1. Conceptual Framework

There are contending arguments on the challenges of the current Eritrean national self-determination and nation-building process. These debates look at the foundations of Eritrean nationalism and where it converges and diverges with traditional European nationalism and with African nationalist principles. This paper looks into the origin, evolution, and impacts of Eritrean nationalism on the post-independence State of Eritrea and the subsequent challenges that the new state is facing in institutionalizing a smooth nation-building process and a viable multi-ethnic state.

In an attempt to find the root of Eritrean nationalism, it is worth identifying the convergences and divergences of Eritrean nationalism to traditional nationalism, in which a nation is the prerequisite for statehood (Gellner 1983), and African nationalism which lays its pillars on common oppression and colonialization by European colonizers, and the territorial feature of national struggle against colonialism.

The philosophical and political features in the discussions of nation-building are basically centered on the concept of nation, mainly in Europe (Smith 2005). But there is no consensus on the very concept of nation and its constitutive elements. According to Levine (2007, 155), nation refers to “a community of people joined together by a common descent and common culture.” It represents homogeneous people “sharing common language, religion, historical myths, and common territory” (155). Joseph Stalin (1929) also defined nation as “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”

The organizing ideology of a nation is nationalism. Nationalism in Europe was rooted in the idea that every nation has the right to government (Lawrence 2005). It was based on the idea that “a state should be founded in a nation and the nation should be constituted as a state, i.e., nation and state should be congruent” (34). It is a “theory of political legitimacy which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state...should not separate the power-holders from the rest” (Gellner 1983, 1). Moreover, its appeal was “popular and democratic, and proclaimed the sovereign right of the people to determine their own destinies, in states of their own, if that was what they desired” (Smith 1998, 1).

Giuseppe Mazzini, in his book A Cosmopolitanism of Nations as translated by Stefano Recchia (2009, 50), defined nation and nation-building in terms of political equality and popular consent expressed in the form of “equality, liberty, and association.” He underlined that only...
these three elements together can constitute a genuine nation. By nation he meant “the entirety of citizens who speak the same language and are associated, under equal enjoyment of civil and political rights, for the common purpose of developing and progressively perfecting all social forces and their activity” (50). He further argued that language, territory, and ethnicity are pre-political factors — probably necessary but not sufficient for the emergence of self-determining political units, and certainly unable in and of themselves to legitimate national independence. The nation is not simply a territory that ought to be strengthened by enlarging its size nor is it just a collection of men who speak the same language and follow the initiative of a single leader. It is instead an organic whole held together by a unity of goals and common efforts. Therefore, nation is a concept that “stands for Unity: Unity of principles, of purpose, and of rights that is the only kind of unity able to associate a multitude of men and transform them into a homogenous whole. Without it, there is no nation, but only a crowd” (14). Mazzini gave nation an essentially political meaning as “commonwealth” or government by the people, based on a written constitution (14). Nation-building is thus, according to Mazzini, the institutionalization of popular sovereignty expressed in the form of equality and liberty of individuals based on a written constitution regardless of the pre-political factors including language, territory and ethnicity.

Charles Tilly, in his historical comparative analysis of European nation-states and their nation-building policies, viewed states as “agents of organized violence” performing four activities:

- **War Making**: Eliminating or neutralizing their rivals outside the territories in which they have clear and continuous priority as wielders of force;
- **State making** (nation-building): Eliminating or neutralizing their rivals inside those territories;
- **Protection**: Eliminating or neutralizing the enemies of their clients; and
- **Extraction**: Acquiring the means of carrying out the first three activities—war making, state making, and protection. (Tilly 1985, 181)

Tilly’s analysis implied that “war makes state,” so that state making as well as the subsequent nation-building process are the result of the state’s capability to organize violence in order to eliminate rivals both from within and outside the state and to extract resources necessary to the making of the state, and ultimately to ensure national unity. Taking the ideas of both Jagger and Tilly, Ayoob (1995, 22) defined state making and nation-building as:

The expansion and consolidation of territorial and demographic domain under a political authority, ...imposing and maintaining order in the occupied territories and people, ...; and extracting resources from the territories and population under the control of the state essential to support not only the war making and policing activities undertaken by the state but also the maintenance of the apparatus of the state necessary to carry on routine administration, deepen the state’s penetration of society, and show symbolic purpose.
In addition to the war making capacity of a state, the historical longevity of the nation-state is also critical in the nation-building process. However, establishing nation-states (i.e., achieving cohesive societies) based on long historical evolution is not the reality in third world states, mainly in Africa, as well summarized in Ayoob (2005, 17):

Societal cohesiveness is equally essential for states to remain largely immune from external intervention. Such cohesiveness is a function of the longevity of the state and its ability to bring to bear superior force against recalcitrant elements among its population. It is also based on its ability over time to weld a diverse population into a “nation” by the standardization of laws, language, and often religion, and the construction of historical memories that provide the foundational myths both for the nation and the state.

According to the above definitions, state making and nation-building thus depend on the state’s ability to monopolize and concentrate the means of coercion in its own hands within the territory and among the population it controls. Hence, it is possible to infer that accumulation of power becomes crucial to state making and nation-building (Ayoob 2005).

However, such a state making and nation-building project is expensive and, more importantly, impossible in an era of global interdependence. New states are late-comers to the state-making enterprise unlike Western states which have already achieved their nation-states using the expansion–extraction approaches stated above. Hence, the nation-building dilemma that new states face is due to structural barriers to accumulating power using the traditional state making and nation-building approaches. Such structural failures in the newly independent states in turn resulted in a “lack of unconditional legitimacy for state boundaries, state institutions, and regimes; inadequate societal cohesion; and absence of societal consensus on fundamental issues of social, economic, and political organization” (Ayoob 1995, 28). These challenges are naturally manifested at the early stages of state making and nation-building as state makers attempt to impose order, monopolize instruments of violence, and demand uncontested loyalties from their populations (Ayoob 1995), which in turn becomes unattainable business to new states.

In Africa, the colonial project by European powers resulted in the arbitrary division of the nations of the continent across different neighboring states creating “part-nation-states.” Part-nation-states refers to a nation divided up among two or more states where the population of each state consists largely of people from that nation. Indeed, a substantial minority of its members falls outside its boundaries, living as minority groups in neighboring states (Buzan 1991, 74). Nationalism in most African states thus formed on the basis of “common territory, common colonial history, and a common goal for de-colonialization” (Davidson 1992, 164-165).

The founding ideology of nation-building in post-independence Africa was populist nationalism with the assertions of a direct link between mass and leadership. The roles of victorious anti-colonialists were considered themselves as legitimate and uncontested builders of the “nation-building-in-process-of-becoming” (Glickman 1987, 33). In doing so, the ideologies were framed to reflect a unity of political sentiment sufficiently strong to support the reconstruction of the ex-colonial state. But most of these ideologies were variations of anti-
pluralist and their defining characteristic was the rejection of political competition, except between the forces of liberation and forces of imperialism (Glickman 1987).

Thus nationalism was defined as the claim to the right to create a new state from colonial domination. The organizing ideologies of the nationalist movements aimed at melting down the prevailing diversity, and creating a state that reflected the pre-existing cultural unity that was artificially divided by colonial rule (Glickman 1987). Although the organizing ideologies of the nationalist movements in their post-independence nation-building projects were intended to be solidaristic, they fell short of achieving their goals. This is because the ideologies of nation-builders were the continuation of colonial administration, i.e., top-down approaches in the name of national unity without taking into account the existing realities of fragile nations, weak institutional capacities, and international dynamics. As a result, the organizing ideologies become targets of penetration, and distortion and eventually undermined the nation-building process (Glickman 1987).

In line with the above argument, Marenin (1987, 65) characterized the organizing ideologies of African states as “extensive, fragile, prebendal, and elitist.” The central idea is that “the state is everywhere: it controls, directs, and misdirects the economy; it shapes social life by granting and withholding amenities and constraining group interactions into approved channels” (Marenin 1987). As a result, the state and its institutions become “more of a resister and processor than maker of demands” (Rothchild 1987, 126) that in turn structurally hamper national unity.

2. Identity Politics in Eritrea

There are a number of emerging lines of academic and political debates on the Eritrean nation-building challenges over whether they are internally evolved or externally imposed. These debates look at the foundations of Eritrean nationalism and where it converges and diverges with traditional European nationalism and with African nationalist principles.

2.1. Contradictory Interpretations of Eritrean Nationalism: Historical perspective

Eritrean nationalism was defiant of European nationalism as Eritrea was/is not inhabited by a single nation. There were different ethnic groups in Eritrea. People living in the lowlands and the highlands in Eritrea had a number of differences, sharing only a common tradition of colonial oppression that later evolved into common national culture (Lobban 1976). Until the arrival of the Italians, the region had experienced multiple and shifting identities. The highlanders are mostly Christians and speak Tigrinya with more communal, religious, and language ties to their counterpart in Ethiopia. On the other hand, the lowlanders are Muslims and speak different languages, mainly Arabic and Afar (Kalewongel 2008).

Furthermore, Eritrean nationalism, although it shares similarities with nationalism of most African states in the sense that it was founded on common territory and common colonial historical experience, also partially defies African nationalism in the sense that it was not expressed by common resistance to Italian colonial rule (Tekeste 1997). Examples of opposition and resistance of Eritreans both in the highlands and the lowlands of Eritrea against Italian colonial rule were almost nonexistent (Mesfin 1986; Tekeste 1987). For those smaller ethnic groups threatened by the more powerful ones, Italian colonial rule was perceived as an impartial phenomenon committed to law, order, and development. Moreover, through the
praxis of meticulous respect for religious liberty, which in effect meant the elevation of Islam to a level of parity with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the colonial state gained support of those ethnic groups which professed Islam” (Ibid). The level of parity of Muslims with Christians during Italian colonialism however did not result in the formation of inclusive identity to demand nationhood immediately after the end of the Italian colonial era (Kalewongel 2008; Mesfin 1986 and 1988). Therefore, Eritrea’s problem was “neither a national nor a colonial question” and hence was not “a typical African phenomenon” but rather “an extreme manifestation of the overall problem of the relationship between state and society in Ethiopia” (Mesfin 1986, 11). Eritrean resistance to colonial rule was not strong enough to qualify as an example of the characteristic feature of African nationalism, i.e., common goal for decolonialization (Mesfin 1986, 11).

It is undeniable fact that, given the influence of Italy and its policy to develop a new identity distinct from the Ethiopian culture, a new Eritrean identity began to be conceived in the minds of both the Christians in the highlands and the Muslims in the lowlands. It arose because of colonial economic practices and territorial exclusiveness from their Ethiopian counterpart (Medhane 1999; Tekeste 1987 and 1997). Some historians (e.g., Osman 1974) claimed that Eritrean identity was a pre-existing reality traceable back to the pre-Italian era and equal to the ancient Ethiopian kingdom. But most of the literature on the history of Eritrean identity does not accept the arguments of a pre-existing or Italian colonial origin of Eritrean national identity. For Bereket (2010), Eritrean nationalism was the result of Italian industrialism that melted down the pre-colonial diverse and disparate Eritrean society. Stephen Longrigg (1945, 3), British military administrator of Eritrea, contended that Eritrea possessed “none of the qualities of geographical or cultural singleness which should entitle it to be a unit of territory or of government.” He further stated that “had the Italians not colonized Eritrea, Eritrea would be partly, as always before, the ill-governed or non-governed northernmost province of Ethiopia” (Longrigg). This idea is also shared by Mensour in discussing the post-1946 intra-Eritrean divisions. He said that “the historical and cultural bondage of most Eritrean Abyssinians with the other part of historical Abyssinia was still strong. Sixty years of different socio-economic transformations had not been enough to cut or weaken the umbilical cord” (2002, 1-2). Tekeste (1987 and 1997) also added that even during Italian colonialism the Eritreans had a strong affinity towards Ethiopia, particularly through the Orthodox Church, the traditional bearer of Ethiopian nationalism.

Hence, an identity consciousness began to take over the Eritrean political sphere during the British period. According to Tekeste (1987 and 1997), the British, due to their desire to re-map the Italian Horn of Africa, allowed the Eritreans access to weekly newspapers and lifted the ban on political activity to express their opinions as to the fate of their country. But Eritreans failed to map out their future destiny due to either non-existent or divided identity of the time. As a result, Longrigg proposed a partition plan unifying the Tigrinya-speaking communities into

---

1 It refers to the geopolitical center of the Axumite civilization, the ancestor of today’s Ethiopia. Its political territory covers the northern parts of Amhara, Tigray, and the highland plateaus of Eritrea. The people of these areas descend from the Semitic family. Their linguistic ties originated from Ge’ez and their religious root is predominantly orthodox Christianity that was introduced into Axum in the 4th century AD. The language of Tigray and the highland plateaus of Eritrea is the same: Tigrinya—the official language of the independent State of Eritrea and the National Regional State of Tigray in Ethiopia.
Ethiopia and the Muslim and Arabic-speaking western and northern parts of Eritrea into Sudan on the assumption that Eritreans were more closely tied with their Sudanese and Ethiopian counterparts than with each other (Sherman 1980; Tekeste 1987).

During the early periods of British administration, the political and national consciousness of the Eritreans was not focused on demanding independence of Eritrea from colonialism. However, in 1946, the Bet Giorgies conference was convened and it was considered a turning point for contemporary Eritrean identity politics as well as for the post-independence nation-building project (Mensour 2002). The meeting, for the first time, brought all Eritreans, both Christians and Muslims, together to discuss their future. According to Mensour (2002, 1), the conference was the beginning or the birth of Eritrean national self-consciousness. It was not a conscious political choice; it was rather a celebration of the transformation from slavery to a politically-conscious society. It was the first test of the newly acquired political consciousness.

The participants came to the conference with diametrically opposed goals. The divergences were reflections of difficult choices faced by both Christian and Muslim Eritreans between unity or independence. Accordingly “most Eritrean Abyssinians suffered identity crises and divided consciousness between their cultural and religious sentiments on the one hand and their newly-acquired identity on the other hand, between joining Christian Ethiopia on the one hand or compromise with their Eritrean Moslem brothers on the other hand” (Mensour 2002, 2).

But Mesfin (1986, 12) argued that the Christian mobilization was centred on “revival and anticipatory hope ... that Eritrea had always been part and parcel of Ethiopia and the union would bring dignity, freedom, and jobs.” Conversely, those opposed to union with Ethiopia engaged in mobilization by “revival and anticipatory fear ... that Eritrea had never been part of Ethiopia and union would bring oppression, pain, and sorrow for Muslims in autocratic and Christian Ethiopia.” Moreover, they feared that “they would be detached from the Arab and Islamic world for which they had had economic interests, and linguistic, cultural, social, and religious affinity” (Mensour 2002, 3).

The conference signalled the end of the Italian colonial policy of constructing a separate and unified identity. The failure of Eritreans themselves to come up with a determined and integrative agreement to claim an Eritrean state was a disappointment. Rather, they defined their mobilization on the basis of Muslim and Christian identities. It also indicated the division of the society into pro-independence, unionist, and pro-colonial thinking that laid down the seeds of the subsequent divisive syndromes which continued to manifest during armed struggle in the post-independence Eritrean state.

The next source of identity conflict in the Eritrean historical continuum was the identity externally-imposed by the United Nations and the failed federation. The failure of Eritreans to provide a home-based solution to their problems due to the divergent approaches made Eritrea, unlike other colonized territories, face an externally-tailored federation. This is also the result of a weak Italian policy of forging a separate Eritrean identity and the inability of the British military administration to effectively prepare the Eritreans to determine their future destiny as its major mandate. Strong Ethiopian interest in Eritrea as its integral part added further complication and made Eritrea the hot tub of conflict of interests which added seeds of lasting problems to their fate.
The federation collapsed in 1962 mainly because of weak Eritrean nationalism. Local forces had no integrative or comprehensive solution to address the historical absence of an inclusive consensus on the idea of Eritrea and Eritreanism. The federation also added inflammatory issues to the already stated divisions including legalization and politicization of the divisions of Eritrean society geographically into highland-lowland, and religiously into Christian-Muslim. This was also reflected in the recognition of both Arabic and Tigrinya as official languages of the federation. Political power was equally shared between Christian and Muslim leaders. These dichotomies were major challenges to Eritrean society. They started during the British mandate, remained through armed struggle, and now persist as structural challenges to national security. The failed federation also internationalized the Eritrean problem because the Eritreans themselves failed to provide a home-based solution.

2.2. Militant Nationalism and the Long March for Territorial Independence

There is no common ground on the basic causes of the Eritrean armed liberation struggle that lasted for three decades and fundamentally affected the post-independence Eritrean nation-building process.

Following the persistent incursions 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 Members) or “Mahber Shewuate” (Tigrinya for Party of Seven Members) in 1958 that evolved into the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) to pursue its goals “politically and diplomatically” (Tekeste 1997, 149). 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” (Tekeste 1997).

The continued disrespect for the federation by the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie cultivated hostility among Eritreans who viewed the incursions as illegal and therefore a form of colonial subjugation no different than that of Italian or British colonialism. According to Sherman (1980) Eritrean nationalism was based on grievances against the Ethiopian state that caused the loss of Eritrea’s regional autonomy. The grievances towards the Ethiopian state are also traced back to the nineteenth-century Italo-Ethiopian agreements and wars, including the Wuchale Treaty of 1889, the Battle of Adwa in 1896, and the Addis Ababa Treaty of 1896, and culminated in the abrogation of the federation as well as the subsequent harsh treatment of Eritreans by the Ethiopian governments.

The other major ingredient to the beginning of Eritrean armed struggle, according to Lobban (1976, 336), was a “national culture of common colonial oppression.” Furthermore, struggle was viewed as a national liberation movement against both past and present colonial oppression—Nahnan Elamanan.³

2 According to my informant Tesfu, (former ELF veteran living in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia), Eritrean nationalism was based on common colonial oppression where there was no an Eritrean oppressor and oppressed class or nation as is the case in Ethiopia where other nations claimed oppression by Amhara domination. As a result, the nationalists defined their struggle as national oppression and the solution is self-determination up to and including secession. Therefore, in Eritrea there is no reason for self-determination up to and including secession due to the absence of oppression—an oppressor class or nation.

3 Tigrinya for “Our struggle and its goals,” the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) manifesto declared in 1971.
The Eritrean armed struggle was initiated by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) based on sectarian (Islamic) nationalism in 1961 in the lowlands of Eritrea. ELF however suffered ideological problems. Practically, the problems reflected the failure of Eritreans to agree on the future state of Eritrea. ELF was pro-Arab and aspired to establish a revolutionary Islamic state of Eritrea. It was supported by many Arab countries. ELF was criticized for excluding and executing Christian Eritreans who joined the armed struggle as Ethiopian state spies. That, in turn, paved the way for the undemocratic and exclusionary nature of the Eritrean liberation struggle (Antonio 2002).

Following recurrent civil wars among the Eritrean liberation fighters, ELF was defeated by the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). EPLF consisted pre-dominantly of Christian highlanders. The 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 within ELF, it was clear that a sectarian-based liberation struggle could not fit to define the objective causes of the Eritrean problems (Antonio 2002). Indeed, the crisis paved the way for the emergence of new nonsectarian liberation front (EPLF) and re-conception of Eritrean nationalism based on territorial identity of the commonly-colonized Eritrean people (Connell 2001; Saideman et al. 2005; Sherman 1980).

EPLF ultimately prevailed over the ELF for several interrelated reasons. First, the EPLF, in its 1971 manifesto “Our Struggle and Its Goals,” Nahnan Elamanan, rejected the ELF’s communal identification and self-consciously propagated a nonsectarian, territorial Eritrean identity that could accommodate everyone who supported independence. As a result, EPLF abandoned the division of Eritrea into a zonal system, adopting a single command structure that reflected its emphasis on building national unity (Connell 2001 and 2005; 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 (even eclectic)” Marxist philosophy of “revolution before unity” emphasizing the principle of uncompromising struggle against the Ethiopian state (Henze 1985, 48). To this end, EPLF, in its national democratic revolution of 1977, “calls for the establishment of a solid worker–peasant alliance and the formation of a broad National United Front under the firm leadership of a proletariat party that can successfully rally all patriotic elements against the common enemy of colonial aggression” ( Sherman 1980, 52). The EPLF’s economic and social programs proved extremely popular; it provided much-needed services such as schools and medical care, undertook land reform, set up village assemblies and peasant associations, and worked to improve the status of women (Sherman 1980).

Learning from the negative experience of the ELF in accepting conditions along with Arab support, the EPLF emphasized self-reliance in all aspects including political, military, and economic development. This remains the unique feature of the post-independence government of Eritrea. Self-reliance became an integral feature of its domestic strategy, which reinforced the EPLF’s commitments to its territorial and ideological identities (Sherman 1980).

The EPLF also effectively galvanized the people into a single wartime identity through “the established axiom of Eritrean identity [that] emerged from war-induced hardship” (Akinola 2007, 49). Furthermore, the EPLF effectively utilized the party’s democratic centralism modeled on the Chinese Maoist principle. According to Mesfine (2001, 6), EPLF mobilized and galvanized
the Eritrean people into a uniform, disciplined, mobilized people who rally around a common cause: independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia. More importantly, through its internal security mechanism, *Halawa Sewura*, Defender of the Revolution, EPLF was able to create a hierarchical and disciplined military organization of formidable historical significance. It initiated and penetrated civic associations of urban workers, peasants, and women and youth; in the rural liberated areas, it provided public services such as health and education (Mesfin 2001; Connell 2005; Gebru 2009). The party used a “combination of promises, mostly land reform, and focused terror” (Ibid). Connell (2005) also argued that the repressive, secretive, and arbitrary exercise of absolute power sought to bring everyone in line with the discipline. It used two techniques to ensure conformity, discipline, and order: the first one was criticism and self-criticism, locally known as *gimgema*, and the second instrument was coercion implemented by the *Halawa Sewura* (Gebru 2009, 66-67).

As to the first instrument, *gimgema* was an instrument of control to “prevent mistakes and cultivate openness, trust, and comradeship,” on the one hand, and encourage “secrecy, hypocrisy, insincerity, self-censorship, and docility for fear of ridicule and humiliation in public sessions,” on the other hand (Gebru 2009, 66). The second instrument was coercion implemented by the so called the *Halawa Sewura* (Gebru 2009, 67). The very function of the *Halawa Sewura* was “to protect the revolution from internal subversion and external infiltration” (Gebru 2009, 67), and it used written and unwritten codes to intimidate the targets so as to make them in line with the discipline. The most common instruments utilized by the party were “isolation and public humiliation” (Gebru 2009, 67).

Such repressive, controlling mechanisms were used by the EPLF not only to punish the ordinary fighters, but to eliminate political and military figures who were considered a threat to the ruling clique in particular and the party in general. One group in opposition to the ruling elite was known as “the *Menkae*” movement. It rose from the educated fighters who criticized the national leadership as backward and ineffective (Connell 2005; Mekonen 2008; Pool 1990). The repression of the *Menkae* movement was followed by the suppression of another opposition group from within the EPLF known as the *Yemin* or rightist opposition” (Mekonen 2008, 44), with feudalist and regionalist tendencies.

All the above structural problems and traumas of intra-Eritrean conflicts and the subsequent repressive mechanisms of eliminating opponent groups used by the liberation movements resulted in politics of exclusion and monopolization, changing the liberation struggles to be undemocratic. This had negative implications for the post-independence nation-building project.

---

4 After the Tigrinya word for bat, and derived from the opposition’s habit of mobilizing support through discussions and propaganda conducted with fighters at night (Pool 1990, 76). On every occasion, in every valley and hilltop, at the highest pitch of their voices they began spreading news that there was no democracy and the rights of the freedom fighters were violated (Ibid). According to Medhane cited in Mekonen (2008, 42), in the Eritrean Tigrinya/highland tradition, a bat symbolizes dishonesty. Remarkably, the Tigrinya word *menkae* also stands for ‘left,’ denoting at the same time left-wing conservatism.
2.3. Nation-building From Above: “One-People, One-Heart”

Robert Kaplan in the April 2003 Atlantic Monthly edition entitled “A Tale of Two Colonies” characterized Eritrea as “the newly independent, sleepy 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…” (Kaplan 2003). Hence, Eritrea’s clarified sense of nationhood is rare in a world of nation-states rent by tribalism and globalization (Kaplan 2003).

However, Kaplan, in the same edition, quoted President Issayas Afeworki on the existing realities of Eritrea, “...we have not yet institutionalized social discipline, so the possibility of chaos is still here. Remember, we have nine language groups and two religions...therefore we will have to manage the creation of political parties so that they don't become means of religious and ethnic division, like in Ivory Coast or Nigeria” (Kaplan 2003). The post-independence Eritrean nation-building from above is the continuity of the EPLF’s controlled national mobilization of the armed struggle. The armed struggle that lasted three decades was effective in mobilizing all Eritreans all over the world to use Kaplan’s description as “an almost Maoist degree of mobilization and an almost Albanian degree of xenophobia” (Kaplan 2003, 13).

The unity that was demonstrated during the armed struggle to achieve the first vision (i.e., independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia) was to be the pillar in achieving the second vision, to radically transform Eritrea into the Singapore of Africa (Berhane 2006, 31). The success of the second vision would be based on “national unity and self-reliance” as stated in the preamble of the unimplemented Eritrean constitution of 1997 while “sub-national identity” that promoted any specific ethnicity and/or religion was strongly condemned (Berhane 2006, 34). The post-independence nation-building was therefore an outgrowth of the liberation conception of Eritrean nationalism: “the ‘melting pot strategy’ that united the fragmented society and mobilized them against an alien occupying army, eventually leading to the country’s independence” through the process of “social engineering” (Berhane 2006, 39) of the multi-ethnic Eritrean people.

However, the post-independence nation-building policy from above under the principle of “one people, one heart” was criticized. The new states of Eritrea faced challenges to consolidate a single national identity since none of the Eritrean ethnic groups are unique to it but rather Eritrea is characterized by all-round trans-border community ties (Berhane 2006; Ibrahim 2010) which in turn make Eritrea an “all-round part-nation state.” This further

5 Locally known as Hade-Hizbi, Hade-Libe.

6 In 1994 EPLF organized an all-Eritrean international conference on how to transform the nation from war-born state to peacetime nation-building. After the conference, the government aspired to catch up to Germany in terms of infrastructure, Israel in terms of military capability, Sweden in ensuring social justice, and Singapore in terms of urbanization by 2015. As result Eritrea was to be the “heartland (power-house)” of the Horn and Ethiopia and Sudan viewed to be the “hinterlands” to support Eritrean industrial establishment in terms of raw material, labor, and market. In fact, this could be the structural problem that makes Eritrea have antagonistic regional relations, especially with its contenders, Ethiopia and Sudan.
indicated that the nation-building process not only depended on war-induced unity but also on the acts of Eritrea’s significant others, Ethiopia and Sudan, as one defining feature of nation-state-of-becoming (Gebru 2006; Medhane 1999; Mesfine 1988 and 1986).

An attempt to build a single national identity out of all-round trans-border community ties, therefore, forced the government of Eritrea to frame contradictory policies which resulted in conflicted relationships with its neighbors. According to Gebru (2006) Eritrea’s conflicted relations with its neighbors 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 and leaping over the arduous and protracted paths of state formation, neglecting the pre-independence identity conflicts among Eritreans. Gebru’s argument is further supported by Bundegaard who said that “the Eritrean leadership has increasingly found itself in the hot water of state-making and nation-building “in a hurry,” though 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 neighboring states in order to forge a strong Eritrean identity, and tapping the resources and markets of neighboring countries with the aim of achieving miraculous economic development strategies” (Gebru 2006, 11). The structural reason for the aggressive policies of the government of Eritrea was/is to differentiate Eritrea’s ethnic groups from their counterparts in the neighboring countries by involving them in wars to sever the ethnic ties with Djibouti, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Yemen and ultimately to promote national unity of the new and young state of Eritrea.

The post-independence Eritrean leadership has been increasingly preoccupied with state making and nation-building strategies to make Eritrea a Tiger of the Horn of Africa within a short period of time via the traditional principle of “war makes state” (Tilly 1985, 181). Eritrea is therefore facing Ayoob’s security predicament of the third world state of “late entry to the state making project, and the simultaneous and contingent natures of nation-building” (1995, 2) with its neighbors. The state-making strategies from above under the principle of Hade-Hizbi, Hade-Libi is framed to continuously project the war-induced mobilization through securitization of every sector, over-politicization of nation-building, and militarization of the young generation through national service (Bundegaard 2004). The national military service, as one major component of nation-building, was introduced in 1995 with the National Service Proclamation of Article5. As Eritrea was born out of war, the national military service was primary aimed at ensuring the inter-generation transition between Yikaalo, the old generation, and Warsay, the new generation, which in turn was to accelerate the “Eritreanization” of nation-building in order to fit the founding pillar of self-reliance (Connell 2001, 11). Similar to the armed struggle, the new generation was to be indoctrinated and militarized 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” (Connell 2001).

7 Tigrinya for “able generation.” It refers to the guerrilla generation of Eritrea who achieved the first Eritrean vision: independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia. It mainly refers to the EPLF fighters. It is also called the “Nakfa” generation.

8 Tigrinya for “heir.” It refers to the post-independence Eritrean generation that was expected to ensure the second Eritrean vision: making Eritrea the Singapore of Africa. It is also called the “Sawa” generation.
Nakfa was the symbol of resistance, heroism, protracted war, and independence accomplished by the old generation, Yikaalo. Now Sawa, the center of post-independence Eritrea’s military training, is considered the symbol of the inter-generation transition (from Yikaalo to Warsay), nation-building and the nucleus or melting pot of the collective identity of the existing diversity of the new generation, Warsay. The end result of the militarization and securitization was therefore a huge military buildup and militarization (both in human and material assets). The militarization together with the longest protracted liberation war aggravated the superiority and the invincibility of the Eritrean army. This indeed contributed to conflictual policy towards its neighbors in border, religion, and economic issues as well as its hegemonic leadership tendency in the Horn of Africa.

Eritrea’s all-round conflict with its neighbors was to stretch the military indoctrination and test the transition into the new generation under the supervision of the old generation and ultimately to establish Eritrea’s leadership in the Horn of Africa’s power structure. According to Henze (2001, 52) “the Eritrean leadership was obsessed with the problems of miscalculations about their reputation they had cultivated for years of being the best fighting forces in Africa as they were the longest guerrilla fighters.” The superiority assumptions thus gave rise to a sense of military invincibility which in turn led to the confusion between the guerrilla army vis-à-vis a conventional army. This deceived the leadership into thinking that they could impose their interest and instigate instability in every direction to meet Tilly’s conception of the state as an “agent of organized violence” (1985, 181) engaging in “war making, protection, extraction, and state making” (Tilly 1985).

Eritrea’s last war, the Ethio-Eritrea war of 1998-2000, however, resulted in negative repercussions to its nation-building strategies as it signified the failure of the invincibility of the Eritrean army, the inter-generation transition, and negative implications to the historical intra-Eritrean divisive factors: bipolar division of Eritrean society as lowland-highland and Christian-Muslim. Furthermore, the war forced the leadership to redefine new policies: internally, the government declared a national emergency with tight control in order to contain internal problems signaling that the state would be swallowed by its neighbors, mainly Ethiopia; externally, the state also engaged in proxy wars in order to contain the internal challenges and to maintain its external power balance.

The United Nation Security Council, upon the request by the African Union, has imposed sanctions in 2009 and 2011 for the reason that Eritrea was destabilizing the fragile region of the horn and supporting terrorist groups in the failed state of Somalia. This further aggravated Eritrea’s isolation from regional and international actors and arenas.

---

9 The center for national military service where the new Eritrean generations are expected to get military training, political indoctrination, and a post high school education.
10 Eritrea fought continuous wars with all of its neighbors following its independence: war with Sudan in 1994, with Yemen in 1995, with Djibouti in 1996 and 2010, and finally with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000 marking the end of Eritrea’s military invincibility in the horn.
11 The African Union, for the first time in its history after the end of apartheid in South Africa, requested the Security Council to impose sanctions on its member state, implying Eritrea’s failure and inability to peacefully establish diplomatic relation with the outside world.
3. **External Challenges to Eritrean Nation-building**

The Horn of Africa seems to be the litmus paper for different kinds of nation-building attempts and failures ranging from secession (war-born), centralization, federation, failing, and collapsed states. Moreover, small and young states (Eritrea and South Sudan), and large and old states (Ethiopia and Sudan) are becoming features of the region. The small states recently achieved independence through protracted armed struggles fought for decades against the large states that partly aggravated the nation-building challenges of the states in the region.

The state making and nation-building project in the region is also inherently conflictual as the contingent nation-building strategies are diametrically opposite (e.g. ethnic federalism in Ethiopia and imposed centralism in Eritrea and Sudan). The relationship of the states is based on “mutual intervention” (Clapham 2000, 4) through hosting opponent groups of their counterparts with consistently fluid alliances as a means to counterbalance both the perceived and actual threats. This is further complicated by the absence of an established “security community” (Medhane 2004, 1) and the lack of strong state with a balancer role that could peacefully contain emerging conflicts and their spillover effects due to the mutual mistrust among the neighboring states.

The failure of nation-building has thus remarkably shown that state building in the Horn of African is not founded on the objective realities of the existing socio-political makeup. To use Medhane’s characterization, “the nation-builders are the products of—not solutions to—the historical contradictions in their respective countries (Medhane 2004, 1). Cognizant of the above structural problems, Eritrea, the unique state “born out of war” not only in the Horn of Africa but also the post-colonial African state system, has challenged the institutional status quo of Organization of African Unity (OAU) that declared the goal to maintain the colonial borders and refrain from accepting any forms of secession. What makes the nation-building experience of Eritrea complex is that it seceded from the regional power, Ethiopia, and its own history of hegemonic leadership in the region. The geopolitical structure of the Horn of Africa is therefore a serious challenge to the nation-building of the small and young state of Eritrea, let alone the other challenges of its policies towards its neighboring states with which it shares trans-border ethnic, religious, and cultural ties. Finally, the nation-building project is further complicated by the regional security predicament of emerging religious fundamentalism and terrorism which could further polarize the Christian and Muslim society of Eritrea.

4. **Windows of Opportunities**

Now, Eritrea is at a crossroads in search of a way out. Two scenarios present themselves:

Best case scenario: Given the complex historical conflicts among the Eritrean liberation fronts based on region and religion, the existential bipolar dichotomies of Eritrean society into Christian-Muslim and lowland-highland, the incompatibility of wartime-peace time mobilization tactics of achieving “one-people, one-heart” nationhood, the militarization and securitization of the new Eritrean generation (Yikaalo to Warsay) that makes the youth hostage to national military service indefinitely, the reported polarization between the people and the government as the critical population is leaving Eritrea for migration, and the absence of legitimately-established institutions of governance which makes Eritrea one of the latest examples of postcolonial democratic reversal, Eritrea needs an inclusive national reconciliation to safely
depolarize the differences, to maintain the social mobilizations inherited from war in peacetime, to rebuild broad-based state institutions, and to ultimately uphold a unitary state of Eritrea.

Middle case scenario: Being that Eritrea is inherently an all-round part-nation-state sharing all-round ties with all its neighbors, that there are structural challenges in the horn for isolated nation-building strategies, that the neighboring states are becoming federalized, especially Ethiopia, the Transitional Government of Somalia, and Sudan to some extent, and that there is an emerging quest for democratic self-determination from Eritrean opposition groups, the Eritrean nation-builders should revisit federal arrangement to re-address its historical, socio-cultural, and political differences. The neighboring states, especially Ethiopia and Sudan, and regional institutions like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) should also constructively engage with the situation to maintain the unity and integrity of Eritrea. In the long run, the neighboring states, mainly Ethiopia and Sudan, and regional institutions should think of possibilities for regional integration and confederation. The healthy nation-building of Eritrea is to the advantage of all states in the region.

5. Conclusion

The nation-building challenges of the young and small war-born state of Eritrea are structural and internal. The challenges center on the lack of agreed consensus among the Eritreans themselves on the creation of an Eritrean state and the identity of Eritreanism. These divergent outlooks are the results of historical evolutions that we trace back to European colonialism, federation with Ethiopia, and the period of armed liberation struggle.

Moreover, the post-independence nation-building from above under the principle of “one people, one heart,” which was the continuation of the armed struggle, was unrealistic as it failed to integrate the existential realities of Eritrean multi-ethnic societies and their historical dichotomies in peacetime nation-building. The nation-building strategy also failed to take into account the basic feature of Eritrea as an “all-round part-nation-state” because of its all-round trans-border community ties with its neighbors. Hence, its attempt to forge a single national identity through melting down diversity and erecting artificial borders with its neighbors through the traditional state making principles “war makes state” and militarization strategy strongly affected the very idea of national unity and equality, i.e., building, cultivating and institutionalizing the idea of the state through agreed and inclusive consensus among its nations.

In addition to the above facts, Eritrean independence is a rare case to the modern nation-state system and institutional norms and frameworks. Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia, the regional power, through war, is at odds with the institutional principles of the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations which advocate for territorial integrity and prohibit secessionism. The leadership’s continuous indoctrination and mobilization tactics, that the Eritrean people have been betrayed by the whole international community throughout its history, and the policy of self-reliance also make Eritrea an enclave state in a globally-interdependent world. And, finally, if the Eritreans and the states in the region, as well as international states and institutions, fail to constructively and timely engage, there are now emerging fears that Eritrea will follow the path of the failed state of Somalia.
References


Bereket Habteselassie. 2010. “State, Religion and Ethno-Regional Politics.”
http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/5509/5/ (accessed on March 1, 2010).


35


