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Eritrea and political pluralism

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DEMOCRACY



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AFRICANA

INTRODUCTION

On May 24, 1993 Eritrea declared its independence and emerged as Africa's 52nd nation state.[1] Its exclusion from the International and African political arena was ended after a thirty-year resistance to Ethiopian hegemony[2]. Eritrea's first bid for nationhood had begun in 1941 when it was the first to be freed by British-led Allied Forces[3]. The Eritrean quest of a one's own nation, derailed at various junctures by internal dissension and external collusion was finally ~~successful~~ achieved after half a century.

In the 1940s and 1950s the different peoples that constituted Eritrea had remained "strangers" to each other despite their co-habitation under a single colonial administration. Formally declared as Italy's "first-born colony" ~~and a prized possession its people in~~ 1890 first encountered each other as colonial subjects to an alien European rule. The different communities adhering to two different religious and a mosaic of cultural and linguistic heritage emerged out of the crucible of colonial bondage with a vague notion of a unifying common identity – that of being Eritrean. Eritrea's pre-colonial ~~past~~ characterized by powerful indigenous chiefs alternating with interludes of external invaders from the Ethiopian Kingdom in the south and ~~rivers~~ ~~kingdom~~ of the eastern Red Sea[4]. Its geographic location on the south eastern coast of the Red Sea also resulted in commercial and cultural interaction with other societies. The demarcation of its boundaries by Italy succeeded in erecting permeable ~~boundaries~~ within which modern Eritrea's political history began to take shape. G.K.N. Trevaskis, a colonial administrator during the British Administration (1941-1952) aptly summarized the Eritrean scene of that period.

> The capricious manner of Eritrea's creation, its long history of immigrations, invasions, and partition between alien rulers, and the physical diversity of its terrain have left their stamp on the inhabitants[5].

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1 Issayas Afeworki, quote ch,1
2 Sanbar, Semir O.A.U.
3 First to be freed
4 Kolomodin
5 G.K.N. Trevaskis *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition* (1941-1952), London : Oxford University Press, 1960, p.11

The replacement of Italy's colonial rule, ~~its aspirations to grandeur punctuated~~ by ~~Mussolini's fascist rhetoric~~ by imperial British presence was at first welcomed by the population. The jubilation at the eminent liberation was soon cut short as the caretaker British Administration proved to be unwilling and unable to shoulder the tasks of decolonization. The post-1945 world order was in the process of establishing new terms of reference where hegemonic domination through the exercise of diplomatic, economic and military prowess was replacing the 19th century exercise of Europe's "civilizing mandate". ~~Being the~~ "first to be freed," (followed by Somalia and Libya) the popular appeal for "a room of one's own, a country of ones own ; a century in which one was not a guest"[6] began to echo amongst the Eritreans as well as their neighbors.

In the Eritrean context, the appeal (later transformed into a defiant demand for a "room ... a country of one's own" characterizes Eritrea's post colonial history. The Eritrean saga began with the dream of one's own articulated by the generation born under colonial rule and versed in the legal implications spawned legitimized by the post World War II emergent international order.

I FRAGMENTED NATIONALISM: 1945-1952

The decolonization period, 1941-1945, ushered in a decade during which Eritrean confronted their disparate traditional legacies and ~~the~~ recently acquired exposure to western concepts of government, administration and values. The intelligentsia which spear-headed the anti-colonial movement encountered resistance to the new conceptions of universal rights, enfranchisement and the rule of law that transcended ethnic and religious loyalties. The unenviable position of advocating self-rule when the political "self" remained mired in a fragmented society divided by geographic, religious, linguistic and ethnic cleavages resulted in the absence of a common vision of the Eritrean nation. The pre-colonial past, replete with myths and legends and actual events of distrust and destruction wrought by factional communities was invoked. The strain upon the emerging identity proved to be too much and the weight of past history emerged as the victor. The death knell of the liberal and secular sentiments if the intelligentsia was sounded with the entry of imperial Ethiopia into the domestic Eritrean arena. Religion and its different

[6] These lines come from the Somali novelist, Nurrudin Farah and it was written about Somalia. Nevertheless the imagery it invokes is apt for the Eritrean quest of a nation which began with inhabiting a space. Nurrudin Farah, *Sardines* (St. Paul, MN: Greywolf Press, 1992, 3rd edition, p.4)

prophets, aligning each individual and community in discrete social, cultural and economic spheres became, in the absence of a critical mass of advocates of a secular state, the rallying points for a nation. The meshing of religion and politics, myth and facts, past history and present imperatives is an inevitable pattern in the formation of a nation. This is especially true in most colonial territories which are amalgams of different peoples, histories and collective memories brought together by colonial boundaries.

The process of the development of a common national identity shaped by pre-colonial and colonial interaction in Eritrea was also affected by the presence of imperial Ethiopia. Imperial claims to the "Mareb Mellash" (the area beyond the Mareb River) became the driving force that hardened traditional animosities and hostilities emanating from ethnic/religious affiliations. The fragile and non-indigenous structure of administration introduce by the British Administration, which introduced the western model was incongruent with the visions and integration of authority, power and societal relations in the formed Italian colony.

Although the political imperatives of the post-W.W.II international order played a key part in the derailing of the first Eritrean bid for nationhood; I argue that the complex historical and socio-cultural dynamics within Eritrea and the Horn of Africa provided the context within modern Eritrean nationalism evolved and emerged after three decades.

The first bid for freedom from alien rule gave rise to the establishment of the first anti-colonial organization Mahber Fikri Hager Eritra (MFHE) in Eritrea. The founding members consisted of the young intelligentsia, traditional figures of authority - notables and religious leaders. At first united by their common goal of anti-Italian sentiments their vision of a future Eritrea was still shaped by traditional animosities that preempted the maturation of an all embracing national identity that encompassed the different faiths of Christianity and Islam.

The MFHE's demand for an immediate end to Italian rule was not met by the British Military Administration due to the empire's declining economic resources and unwillingness to invest in ensuring a "fair" decolonization of a colonial territory.

The BMA, as a care-taker of an occupied territory was required to function at the minimum cost and had no mandate to introduce large-scale reforms or innovations, which might incur additional financial expenditure[7].

These constraints on the care-taker government were incompatible with the reforms demanded by the anti-colonial Eritrean nationalities of the 19440s from the "liberators" perspective the efforts of the Allies were focused on defeating the Axis powers rather than a pre-meditated "humanitarian" endeavor to free Eritrean from fascist rule. Once the Axis powers were defeated, the care-taker governments priorities (and those of the Allied Forces) immediately shifted to the establishment of spheres of influence in the post-1945 international order. The international debates about the fate of Eritrea (and the other Italian colonies of Libya and Somalia) began in 1945 four years after the defeat of the Italians. The body entrusted with this task was a Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) made up of representatives of the USA, USSR, Britain and France. The solutions proposed by the "Big Four" were different and due to the lack of consensus another Commission - the Four Powers Commission of Investigation (FPC) was established in 1947.

The time period between 1941 to 1947 when external powers were debating the fate of Eritrea the anti-colonial platform united in their original demand for the end of Italian rule had fragmented. Consensus, was also lacking in the domestic political arena as it was in the international arena.

The first crack in the MFHE appeared with the entry of Ethiopia into the domestic and external debates over the fate of Eritrea. The Big Four's debated centered on either the maintenance, expansion of colonial possessions[8] or the establishment of new bases and alliances[9].

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[7] J.C.Cray and L. Silberman *The Fate of Italy's Colonies: A Report to the Italian Colonial Bureau.*, London: Fabian Publications, Ltd., July 1948, pp.24-26

[8] American and Soviet efforts focused more on competition to establish footholds vacated by Italy and to replace Britain as the paramount international power in the Horn. See Marcus, pp79-87

[9] Britain's interests were to ensure the economic well-being of its two colonies. British Somaliland and the Sudan. Therefore Britain proposed to partition Eritrea between Ethiopia and the Sudan to restore the Ogaden to Somalia. France on the other hand sought to maintain the colonial status and to prevent precedents of early independence for its colonies in the Horn and the Maghreb. For details, see

The domestic debates revolved around the type of post-occupation rule over Eritrea, heavily infused with which societal sector would emerge as the dominant power. The Eritrean intelligentsia of the 1940s demanded the ousting of foreign rule (both Italian and British) the traditional chiefs envisioned a return to a "pre-colonial" past.

The one common denominator that made the fulfillment of external solutions ... the resolution of the Eritrean question to compatible with the Big Four's interest ... was imperial Ethiopia's desire to incorporate the territory[10].

The MFHE's elites - the new elites composed of the intelligentsia and the traditional elites composed of chiefs and religious leaders... shared anti-Italian sentiments and a desire for freedom from colonial rule. Beyond this, the MFHE had little in the way of a clear political agenda which could withstand the pressure from within and without. The traditional elite regarded the defeat of the Italians as an opportunity to restore their pre-colonial power and status buttressed and justified by ethnic and religious affiliations. The new elite, product of the Italian colonial system and beneficiaries of western education, wanted to retain their status and prospects of social mobility. The prospects for a restoration of traditional figures to authority based on either lineage or conquest were thus first threatened by the intelligentsia which sought power on the basis of education, leadership, skills and populist appeal. Thus the first cleavage to appear was an urban rural divide in the competition for power in the yet to-be-decolonized territory[11]. This internal polarization within the MFHE provided a window of opportunity for imperial Ethiopia's aspiration for expansion through an alliance of the traditional elites and the Coptic Orthodox Church. The help of the Eritrean Coptic Church was enlisted in order to convert people to support union with Ethiopia as a venue for the decolonization of the territory.

Harold Marcus, Ethiopia, Great Britain, the United States 1941-1974, Berkeley, University. of CA Press, 1983, p.41.

[10] For details on debates concerning the fate of Eritrea by the FPC and the UN, see Okbazghi Yohannes, *Eritrea: A Pawn in World Politics.* Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991, pp.51-25

[11] This was clearly demonstrated by Trevaskis statement of the urban-centered view of the new elite that "no-Eritrean class was better-fed with liberal ideas than the Asmara intelligentsia (and) none was so starved of British reform" Trevaskis, *Colony in Transition,* p.52

The politicization of religion and the new proposal of uniting Eritrea with Ethiopia led to the sharpening of pre-existing local, socio-cultural, economic and political cleavages between the Christian and Muslim Eritrean communities. Union with the Ethiopia would ensure the continuity of feudal traditional forms of rule that pre-existing local, socio-cultural, economic and political cleavages between the Christian and Muslim Eritrean communities. Union with Ethiopia would ensure the continuity of feudal traditional, forms of rule that pre-empted the emergence of the intelligentsia elite which threatened the traditional elites. The introduction of religion as an actor in nationalist politics served to weaken the fragile bonds of the intelligentsia whose power-base and appeal was limited to the urban sectors. The demand for union, supported by the Coptic Church and the majority of the traditional elites was soon paralleled by a demand for immediate independence and the formation of a sovereign state of Eritrea. By 1944, a group known as the Eritrea for Eritreans had taken up the banned of independence. The specter of an Imperial and Christian empire presented a dilemma for Muslim inhabitants who faced a return to the capricious rule of aristocracy and the exigencies of lord-serf relations sought by traditional elites who were willing to accept imperial Ethiopian domination in return for a restoration of feudal control weakened by Italian colonial rule and British reforms[12].

Thus, in the decade of the 1940s, Eritrea which entered a new stage... from colonial rule, to occupation and decolonization... contested internally and externally and lacking a consensus on its future. The sole anti-colonial movement of 1941, MFHE, splintered into two factions - pro-union and pro independence which became the foundations for the three major parties of the late 1940s and 1950s. The major external actors were the four powers, imperial Ethiopia and the newly established United Nations. Internally, factionalism and fragmentation based on self-determination, pre-colonial affiliation, and ethno-religious rivalries resulted in an era of legal and illegal political activism that turned the ex-Italian colony into a contested territory. The diplomatic, military and economic resources of imperial Ethiopia derailed the first bid of Eritrean aspirations to nationhood and brought about the realization of an expanded territory through a UN sponsored

[12] For details on the ruling castes of the Muslim inhabited areas see S.F. Nadel *Races and Tribes of Eritrea.* Asmara, British Military Administration - Eritrea, January 1944

federation in 1952. The pro-union elements supported by imperial Ethiopia emerged victorious and the Ethiopianization of Eritrea became institutionalized through a submission to the Crown.

Belatedly, the pro-independence parties and groups attempted to coalesce under the demand for independence transcending ethnic, religious and religious rivalries. The Independence Bloc established in 1949 [13] was by that time facing the formidable might of a neighboring empire, with access to international channels which has allied itself with the emergent American superpower in its quest for regional hegemony. The fragmented Eritrean nationalism, polarized by socio-economic and cultural identification to political affiliation proved incapable of transcending its historica constraints. On December 2, 1950 the UN General Assembly passed resolution 390 A(V) to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia as an "autonomous unit ... under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown.[14]". The UN resolution to implement a flawed and eschewed framework inaugurated a new era in the 1950s which gave birth to a defiant nationalism which sharpened the contours of Eritrean nationalism in the following two decades. The subordination of Eritrean society which underwent European colonialism, experienced political competition and interaction among its disparate sectors, ... under absolute imperial control was to prove incompatible G.K.N. Trevaskis, a former British official in Eritrea pointed out the difficulties of maintaining federal relations [15] that bound the two societies in light of the tendency of an absolutist empire to "fall back on its traditional model of rule"[16] .

Imperial Ethiopian tendency for absolute control was manifested in two ways. The first was a continuation of imperial patronage of pro-union Eritrean autonomy over its economic, social and political affairs. These two approaches to the federal

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[13] The Independence Bloc, Selfi Natznet, was established on July 25, 1949 and it included four parties and two associations which proclaimed then commitment to independence. For details, see Nai Ertra Semunawit Gazeta, No.308 "Me'merekta Selfi Natznet Eritra", Thursday, July 28, 1949.

[14] For details see United Nations, "Text of Resolution 390 A(V) adopted on December 2 1950 by the General Assembly, Official Records: Seventh Session, Supplement, No.15 (A/2188) New York, 1952, pp.74-75

[15] See Trevaskis, *Colony in Transition*, p.129-130

[16] Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: domination, resistance and nationalism*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994 forthcoming Oct.1994 forthcoming Oct.1994 Manuscript page 143

solution were to result in "... Eritrean discontent and eventual revolt"[17]. This discontent and revolt triggered by Ethiopian encroachments on Eritrean autonomy resulted in the re-assessment of the linkage between the two countries and a re-vitalization of the secular nationalist elements which attempted to re-group the fragmented nationalism of the 1940's and redefine the nature of nationalist protest.

II CREATIVE RADICALISM : THE PROTEST OF POLITICS

During the federation years, 1952-1962, freedom of expression was curtailed. But grass roots resentment against the violation of individual rights and the autonomy of the Eritrean state found expression in the folk-culture. The harshness of Ethiopian rule seems to exceed that of Italian rule. The legendary words of a traditional Retrain chief in 1894 who had warned his people belatedly of encroaching colonial rule-- that " it is difficult to find a cure once the red snake had bitten"[18] was reversed in the 1950's with incredulity. The realization that a "fraternal black snake advocating African' liberation through unity' as a cure for [European] colonialism[19].

The incredulity and despair at having missed an historic opportunity of escaping domination European and African - is reflected in a popular song of the mid 1950's.[20]

Ata Ane'ye Gerimuni	I am amazed at what's happening.
Marcia Indietro' do	I never thought we would
N'kheid Mesulini!	go backwards in history
Kabzi khulu's Mussolini	Would Mussolini have
d'o Me'heseleni?!	been better for me?!

Official Eritrean and Ethiopian censorship of discontent was met by an increasing awareness of the curtailment of rights. Popular assessment of the ineffectual Eritrean Assembly, instituted as a national legislative body entrusted with the task

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[17] Trevaskis, *A Colony in Transition*, p.130

[18] C. Conti Rossini, documents 'Bahta Hagos' lament in Italian. As "Dopo che il serpente rosso ha morso; per quanto cerchi, non si trova il suo rimedio," translated from the Tigrigna narration of " Keih temen ind>hri nekhisu deli'kha ay'ghinen fewsu". See Rossini, Proverbi Tradizioni' e Canzoni Tigrine (Italia: Amboglio Airoldi, 1942:305).

[19] Iyob, R. The Eritrean Struggle for Independence. Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, P. 78

[20] A verse of a Tigringna song from the late 1950's popular in the Inda Shahi (Tea Houses) and Inda Suwa (Beer Houses) of Asmara.

of debating public issues and formulating policies representing Eritrean concerns, interests and grievances, could be measured by folk songs echoing a warning of unaddressed grievance.

Assembleia B'haki F'redu	MP's do the right thing
Kabti Reshan	so that you may leave
B'dehan K'twerdu	your offices safely.

Such sentiments and warnings were not limited to aggrieved folk-singers. By May, 1962, the conventional wisdom that the autonomy of Eritrean Assembly, was an instrument to act as a rubber stamp for the Ethiopian crown wishes to annex the territory led to a demonstration of high school students demanding freedom. The demonstration was well organized and reflected the existence of organized resistance leading the American Consul in Asmara, to note that:

it was a surprising and courageous move in the police state. Symptomatic of general discontent...apparently triggered off by a widespread rumor that the Eritrean Assembly was about to vote for full union with Ethiopia.[21]

Indeed, the Consul's remarks were accurate about the existence of an organized clandestine opposition because with a wide spread following. The folk songs, and the "rumours" were based on the information network established by the first Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) which came into existence in 1958. The warning to the MPs combined with the student demonstrations had indeed struck home. An imperial edict soon followed to strengthen the police force to ensure order in the territory. The Eritrean Assembly, which convened on June 19, 1962 rejected the proposal submitted by titular head of the Eritrean Assembly sending out the first signal that "the acquiescence of the Eritreans cannot be taken for granted even though its members may have been suborned with money, titles or decorations.[22] The defiance to Ethiopia's imperial control had taken hold at the grass-roots and had created an organized network that operated out of every

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[21] Foreign Service Despatch. Matthew Looram, American Consul to the Department of State, Washington D.C., USA. No. 775 a.00/5.2562, May 25, 1962.

[22] Foreign Service Despatch "Monthly Summary of Everb - June, 1962" from Matthew Looram, American Consul, Asmara to the Department of State, Washington DC, USA, No 775 a.00/7462, July 4, 1962.

community through the use of the cultural arena. The Hare Khat Tahrir Eritrea (ELM), which came into being in 1958 was an urban-based nationalist movement which began by young Eritrean exiles in Port Sudan who had (6 years after federation) realized that the facade of federation could not accommodate the autonomy granted by UN Resolution 390 a (V). The party leaders and traditional elites of the 1940's were replaced by young exiles who focused on the tasks of reconciling the fragmented nationalism that had led to the failure of Eritrea's first bid for nationhood.[23] The founders of the ELM, all Muslims, attempted to overcome the religious hostility fueled by the Ethiopian and Eritrean Coptic Churches in the competition for power during the British Administration. In an effort, to narrow the class cleavages of traditional Eritrean society their recruitment efforts were directed at the working class, small traders and students, social groups from which the leadership itself was derived. By widening the scope of membership, the ELM's platform challenged the traditional mode of conducting politics through patronage and inter-elite alliances. The ELM's charter was the first to formally declare that Eritrea belonged to both Christian and Muslim alike thus pre-empting the re-awakening of traditional hostilities between adherents of the two religions.

A new politics of protest clearly indicative of a generational difference in political attitudes emerged under the ELM which aimed at:

1) a re-definition of a politically distinct, pluralist and secular Eritrean state;
2) a re-assertion of the Eritrean demand for independence citing Ethiopia's violation of Eritrea's constitutional rights.
3) a rejection of Pan-Ethiopianism[24]
4) denunciation of elite nationalism based on patronage politics and confessionalism.

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[23] For details see John Markakis, National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa. Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1987.pp.106-107 and Ruth Iyob, The Eritrean Struggle,pp. 171-182.

[24] Pan-Ethiopianism is defined here as the doctrine based on coerced unity justified/legitimated by virtue of claims to cultural similarity and conquest. It has been presented as an expression of "African unity" and used to legitimate Ethiopia's territorial expansion in the Post-War II era. For details see Iyob, pp.65.

These goals were not expressed openly in the formal arena, therefore, political thought and opposition became ensconced in the informal sector. Tea-houses, bazaars, soccer events and schools became the center for recruitment and mobilization. Clandestine cells consisted of a core group of seven persons, each of whom was in turn assigned the task of recruiting six additional members. Induction into the organization required an oath to support the preamble, to donate 3% of one's earnings and to attend bi-weekly meeting.[25] This new organizational structure reflected a similarity with the Sudanese Communist Party's mode of operation which also emphasized literary study circles.[26] The ELM's mobilization strategies appealed to Eritreans of different ages, faiths, economic classes and political orientations. It widened the scope of political activities, introduced a degree of tolerance. This was in marked contrast to the previous decade when membership and representation depended on the good will of elites ... party politicians and traditional rulers... which had circumscribed mass political activity. The new opposition spread throughout towns and cities and Mahber Shewate (7 member cells) quickly multiplied.

Secondary schools under pressure from Ethiopian "amharization"[27] policies provided a ready-made network of alienated elements which included students, teachers and civil servants in the Ministry of Education. The banning of political parties and unions after the federal act was implemented led to the politicization of social organizations such as soccer teams. Soccer team members were recruited into the ELM when they traveled to the Sudan and spread the network inside Eritrea.

The failure of the older nationalists of the 1940's was viewed as a betrayal of Eritrea's youth which was expressed in the social and cultural arena. Popular folk songs in the beer houses reflected the discontent with the older generation. An example was:

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[25] Stefano Posia, Eritrea: Colonia Tradita. Rome: Edizione Associate, 199, pp.69-70.

[26] For details on the SCP see Tim Niblock, Class and Power in the Sudan: The Dynamics of Sudanese Politics, 1898-1985. New York: University of New York Press, 1987,pp. 163-183.

[27] The term amharization refers to the imposition of Ethiopia's official language - Amharic- and its replacement of Eritrea's medium of instruction - Tigringna and Arabic. These policies were also accompanied by the transfer of Ethiopian teachers to Eritrean schools.

Abotat'na Uwano	Our misguided elders
Ab Idom kelo	Although they had the power
Lemano	they went begging.

Such popular expressions of growing nationalism in the streets was also reinforced by the establishment of a cultural association, the Mahber Theatre Asmara (Ma. T. A.).[28] Ma. T. A. served as a recruitment center, fund raiser and an outlet for the frustrated population.

As discontent increased so did the responses of the Ethiopian Empire. By 1959 a series of steps were taken to ensure the absolute control of the Empire over its federated "state" of Eritrea: In November, 1959, the Eritrean flag was replaced by the Ethiopian tricolour; in May 1960, the Eritrean Seal of Government was abolished and the name was changed to "Eritrean Administration". Students protesting the addition of the Amharic language as a requirement in the Eritrean curriculum were jailed.[29] Dismayed at the poor performance of its "formally elected" representatives, Eritreans flocked to the Ma. T.A.'s bi-monthly cultural shows. Plays, singers and stand-up comics satirized the federal scheme and warned against the evils of "alien" cultures.[30] Although the shows were censored by authorities, the artists camouflaged the political messages in the intricacies of traditional ballads. In the cultural arena both the new radicals and traditional nationalists were united in their desire to oppose Ethiopian absolutism.

The clandestine politics of protest permeated a wide constituency and popularized the nationalist struggle through a creative mobilization of social and economic grievances against Ethiopian violations of federal guarantees. The creative radicalism of the ELM despite its large following in urban Eritrean centers and in exile was lacking the support of veteran party politicians and traditional elites who perceived it as too radical and mistrusted its " communist " affiliations.

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[28] Ma. T. A. was not the only cultural organization at that time. An earlier organization known as the Mahber M'mhiash Hagerawi Bahli (Association for the Improvement and Preservation of National Culture) had been established in the late 1950's by two musicians Tewolde Redda and T'kabo Woldemariam who were also members of Ma. T. A. For details, see Poscia, Colonia Tradita, p.88.

[29] Interview with Kesete Habtezion, a participant in the student demonstrations of 1960. 14 August, 1990, New York, USA.

[30] This was in reference to the American broadcasts from the Kagnew Station in Asmara (an agreement between the Empire and superpowers that formalized Ethiopia's alliance with the West) and the Amharic language broadcasts from Radio Ethiopia in Addis Ababa.

The ELM envisioned the liberation of Eritrea through a coup d' etat, which was considered as fool hardy and not feasible by experienced politicians. Traditional elites' support thus went to a newer opposition, with recruits in the rural areas and head-quarters in Cairo which was established by veteran political exiles. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) came into being in 1960 led by former leaders of the Eritrean Assembly and ex-party leaders in exile. Despite its enthusiastic followers and successful establishment of opposition networks, the ELM cells were hampered by the fact that the leadership was in exile and distant from the daily events that affected its members. The acephalous nature of the ELM ells and then lack of autonomous decision making capacity mitigated against the quick action needed for any urban-based clandestine opposition to be effective. Unable to obtain the support of experienced politicians and the traditional elite, the ELM (belatedly) resolved to consider the "necessity of armed struggle in the event of a failed coup.[31]

In 1961 the ELF declared its armed struggle as the sole means of achieving independence and obtained support from both the urban and rural population including a number of ELM cells which joined the new front.[32] Although the ELF (like the ELM) had the disadvantage of being directed from outside Eritrea, it benefited from its well-known leaders of the past. In September 1961, the first shots rang in the lowland Barka region. They came from the guns of Hamid Idris Awate's group made up of thirteen ELF recruits. The ELM proceeded to continue to organize a separate armed struggle ELM-ELF rivalry had triggered a warning signal that the Eritrean-Ethiopian federation had become untenable.

The Assembly was convened and Eritrea was declared a part of the Ethiopian Empire. The Executive of the Eritrean Administration, a staunch pro-unionist, clearly demonstrated that the facade of federation was no longer necessary: this words clearly expressed the Empire's views on the ten years of linkage:

> Our continent and ourselves have through the law clearly identified ourselves as Ethiopians and have merged with our "Mother Country" for the last ten years... The people of Eritrea know that they had become fused with their greater part, governed by the Emperor and protected by

[31] Markakis, National and Class Conflict, p. 197.
[32] Hadas Eritra *"The Clandestine Struggle: The ELM,"* No.98, Wednesday, August 5, 1992

> one seal. As for the thing called federation, the people do not know the intricacies of federation let alone the word or concept itself... . Therefore I present to you the wishes of our people that the present (federal) administration be dissolved because it is imposed by aliens and has never been part of our history. ... As representatives of your people and guardians of history I trust that you will accept this unanimously[33].

The charade had ended and this signaled an inauspicious closure to the politics of protest and ushered in an era of armed struggle and national liberation in post-colonial Eritrea. Annexation, which ended the territory's brief interlude with "democracy" and "popular participation", was the anti-climactic end to a gradual usurpation of the right of self-determination for Eritrea.

The Eritrean-Ethiopian federation, envisioned as a mechanism of decolonization, succeeded in constructing a new legal entity which only affirmed the existence of Eritrea by virtue of its association with the Empire. The semblance of autonomy and even acquiescence to international law were flagrantly violated by the annexation of the territory. Adding insult to injury, the uneasy federal linkage was severed with the announcement that a decade of compromise among Eritrean nationalist had amounted to nothing less than an "alien" imposition. This experience of outright erasure of a decade of historical experience and the denial of a political and socio-cultural entity known as Eritrea remained engraved in the collective Eritrean memory and ignored until the re-grouping of nationalist elements, once again, seeking to restore its separate entity. The construction of a mature nationalism, transcending traditional cleavages and capable of challenging external intervention was to take an additional two decades. The Eritreans of the 1940s and 1950s had been faced with the opportunity to create a "nation" from the artificial amalgamation of its disparate communities. Although the "Eritreans" of this era had inhabited clearly demarcated boundaries they had not developed a clear sense of what separated them from their neighbors to the south, north-east or east. They had barely began to interact as equal members of the new post-colonial society before external interests derailed their path to nationhood.

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[33] For details see Asfha Woldemichael's speech to the Assembly, published in *Zemen*, Asmara, Thursday, 15 November 1962, p.1

The process of separating primary affiliations of kinship, regionalism and religion involves yet another process ... that of shared historical experience... resulting in a compilation of collective memories. As everywhere else, the creation of a consensus that defines the common experience, the compilation of a shared political lexicon, sets of symbols, and ideology were in their embryonic stages in the two decades following colonial rule[34].

Eritrean nationalism permeable to competing external threats, underwent a qualitative transformation during the Federation period, culminating in the establishment of an anti-Ethiopia liberation struggle.

To build the Eritrean Polity

Independent Eritrea faces multiple challenges of economic, social and political reconstruction. Although future generations will continue to feel the after-effects of the long war, Eritreans emerged with a strong sense of nationalism which binds the different ethnic and religious groups as citizens. What Trevaskis described as a "conglomerate of different communities" had, after thirty years of war, fused into a single people. While Italian colonialism can be credited for demarcating modern Eritrea's boundaries, Ethiopian hegemonic domination was the principal contributing factor in the construction of a separation of a separate Eritrean political identity.

Eritreans finally achieved their quest for a country of their own. They proved to the outside world that they can co-exist and cooperate with their larger neighbor if the relationship is based on consent and consensus rather than coercion. The needs of both countries - Ethiopia's access to the sea and Eritrea's need for a stable trading and financial partner - were achieved through negotiation and bilateral agreements. The first independent government of Eritrea also emphasized the importance of solidarity between the peoples of both countries and announced that it is cooperating with the Ethiopian Government to enable the "free movements of people and harmonization of immigration laws."[35] These new relations of economic interdependence and social reconciliation became possible because

[34] John Lonsdale, *African Pasts in Africa's Future*, Canadian Journal of African Studies, 25, No.1, 1989.
[35] Telephone interview with Ato Arefaine Berhe, Minister Counselor and Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Eritrea, Washington, D.C., August 9, 1993

Eritrea and Ethiopia treated each other as equals. The end of the Cold War also decreased the possibility of external intervention, which could have favored one side over the other.

The new nation faces immense problems of re-construction. During the interim period while the country prepared for the referendum, investments and international economic assistance were delayed.[36] External assistance was also not forthcoming because of the government's insistence on dictating the terms of aid and prioritizing projects dealing with food security, land reform, education and social justice. Prior to independence a proposed aid package of $26 million tied to free-market reforms was rejected by the Eritrean government due to a "misunderstanding" over priorities and a clash of attitudes. After a series of meetings compromises were reached and aid started to flow from both the USAID, the European Community and the World Bank.[37]

The long years of war and the absence of the rule of law had also created a socio-economic system based on patronage and bribery. The government faced problems of corruption, inflation, a thriving black market and unequal development of urban and rural areas.[38] New laws intended to correct these problems were drafted and put into effect immediately. The leadership appealed to the population for support in these efforts to eliminate poverty, inequality and a better life for all citizens.

> The development of a country can be measured by the even growth of all sectors of society. It is not only unjust but also backward when only the elite enjoys life while the majority of consumers struggle to survive. The [government] ...calls on everyone to cooperate in implementing the guidelines and proclamations.[39]

On the eve of independence, the government raised the salaries of the civil service in order to equalize the gap between the high cost of living. The liberalization of the economy necessitated the lifting of state control over the local economy while

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[36] Saleh, Heba "Now That The War is Over," BBC Focus on Africa, Vol.3, No.3, July-September 1992, p.49

[37] Hubbell, Stephen, "Eritrea Nascent: The Next Fight for Independence," The Nation, May 31, 1993. See also Sarah Gauch, "Eritrea Seeks Industrial Revival," African Business, February 1933, p.45

[38] *Hadas Ertra, "Equal Attention to Urban and Rural Areas,"* No.16, Wednesday, October 23, 1991.

[39] *Hadas Eritra*, No.70, Wednesday, April 29, 1992

at the same time trying to curb excessive high prices by merchants and petty traders. Maintaining a balance between a gradual opening of the economy and protecting the rights of consumers and suppliers resulted in a cautious move towards privatization. In order to avoid the dangers of an unfettered free market system, economic dependency, and uneven development without scaring off investors the government revised the guidelines and laws dealing with both local and foreign companies.[40]

Nevertheless, Eritrea's natural resources as natural gas, oil, gold and copper deposits, fisheries and tourism provided the new nation with a strong position to dictate its terms of investment. The prospects of oil deposits in the Eritrean coast, confirmed by new geological studies, led to exploratory talks between Eritrean and multinational companies in 1992.[41] Mobil Oil was the first to establish a branch office in Asmara with SHELL, AGIP and TOTAL, following suit.[42] One of the first decrees after the declaration of independence were Proclamation 40/1993 dealing with the regulation of oil exploration and Proclamation 41/1993 of revenue collection from oil exploration activities.[43] Maintaining a balance between the government's policy of self-reliance and attracting international investors could very well expedite the integration of the previously isolated Eritrea's economy and its national re-construction.

The importance of striking a balance between Eritrean national interests and the international economic community were stressed during the new nation's participation at the meeting of the UN Economic and Social Council in July 1993. President Issaias Afewerki stressed the need for a convergence of interests between donors and recipients.

> What is required, and what has been conspicuously lacking, is international assistance commensurate with the needs of the country... The aspect that needs elaboration perhaps is the impact of assistance on recipient communities: whether it inspires or dampens their creativity

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[40] PGE, Investment Proclamation, No.18/1991, Gazette of Eritrean Laws, Vol.1, No.4, Asmara, December 1991

[41] Mahmoud Nagati, "Red Sea Oil Shows Attract Attention to Miocene Salt, Post-Salt Sequence," Oil&Gas Journal, December 7, 1992, pp. 46-53. See also "Exploration Slated on Contract Are in Ethiopian Frontier," Oil&Gas Journal, November 20, 1989, p.36

[42] *Hadas Eritra*, No.73, Saturday, May 9, 1992

[43] Government of Eritrea, *"Dimtsi Hafash"* Radio Broadcast, August 3, 1993

and self-respect? what mechanisms and instruments can be developed to inhibit mentalities and attitudes of permanent dependence?

[Our] government believes that all assistance granted or disbursed must include in-built mechanisms of sustainability with a view of [generating], at least partially, the funds for other development projects... [44]

These views reflected a maturation of Eritrea's policy of self reliance and a willingness to come to terms with the new nation's need for integration in the world economic system. Its potential for a viable economy - assessed as too poor and weak by the UN in 1950 - has certainly been reversed in the 1990s. The uncertainties of whether the new nation and its former guerrilla leaders could demonstrate the necessary flexibility and operate as functional members of the international economic system were dispelled in the early months of its existence. Eritrea's future success will depend on how it develops its economic capabilities and allocates its resources to meet the demands of its population.

Jackson and Rosberg noted in 1982 that at independence almost all African countries were endowed with the juridical attributes of statehood without, however, also having in place the empirical reality that undergirds it.[45] In effect they received the institutions and structures of government, but without the benefit of the mass civic loyalty and sense of political community that could animate the state and create the nation-state. That latter task, of building national civic cultures, has preoccupied the post-colonial African states during the past thirty years and, sad to say, thus far it has been accomplished with only partial success. Eritrea represents another perhaps unique, case of African state-building.

The referendum of April 1993, which gave Eritrea its independence, was conducted from the "empirical" base of a mature nationalism and a strong sense of political community nurtured during the thirty years' war with its imperial neighbor. The new state also emerged with a dedicated leadership group, the experience of running a "parallel polity." All this is at least as much, and perhaps

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[44] United Nations, "Address by H.E. Issaias Afewerki, President of Eritrea to the 1993, Regular Session of The Economic and Social Council, Geneva, July 3, 1993

[45] Robert H.Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, "Why Africa's Weak States Persist: The Empirical and Juridical in Statehood," "World Politics 35, No.1 (October 1992).

more, as had other African states such as Algeria, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, and Guinea-Bissau emerging from "wars of national liberation." But is it enough of a foundation on which to build the new Eritrean polity? Perhaps, but given the mixed bag of experience,[46] for good and for ill, of modern Africa, it is worth devoting some sober reflection to some of the daunting political problems facing the new Eritrean regime.

Of these problems, the institutional one deserves close attention. Given the disarray, the inefficiency, and often, the corrupt nature of the administrative infrastructure left behind by the Ethiopians in the main towns, the Eritreans confront a mixed blessing: on the one hand , they can simply sweep away the old institutions and rebuild with brand new ones, but on the other, they must literally create (or re-create) institutional memories, the minutiae of administrative regulation, the hierarchies of bureaucratic responsibilities, and learn, and learn quickly, the dynamics and machineries of meeting public needs with official responses. As the events of May 20, 1993 unfulfilled promises and unmet expectations can lead either to active confrontation or a gradual disengagement of the society from its government. If Eritreans are to succeed in establishing a pluralist and democratic system of government a great deal will depend on crafting mechanisms of accountability, maintaining open channels of communication between the leadership and its constituents, decentralizing the various bodies of government and ensuring a system of checks and balances.

Another set of problems, although less visible than those involving institution-building, is equally challenging. At issue are the imperatives of moving from a war economy to one based on peace; of shifting minds, energies, and attitudes from resistance to reconstruction; of giving "empirical" reality to the ideological premises of the struggle. In effect, what will be needed is a new covenant between the Eritrean people and the state based on the reciprocities of civic obligation and not on the need to survive in the face of a common enemy. Of course, there is no standard list that defines these problematic: its content is

[46] For an excellent analysis of the consequence of the legacies of this failure and constraints to democratization see Rene Lemarchand, "Africa's Troubled Transitions," Journal of Democracy, Vol. 3, No. 4, October 1992, pp. 99-108 and "Uncivil States and Civil Societies," Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp.177-191.

situationally defined. In the Eritrean case, these questions, at least, will have answered.

Given the general commitment to democracy, can the Eritrean leadership develop a *modus operandi* that combines its efficient mobilizing capability with the flexibility necessary for the tasks of governance? In order for democracy to succeed Eritreans **must be socialized not merely mobilized** to democratic values. In the past, the EPLF's success was based on a hierarchical chain of command and its ability to impose discipline in the pursuit of a collective goal of independence. The maintenance of the political unity forged among Eritreans of different ethnic communities, religious affiliations and ideological orientations during the liberation struggle, requires tolerance. Democracy - a messy business, at best - requires that individual rights, liberties, diverse opinions and interest be taken into consideration simultaneously with the collective good. If the government of Eritrea does not succumb to the temptation to overvalue order and stability and thus curb the sphere of political participation, the population can be socialized to live with the happy uncertainties of democracy.

Is there, or can there be found, an ideology appropriate to national construction, one that can define the transition from the liberation struggle to the making of an Eritrean polity? The most difficult task facing the future Eritrean government will be how to harmonize the private and public spheres, giving each its due in the new democratic environment. During the war years and the interim period from 1991-1993 , the private sphere was subordinated to the attainment of the larger common good - independence. The country's economic survival and reconstruction of the war is shattered economy were made possible because of such collective endeavors and discipline. Having achieved independence and shouldered the burdens of governance a balance must be struck so that both the public good and individual needs can be maintained and the gains of the past can be perpetuated. In this task, both the people and the state will have to constantly re-affirm and revise the basis of interaction between the governing institutions and the governed.

Given the past history of fratricidal conflict within the Eritrean political camp, can the present leadership capitalize on its current unity to devise ways by which internal differences can be contained and/or institutionalized, rather than erupting in violence? Bold and innovative steps need to be taken by the post-

independence government in order to ensure that war is not used as a substitute for political dialogue. Protecting the constitutional rights of all citizens without discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion or gender is a fundamental step towards the creation of a unity based on diversity. Future governments need to be careful not to fall into the self-destructive trap of most new African governments, i.e., curtailing the democratic rights of the opposition in the name of eliminating threats to "national security." The government of independent Eritrea prohibits the formation of "political parties based on religion, ethnicity, region, province... and those with direct or indirect linkages to political forces abroad."[47] It also has taken the time and expended efforts in educating its people about the dangers of religious fundamentalism and ethnic chauvinism. At the outset of 1993 it appeared that the new government was successful in establishing the basis for a relatively inclusive political system which included former opponents. Members of defunct liberation fronts such as the ELF, ELF-PLF, EDM and other organizations who had been in exile joined the new government as members of the assembly and civil service. It set up the legal framework for a pluralist system which utilized both traditional social customs and modern laws..[48] It took steps to ensure that the population is informed about the nature and functioning of the new political framework.[49] The more challenging task will be to keep it going.

How can political pluralism be maintained? Successful plural polities which maintain self-conscious social groups in tolerant accommodation to each other are rare in modern Africa. The potential for a democratic Eritrean polity exists. It will be up to both the government(s) of Eritrea and its people to ensure that the lessons of the past have not been in vain.

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[47] *Hadas Eritra, "President Issaias Afeworki Responds to Questions from the People,"* No.83, Wednesday, June 16, 1993

[48] The PGE since 1991 published eight proclamations concerning the re-establishment of legal laws concerning the civil code, laws governing crimes, abjudication, labor and commercial laws. For details see PGE, *Negarit Gazeta, Vol.1, 1991, September 15, 1991.* Traditional customs governing adjudication and administration were adapted to existing structure of local governments.

[49] The PGE used the media - radio, television and newspapers as well as official publications - to educate the population about civic duties, political parties, modes of popular participation and voting. In addition, it issued a new series of pamphlets with a special focus on pluralist systems, political parties and systems of governance which are also used to inform the public. For details see PGE (EPLF), State, Government, Party (Asmara: Department of Media and Culture, December 1992), 1-56.