

NATIONALISM AS A CONTINGENT EVENT: SOME REFLECTIONS ON ETHIO-ERITREAN EXPERIENCE*

Mesfin Araya

* This paper is a bare outline of a larger manuscript near completion. Dr. Mesfin Araya is a professor of African and African-American Studies and Director of its Research Center at York College, CUNY.

Background

What is politically significant and what really attracts scholarly research in any nationalism is the awakening of the masses - i.e. the effective transition from elite-based to mass-based nationalism; this study is concerned with that transition in the Eritrean experience in the modern political history of Ethiopia.

Eritrea is a multi-ethnic society comprising eight linguistic groups, but historically, the great cultural and political divide has been religion - with roughly equal population distribution between Christians and Moslems. From 1890-1941, the region was an Italian colony; with the collapse of the Italian empire in the Horn of Africa, it was "administered" by the British until 1952, when it joined Ethiopia under a "federal" arrangement, sponsored by the United Nations; with the collapse of the "federation" in 1962, Eritrea became a province of Ethiopia; In April 1993, however, it reemerged as a new nation-state: the referendum, sponsored by the United Nations, is said to have resulted in 99.8 percent vote for Independence; the birth of the new nation-state has radically redrawn the post-colonial African map, held sacred by the members of the Organization of African Unity.

The checkered political history of the tiny former Italian colony, British protectorate, autonomous region, province of Ethiopia, and finally a new nation-state, seems to raise interesting theoretical questions to the student of nations, nationhood, and nationalism: when (conceptualized in historical perspective), how, and why, did the Eritrean nationhood become a reality? Was the reality of Eritrean nationhood a thing that developed or a contingent historical event? How deeply rooted and solid is Eritrean national identity? At a more general level: What is Nationalism? Is its dynamics inherently governed by the qualities of cultural group identities, or is it primarily a product of enduring socio-economic forces, entailed by modernity? What does the Eritrean experience in the modern political history of Ethiopia suggest?

I was motivated to explore the Eritrean experience in the modern political history of Ethiopia by the difficulties I encounter in two areas: the theoretical debate about nations, nationhood, and nationalism, and the specific scholarly literature on Eritrean nationalism. This study has two goals: as an investigation of a specific historical case study, it attempts to offer some insights to the ongoing theoretical discussions about nationalism; also, it tries to present fresh interpretation that claims to provide corrective measures to existing literature on Eritrean nationalism.

Framework of Analysis

The proliferation of nationalist struggles has given rise to a flurry of activity in theory concerning nations, nationhood and nationalism. Yet nationalism, as an object of scholarship, remains elusive, "puzzling about which there is less analytical consensus... Disagreement about its origins is matched by uncertainty about its future." (Anderson, 1996:1)

Nationalist movements create, invoke, conjure up, nations where they do not exist to justify, legitimize their claims; hence, nationalist struggle is seen as the unfolding spirit of the nation, and the nationalists see themselves as the carrier of that spirit. Having, therefore, a necessary functional role, the idea, nation, is inherent to the practice of nationalists. That historical truth need not be surprising. What remains surprising is that the practical discourse of nationalist movements seems to have influenced the theoretical discussions about nations, nationhood, and nationalism. As Rogers Brubaker aptly describes - most theoretical discussions about nationalism are indeed discussions of nations.¹ To elaborate my argument and reformulate the analytical framework adopted in this study, let me outline the perspectives of two dominant schools of thought - continuum and modernist.

The first is popularly associated with Anthony Smith; although Smith (1986:16) does not deny the modern character of Nationalism, he nevertheless, perceives "Ethnie" as the seed of nations. Although the specific emphasis may vary, a number of scholars - e.g. John Armstrong (1982), Walker Connor (1994), and John Hucheson (1994) -- belong to the Continuum school of thought, whose central thesis is continuity between a pre-existing, enduring, sense of group ethnic/cultural identity and nationalism. There are even those, like Connor, who suggest that every ethnic group is a potential political candidate for nationhood, apparently implying the likelihood of the disintegration of multi-ethnic societies such as post-colonial Africa.

Shared myths, cultural symbols, or ethnic identity, can indeed have a powerful catalyst role in nationalist politics, but the dynamics of nationalism is not inherently, necessarily, governed by the properties of cultural group identities (Brubaker 1996). Indeed there are concrete historical cases that such a theoretical perspective could hardly explain. There are societies with strong cultural solidarity but weak nationalist politics - e.g. Basques, Catalans, Corsicans, Kurds, Scots, Sikhs, Tibetans, and Welsh, who have failed to produce their own nation-states; the collapse of the Somalia nation-state is even more a vivid example of the non-historical correspondence between the so-called "ethnie" and nationalism. Even among those who may be seen as having shared myths and cultural symbols, there was clear historical variation; as historians would tell us, most individuals nationalities in the Hapsburg monarchy did not begin to yearn for a separate state until late nineteenth century; nor did the Polish produce their own nation-state until 1918. We also encounter in history societies with weak cultural solidarity but strong nationalist politics, nevertheless: the nation-states born out of the anti-colonial nationalism in Africa - where culture, ethnic, or linguistic heterogeneity was the rule - are indeed good historical examples.

The second school of thought, identified as modernist, invariably invokes enduring socio-political and economic structural forces - social communications (Deutsch 1966), the modern state (Michael Mann 1975:44-64), industrialism (Gellner 1983), print capitalism (Anderson 1991), unequal regional development (Narin 1977) - associated with modernity to account for nationalism. But such a theoretical perspective has also its own inadequacies. There are those, for example, who cite French nationalism without industrialization to counter argue that historically nationalism emerged in the absence of modernity;² nor do nations effortlessly follow from modernity; in his prominent historical, sociological, and comparative, study of small-county nationalist movements in Central and Eastern Europe, Miroslav Hroch (1985) has strongly underlined what the modernist school of thought is totally indifferent to: the historical variability of world-timing among those nationalist movements. What is even more - as Lia Greenfeld (1992), in her comparative historical study, strongly shows -- modernity may actually be the product of nationhood rather than vice versa. The modernist perspective may be helpful to account for ethnic elite alienation, and hence the rise of elite-based nationalism - but it fails to specify the conditions, or the historical events, that effect the transition to mass-based

nationalism: the vital question of when, how, and why, does the nationalist entrepreneur's construction of nation come to captivate the masses is visibly missing in the theoretical formula of the modernist

Those two schools of thought - despite their difference in perspective - actually seem to fall into a single school of thought: developmentalist perspective, as both treat nationalism as a product of underlying, enduring, cultural (continuum approach) or socio-political and economic (modernist approach) forces; as a result, both render the concept nation - which is inherent to the practice of nationalists - a reified analytical status - the idea, nation, conceptualized as an entity that needs to be defined, as a thing out there that develops³ -- and as Brubaker (1996) rightly notes -- it is not a mere coincidence that the theoretical literature is invariably marked by a debate on what constitutes nation - objective, and subjective measurements are often invoked with little consensus.

As far as the literature on Eritrean Nationalism is concerned, certain basic weaknesses can be identified.⁴ It lacks originality, as it is visibly dominated by nation-minded scholars, and it is not altogether theoretically coherent. In a restless search for a justification regarding the right of self-determination of the Eritrean people, the literature fruitlessly tries to derive Eritrean nationalism from pre-existing Eritrean national identity - hence, the latter is traced to pre-Italian colonial period; or Italian Colonialism is said to have laid down the modern socio-political and economic foundation for Eritrean national consciousness; and at times, the history of the nationalist armed struggle is privileged as the catalyst in the development of Eritrean national identity. Conspiracy theory is also invoked to explain why Eritrea - unlike colonized African societies - failed to acquire its own nation-state, or why the Ethio-Eritrean "federation" collapsed in 1962.

Despite the availability of comparative knowledge on the nature and histories of liberation movements in the "Third World," the literature never fails to romanticize the history and role of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF); the strength of EPLF's hegemonic project is uncritically stressed; EPLF's leadership seen as visionary is said to have carried out democratic and social revolution in the Eritrean society; and the historical solidity of the Eritrean national identity is unduly exaggerated. Rather than an object of inquiry, the Eritrean nationalist discourse is taken for granted - the Eritrean nationalists themselves being the basic reference sources for the nation-minded scholars. On the whole, the literature is theoretically barren and empirically highly biased. "The progress of historical studies, says Hobsbawm (1996:255), is often dangerous to a nationality;" that has not been the case - fortunately to the nationalists - with the dominant literature on the modern political history of Eritrea, as the outcome has been - to use Patrick Gilkes (1991: 624] apt phraseology - the production and reproduction of "Guerilla Groupie" literature.

The work of John Markakis (1990) is indeed an exception. According to his analytical perspective, Eritrean Nationalism was driven by material interests - the increasingly centralizing tendencies of the Ethiopian state under the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, the collapse of the Ethio-Eritrean "federation", the diversion of Eritrean resources, and the imposition of Amharic language, and the protracted armed struggle finally effecting a transformation in the nature of Eritrean nationalism. Although he provides a rich historical evidence, his reductionist materialist perspective seems to deprive him of a clear theoretical framework that would have enabled him to account for variability in the history of the nationalist movement itself. What is more, if indeed material interests were the driving force of nationalism, the absence, for example, of Oromo nationalism under the reign of Haile Selassie would require explanation-as the region was the most exploited, dominated, part of Ethiopia. Material interests, enduring structures, may define the larger boundary, but social behavior is not mechanically derived from them, it is rather

mediated through processes of social interaction.⁵ Markakis' work - fashioned after the modernist school of thought - fails to theorize on specific historical conjectures, events, personalities, that may have played a critical role in molding, shaping, and finally transforming the Eritrean experience in the modern political history of Ethiopia.

Individuals and groups have multiple identities, none of which are permanently fixed, immutable, social categories. On the contrary, "Time and again," as Max Weber (1968:397-398) would remind us, "we find that the concept 'Nation' [rather] directs us to political power." In his more detailed work, John Breuilly has elaborated Weber's thesis that nationalism - which draws a veil over other group identities - is first and foremost a form of politics (Breuilly 1982). As such, the so-called nation is indeed a 'political fiction'⁶ constructed by nationalist entrepreneurs (Brubaker 1996:16), and it is precisely its power or weakness in practice that we need to explain:

We should not ask 'What is a nation' but rather: how is nationhood as a political and cultural form institutionalized within and among states? How does a nation work as practical category, as classificatory scheme, as cognitive frame? What makes the use of the category by or against states more or less resonant or effective? What makes the nation-evoking, nation-invoking efforts of political entrepreneurs more or less likely to succeed?

In order to fully grasp Nationalism, therefore, the practical uses of the category "nation" must first be understood: "the ways by which it comes to structure perception, to inform thought and experience, to organize discourse and political action(Brubaker:1996:19).

I submit that nationalism- as primarily a form of politics- is best understood as a contingent event; and being one kind of identity, among multiple and changing group identities, it could hardly claim a monopoly status in history. In what follows I will try to substantiate empirically those two interrelated theoretical claims through a critical reading of the checkered experience of Eritrean nationalism in the modern political history of Ethiopia.

The Eritrean Experience in the Modern History of Ethiopia

Eritrean nationalists do not hesitate to trace the existence of their national identity as far back as ancient history of the region. Adulis, the port of ancient Axum, for example, is treated as a symbol of the enduring common history of the country. Despite Ernest Renan's (1882:8-22) caveat emptor that nationalists are the first to engage in historical distortions, nation-minded scholars have uncritically taken the Eritrean nationalist discourse as their point of departure rather than as an object of inquiry.

On the contrary, until the arrival of the Italians, the region has experienced multiple and shifting identities. In the conflict with the lowland Moslems, Turks, Egyptians, and Italians, the highland Christians have invariably stood behind Christian Ethiopia (Abyssinia). Yet, despite religious, linguistic, and cultural unity, they have also fought, depending on the circumstances, against each other on the basis of kinship or regional ties. A village traditional chief aptly describes the multiple and shifting identities that marked the highland Christian region:

All the time we unite with our nearest if we come into trouble or conflict. If it is a conflict within the village, gezauti stand against gezauti. If it is a conflict between villages - each village will unite against the other. If it is a conflict at the province level, province will stand against province. And if the lowland tribes attack us, the whole Kebessa (highland) will unite! (Tronvoll1998:124)

Although the lowlanders might have had frequent wars with the Christian highland region along religious lines, they have never been less fragmented from within along clan and sub-clan ties (Nadel 1945:51-93).

The Italians brought peace to a region which had otherwise been often marked by frequent religious or military warfare, and for the first time created a distinct political boundary, laying down the potential institutional infrastructure for what Anderson (1991) would call cartographical discourse of nationalism - i.e. a potential political basis for territorial identity. The Ethio-Eritrean "federation" - which gave the region an autonomous status - enhanced that potentiality for territorial identity. However, and this point needs to be strongly underlined: despite having a distinct political boundary for over seventy years - taking into account Italian colonialism, British "Administration", and the period of Ethio-Eritrean "federation" - Eritrean nationalism had remained fragmented until post-1974 Ethiopian revolution. Indeed, the transition from alienated nationalism-merely confined to the elite groups- to mass-based nationalism is primarily a post-1974 phenomenon.

Eritrea's historical failure to give continuity to a state that had been established for over half a century under Italian colonial rule is in stark contrast to what happened elsewhere in the continent, including Libya and Somalia, the two other former Italian colonies (Araya 1990:79-100). There had been no consensus on what constituted Eritrean 'national self'. The Ethio-Eritrean "federation" of 1952-1962 was largely a compromise between the anti-Ethiopian movement, led and supported mainly by Eritrean Moslems and the pro-Ethiopian movement, led and supported largely by Eritrean highland Christians. The collapse of the "federation" in 1962 only reflected the fundamental weaknesses of the Eritrean nationalists rather than the manipulative role of Haile Selassie. It is unlikely, indeed, that the Emperor could have successfully destroyed the "federation" had there been a solid intra-elite integration within Eritrea. In a splendid analyses, supported by rich empirical evidence, Tekeste Negash (1997) and especially Zwede Retta (1999) have put the conspiracy theory of the "Guerilla Groupie" literature to final rest.

Analyses by various observers of post-"federation" period reinforce the argument that there is little historical evidence to support the existence of an Eritrean national consciousness. (Campell 1971:19-20; Holliday 1971:57-67; Erlich 1983) The armed nationalist movement, Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) - which had emerged with the collapse of the "federation" - remained, both in leadership and support, predominantly Moslem; and the active involvement of the highland Christians in the anti-Ethiopian movement was - as in the past - essentially peripheral, and largely confined to a minority of educated urban youth. The few Christian elements involved were persecuted by the Moslem leadership as "Habasha", "Kafir" - interchangeable terms for a traitor, an Ethiopian fifth column; and since the emergence of a Christian-dominated EPLF in Early 1970s, there had been periodic civil war between the two contending nationalist movements until 1981. Indeed there is hardly any tangible evidence to support the argument that the reality of Eritrean nationhood in 1993 is a thing that developed, a product of enduring national identity, or of deep developmental forces of modernity.

At the outset, it can safely be argued that Eritrean nationalism - as a form of politics, a struggle to create an independent state - had indeed initially emerged as a reaction the enduring character of the Ethiopian modern state, but to capture its transition to mass-based nationalist phenomenon, we need - above and beyond a structural reductionist analysis - to theorize on specific post-1974 historical events that rendered the transition effective. Indeed, the international political significance of Eritrean nationalism and the proliferation of scholarly literature on the subject can directly be traced to the post-1974 revolutionary period. In what

follows, I will identify and analyze certain historically momentous post-1974 events whose combination had a transformative quality on the character of Eritrean nationalism, which otherwise had remained internally fragmented. Finally, I will conclude by outlining the potential crises contesting, challenging, the hegemonic nationalist project of the current Eritrean leadership. The historical events outlined below - although overlapping in reality - are treated separately to attain analytical clarity; little attention is, therefore, given to any sense of chronological ranking.

The 1974 Ethiopian Revolution

When the 1974 revolution broke out, it unleashed rising expectations among the various ethnic and regional elite groups in the country; it triggered - what is important to all social movements: "cognitive liberation" - the notion that collective action could indeed transform the world (Calhoun 1997:129). Indeed, it was during the revolutionary process that a variety of nationalist movements emerged in Ethiopia. The structural opportunities opened up by the crisis of the Ethiopian State induced rebellion, especially among the urban younger generation of the intelligentsia, whose future prospects under the ancien regime had increasingly become dimmer.⁷ The new political condition was even more enticing to the sons and daughters of the Christian Eritrean middle class - who had harbored resentment on the loss of Eritrean regional autonomy - as they encountered, for the first time in the history of Eritrea, the rise of a Christian-dominated nationalist movement. With the rise of the new Front and the collapse of the ancien regime, the belief in, and the idea of, imminent Eritrean independence began to captivate the urban Christian elements, who, otherwise, had remained marginal actors in the nationalist political drama, monopolized by the Moslems. The socio-psychological impact of the revolutionary event on Eritrean nationalism can successfully be theorized.

The Post-1974 Ethiopian Leadership

The ancien regime had been able to sustain Ethiopian nationalism in the Eritrean highlands by co-opting the old generation elite group. The beneficiaries of post-"federation" Eritrea-particularly in administration and education-were mainly Christians.

The regime also employed ideological method by constantly propagating the fear of 'Islamic encirclement', helped by past history and Eritrea's geographical proximity to the Islamic World. It was able to organize Israeli-trained commandos, mainly Eritrean Christians, to fight ELF; and the Eritrean police and security forces were mainly local Christians.

The death of General Aman Andom was a momentous historical event in the Eritrean experience. Although we may never know whether he could have successfully addressed the Eritrean question, it is, however, a common knowledge that his visit to Asmara was popular; especially the Christian highlanders saw it as the return of the prodigal son, while, interestingly, the Fronts perceived it as a threat, a destabilizing force.

The subsequent government policy of all out political and military repression bears the major responsibility for alienating, especially the Eritrean Christian highlanders; describing the immediate consequences of the repressive measures employed by the new government in 1970's, a French journalist (Lefort 1983:147) had this to report:

The frightening carnage...drove the 'modern' elites in Eritrea (university and secondary students, civil servants, cadres and technicians) to join the guerillas *en masse*. After the battle of Asmara, most of the Eritrean forces which had managed as best they could to stay at an equal distance from the Fronts and the central government, swung over to the nationalist camp.

According to some observers (Erlic 1983:16), the number of Eritrean guerrilla fighters until 1974 was no more than 2,500, but by early 1977 the estimate ranged between 38,500 and 43,000. Indeed, the growing influence of Christian elements in the field began to be felt only after the 1974 revolution, and the phenomenon of war refugees from Christian highland Eritrea had hardly been experienced previously. Major military offensives were repeatedly conducted by the government, including urban terror against Eritrean youth. The war claimed the lives of thousands of Eritreans; the scale of social dislocation and destruction of property, were immense - with no analogous example under the reign of Haile Selassie. Describing the devastating effects of the war, an old Eritrean woman is said to have remarked: "Even the stones are burning" (Pateman 1990:179).

After her experience living under six months of bloody war, a Croat woman journalist (Drakulic 1993:51-52)- for whom being a Croat had no special meaning in the past - wrote:

...being Croat has become my destiny... in this war I am defined by my nationality, and by it alone... Along with millions of other Croats, I was pinned to the wall of nationhood... That is what the war is doing to us, reducing us to one dimension: the Nation... Where as before I was defined by my education, my job, my ideas, my character and, yes, my nationality too, now I feel stripped of all that. I am nobody because I am not a person any more. I am one of 4.5 million Croats.

...I am not in a position to choose any longer. Nor, I think is anyone else.... one doesn't have to succumb voluntarily to this ideology of the nation - one is sucked into it.

There is indeed a striking similarity to what happened to the Eritrean experience in post-1974 Ethiopia. The sustained war and political repression had a transformative quality on the Eritrean nationalist politics - rendering it, for the first time, a real national dimension. In the past, the nationalist politics had to face enduring difficulties in socially constructing an all-encompassing Eritrean identity; what Anderson (1991) called the "imagined community" had for decades remained elusive to the Eritrean nationalists. But in the face of the post-1974 government policy of total repression, almost every Eritrean, Moslem or Christian, was - like the Croat journalist - pinned to the wall of nationhood. The popular referendum outcome for independence was indeed reflective of such momentous historical event. It is imperative that the repressive behavior of the Ethiopian state be theorized as a specific historical event of post-1974, rather than as an inevitable product of the Ethiopian modern state per se - hence, the necessity of cross-historical comparison of the state under Haile Selassie and the Dergue regarding the Eritrean question.

The Rise of New Eritrean Leadership

Cross-historical comparison on the role of leadership in the modern political history of Eritrea clearly indicates that the emergence of EPLF was indeed a watershed.

Despite its longer history of existence, ELF was highly marked by enduring ideological and organizational crises to assume the role of an effective national leadership (Medhane 1986); its 'pan-Islamic' ideology had no appeal outside the Moslem population in Eritrea; it never attained international sympathy beyond the Arab world; and organizationally, it was undermined by recurring sectarian politics; its final military defeat in 1981 was only the culmination of its gradual decline that had begun since its inception. By way of contrast, EPLF had a secular

ideology, a unified leadership,⁸ an immense capacity for political mobilization, and had carefully cultivated international image, effectively publicizing in the Western world the image of victimized Eritrea.

In its struggle to overcome religious division that had haunted the Eritrean nationalists for decades, the new leadership stressed the value of cultural autonomy within the context of a multi-ethnic Eritrea; the various ethnic groups were treated as nationalities rather than religious communities. Through literacy campaign and cultural activities, the politics of diversity in the context of Eritrean unity was advanced as a new instrument of nation-building.

Although it advocated the rhetoric of class struggle and socialism, in practice it was a populist movement - engaged in controlled social reforms from above in areas of land reform and gender issues; political rather than social mobilization was the main instrument employed.

Through its internal security mechanism - "Halawe Sawra," 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, women and youth; in the rural liberated areas, it provided public services such as health and education. Through its relief organization, the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), it played a significant role at the height of the social dislocation and famine within Eritrea; and in that area, EPLF had earned international admiration.

Its political and military strategies were radically a new approach in the modern history of Eritrean nationalist politics. It destabilized the central government by recruiting, supporting, opposition forces within Ethiopia, and establishing military alliances.

In the modern political history of Eritrea, the role of EPLF was certainly a new phenomenon; and it is not, therefore, without historical foundation when Eritrean supporters regard the leader, Issais Afewerki, as the George Washington of Eritrea, who has delivered what had in the past seemed utterly impossible: the Eritrean Nation-state.

The Emergence of an Allied Political Movement

The emergence in 1975 of an armed ethno-nationalist movement (Young 1997) in the northern part of Ethiopia, bordering Eritrea, was no less a catalyst in strengthening the Eritrean nationalist politics. The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) from the province of predominantly Christian Tigray, had specific supportive functions that could be cited and elaborated. It embraced the Eritrean nationalist political agenda, established a military buffer zone between the central government and the Eritrean nationalists - rendering the latter a much needed political as well as military space; it provided critical military support for EPLF against the latter's deadly enemies: the ELF within Eritrea and the central government in Ethiopia. The military defeat of the former in 1981 by the combined forces of the two Christian allies, produced - for the first time in the modern political history of Eritrea - a single and unified nationalist leadership, organized around EPLF. The sustained military victory over the heavily armed central government, backed by the Soviet Union, brought EPLF popularity, as the defender of Eritreans against a brutal regime; and its project for an independent Eritrea increasingly became, in the eyes of the population, not only desirable but also believable. There is rich empirical evidence to substantiate the thesis advanced in this section.

The Collapse of an Alternative Social Discourse

There were in Ethiopia radical political movements that advanced an alternative political discourse to that of the nationalist movements and the central government. They advocated class struggle - over what they called narrow nationalism or national chauvinism - and democratization. Between 1975 and 1978, however, those movements were violently attacked not only by the government at the center - for whom the Ethiopian territorial integrity was a primary concern - but also by the nationalist movements in the northern peripheries, (Markakis

1990; Tiruneh 1992) for whom the radicals seemed to pose real or imagined ideological threat. Under the combined violence of the government and the nationalists, the radical movements soon collapsed. In any political struggle, victory over the battle of ideas is a pre-condition for success. Although we may never know the outcome, had the radical movements survived, their demise seems to have rendered the ideology of the nationalists and that of the central government ample space to assume a dominant status in the sphere of public discourse. Since the collapse of the radical movements, the public discourse was dominated, monopolized, by the two competing ideologies. The specifics of the correlation especially between the decline of the radicals' ideological discourse and the ascendancy of the Nationalists' needs further empirical investigation.

The Post--1974 Geo-Politics

In the Ethio-Eritrean experience, Ethiopia's post-1974 alliance with the Eastern Communist Bloc was no less a momentous historical event that transformed the nature of Eritrean nationalist politics. The Western world which had been in the past behind Ethiopia, now turned its support to the nationalist forces in the northern peripheries. Mark Duffield and John Pendergast (1994) have offered us rare insights into the range and complexity of support given by Western governments, NGOs, and other international agencies, under the cover of humanitarian intervention. The massive humanitarian intervention especially after 1983 was not politically entirely neutral: It freed the nationalists to focus on their political, military, activities. Members of various NGOs assumed the role of an advocate for the Eritrean cause in the Western world - popularizing it and at the same time undermining the image of the Ethiopian government - hence, the sudden proliferation in 1980s of grass-root support groups for Eritrea all over the Western world. Here too, there is rich empirical evidence to support the argument. The critical supporting role of the border country, Sudan, the human rights foreign policy of Carter's administration, the Reagan and Thatcher foreign policy revolution, need theorizing.

The Post-Independent Eritrean State

The leaders of EPLF have indeed made an Eritrean state, but have they made Eritreans?⁹ How internally solid, and enduring is Eritrean national identity? That question is no less legitimate in any inquiry of Nations, nationhood, and nationalism.

Erick Hobsbawn (1992:123) remarks:

Men and women did not choose collective identification as they choose shoes, knowing that one could only put on one pair at a time. They had, and still have, several attachments and loyalties simultaneously, including nationality, and are simultaneously concerned with various aspects of life, any of which may at any one time be foremost in their minds, as occasion suggests.

Nationalists appeal, the critic (Hobsbawn 1992:177) continues,

Crumbles as the national cause is identified not with the generalities, but with much more divisive specifics: not with [to cite examples] Israel in general, but with the policies of Begin, Shamir or Sharon...; not with Flemishness as against Frenchness but with specific Flemish party.

Indeed, especially after the recent Ethio-Eritrean war, the question in post-independent Eritrea has increasingly come to deal not with Eritreanism in general but with the EPLF leadership in particular. As Africa Confidential (23 February 2001:1) reports:

For the first time in his political life, President Issayas Aferworki faces serious challenges from his political peers. There is now a substantial group within the

ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) that is dissatisfied with his leadership. This results mainly from the war with Ethiopia and from stonewalling on political reform. It has been getting harder for Asmara to dismiss the growing band of critics of Issayas as tools of Ethiopian intelligence and a spate of sackings and resignations at the apex of the regime indicates a new degree of discontent. Outside government, critics are increasingly strident. For now, Issayas will weather the storm: he's set to win any leadership contest and face down any rivals this year. Yet the political climate is growing chillier and the President's options are narrowing.

The fault lines in the Nationalist's hegemony have indeed taken various manifestations.¹⁰ The national economy is hard hit with thousands dislocated due to the war; the old intra-elite cleavage between Christians and Moslems is far from being resolved; the Moslem faction in the opposition group perceive EPLF as a Christian power. No one seems to doubt the fundamental weakness of Eritrean national identity more than Issais himself; the leadership's obsessive concern - above and beyond everything else - for unity is clearly indicative. A close reading of the specific policies - such as dividing the territory into six administrative zones, the control of religious freedom, regulation of laws regarding elections and formation of multi-parties - underline the fact that the so-called Eritrean national unity remains at best a project and not yet a historical fact, with its fate open-ended. The introduction of democracy, for all we know, may be poisonous to the very survival of Eritrea as a nation-state. The George Washington of Eritrea seems to have understood that potential danger, as he has singularly taken it to himself to save the country; but his approach remains no less problematic.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has tried to advance two interrelated theoretical claims: nationalism is best understood as a contingent event, and that it could hardly claim a monopoly status in history. I have - al be it in a rather sketchy form - tried to support those arguments through a close reading of the Eritrean experience in the modern political history of Ethiopia.

NOTES

¹ My entire theoretical framework of analysis is indebted to the insights contained in Brubaker, 1996.

² Hastings, 1997, for example, argues that nationalism is a pre-modern phenomenon.

³ For a sustained critique, see Brubaker, 1996.

⁴ The reader may consult the following works which are representative: Connell, 1997; Davidson and Clife, 1990; Habte Selassie, 1980; Gebre-Medhin, 1989; Pateman, 1990.

⁵ On power as essentially a social relations and the significance of human agency in history see Smith, 1977.

⁶ A "Political fiction" because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them" (Benedict Anderson, 1991)

⁷ For insightful analysis about the role of the petite Bourgeoisie in the Ethiopian revolution see Grey 1987:118-129.

⁸ For more information, the reader may consult Markakis, 1990.

⁹ Employing in the Eritrean context Massimo d'Azeglio's famous statement on Italian unification - "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians," quoted in Hobsbawm 1992:44.

¹⁰ For more information, see Araya 2000:107-126.

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