (to continue in perpetual), Issaias has also been trying to buy permanent security guarantee from Ethiopia in exchange for the vital assets of Eritrea (Access to the Sea, Ports, Economic Investment Concessions, Control of Vital Socio-economic Interests, etc.). To grasp the gravity of what Issaias has been and is up to, it suffices to revisit to what has been transpiring in Eritrea since Issaias’ recent visit to Ethiopia and what he did and he said there. For Issaias, Eritrea is his private property and he thinks he can dispose of Eritrea as he wishes. Issaias has committed national treason when he said, “The Eritrean people and the Ethiopian people are one and same; I have given (transferred to) you (Dr. Abiy) my authority as a president and from onward you can lead us”. He was actually saying that Eritrea is not a sovereign country and to say that is an act which amounts to committing national treason. But, not only has Issaias not been held accountable for his crimes, but also continued to engage in secretive and clandestine treaties and dealings to the pearl and at the expense of the National Interest of Eritrea. This might still seem myth to many Eritreans. The reality, however, is that it was on the making and it was a matter of time before it becomes naked for everyone to see.

For instance, to the majority of Eritreans, now it is not secret that “Family Dynasty” is being crafted in Eritrea and even some Eritreans have been writing about it for some time now. For wider readership and to benefit those who missed these writings (articles), I will try to include some of them with this series of articles. Here is part I:

Issaias’ Last Ditch to Bury the Legacy of the EPLF: The End of the “Hope” for Constitutional Governance/Political Pluralism and the Dawning of a Family Dynasty in Eritrea

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26 February 2015

Part I

Issaias is digging the last ditch to bury the legacy of the EPLF/the liberation struggle and with that comes the continuation of denial of Eritrean people their right to have a constitutional political system that upholds the rule of law and respects the fundamental principles of freedom and basic human rights.

The history of modern Eritrea is the history of a long and arduous struggle in search of statehood and national identity. Successive generations of Eritreans waged both peaceful and armed struggle collectively against their common colonial powers (Turks, Egyptians, Italians, British, and Ethiopians). Particularly, organized Eritrean national resistance against colonial rules got momentum during the 1940's and the 1950's, which overtime get transformed into an armed national liberation movement in the 1960's. Thus, after struggling against successive colonial powers for almost 100 years that includes thirty years of bloody armed nationalistic struggle against the last colonial power, Ethiopia, Eritrea's *de facto* independence was realized under the leadership of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in May 1991 and the birth of the nation was formally legalized, *de jure* independence, through the April 1993 United Nations monitored referendum. However, as we know, independence was not an aim in itself but a means to an end- to have an all-inclusive and democratic political, economic, and social system in Eritrea. That is, independence was a necessary condition not a sufficient condition for establishing a democratic and prosperous Eritrea.

Indeed, the core objectives and aims of the Eritrean war of liberation were freedom, justice, democracy and economic and social emancipation. It is well-evidenced that throughout our struggle, leading Eritrean figures of the armed struggle constantly made solemn pledges and vows of the importance of the establishment of democracy; rule of law, and a society governed by democratic principles and institution anchored on a constitutional governance that is accountable to the people in post-independence Eritrea. These pledges also continued during the first few years after *de facto* independence. The ***National Charter for Eritrea*** (adopted by the 3rd congress of EPLF in 1994) and the ***ratified Constitution of Eritrea (1997)***, for example, pledged the birth/creation of free, democratic and prosperous Eritrea with a constitutional political system that upholds the rule of law and respects the fundamental principles of freedom and human rights. The pursuit of these noble objectives were the *raison d'être* for the Eritrean liberation struggle where generations of Eritreans paid untold sacrifices. Hence, the ultimate legacy of the Eritrean liberation struggle in general and the EPLF (as an organization that led the Eritrean people to victory) in particular would have been the creation of a constitutional and democratic Eritrean State, which would recognize the legitimacy of a government that derives from the consent of the governed (the people) and that would become sustainable by an active citizenry engagement and participation in the governance of the country. It did not happen.

Because, not long after independence, the process of nation building and the democratization of Eritrea was hijacked by a group of ruthless predatory dictators and subsequently the noble objectives of the liberation struggle were subverted for personal power and aggrandizements of these few unscrupulous predators - antithetical to what Eritrean martyrs and Eritrean people had all along struggled and envisioned for their country, meaning the establishment of popular governance and not a dictatorship. But, what we have now in Eritrea is the latter, which is the rule of dictatorship under one man with unlimited power that rules by decrees. With this, all the pledges and the concrete promises that were made during and after the liberation struggle were betrayed to the core by none other than Issaias and his henchmen elites who are anti democracy, anti-diverse views, and anti-Eritrean citizens' sovereignty.

Having secured power through the PFDJ Party, which is the nucleus of authoritarianism in Eritrea, this kleptocratic group led by Issaias went on a spree of purging and eliminating pro-democracy elements among the ranks of the EPLF first and later against members of the PFDJ. Once Issaias took control of the PFDJ, he changed its structure and character, reduced it to a mere exploitative weapon, and made it a brute Party to suppress all political dissenters and oppositions. And over the past two decades, Issaias frozen public servants and military personnel, tortured opponents, outlawed press freedom, imprisoned and murdered hundreds of pro-democracy movement groups who pushed and called for constitution governance in Eritrea, and put hundreds of others in incommunicado and solitary confinements. Needless to say, now two decades later, it seems that Issaias has reached the stage where he thinks he can have a free and smooth ride to his dream land – ***an Eritrea ruled by his family dynasty***. History shows that some dictators succeeded in creating family dynasties such as the three generations lineage of the Kim Dynasty of North Korea and the Al-Assad Dynasty of Syria; and other dictators such as Mubarak of Egypt, Gaddafi of Libya, and Ali Abdella Saleh of Yemen - attempted to create a family dynasty but they failed due to popular uprising.

In his 2015 New Year Interview, after shelving it for 17 years, Issaias declared the 1997 ratified Eritrean constitution as a 'dead' document. Not only that, but also he declared that he is planning to draft a new one. Will he draft a new one? What kind of constitution will it be? How will it be different from the 1997 constitution? If at all his hidden drafters produce one, it will be either a document that will allow ***ONLY One Party System*** or ***a NO-Party System***. Both these systems pave the way for the establishment of a "***Family Dynasty***" in Eritrea – the dream land of Issaias. Issaias is digging the last ditch to bury the legacy of the EPLF/the liberation struggle and with that comes the continuation of the denial of Eritrean people their right to have a constitutional political system that upholds the rule of law and respects the fundamental freedoms and basic human rights. Whether or not Issaias will be able to land in his dream land will depend on what the Eritrean people will do. But what is absolutely clear now through his recent interview is that Issaias has admitted that he has in fact been ruling Eritrea without a constitution (without the consent of the Eritrean people) for the last 17 years. For the brainwashed majority followers of the PFDJ, this should be a red flag that Issaias' regime is illegitimate and that Issaias has neither a right nor a legitimacy to eliminate or declare the 1997 ratified Eritrean Constitution (a people's legal document) as dead.

But in a reversal of fortune, as if the Eritrean history is not replete with betrayals, the Eritrean people have been betrayed once again by a homegrown predatory dictator. Because of this, almost 24 years after independence, Eritrea does not have a constitution, has had no elections and no contract between the governed and the government. The Issaias regime has failed Eritrea in all its political, educational, cultural and socio-economic policies. Instead, Issaias all along engaged in looting the country's resources and distributing it to the ruling class and other selective minority groups as a means to maximize the power of his dictatorial regime. The use of the country's resources as a form of patronage and favoritism is used to placate supporters and punish those who oppose the regime.

The brute fact is instead of establishing governance structures and resources allocation system that allows popular participation, the regime from the outset adopted extractive and exclusionary laws that allow it to capture all the benefits of our independence. As a consequence, many population groups in our country were and are marginalized politically, socially and economically. Ever since its inception, the regime has centralized the production and distribution of resources, established patronage and privileges at the expense of all other elements of the nation's economy. We know, using this political power, the few in PFDJ have accumulated enormous wealth and resources of the state for themselves. In addition, the state power arrangement does not constrain the powers of the government: it does not guarantee economic freedom; it does not provide mechanisms for peaceful resolution of conflicting interests of various groups within Eritrea; it does not advocate for peaceful coexistence in Eritrea. What we have in Eritrea is a "failed state phenomenon" where the regime neither cares for the majority of the people or for the public good, nor for the people's right.

Last, with the latest declaration of scrapping the 1997 constitution, Eritrea is being exposed to a bone-deep deficiency of statehood and representative political system, which is a major threat to the country and its people. And this is the final nail in the coffin of all the legacies of EPLF and of the struggle of Eritrean people for democracy and freedom. Where is the anger of ex-EPLF fighters who paid blood and sweat to achieve free Eritrea, but betrayed by Issaias? Our question is, was not the basic precept of the "**The National Charter for Eritrea** (adopted by the 3rd congress of EPLF in 1994) and **the ratified Constitution of Eritrea (1997)**" to establish rule of law and representative government in Eritrea? Is not it time that we say enough is enough and stop the evil minded Issaias from destroying and burying the legacy of our armed struggle and the dream of our people – a dream of democracy, rule of law, and constitutional governance that is accountable to the people of Eritrea? EPDP says "it is high time we should" call upon the Eritrean public in general and all ex-EPLF fighters and supporters in particular to join hands and confront the evil intent and design of Issaias and save the "Eritrean Nation" from descending into political, social, economic and demographic abyss. Understanding the evil mind behind this unfortunate negative trend is relegated to the Part II of this series.