Eritrea’s National Security: Towards the End of Old Odds

Meressa Tsehaye

1. Introduction

News coming from Eritrea in recent years/days are in fast dynamism. The PFDJ regime in Asmara is saliently failing. Some of the indications are in 2014 Ethiopia air attacked on campuses anti-Ethiopia armed forces inside Eritrea, the regime oddly kept salient; 2015 attack on Bisha gold mining, the regime denied, and September 2015 defection of leader of Tigray People democratic Movement (TPDM) with its soldiers to Ethiopia indicates the degree of regime’s failure to effectively control its sovereignty though Eritrea has been viewed as ‘over militarized state’ in the region.

Dan Connell (1997), a long term sympathizer of EPLF turned critique, branded Eritrea’s journal to territorial independence via popular armed struggle as “revolution against all odds”. The EPLF/PFDJ mainstreamed the branding for the projection of uniqueness and rareness of the State of Eritrea and EPLF/PFDJ itself is comparing to none in Africa but with the superpowers- as in the songs of Helen Meles’s ‘Arha nber’ (ዓርሓንበር) and WediTikano’s ‘Yigermena Alo’ (ይገርመናኢሎ).

**Ideologically/nationalist thesis wise**, Eritrea’s thesis for armed struggle, *first*, defied *national oppression* struggle for autonomy and equality of the 9 nations as in the case of TPLF/ERDF claiming there was no oppressor and oppressed which later became a challenge to the project of “one people, one heart (እHECKETH, እርፈና እንቀለት)” to succeed. Relying on territorial nationalism, EPLF/PFDJ thus becomes antagonistic with nations’ right for self-determination and federal architect of its large neighboring states like Ethiopia on the old assumption that Eritrea was created by Italy and the people were commonly colonized, melting diversity is the only remaining option for Eritrea.

**Second**, the *colonial thesis* was also faced a critical challenge eventually to get recognition from all actors due to *dynamics of power politics* (even though Eritreans were under Italian colonialism and British mandate-European colonizer to qualify the quest for decolonization) as witnessed in the federation pact (neither the independence bloc nor unionist bloc won) and now even the sympathizers of colonial thesis are also in trap due to bad politics of EPLF/PFDJ which turned all friends into enemy and as a result the promised peaceful Eritrean state trapped into ‘postcolonial Africa nation-building crisis/collapse’, and ultimately it becomes hotbed of national and regional insecurity for all. **Third**, Both ELF & EPLF defined their Struggle for decolonization from what they called ‘territorial nationalist (expansionist and assimilationist) of feudal /militarist Ethiopia’. Unfortunately, EPLF/PFDJ depicted the ‘melting pot’ (“one people, one heart”) policies of nation-building of Haile Selassie and Dergue, and now PFDJ is making alliances with its historically defined ‘relevant enemies’ (the ‘up to Red Sea Ethiopianist’) like G-7 and Patriotic front in a fight against TPLF/PRDF (sympathizer of Eritrea’s Independence); “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”. Therefore, EPLF/PFDJ’s nationalism was/is at all odds, it could be on ‘PFDJ’s Eritrean phenomenon’.

---

1 The base ideas for this article is my MA thesis titled as “National Security Challenges of the Post-Independent State of Eritrea”, Institute for Peace and Security Studies, AAU, 2010
2 Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science and Strategic Studies, Mekelle University, Email: meressa21@yahoo.com or meressa21t@gmail.com, +2510939229762
Institutionally/legally, Eritrean people armed struggle for independence was also oddly challenged (though people’s struggle for freedom and equality is fundamental) OAU’s principle of territorial integrity/unity (against secessionist/irredentist) versus the 1964 Cairo Agreement on “maintaining colonial Borders as it was”, and UN principle of ‘territorial integrity versus self-determination and people’s freedom’ provided that Eritrea won its independence via war from Horn Africa’s ‘powerful state’ of Ethiopia. All could be reasons towards xenophobic (oddly) orientation to international community, self-reliance, in era global interdependence.

The post-2001 Eritrea is repeatedly viewed as small state with isolationist foreign policy that could not burden totalitarianism, that the critical young generation is leaving the state and the remaining population is in a military uniform waiting for an imaginary enemy, that all the critical state institutions are decayed, that the Port-based (Massawa and Assab) national economy lost its comparative and competitive advantage to Djibouti for decades to come, as a result the policy of “self-reliance” in era of globalization proved to be incompatible with the “Singaporization” of Eritrea. The purpose of this article is therefore to highlight agendas on Eritrea’s national and regional security dilemmas in the context of emerging security threats in broader Middle East and Horn of Africa’s and eventual burden on the Ethiopian state.

2. Conceptual Framework

National security has been exclusively, traditionally, defined as state’s ability to survive and prosper in the self-help anarchic international system. State’s security threats were viewed external in their origin and militaristic in their nature. The instruments of defense were military capabilities, and wars were considered to be fought outside the jurisdiction of the state (Rourke, 1993). In this regard states were considered as the only referent object (unit of analysis) for and provider of security and the other non-state actors were neglected as marginal units (Buzan, 1997 and1991). Therefore, national security was defined as phenomenon of war: focusing on the threat, use and control of military force (Walt, 1991).

The end of the Cold War, however, paved to the emergence of alternative school within the security studies calling for “widening and ultimately deepening” of the subject. The Widening schools called for horizontal inclusions of symmetric and asymmetric threats (both military and non-military) that could emerge both from outside and inside of the state and instigated by both state and non-state actors (Buzan, 1997). The Deepening schools called for vertical actors’ redefinition of referent objects for security to include non-state actors mainly human beings (Williams, 2004).According to the critical school (mainly the deepening), states are thus not only the referent and providers of security but also could be source of threats to their citizens. And the major threats to national security are emanating from within the state due to lack of agreed consensus on the idea of the state, i.e. the nation and its organizing ideology, by all responsible actors though external threats are still existential but could be easily deterred.

Barry Buzan (1991) defined that national security is basically about building an established legitimacy on the idea of the state (entrenched belongingness in the minds of state citizens) by those who are claiming as nation-builders and citizens of the state through establishing an imagined community. The idea of the state is thus the pillar to national security supported by defensive physical base (territory) and established institutions of the state (parliament, judiciary and executive). The idea of the state “needed to be firmly rooted in the minds its citizens and in the minds of other states, so that the idea of national self-rule to have a high legitimacy in international system” (Ibid: 78).
Cognizant of this, since the African states are creations of colonialism which makes them inorganic, failed to evolve from internal struggle, and incompatibly transplanted over pre-colonial primordial identities, the post-independent nation-builders therefore inherited the protracted and conflictual nation-building process. The decolonized states thus emerged as “part-nation-states” (Buzan, 1991:74) sharing the same ethnic groups with their neighbors and such ethnic groups remain marginalized minorities which in turn paved a fertile ground for secessionist- irredentist movements to challenge the nation building process, and poses actual and potential national security threats.

The failure to build strong idea of nation-state and national security of nonwestern mainly African states is further complicated by their late entrance to nation-state system and early stage of nation-building process that constrains nation-builders to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of their society (Ayoob, 2005 and 1995). Besides the simultaneous and contingent nature of nation-building process of African states also served the nation-builders to rely on the “idea of war makes state”, and their preoccupations with war making, expansion and resource extraction as means of state making in hurry (Tilly, 1985: 181).

Therefore, the national security challenges that new states facing are, on one hand, the results of externalizing and overemphasizing on externally incoming threats and hence securitization and militarization of the nation-building process internally (Bundegaard, 2004). And, On the other hand, failure to cultivate, strengthen and build an integrative consensus of citizens on the idea of the state which ultimately results in winner-loser complex and negation of the core idea of the state.

3. **Eritrea’s National Security Predicament: Historical Antecedents**

Eritrean national security challenges are, partly, part of the broader African security challenge; imagining and building decolonized nation-state system, and neutralizing the colonial induced differences through forging mobilizing principles of commonly colonized and oppressed people, and ultimately forming new colonially created territorial identities (Bundegaard, 2004). In line with this, today’s Eritrean nation-building challenges are basically the results of divergent conceptions of the idea of Eritreanism that traces back to Italian colonialism, British mandate, federation farce and the subsequent developments of divergent strategies of framing the future Eritrea and Eritrean (Yosief, 2013).

Most literatures indicated that the half a century Italian rule did not have a substantial impact on the Eritrean identity formation. Even though the Italians boasted the economic wellbeing of Eritrean in relation to Ethiopian and able to elevate the Muslim lowlander Eritrean (local known as *Metahit*) to the parity with the Christian Eritrean, it was not effective in forging new identity and western types of elites to lead the post-colonial nation-building process(Tekeste, 1997).

The highlanders (local known as *kebessa*) who were considered relatively political conscious due to their access to the state system and modern missionary education were still with their pro-Ethiopian ties and demanded unconditional union with Ethiopia (Ibid). Muslim lowlanders, in their demand for immediate independence, failed to convince the highlanders to form a collective post-primordial identity of Eritreanism. Instead, the Muslim League (later Eritrean Liberation Front) evolved into Islamic primordialist armed movement in 1961.

The parity system, however, laid the basis to the later politicization of Muslim/Christian, lowlander/highlander dichotomies of Eritrean politics and nationalism. And hence, Eritrean identity
remains dominantly primordialist (Muslim/Christian, Metahit /kebessa) though they claimed Eritrean identity was/is western industrial exposed modern identity when they pretend to view Ethiopian counterparts, as their relevant others, as uncivilized traditional societies.

‘The Italian period based modernist school of Eritrea identity’, according to Abdulkader (2013), argued that the Italians introduced positive innovations, such as urbanization, a transportation system (especially the railways) and the development of the Massawa and Assab ports. They also encouraged the migration of peasants from Tigray to Eritrea, who settled in kebessa as labor force. In addition, the Italians recruited a large number of soldiers (askari) into their army who settled in cities and towns. This group contributed significantly to the urbanization process and developed a national consciousness due to their involvement in various colonial wars.

‘The British mandate period based modernist school of Eritrea identity’, however, rejected the Italian thought and argued that Eritrean identity consciousness begun to surface onto the Eritrean political spectrum during the British mandate period (Yosief, 2013). The British in their attempt to prepare the Eritreans to decide their future allowed freedom of speech and association, and as a result the Eritreans began to structure and define their future state (Ibid; Tekeste, 1997). And hence, the pre-colonial and colonial (pre-mandate era) Eritrean identity was not historically and politically sufficient enough to justify their subsequently evolved colonial thesis (Meressa, 2013).

The 1946 Bet Georges conference was the first historically noticed intra-Eritrean gathering to debate on their future and determine their identity consciousness. However, the conference ended up without agreement due to the divergent views of the existing Muslim and Christian political groups on future Eritrean state and Eritreanism.

The divergent outlooks were reflected in the organization of the contending groups and their mobilizations. Most the Muslim lowlanders were organized around the “Al-Rabita al Islamiya al Eritriya” (the Muslim League) mainly since December 1946 and claimed independence of Eritrea on the basis of anticipatory fear and mistrust that the union would bring oppression under autocratic and Christian Ethiopia (Mesfine, 1988). According to Ellingson cited in Abdulkader (2013:1389), the ML made a clear statement against unification in front of the Four Power Commission: “Is it just that a still barbaric and primitive nation such as the Ethiopians – whose government is unable to improve the lot of its own people – should come into possession of a territory which is far more disciplined, advanced and civilized than the Abyssinians?”

Conversely, most of the Christian highlanders were organized under the unionists on the basis of anticipatory hope that the union would bring dignity and freedom (Mesfine, 1988). And the remaining political groups were in between the two major organizations. From this, possible to infer, that the absence of agreed consensus on the imagined or invented idea of the state and the endemic natures of the highland/lowland, Christian/Muslim dichotomies in Eritrean politics in which the establishment of inclusive Eritreanism require to properly integrate these realities.

Failing to provide an internally agreed solution, which evolved out of a half a century Italian colonial rule, to their future destiny made the Eritrean case to be decided from outside through federation that was not in the political vocabulary of Eritrean and Ethiopian in particular (Abdulkader, 2013; Tekeste, 1997; Yosief, 2013), and the colonized Africans in general. And hence, the federal concept, at least, it was not in the process -of- becoming in the continent of colonized states, at worst it was non-existing and alien to the recipients.
The UN imposed a quasi- federal liberal democratic constitution, the first internationally tailored inclusive constitution on Africa soil, on Eritrea. The federation was not, therefore, among the first, second and third options of real actors to the contemporary conflict, but none to all. The paradox was therefore Eritrea was entered into a federal marriage with a state of absolute monarchial political system which inherently antithesis to federal democratic culture. The Eritreans, based on federal prescription, to accept the state and its leader which they labeled as “backward, feudal, uncivilized, primitive, archaic, and inferior”(Yosief,2013) as their sovereign leader, one hand, Emperor Haile Selassie were awaited to accept and implement a federal democratic constitution on Eritrea which was ahistorical and apolitical to the organic foundation of his imperial absolute monarch that would transplanted a seed to his empire’s eventual downfall on the other hand. The prevailing paradoxes and impracticalities of the federation were well summarized by Yosief Gebrehiwot’s article entitled “Eritrea: the Federal Arrangement Farce” under subtopic “You cannot give what you don’t have”:

“The farcical element in this deal can be teased out by asking this question: How was it possible for Imperial Ethiopia to let Eritrea have a federal system (and the democratic system that necessarily went with it) while it had none for itself? How was it possible for it to give what it didn’t possess? How was it possible for an absolute monarchy to accommodate an island of democratic enclave within its imperial domain? Anybody that entertained such an idea to begin with was either immensely naive or criminally irresponsible. While the former describes the state of mind of many Eritrean elite who have made that annulment their battle cry for half a century (especially the nationalist historians), the latter description fits well the UN. Even as the UN architects knew that the federal arrangement under such a condition was unsustainable, they failed to come up with any other formula because they were anxious to get rid of the Eritrean problem from their hands as soon as possible” (December, 2013 retrieved from http://awate.com/eritrea-the-federal-arrangement-farce/comment-page-2/).

The 1952 federal -middle way solution- was basically the result of Eritrean failure to provide convincing reasons to the international community (due to either decolonized independence was not mainstreamed in the politics of colonizers/colonized- the 1960 African year of independence was to come later, or five decades colonization was not successful to give birth a new Eritrean national identity) at least to the major powers of the time(USA, USSR, UK, France), that Eritrean question was colonial and its solution would be decolonization like all other colonies, and inclusively that Eritreanism was colonial creation, its people were commonly oppressed/colonized, and hence aspired to invent or imagine a collective independence or autonomy of colonially suffered people of Eritrea.

One major result of the federation, however, was the internationalization of the Eritrean problem of identity formation, on one hand, and elevation of Eritrean consciousness as the federation gave them an autonomous status that had never been achieved before. The federation also recognized that the existential bipolar natures of the Muslim/Christian, lowland /highland division of Eritrean politics which was reflected through equal representations of Muslim and Christian in the parliament and other governance structures. More importantly, Arabic and Tigrigna were entitled equal official language status and still are remain as symbols of inclusion or exclusion.

4. Militant Identity Invention and Territorial Independence

3 the 1952UN Federal Constitution on Eritrea titled “Shaping a People’s Destiny: the Story of Eritrea and the United Nations” published by United Nations Department of Public Information
There is no common ground on the basic causes of the Eritrean armed liberation struggle that lasted for three decades. The liberation based identity formation affected the post-independence Eritrean national security.

Following the consistent incursion of the Ethiopian government and the observable weakness of the federation, the Eritreans began to establish an underground cell called “Haraka al-Tahrir al-Eritrea” (Arabic for ‘Party of seven member’) or “Mahber Shewuate” in 1958 that evolved into Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) to pursue its goals “politically and diplomatically” (Tekeste, 1997:149)-to maintain what was already gained . The major purpose of the ELM was “protecting the collapse of the federation, and its members were composed of both Muslims and Christians who had sympathy for the federation” (Ibid).

When the Emperor abrogated the federal arrangement in 1962, many Christian Eritreans, just like their Muslim counterparts, felt that the regime was acting against their core interests as a form of colonial subjugation no different than that of Italian or British colonialism (Sherman, 1980).

After a failed two decade, post-colonial, search for an all-Eritrean identity formation and the failure of emperor Haile Selassie either to maintain the federation until the unionist group got hegemony or convince the secessionist groups that the emperor and Ethiopian state was not anti-Islamist as it was stated, the lowland Eritrean started one of the longest armed struggle in Africa to invent a militant identity in September 1, 1961 at Barka, by Idris Awate.

The armed struggle for independence started in 1961 by Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) on the eve of the abrogation of the federation 1962 was a continuation of the Muslim dissatisfaction with the federation because they used it as transitional instrument to their stated end; independence. The abrogation of the federation was thus pretext and indeed did not mobilize all Eritreans including the larger segments of Christian highlanders who lately joined it due to the failures of Ethiopian government to peacefully contain the highlanders (Mesfine, 1988).

The ELF, however, was criticized for its layering of Islamic nationalism over colonial thought while all Christian and Muslim Eritreans share the history of commonly colonized people that later negatively contributed to the civil war and to the post independent exclusive Eritrean system. Generally, the sectarian policy of ELF and divisions within it based on religion, region and personal interests not only led to civil wars that ultimately drove out ELF from the armed struggle but also aborted the democratic political culture of the liberation struggle (Gebru, 2009) and this also negatively affected the subsequent struggle to be controlled, mobilized and strongly xenophobic to democratic differences within the parties.

5. Eritrean People’s Liberation Front and Territorial Nationalism

Saideman et al. (2005:8) defined territorial nationalism as “a bond based on common residence within a particular region that is distinct from the core”. He further argued that “homeland identity is significant because secessionists need first and foremost a territory they can claim as their own before they can legitimately call for territorial self-determination (Ibid). Establishing a territorial base is probably the most important strategic consideration for a movement’s organizer in order to distinguish itself from the mother state and legitimize the “self” in need of “determination” in the eyes of both domestic and international audiences (Ibid).
In the selection of identity base for liberation struggle Saideman underlined the importance of the ethnic compositions of the claimed territory. Accordingly, “if the territory is dominated by a single ethnic group, a salient territorial identity is less important for obtaining the support of its inhabitants- nation based struggle, not territory, is important” (Ibid: 29). This is particularly true of irredentist groups. For them, it is less important to establish a separate territorial identity than it is to establish a communal linkage with their homeland. Conversely, “if the territory is ethnically heterogeneous, a salient territorial identity is absolutely vital” (Ibid).

EPLF was realistic in out maneuvering its predecessor by redefining the territorial conception of Eritrean nationalism over the communal (sectarian) conception of the ELF. Following the internal leadership crisis of ELF it was clear that sectarian based liberation struggle could not fit to define the objective causes of the Eritrean problems. Indeed, the crisis paved the way to the emergence of new non-sectarian liberation front (EPLF) and re-conception of Eritrean nationalism based on territorial identity of the commonly colonized Eritrean people (Connell, 2001; Saideman etal, 2005).

EPLF ultimately prevailed over the ELF for several interrelated reasons. First, the EPLF, in its 1971 manifesto “Our Struggle and Its Goals” (Nahnan Elamanan⁴), rejected the ELF’s communal identification, and self-consciously propagated a nonsectarian, territorial Eritrean identity that could accommodate everyone who supported independence (Connell, 2001and2005). As a result, EPLF abandoned the divisive zonal system, adopting a single command structure that reflected its emphasis on building national unity (Saideman et al., 2005; Sherman, 1980). Second, the EPLF had layered an ideological identity onto its territorial identity. Its leadership was committed to social revolution as part of the liberation struggle, and it adopted a selective, pragmatic Marxist philosophy of conducting “revolution before unity”-emphasizing the principle of uncompromising struggle against Ethiopian state (Henze,1985:48).

With regard to the evolution of EPLF’s colonial thesis based territorial nationalism, there are still contending views, on one hand there are groups who argued that Eritrean identity as pre-existing realities that traces back to Axumit civilization (Bereket, 2010; Osman, 1974). On the other hand, groups including (Mesfine, 1988 and1986; Tekeste, 1997) argued that Eritrean nationalism is a post-1960s phenomenon. Accordingly, Eritrean nationalism is neither the European type, i.e. nation as pre-requisite for statehood, nor African type based on common resistance to colonialism which was non-existent in colonial history of Eritrea. The second group contended that Eritrean nationalism not colonial but grievance based nationalism aggravated by consistent failures and crisis, and repressive means of the Ethiopian state.

All the above structural traumas of Eritrean civil wars and the subsequent repressive mechanism of eliminating opponent groups used by the liberation movements had resulted in, on one hand, the politics of exclusion and monopolization (Eritrea could not shoulder more than one party) that turned the liberation war to be undemocratic which in turn has negative implications to the post-independent nation-building project. On the other hand, the recurrent pre-and post-independence Eritrean problems indicated that Eritrean nationalism was not established by an all-inclusive Eritrean consensus and agreements from the very beginning.

Externally the EPLF’s nationalism was based on grievances and establishment of an ever existing significant enmity of Ethiopia in particular, the international community in general. With regard to

⁴ Tigrigna for Our Struggle and Its Goal, 1971 EPLF manifesto
Ethiopia, EPLF defined it as an African colonizer (imperialist) (Nahnan Elamanan, 1971:2). The grievance based nationalism against Ethiopian was framed, first, by denouncing Eritrea-Ethiopian ties: in the Nahnan Elamanan (1971:2) Eritrea was defined as a separate unit politically, economically, socially and historically created by Italian colonialism.

Second, it considered Eritreans as betrayed people (Sherman, 1980) by Ethiopia due to Menelik’s agreement with Italy from Wuchale to Addis Ababa treaties; the abrogation of the federation (1952-62); and the repressive military solutions of the Dergue regime. The failures of the Ethiopian governments further supported the nationalist movements to rally the Eritrean people against Ethiopian state. However, the EPLF’s grievance based nationalism has negative implication to the future Eritrean state, i.e. the continuity of Eritrean nationalism and statehood always depends on either weak Ethiopian state, or strong but undemocratic state towards the Eritreans.

In addition to the Ethiopian factor, the EPLF developed a xenophobic attitude towards the international community by inventing the doctrine of self-reliance. The policy of self-reliance stated that the support from international community has negative and divisive role to the Eritrean nationalism. EPLF also viewed the international community as betraying the Eritrean people at different historical realities in supporting the Ethiopian state following the Italian colonialism by imposing federation, the failure of the OAU and great powers to prevent Haile Selassie’s abrogation of the federation and to support their national armed liberation struggle. Therefore, the continuity of the intra-Eritrean relations and their national security is strongly based on the activities of external actors.

6. One People-One Heart: a Post-colonial African Syndrome

Robert Kaplan in the April 2003 Atlantic Monthly edition entitled “a Tale of Two Colonies” characterized Eritrea as “the newly independent, sleepily calm, and remarkably stable state”. He further argued that the country has achieved “a degree of non-coercive social discipline and efficiency enviable in the developing world and particularly in Africa”. According to Kaplan Eritrea has achieved such a non-coercive social function “by ignoring the West's advice on democracy and development, by cultivating a sometimes obsessive and narcissistic dislike of its neighbors, and by not demobilizing its vast army, built up during a thirty-year conflict with Ethiopia…” (Ibid). Hence, Eritrea’s clarified sense of nationhood is rare in a world of nation-states rent by tribalism and globalization (Ibid).

The post-independence Eritrean nation-building is the continuity of the EPLF’s controlled national mobilization of the armed struggle. The Eritrean people made a remarkable history in rallying and supporting the armed struggle under the principle “Hade Hizbi-Hade Libi” (one-people, one heart), and finally achieved their “first vision: independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia”.

The unity that was demonstrated during the armed struggle to achieve the first vision was also expected and made to be the pillar in achieving the “Second Vision; to radically transform Eritrea to the Singapore of Africa. The success of the second vision was stated to base on “national unity and self-reliance” as stated in the preamble of the unimplemented Eritrean constitution of 1997 while ‘sub national identity’ that promote any specific ethnicity and /or religion were strongly condemned.

However, the post-independence nation-building policy from above under the principle of ‘one people, one heart’ was criticized and considered challenging to the new state of Eritrea to consolidate a single national identity being none of the Eritrean ethnic groups are unique to it but rather Eritrea is...
characterized by an all-round trans-border community ties (Berhane, 2006) which in turn makes Eritrea an all-round “part nation state”. This further indicated that the nation-building process not only depended on war induced unity but also on the acts of Eritrea’s significant other (Ethiopia and Sudan) as one defining feature of nation-state of becoming (Gebru, 2006)

An attempt to build a single national identity out of an all-round trans-border community ties, therefore, forced the government of Eritrea to frame contradictory policies which resulted in conflictual relationship with its neighbours. According to Gebru (2006) Eritrea’s conflictual relations with its neighbours emanated basically from the aspirations of the leadership to forge a single Eritrean national identity within a short period of time taking the triumphant militant nationalism and the war induced mobilization leaping over the arduous and protracted paths of state formation neglecting the pre-independence identity conflicts among Eritreans. Gebru’s argument on the difficult nature of nation-building and the ambitious project of the new state Eritrean is further supported by Bundegaard’s statement as:

*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 (2004:17).*

Gebru further went on to substantiate his argument that the leadership strategy was “conflicting and self-defeating ,i.e. fanning conflicts with neighbouring states in order to forge a strong Eritrean identity ,and tapping the resources and markets of neighbouring countries with the aim of achieving miraculous economic development strategies”( *Ibid:*11). The reason for the conflictual policies of the government of Eritrea was to differentiate Eritrea’s ethnic groups from their counterparts in the neighbouring countries by involving them in wars to severe the ethnic ties with Djibouti, Ethiopia, Sudan ,and Yemen and ultimately to promote national unity.

Moreover, the post-independence Eritrean leadership has been increasingly preoccupied with nation-building strategies to make Eritrea as Tiger of the Horn of Africa within a short period of time guided by the traditional principle of “war makes state”(*Tilly, 1985:181*) as Eritrea was the only example in post-colonial Africa that established through protracted war (*Clapham,2000:3*).

Being Eritrea was to face Third world state’s Security Predicament of “late entry to the state-making project, and the simultaneous and contingent natures of the nation-building”(*1995:2*) with its neighbours, the leadership framed the nation-building strategies from above under the principle of “*Hade-Hizbi, Hade-Libi*” to continuously project the war induced mobilization through securitization of every sector, over-politicization of the nation-building and militarization of the young generation through national service which is too big and expensive for a war-torn small and young state of Eritrea.

7. **National Service and Militarization of National Security**

The national military service, as one major component of nation-building, was introduced with the objectives as stated in the 1995 National Service Proclamation of Article5:

> to establish of a strong defense force ;to preserve and entrust future generations the courage, resoluteness heroic episodes shown, in the armed struggle by our people in the past thirty years; to create a new generation characterized by love of work, discipline, ready to participate and serve in reconstruction of the nation; to develop and enforce the economy of the nation by investing in development work our people as a potential wealth; to develop professional capacity and physical fitness
by giving regular military training and continuous practice to participants in training Centers; and to foster national unity among our people by eliminating sub-national feelings.

Taking into account that the state of Eritrea was born out of war, the national military service was primary aimed at ensuring the inter-generation transition between ‘Yika’alo’ and ‘Warsay’ which in turn to accelerate the “Eritreanization of the nation building ”(Connell, 2001:11) to fit the founding pillar of self-reliance similar to the armed struggle so that indoctrination and militarization of the new generation under the revolutionary slogan: “An army without a revolutionary ideology is like a man without a brain. An army without a brain can never defeat the enemy” (Ibid).

In post-independent Eritrea, Sawa, the center of post-independence Eritrea’s military training, is considered as the symbol of inter-generation transition (between Yikaalo and Warsay), nation-building and melting pot of collective identity of the existing diversity to the new generation-Warsay; as Nakfa-revolutionary base of armed struggle, was the symbol of resistance, heroism, protracted war and independence accomplished by the old generation-Yikaalo. The end resulted of the militarization and securitization was therefore a huge military buildup and militarization (both in human and material).

The militarization together with the longest protracted liberation war aggravated the superiority and the invincibility of the Eritrean army and therefore could be changed in to economic power. This indeed contributed to conflictual policy towards all its neighbors based on border, religion, economy as well as its hegemonic and leadership tendency in the region. Eritrea’s all round conflicts with its neighbours was to test the success of military indoctrination and transition to the new generation -Warsay under the supervision of the old generation-Yikaalo ultimately to redefine the Horn of Africa’s power structure in particular, and Africa in general.


There is a common agreement that Eritrean national security and the leadership acting behaviour was radically relapsed to one of the most totalitarian state following the Ethiopia-Eritrean war of 1998-2000. The worst impact of the war was the erosion of leadership legitimacy and invincibility of President Isaias from with the party and the critical Eritrean mass, particularly from the top political figures and the academician. The first criticism to the President’s leadership inability came from the intellectuals known as “the G-13” and their petition manifesto known as “the Berlin-Manifesto”. In the first part of the petition entitled “a hard-Won independence was nearly lost” (2000:2) criticised the conduct of state both domestic and foreign affairs and about the nature and style of the leadership in the post-independence period. The manifesto also criticized the policy of self-reliance as senseless arrogance. Finally they expressed their frustrations on the concentration of power in the hand of the President and the eventual one-man leadership.

The Ethiopia-Eritrea war ended up Eritrea’s military invincibility and weakened the leadership’s arrogance of power projection and instigating instability against its neighbours. Economically, the war ended up Eritrea’s vision of “Singaporization” - to be Horn of Africa Industrial Houses”. The port-based national economy (Massawa and Assab) lost its comparative and competitive advantage to Djibouti for decades to come, and the policy of “self-reliance” proved to be a structural failure to a poor war torn state in era globalization. Indeed, the war made Eritrea a contained and isolated state in era of global interdependence.

Since 1998 Eritrea government is at unwinnable hot and cold wars with its neighbours and international community, harboring proxy warriors via supporting terrorist groups like Al-Shabab. Torture and
imprisonment of its citizens are aired as endemic identity of the regime; the critical young generation is either in the military trenches indefinitely or fleeing the state as a result Eritrea will remain with under and over aged people, no constitution, no Parliament, no judiciary, no election, no functioning institution (Yosief, 2013). Eritrea is called the North Korea of Africa that makes it functionally ‘failing’ state to use Yosief Gebrehiwot expression that Eritrea is in the process of Somalization, hence potentially a “failed state” in the war hotbed region of the Horn of Africa.

The process of Somalization of the Eritrean state is reaffirmed by President Isaias Afeworki in his New Year (January 1, 2015) address to nation that in the past fifteen years Eritrea was under national state of emergency due to the declared war from Ethiopia, and political and diplomatic sanction by the USA led UN security council as result Eritrean development is paralyzed, it loses its young labor forces due to the externally induced migration and the remaining citizens are forced to stay in military trenches indefinitely. In generally Eritrea is in “Hostage and freezing”. In general, Eritrea is in the process of becoming second Somalia in a region where fragile states is pervasive (fall of Yemen, and other neighboring states), and terrorism is becoming epidemic (Alshebab, ISIS,Alqada), and the neighboring states mainly Ethiopia should thus develop a road map to contain the worst case scenario: State collapse on the Red Sea. So, are the fast moving dynamics heralding the end of old odds and building realities?

References


