

Before It Proves Too Late for Eritrea...! Lessons from Somalia

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Prelude

Several Eritreans and foreign observers of Eritrean politics have now been even more concerned about where this new and small state is heading under President Esayas Afeworki's rule. Subjectivity aside, the Eritrean phenomenon arouses intellectual interest how such a small, war-battered and internationally isolated state has continued to survive and function under a self-imposed status of international pariah. More controversial than this is the discussion on the future fate of the Eritrean state. In other words, given that Esayas is mortal, what will post-Esayas Eritrea most likely look like?

A dozen of scholars and analysts have come up with a set of pessimistic and optimistic views and predictions. Among these is the argument that goes underlining that some serious indicators of a possible state failure could challenge Eritrea, given that present political situations continue unchanged. Unfortunately, this change for most analysts is too bleak to happen under Esayas.

This paper argues in line with the 'failed state' thesis by comparing Eritrea of Esayas with Somalia of the Mohamed Siad Bare era from 1969 to 1991, an actual showcase of a failed state.

1. Eritrea of Esayas and Somalia of Siad Bare

As any society in Africa organized on the Westphalia (1648) model of the modern state, Somalia after 1961 and Eritrea after 1991 had to engage in the difficult task of state formation and nation building. State building in both countries required Esayas in Eritrea and Bare in Somalia to finalize permanently such controversial issues as border demarcation, citizenship, lasting and well functioning state machinery and institutions, routes of international relations and so on. However, based on the socio-cultural similarities shared by the typical African state, state building was never an exception to Eritrea and Somalia in that it has to serve more as a means than as an end. The end was and is nation building, which is the permissive threshold toward achieving rapid socio-economic transformation. Otherwise, what would be the ultimate justification of the bloody wars for national liberation?

As elsewhere in Africa, nation building posed itself as a grand task for both Eritrea and Somalia for the least controversial reasons of historical, socio-cultural and socio-economic deficiencies that supply the eternal politico-ideological glue uniting the fractionalized communities. Applying Adebayo's subtle diagnosis to

Eritrea and Somalia, both countries structurally lack the material magnetism of national unity---aggressive capital, ever-widening capitalist market and the value cement that results from these. Unbelievable successes in liberation or interstate wars do matter but they never furnish the lasting glue that economic success only could produce. Thus, for Eritrea¹ and Somalia, countries of majority agrarian, pastoralist and war-stricken populations, nation building is a fantasy without a parallel success in socio-economic advancement. ,

As J. Hobbswam (1984) writes, what governments do at the sensitive spots in the process of state formation and nation building is the repository of success or retreat, consolidation or dismemberment, survival or failure of the entire state and nation in the future. The crucial concern here is the question how Eritrea of Esayas and Somalia of Bare had been trying to accomplish these most challenging post-independence projects in their respective countries. Let us now see the following comparisons.

Firstly, Eritrea and Somalia have been young nations with a temporal difference in which Esayas had to build the new state since 1991 while Siad Bare jumped into office in the new Somalian state through a military coup in 1969. Bare toppled the first government and its leaders of the post-independence Somalia that assumed office in 1961 through election. Esayas had to overcome an equally bitter rivalry organization, his senior liberation front for Eritrea—the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) since 1973. Bare² organized a conservative nationalist military circle secretly under the Five-Star Somalian post-independence ambition of recreating Somalia inclusive of all Somalis fragmented into Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti. Whereas, Esayas led a bitter liberation war against Derg in Ethiopia since the last days of the 1960 by which his Front emerged victorious. This enables Esayas and his party to embark on the formation of the free Eritrean State. While Bare himself was a senior general in the Somalian army, Esayas was a politico-military commander, which undoubtedly cultivated a *praetorian culture* in their protracted political life as a dominant consciousness;

Secondly, both Eritrea and Somalia have long stretches of water shores with strategically significant ports even though both are essentially hinterland countries to geographically and demographically large neighboring states—Ethiopia and Kenya for Somalia and Ethiopia and Sudan for Eritrea. Ethiopia outflanked by Eritrea in the north and Somalia in the east shares culturally homogenous populations—ethnic Somalis with Somalia and Tigrians, Afars, Kunamas and Erobess with Eritrea. *Separatism* from Ethiopia supplied the mental hub of Eritrean nationalism under a Tigrian-dominated liberation mobilization and

¹ Iyob, R. (1995) *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism 1941–1993*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² Mohamed, J. (1999) "Epidemics and Public Health in Early Colonial Somaliland," *Social Science and Medicine* 48: 507–21.

fight. On Somalia's part, *irredentism* served as political instrument of Somalia's hostile relations with Ethiopia under Siad Bare. Both finally retained unmet demands from Ethiopia as the core guideline of their Ethiopia's policy as well as the end goal of their state formation and nation building projects. As implied above, both tended to instituted war as the major tool of completing the process of their imagined state formation plans on the military submission of Ethiopia;

Thirdly, Esayas unlike Siad Bare had to face the challenges of integrating diverse ethnic groups under a unified Eritrean state. Bare, on the other hand, had aborted the advantages of socio-cultural homogeneity of his people in the effort to consolidate a strong nationalist state of Somalia. In Eritrea's case, the Esayas-led liberation war from 1973 to 1991 played a strong catalytic spiritual role in uniting a common and grassroots Eritrean front against Derg³. In parallel, this war worsened political situations in Ethiopia by causing vast popular boredom, senselessness and poverty. Whereas, in the case of Somalia, after Bare lost the 1977 war, the people, bitterly commented that Bare made their sons a 'fodder of Ethiopian cannon' in a purposeless war⁴. Eritrea's loss of the war in 2000 with Ethiopia proved an exact opposite and reversal of the pre-1991 spirit. By this, Esayas like Bare lost the last reason d'être of posing himself as a state creator and nation builder with a designed goal of consolidating internal unity;

Fourthly, the war with Ethiopia cost Esayas and his regime not only his unquestioned pre-war legitimacy, but also the international prestige, which he earned in the bloody fight for independence. Both wars of Somalia and Eritrea against Ethiopia were never official declarations. That they lacked endorsement by national parliaments and that they were never second-shot defensive fights drove both populations into complete loss of confidence in their governments. Massive immigrations in both states followed as a sequel to the horrible memories of the senseless wars. Tens of thousands of youngster Eritreans left, and are now leaving their homeland like Somalians in Bare's last days by all chances.

Fifthly, the expensive war effort, the decision by Esayas to cancel massive demobilization and his continued financing of the National Military Service added the pain to the Eritrean economy. Esayas's commitment to the financial and material support for Ethiopia's Opposition in Eritrea, the interruption of international trade with the former major partner of Ethiopia, the bitter costs for rehabilitation caused by the aftermaths of the border war, etc, inflicted upon the people too harshly. The insistence never to systemically access and exploit external sources of finance aggravated the crisis in that, together with the above, it shocked and reversed the pre-2000 socio-economic drive into disarray.

³ Bereketeab, R. (2000) Eritrea: The Making of a Nation, 1890–1991, Ph.D. thesis, Department of Sociology, Uppsala University.

⁴ Samatar, A.I. (1989) The State and Rural Transformation in Northern Somalia, 1884–1986, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Shortages of food caused by the war in western Eritrea, like that of Somalia in 1987-88, the very theatre of better harvest, forced Esayas to impose compulsory quota provision by Eritrean farmers. This has been adding benzene on the fire.

These developments fueled vibrant criticisms and oppositions to both regimes from their own apparently silent populations, which became much bitter than ever before.

2. How Esayas like Bare is in Reaction

Amidst fast erosion of his legitimacy, there are evidences supporting the argument that Esayas, now approaching his 70s, has grown more conservative and rigid in his stance of keeping up with the 'undeclared emergencies' imposed on the morrow of the bloodiest border war with Ethiopia in 2000. While the emergency has already changed the 'emancipative regime' of Esayas into a perfect 'security/police state' from top-down, it has caused massive anxiety among informed Eritreans, bottom up. By all politico-historical standards, this undesirable internal situation of Eritrea will definitely end someday, at least, at the natural death of Esayas, just as any mortal human being. It is at this point that the question *what could follow his departure* arises.

Both Mohammad Said Bare and Esayas responded to post-border war oppositions in the harshest possible way at their hands. While Bare had to brutally deal with an immediate coup attempt against his life and power in 1978 by his formerly loyal officers, Esayas reacted by ordering a life long imprisonment of his former comrades and citizens. Esayas had to face the second poorly organized military mutiny against his rule recently in this year by a band of soldiers. By all standards of political analysis, no matter how the mutiny was a small and brief spark of anger against the 'maximum leader', President Esayas and his regime before and after this event could never be the same as it was true for Siad Bare before and after 1978;

Nonetheless, both Esayas and Siad Bare had tightened their grips over government and the people. In both cases, their states' full time mission and task had been insuring the continued existence of the regime. They had been employing naked force as the last resort in dealing with domestic oppositions, which temporarily appeared to render them peace and stability so that a false sense of continued legitimacy. This desperate step in both cases had been responsible to weaken possibilities for an alternate dominant political party that could easily overtake the fledgling regimes by forging a broad based national front and transitional government. The clearest result of this in Somalia was that extremely polarized rival parties armed to the teeth appeared on the post-Siad Bare politics while similar scenario is undoubtedly at hand in Eritrea's case;

Finally yet importantly, both Esayas and Siad Bare had been similar cases of deliberate delay to take boldly a remedial policy step obviously to the last

munities of their powers. Both tried to cover up the fact of their power decline and all signs of imminent changes in the balance of powers against their opponents, in side and outside. Both searched for outside explanations about the causes of their hard times where Ethiopia had always been the first culprit. Both rulers and regimes promised better times for their populations at the defeat of Ethiopia, sooner or latter. Until then, both imposed severe emergency rules following the lost wars by way of maintaining continued anti-Ethiopia domestic nationalism.

Thus, one can see that these converging patterns of regime behavior between Esayas and Bare had been a matter of deliberate policy option rather than an accident.

3. Why an Eritrean State Failure is a Real Possibility

State failure is a dialectical outcome in the bitter struggle between fundamental socio-political contradictions. When these conflicts attain a stage of political no return, they unavoidably push the entire state machinery into complete dysfunction, if not total collapse.

This naturally undermines state institutions, creates a worrisome mass of citizens, results in heavily divided, small and antagonized political parties in side and outside. Consequently, usually a silent but an unfolding tendency among influential elites to shift to patrimonial (kinship, clan, tribal, ethnic and religious) alliances logically follows. These elites find the kinship alliance as a safety valve of ultimate security instead of the precarious state machinery. This is because the state declines to be an inefficient agency for the security of all. Thus, the conflict reaches a point of growth where the state, on the one hand, is no more able to command its monopolistic and exclusively reserved authoritative powers over citizens. On the other hand, citizens now regrouped into the security chains of their tribes or ethnic groups pick up arms and begin to privatize effectively the roles of providing security. They also bend themselves to controlling distributional routes for themselves and their relatives, which is exactly what scholars call the phenomena of a 'failed state'.

As the above comparisons demonstrate, the current situation in Eritrea, all state particularities discussed above considered, greatly remind a critical observer of Somalia's politics in between 1988 and 1991. The worsening tension and contradiction between grassroots' vibrantly strong sense of a separate cultural identity and the unifying authorities of the modern state in Eritrea of today are assuming an ever-closest similarity with those of Bare Somalia in the second half of the 1980s. There are ample evidences in Eritrea today that ethnic groups (except Tigrina speakers) have greatly tended to pick up their cultural identities as the locomotive of their resistance to the reason d'être of the modern state in Asmara and its institutions as was exactly in Somalia of Bare.

As was the case in Bare Somalia, the brutal repression in Eritrea today has denied nationalist Eritreans the opportunity to form a strong domestic alliance. This convinced many concerned Eritreans to crave for lasting solutions from outside, but from heavily fragmented directions like Somalia of 1987. Some have already picked arms while others prefer patiently waiting for the end of Esayas by either some unexpected internal or external action or by natural death.

On the other hand, the largest but the disparate Eritrean army constituting about 35-40% of the national work force has shown a growingly keen interest and concern about politics and political rule. This armed contingent of Eritreans has been doing this in the feet of what political parties should have done. Worse than this, both pre-independence and post-independence generations of Eritreans have had a minimum skill of operating personal war rifles and grenades even though they apparently lead civilian life. These Eritreans have had presently a faint sense of Esayas's legitimacy and authority as each day passes without bringing any better life.

However, these Eritreans might tend to long to see the peaceful end of Esayas and his regime probably not to spoil his heroic image of the liberation war or perceiving that he is still strong. They could also reasonably wish to avoid a possible bloody encounter because of hopeless reaction from Esayas's loyal followers in the army and the government, which I also share. Nonetheless, what would happen if the existing balance of powers tips in post-Esayas Eritrea toward their disadvantages? Will they resort to arms? This anxiety becomes more justifiable by the assured possibility of Muslim Eritreans to firmly assert their legitimate shares in the state, by all means available, including arms if necessary. Without surprise, they have already been doing this at various points of time.

The additional problematic scenario still is that the Eritrean army consists of the two dominant religious groups—Islam versus Christianity but with asymmetrical distribution of ethnic groups. Under mounting crises, it is easy to assume that each soldier could finally resort to one's ethnic fallback position. If this happens, it is the unquestioned Somalian replica of intertribal warfare in the form of interethnic and interreligious violence in Eritrea's case. An authoritarian regime, as a rule, speeds up the creation of these views as it persists in office. These opposite values are mostly reactions to the personality of prominent individuals and the regime who actively but irresponsibly merge chances of their survivals with the existence and fate of the very state.

Here again, one easily feels the absence of a dominant and strong alternate political party, which could command an emergency supremacy by filling the dangerous power vacuum until an elected government comes to the scene. The problem is that Eritrea is not Egypt or Tunisia where state institutions were strong enough to avert any danger of state failure. Still, Eritrea is not Libya to have attracted quickly international support that would salvage the state from failure.

Here lies the key point in the argument that state failure could most likely result unless Eritreans of paramount influence emergently move to preempt primarily the real possibility before they search for political shares.

Conclusions

As one could appreciate from the discussions above, state failure proves to be a real possibility in Eritrea without any subjective or political partisanship. It is an outcome of careful, responsible and objective analysis of the existing relations among three major actors decisively influencing the fate and character of Eritrean politics and the young state. These are the ruling party and the government, the entire population and the international community. The ruling party and its regime have continually produced an internal tension with their populations, in Eritrea and outside, as a spillover consequence of their non-stately and unwarranted diplomatic relations with the various levels and organs of the international community.

This has caused the hearts of many Eritreans to grow divided between opposite options---loyalties to the Eritrean state versus loyalties to the Eritrean government. This dilemma is eating up the appropriate timeline for searching the right solution for predictably chaotic situations in post-Esayas Eritrea. the worst development is that a number of Eritreans begin to search for thier cultural groupings to offer them what Esayas;s regime failed to offer—certainty and confidence about tomorrow. If this continues to broaden, that post-Esayas Eritrea awaits the new situation without a dominant political party capable of succeeding the fragile regime is an assured path toward privatization of politics and security by private citizens and groups.

It would be a disastrously mistaken calculation if the Eritrean people expect solutions from Eritreans outside or from any foreign power. It would also be unwise to advise Eritreans to stage a kind of ‘Eritrean Spring’, which could include an equal opportunity of bloodier violence; Eritreans should never allow any move from by any political actor and political action where post-Esayas Eritrea will probably turn out to be *no man’s land*. The wisest course is to await patently the passage of Esayas by natural death with the Eritrean mind becoming busy with sorting out best roadmaps guaranteeing that Eritrea would never be another Somalia by any means at all.