

Realpolitik or Defying Reality: A Perspective on the Future of the Ethio-Eritrean Relationship

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Although colonialism and historical differences are often cited, I believe that the root cause of Ethio-Eritrean conflict is authoritarianism. In my view, the Eritrean people's demand from the beginning was for **democracy**, but the response from successive Ethiopian regimes has been **repression**, and thus the process of Eritrean independence - essentially a violent insurrection led by a highly centralized rebel group and made official through a mock referendum - was predictably **undemocratic**. **Therefore we should look for a democratic solution.**

Unfortunately, although democracy has been the popular cause that countless lives and immeasurable resources have been paid for, the people of the two countries are far from enjoying anything that resembles liberty. There can be several reasons why we have not achieved a democratic breakthrough despite relentless efforts by the people of the two countries; chief among these I'd argue is the pattern of realpolitik-inspired tactical choices made by the elites of the two states in the name of promoting freedom and democracy which has instead only contributed to the derailment of these aims.

Realpolitik, articulated by Machiavelli and made famous by the success of Otto von Bismarck, sees politics based on "realistic, practical and material factors rather than on theoretical or ethical objectives." Decisions are aimed at short-term success rather than long-term goals.¹ Although this approach was developed to balance power within the international system, it has been adopted - in the form of short-term tactical alliances - to deal with domestic affairs as well. Yet while international relations present relatively clear and definable interests, domestic affairs are more complex due to cultural, social, economic and territorial interconnections within the state.

The political game played by the key actors in the Ethio-Eritrean conflict for the last four decades seems to have been heavily influenced by this school of thought. While alliances of forces based on realpolitik have helped various groups achieve short-term objectives, I would argue that, they have contributed significantly to the perpetuation of regional political instability.

I call for a paradigm shift towards a politics that carefully assesses long-term implications of today's tactical decisions. I suggest that a long-term strategic partnership between democratic forces of the two countries be forged based on vision that advances mutual interests. In terms of priority, I recommend democratization of each state unilaterally. This can set the stage for normalization of the relationship through reconciliation between the people, which can be followed by economic integration. I caution against a rush towards structural reconfiguration, be it federation or confederation. Finally, in order to achieve durable democracy and sustainable peace, I call for a strategic shift from violent resistance to nonviolent struggle.

Towards a Democratic Peace

The democratic peace theory tells us that two democracies are less likely to engage in war in the event of dispute and instead more likely to solve conflicts peacefully.ⁱⁱ This occurs because democratic institutions restrain executive power, democratic norms make compromise rather than elimination a preferred method of dealing with adversaries, and democratic neighbors tend to have strong economic interdependence, which makes war *Pareto inefficient*.

In contrast, two authoritarian states are more likely to choose war as a means of settling disputes. In such systems, both domestic and foreign policies are solely determined by the executive power with often one person who has absolute power to making all the decisions. There are no institutional or legal mechanisms to scrutinize reasons given by the state to justify wars; the absence of independent media means that such states lack transparency, making it difficult to know the intentions behind its political statements and thus increasing the possibility that an unjustified preemptive strike against an adversary could take place.

There is no better example than the Ethio-Eritrean conflict for the applicability of this theory. Most would agree that the starting point for tension was the dissolution of the federated relationship. The emperor ended the federal union against the will of the Eritrean people and imposed a unitary system. This was largely because he was worried that a relatively liberal Eritrea, with its moderately vibrant press, competitive political groups, and market economy, could be a spoiler to strict unitary feudal system rule in the South.

The undemocratic dissolution of the federation and the harshly repressive measures taken against its opponents were the primary factors that initiated and intensified the war. Had there been a democratic system, war would have been unlikely. The central government would have been restrained by civil institutions from imposing a unitary system that was opposed by the popular will. Under a democratic system, appealing to

the freely expressed will of the people could be the only game played by unionist, federalist and secessionist groups. No faction would be forced to resort to violence, and choosing to do so would run the risk of losing vital popular support for their cause.

Had the 1974 revolution resulted in the establishment of a democratic system in Finfinne, Eritrea's problem could perhaps have been solved short of separation, despite the relative strength and radical position of the rebels. An open and free debate on the issue could have empowered moderate progressive voices, which play a critical role in defusing tension, facilitating compromise, and allowing ample time for negotiation in a dispute. Instead, we had a few media outlets in two sharply divided camps that were directly controlled by the military junta and hardliner leaders of the rebellion. As a result the press became the medium for expression of the most extreme views, polarizing opinions on both sides, and the lack of alternative institutions contributed further to the absence of any balanced, independent viewpoints.

Even if the war did not end immediately after the revolution, had a gradual democratization taken place and the press been able to report the increasing cost of the war, public opinion could have turned against it and pressured the regime to seek a peaceful resolution. The best historical example of this phenomenon is the gradual buildup of anti-war opposition that made it impossible for the U.S. to continue its operation in Vietnam.

The emergence of twin authoritarian regimes in Asmara and Finfinne after the downfall of the junta provides another example of the theory, and shows that the ability to solve disputes through a nonviolent means could have been possible only if the states had been democratic.

Both regimes seized power by force, eliminating, or in Eritrea's case never allowing, the emergence of an alternative political voice. Hence, not only was the process of Eritrean independence determined undemocratically and illegally by two powerful authoritarians, but also the future bilateral relationship of the two countries was founded on shaky grounds.

Had those who ousted Mengistu allowed for the possibility of a democratic and inclusive consultation on the fate of Eritrea, the separation of the two states would have been legitimate, and more importantly, a clear and strong bilateral relationship could have been established. Instead, those in Asmara silenced dissenters, blocked public discourse, and made a lopsided referendum in complete disregard to the future welfare of the people who had brought them to power.

In Finfinne, Meles Zenawi and the TPLF, blinded by their desire to get rid of a powerful political opponent - the EPLF - begged the world community to break away an important part of the country they had just begun to rule. Upon separation, the reign of

dictatorships in Asmara and Finfinne resulted in a complete lack of transparency and clarity on the principles, agreements and promises necessary for a future bilateral relationship. The public was kept away from asking critical questions. Those who dared to raise the contentious issues that were to plunge the two countries into war just five years later were denounced as enemies of the people, harassed, killed, or were forced into exile. There was no press to report the important events and developments that led to the confrontation in 1998, no civil society to provide a forum for the public's concerns, and no legislative or judiciary institutions to scrutinize and moderate the effects of the dangerously shortsighted decisions of the executives.

Has Realpolitik worked?

Recently a friend asked me to attend a rally to protest the UN sanctions against Eritrea. I asked him for a logical explanation of why a person like me should rally in support of the Eritrean government. He said that while Isaias Afewerki's dictatorship is deplorable, Eritrea's ruler should be supported as long as he is willing to assist forces fighting Ethiopia's tyrant, citing the old tradition of Realpolitik: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." I rejected his invitation on two grounds.

1. In principle, for a democrat resisting oppression and injustice in his home country, there is no moral or ethical justification in taking sides with a dictator oppressing someone else in order to fight against the tyrant who oppresses me. Supporting one dictator in order to advance your own objectives is prolonging the suffering of a fellow human being.
2. Strategically speaking, there is no better example than the Ethio-Eritrean conflict of how such a choice of short-term tactical alliances over long-term strategic partnership has miserably failed to bring about sustainable change. Instead, such shortsighted temporary alliances, forged to advance the narrow interests of the time, have merely led to more complications in the region.

The history of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict is full of such miscalculations, which have ultimately benefited neither Ethiopians nor Eritreans. Over the last several decades, well-meaning activists and groups who were organized with the aim of fighting injustices committed by dictators and improving the lives of their people have unintentionally contributed to prolonging the instability, authoritarianism, and continuation of vicious cycles of poverty we observe in the region. Below, I will look at some of the major tactical alliances formed based on the strategic thinking of "Realpolitik" and their eventual outcomes.

1. The EPRP/EDU/EPLF Alliance

During the 1970s, progressive Ethiopian students and intellectuals supported Eritrean rebels partly out of ideological conviction but most importantly because of tactical considerations. After all, by the '70s Eritrean forces had over 10 years of experience fighting the central government and in the process established crucial links to the outside world, particularly in the Middle East. They were the ideal tactical partners therefore for the young Ethiopians who espoused revolution through armed struggle. By allying with the Eritrean rebels, the Ethiopians were provided material and logistic support and a critical link to the outside world. In return, the Eritrean rebels demanded acceptance and support of their secessionist position.

Due to their awareness of the government's repression in Eritrea and the popularity of "self-determination" as an ideology of the time, it's understandable that the founders of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) were sympathetic to the Eritrean cause. Yet it's likely that the EPRP leaders believed, once the proletariat movement succeeded, Eritrea's problem would be solved short of full secession as class solidarity would supersede ethnic demands. ⁱⁱⁱ

From the revolutionaries' point of view, the imperialist government and later the military junta were the primary obstacles to reform. It was then seen as justifiable to remove it by "any means necessary" - which included siding with a secessionist rebellion, despite the serious reservation if not outright opposition to splitting the country. Less attention was given to the potential long-term complication that the Eritrean independence would bring to the revolutionary socialist Ethiopia they were fighting to establish.

EPRP was not the only Ethiopian opposition that took sides with the Eritrean rebels based on short-term strategic considerations. Even the conservative Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), which was established by the remnants of the feudal regime and was strongly opposed to the revolutionary politics of the time, including self-determination, was willing to ally with Eritrea's rebels in order to wage a joint war against the military junta. Again this was also purely a tactical move with no consideration for long-term consequences. The thinking was to use whatever help was available in order to achieve the objective of removing the regime from power. But had the planned joint campaign succeeded in toppling the military junta, it is not obvious what kind of political reality would have resulted. My guess is that whichever party had the upper hand in terms of military strength would have tried to enforce its will over its former tactical ally - and a new war would have begun.^{iv}

Consequences

Although the EPRP and to some extent the EDU benefited from their alliance with Eritrea, the alliance eventually proved to be disastrous for both. Initially the parties were able to gain political, logistic and material support, but the association with Eritrean

rebels heavily eroded their credibility among their target constituency back home. On the aftermath of his victory over Ziad Barre's invading forces, with Ethiopian nationalism as the sweeping sentiment of the time, Mengistu did not miss the opportunity to portray his opponents as mercenaries and enemy surrogates working to disintegrate Ethiopia. While this propaganda might not have worked to dissuade the educated circle, it was effective among the ordinary citizens. The dictator was able to find a justification for his intensified campaign of silencing dissenting views, bringing about a rapid reversal of the revolution and dashing any hope for a democratic government. As the war between the Derg and Eritrean rebels intensified, the Ethiopian opposition parties were boxed out. The crisis of legitimacy they faced was followed by political and military defeat at the hand of the regime, the result, Eritreans no longer needed them and traded them for a new alternative ally - the TPLF. Thus when the Derg finally collapsed, the two organizations were in no position to shape the fate of the new Ethiopia. Their realpolitik-based tactical choices helped neither their party nor the people for which they sacrificed.

In the long run, it was generally obvious that Eritrea's independence would make Ethiopia landlocked, an outcome that was fundamentally unacceptable to the opposition parties' political support base. It's ironic that the same parties later became staunch opponents of Eritrean independence once it was realized. A careful assessment of long-term objectives for each organization could have helped them realize that while trying to solve the problem of dictatorship they were actually sowing seed for future complications.

2. The MEISON/ DERG Alliance

When the popular resistance swept away Haileselassie's regime, progressive intellectuals organized under the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON) tactically aligned themselves with the military junta. This alliance, which was dubbed "Critical Support" for the military, aimed at exerting internal pressure on the junta in order to achieve the social, economic and political reforms sought by the popular movements. In addition, I suspect that since the EPRP had already dominated the radicalized youth, MEISON might have felt that it needed institutional backing in order to recruit members and expand its influence into the countryside in order to survive the heated political competition of the time. Interestingly, the leaders of this party were acutely aware that the Derg would not be a lasting partner, but they still believed that in the short-term they could use the opportunity to bring some changes and prepare their party for an eventual showdown.

However, the move stuck them between a rock and hard place, with the increasingly dictatorial Derg on the one side and the militant, uncompromising EPRP, on the other. The former conceded little, accepting some demands but refusing fundamental political

reform, and continuously soliciting MEISON for intellectual matters while cutting them off from political power. The EPRP youth saw their elders' tactical decisions as an ultimate betrayal of the struggle and subsequently waged a war of condemnation on them. When the military junta and EPRP urban squad unleashed the wave of political assassinations - the White and Red Terrors - MEISON was the first to be targeted. Forced to defend themselves, but morally opposed to the regime's indiscriminate killings, they found themselves rapidly squeezed out. Once it eradicated the EPRP youth, the junta moved against MEISON, and completely obliterated the organization by liquidating its leadership.

Consequences

The lasting consequence of MEISON's alliance with the Derg was that, while its presence played an important role in pressuring the junta to effect land reform and state secularization, among other important changes, it adversely affected the ensuing political climate by giving legitimacy to the junta and dividing and weakening the progressive camp. Had long-term strategies been given priority over short-term success, the realization that only a unified progressive opposition could force the military to effectively implement popular demands and even relinquish power would have been more likely to occur to the parties. Instead, the EPRP's alliance with Eritrean rebels - and therefore unnecessarily premature declaration of armed struggle - and MEISON's alliance with the junta undercut their collective potential to realize a democratic system. Their tactical mistakes led to the re-alliance of the Derg with conservative right wing groups on one hand and the rise of powerful ethno-nationalist movements on the other, which have since dominated the political scene. A long term strategic partnership between the two progressive camps could have helped them coordinate their actions in order to maximize each camp's gain.

3. The EPLF/TPLF/OLF Alliance

The Realpolitik minded opponents of the Derg played another interesting but disastrous game when Mengistu bailed out for Harare. Ethno-nationalist parties, which had emerged as military and political hegemonies at the end of the bloody 17 years war, were well-positioned to determine the future of the two countries. It was therefore obviously "realistic" for the OLF to join the preexisting EPLF-TPLF alliance. The alliance of the three fronts was powerful enough, politically and militarily, to silence any group that opposed the ethno-nationalist line of thinking. Not only was there the allegation that together the alliance conspired to prevent "multinational" parties and conservative individuals from taking part in the crafting of the Transitional Charter; moreover, the new addition of the OLF was essential in legitimizing the entire process.

Oromo participation transformed ethnic federalism and the Eritrean referendum from positions supported by peripheral groups fighting to replace Amhara hegemony - the Eritreans and the Tigreans - into positions supported by the majority. As a result, those in opposition could simply be dismissed as remnants of the past, or as Amhara oppressors dreaming to regain centralized power.

The alliance also had specific short-term benefits for each party. The EPLF was able to legitimize an independent Eritrea by showing that even those who held power in Ethiopia were in favor of Eritrean independence. Allied with the inheritors of the central government, the EPLF probably was also able to take the lion's share of state resources left behind by the Derg. The OLF got a golden opportunity to implement some of its policies. It was able to establish Oromia, make official and implement Afan Oromo as the working language in the region, and introduce its objectives to the wider Oromo public. The TPLF, in addition to establishing autonomous Tigray, was able to occupy the palace and eventually emerge as the central power player.

Consequences

By being narrowly focused on short-term gains, each party was facilitating conditions for the multiple problems that would undermine them in the long run. The OLF believed that by joining the transitional government it was positioning itself to take power in an eventual democratic election. It failed to understand however that by cooperating in the alliance's prevention of other dissenting groups from participating in the transitional process, it was setting itself up to become the lone opponent to TPLF domination backed by the EPLF. Such a lopsided situation could not have led to democratization. It should not have come as a surprise then that, in accordance with the game of realpolitik, the EPLF and TPLF began to squeeze their junior partner out long before the Charter's ink was dry. The OLF, which was desperately needed by the two groups to legitimize the process, had enough leverage to insist on inclusion of other political groups, and this could have increased the voice of dissent in the transition which has added value for OLF. This could have expanded the political space, perhaps widening the possibility of gradual democratization – a situation that is most advantageous to the OLF.

The EPLF thought that by installing a friendly, if not puppet, government in Finfinne, it was positioning itself to have comparative economic advantage that could propel Eritrea's development - the Singaporean way. While landlocked Ethiopia would be unilaterally dependent on Eritrean ports, Asmara, as the kingmaker in Finfinne, would have unrestricted access to the natural resources of the South. Fundamentally, the problem with this shortsighted strategy was that it only considered political phenomena from the EPLF's fixed standpoint. Every political decision is however subject to change from its actual implementation and from the dynamic and unpredictable reactions it

provokes in others - this holds even more so in already troubled regions. The EPLF's desired outcome of one state's enormous disproportional advantage over its neighbor ignored the obvious reality that such a state of affairs could not have been tolerated by the neighboring population, and would eventually lead to confrontation. And realistically speaking, it does not make sense that an Ethiopian regime with an advantage in population and natural resources would remain the puppet of an inferior regime in Asmara.

The consequence of this alliance therefore was a replacement of one dictator, Mengistu, by twin tyrants: Meles and Isaias. The people of the two countries now have to fight two systems rather than one.

4) The EPLF/TPLF Alliance

Another game of realpolitik-based relationships was that of the EPLF and TPLF. The EPLF needed an ally that could hold off the Derg's forces in Tigray before they reached Eritrea. The young TPLF, in order to emerge as a viable political force, was desperate to find material, logistic, and political support; EPLF was the ideal candidate. From the outside, given their cultural similarity and territorial proximity, it might have appeared natural for the Eritrean and Tigrean rebels to join hands in order to fight a common enemy. Yet the long-term objectives of both organizations were contradictory. The EPLF's aim was to establish an independent Eritrean republic, while the TPLF was waffling between carving out an independent Tigray or taking power in Finfinne. For either of these two options the TPLF was considering, the Eritreans seem not to have given enough thought about the potential long-term complication.

The two organizations for the most part avoided discussing issues that were not of immediate importance, and instead focused on maximizing the efficiency of their short-term military alliances. Despite the tension created by the rapid growth and increasing independence of the TPLF, their alliance did in fact enable them to eliminate their mutual and individual enemies. Together they eliminated their respective factional rivals, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Tigrean Liberation Front (TLF). They also defeated the Derg, collaborated to box out Ethiopianist parties from the Charter, and later waged a coordinated campaign against the OLF.

Consequences

Out of all these tactical maneuvers, the post-Derg alliance was what had the most devastating consequences for the relationship of the two countries. By helping the TPLF eliminate its potential rivals, the EPLF helped the emergence of an uncontested authoritarian ruler in Finfinne. Eritrea's plan of maintaining comparative economic advantage over its southern neighbor might have worked had there been multiple power contenders in Finfinne that Asmara could manipulate by playing them against each

other. But if a single, uncontested power holder emerged, it would predictably have more muscle than Asmara itself. That is in fact what happened, as the two regimes found themselves at odds in less than a decade, headed for a bloody war in which Eritrea would be soundly defeated while the TPLF gained legitimacy as defender of Ethiopian sovereignty - even after they had pushed for the separation of Eritrea. In less than ten years, before the wound of the three decade-long war had healed, the people of the two countries would again be forced to give up their children to the senseless war machine.

5) OLF/Eritrea Alliance

When the TPLF and EPLF went into war in 1998, a new tactical alliance between the latter and the OLF was forged. As the sole force that was actively fighting the TPLF's dominance, the OLF was desperate to establish an external base for its leadership. Despite strong resentment from the rank and file against moving to Asmara due to the EPLF's role in attacking OLF fighters few years earlier, the OLF leadership justified the new alliance through the old saying: "There is no permanent enemy, but only permanent interest."

Although the OLF leadership was able to find temporary sanctuary, this tactical move was a major blunder.^v Its primary cost came in making the Oromo movement hostage to the Ethio-Eritrean conflict. The Oromo movement benefited nothing from this alliance.^{vi} A long-term strategic assessment should have shown the improbability of an Eritrean dictator providing sustainable support to an Oromo party that could become an even stronger adversary upon reaching Finfinne.

6) TPLF & Ethiopianist Alliance

On the other side were the Ethiopianist opposition groups, critical of Meles for willingly allowing separation of Eritrea and making the country landlocked. When the Badme war broke out, they predictably took sides with the TPLF in the name of defending Ethiopia's sovereignty and also perhaps hoping to regain the Asab Port. This alliance did not last long, and began falling apart when Meles prevented the army from taking Asab, resulting in the conservatives' characterization of Meles as an Eritrean mercenary.

While defending sovereignty is a natural and expected position for conservative groups, this alliance of the Ethiopianist forces with Meles stretched such justifications to an extreme. By declaring Isaias Afewerki the only one responsible for the Ethio-Eritrean conflict, the TPLF was relieved of their fair share of accountability for the policies and decisions that led to the war.

Ethiopianist parties also waged a heavy propaganda war against the OLF for aligning with the TPLF during the transition. It would not be an exaggeration to say that they saw the OLF as their primary enemy before the one who actually held power, the TPLF. When the Badme war broke out, they once again went after the OLF for siding with the “enemy of the nation” – shabia. In an effort to discredit the OLF, they mounted campaigns of defamation against it. The plight of unjustly persecuted Oromo masses was dismissed by Ethiopia’s so-called human rights advocacy groups. It is no surprise then that those Ethiopianist human rights champions needed to be jailed to realize the fact that 95% of prison cells are filled with Oromo political prisoners. If they had had long-term strategic objectives, they would have defended Oromo political prisoners regardless of their objections to the OLF’s politics.

The consequence of this alliance was that, by marginalizing the Oromo movement, it prevented consolidation and unity of resistance against the ever-increasing dictatorship of Meles Zenawi. As democratization requires participation of the majority of the people, the absence of the Oromo had a drastic effect on the outcome of the 2005 election. Their plight minimized during the pre-election campaign, Oromo students and peasants had neither the interest nor preparation necessary to joining the urban resistance, and instead students waged their own campaign in response to the OLF’s call. Had the two movements joined hands during the post-election months, they could have exerted greater pressure on the regime.

7) Meles and the Eritrean Opposition Coalition

Like their Ethiopian counterparts, many members of the Eritrean opposition have been driven to adopt a short-term tactical alliance with a dictator next door in order to fight the one running their own country. With the dream of a peaceful, prosperous and independent democratic Eritrea dashed by the senseless war, and the devolution of the “father of the nation” into a replica of the very tyrant they fought against, the Eritrean opposition seem to see no other option than an alliance with Meles.

This alliance has actually damaged the opposition themselves, rather than their intended target, Isaias Afewerki. First, given the fact that there is a history of war between the two countries, an Eritrean opposition siding with the former “colonizer” who now has a “renewed ambition of conquest” has allowed Isaias to label his opponents as mercenaries. The people of Eritrea who have suffered severe repression at the hands of Ethiopian rulers still have fresh memories of it, and Isaias has not missed the opportunity to play on these emotions through the use of scare tactics warning the people that his opponents are trying to bring back slavery.

Second, this alliance has put Eritreans in a precarious situation, whereby individuals and groups who advocate independently for democracy and protection of human rights are placed in the same category as those allied with Meles Zenawi – those who have been accused of betraying their country and the sacrifices of its patriots. This has greatly undercut the potential power of dissenters to mobilize the Eritrean people in removing the dictator from power. Eritrean nationalists have found themselves having to make two equally unattractive choices: either appear to side with the archenemy of their country and perhaps risk their independence, or stay the course under an egomaniac and increasingly irrational dictator who is leading their people to starvation.

Therefore, the alliance of some of the Eritrean opposition with Meles Zenawi is a blessing in disguise for Isaias Afewerki. It presents not only a serious obstacle to democratization, but also contributes to the deadlock between the two countries.

8) EPLF, OLF, and G7 : New Alliance?

After Meles rigged the 2005 election, massacred protesters, and jailed hundreds of opposition leaders, the voices calling for his removal grew louder. Those already committed to armed struggle and those cynical about the possibility of a peaceful transfer of power were joined by those who had once championed nonviolent struggle as the only means towards democratization. This was rapidly followed by a call for tactical alliance between Ethiopian opposition forces and the Eritrean regime.

The abandonment of nonviolent struggle by some of its leading proponents, particularly the likes of Dr Brehanu Nega, was a blow to the democratic movement in Ethiopia. First, as key strategists have left the country, the opposition movement has been weakened. Second, their decision to adopt the line “by any means necessary” has given the regime a pretext to silence the opposition camp in the name of fighting terrorism. Third, their alliance with Eritrea, a county that is at war with Ethiopia, will justify further repression of democratic institutions in the name of national security. It should be remembered that the OLF’s alliance with Eritrea has been one of the major reasons why nonviolent Oromo political parties remain weak and ineffectual. This new alliance will have an even more negative impact on the democratic movement in Ethiopia.

Possible Consequences

Even if we assume that this new emerging tactical alliance will prove to be strong and effective in achieving the short-term goal of removing Meles Zenawi from power, the issues I have discussed above should caution us that it is very unlikely that we will be able to solve the underlining causes of contention in the region.

As with any of the previous examples, the current tactical alliance is not a durable partnership focused on working out lasting and mutually beneficial objectives; hence, contentious issues have been avoided. The Ethiopianist parties have a declared and unflinching position on Ethiopia's right to have access to the sea. In 2005 they campaigned on repealing ethnic federalism, which puts them diametrically opposed to some of the parties joining the new alliance. The Eritrean regime has an unspoken but obvious interest in having access to Southern resources and playing a major role in the political power play in Finfinne. How they intend to solve these serious differences after taking power through armed struggle is unclear. At this stage, such issues are often dismissed outright or justified by saying that once Meles is removed, the victors will solve the issues peacefully and legally. This is the same argument given by the revolutionaries – a victory of the proletariat will solve everything. As we saw already in 1991, those who gain power from the barrel of the gun are less likely to solve issues democratically. Instead “survival of the fittest” and the maxim gun will be the game, and will lead only to repetition of the old cycle.

The commonality of these Tactical Alliances

- ❖ Focused on short-term goals, while vital and controversial issues are either purposely ignored or never even considered. Each participant knows full well that the alliance is just a “fling.”

- ❖ A single actor – individual or group - is identified as the sole source of complex social, economic, and geopolitical problems. There is a monolithic enemy.

- ❖ Each alliance helped extend the dictatorship of the time and led to the rise of another.

Consequentially, these repeated games of realpolitik had greatly contributed towards the erosion of trust and nihilism that has become the major characteristics of politics in our region. As Albert Einstein said “Insanity:[is] doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”

Defying Reality: towards durable Strategic Partnership

This essay asserts that the fundamental cause of the prolonged conflict between the two countries has always been authoritarianism. It also implies that our choice of short-term tactical alliances has led us to miss several opportunities that could have been used to establish a strong foundation for a mutually beneficial future.

Yet in recent years, we are observing activities and general movement, albeit small, that make me optimistic about the future of a bilateral relationship. The creation of independent and politically neutral associations by scholars and activists of the two countries to soberly discuss issues that concern the people of each country is one of the most productive ways to move forward.

In adding my voice to this effort, I caution against a rush towards structural reunification of the two states either in the form of a federation or confederation. Instead I suggest that citizens who wish to see a normalized, stable and sustainable relationship between the two states work towards forging a strategic partnership based on long-term objectives. Achieving a mutually beneficial relationship will require first and foremost democratizing each state. Democratizing each state would allow for a gradual resolution of disputed matters in a sustainable fashion. This can only happen when democratic forces of the two countries avoid becoming hostage to the tactical maneuvering of their respective dictatorial regimes.

Unilateral democratization of each state will have a positive impact in improving their relationship with each other. First, democratization will allow each state to peacefully settle their internal contradictions and disputes. This in turn will help eliminate the tendency to fight proxy war. Dissidents of both states will be able to advance their political agenda internally without resorting to violence that makes parasite to external force.

Second, the economies of these two countries are mutually interdependent. Ethiopia, as a landlocked economy, has a vital interest in using the port of Asab. Eritrea, a country with very limited natural resources, is not a viable state without access to Ethiopian resources and markets. In one way or another, the two countries need to access the resources located in each state. So far, each seems to be attempting to gain absolute economic advantage over the other through either political maneuvering or military muscle. This has limited market potential as each state has chosen to sever trade and engage in unfair business. By and large both states have been acting to advance the interests of a very few regime-affiliated business oligarchs.

Democracy will increase contacts between the business community that have been severed by war, which can in turn play an important role in fostering friendship and preventing political conflict as individuals and groups follow their natural economic interests. The flourishing of small business across a broader area will be instrumental in generating communication and understanding.

Strategic Shift: From Gunpowder to People Power

Mao Tse-tung said that “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” The factuality of this statement is indisputable, given that history tells that for much of human

existence violence has been the leading means by which power is transferred from one ruler to another. Yet wars rarely empowered the ordinary people in whose name revolutionaries such as Mao picked up arms. A political change is said to have empowered the “people” when it helps them control their leaders. And yet leaders that rise through military muscle have less incentive to budge to popular demand, as the source of their power is the barrel of the gun and not the people’s consent.

As I have argued above, the problem in the two countries under discussion has always been dictatorship and the solution is to empower people through democracy. Yet the choice of violence as a means of achieving democracy has only led to the birth of multiple dictators. Perhaps it’s then time we give nonviolent resistance a chance. Nonviolent struggle is often misconceived as pacifism or avoidance of conflict, but is more accurately a form of active resistance by which the oppressed fights back through the use of tactics and means other than the violence used by the oppressor. In short, nonviolent methods are believed to have a better comparative strategic advantage than violent resistance to fight repression.

The evidence for this is that out of 67 governmental transitions between 1970 and 2005, nonviolent campaigns were leading factors in 50 of them. Out of these, 32, (70%) of the countries have consolidated democracy, 14 are in transition, and only 4 have fallen back to authoritarianism. By contrast, out of those that experienced violent change, only 2 (14%) have consolidated democracy, 8 are still in transition and 4 have fallen back.^{vii}

How can we explain this significant difference?

Simply put, nonviolent resistance is a game of numbers. Its success depends on the extent to which people from widespread areas of society participate in it. A nonviolent movement can only increase popular participation when its objectives, strategies and tactics are inclusive of most if not all sectors of society. Furthermore, in nonviolent resistance, *consent* rather than coercion is the only means by which participants are recruited and retained. Leaders and organizers have to present plausible *reason* to convince people to join them and stay the course. It is true that freedom fighters also join armed groups voluntarily, but once in, military rule - in which obeying command, secrecy and loyalty are highly valued - makes voluntary exit unlikely.

When consent is the only means by which leaders of a movement can recruit and retain members, there exists a space for members to challenge, scrutinize and resist their leaders. Similarly, when leaders use reason to reach out to the public rather than appealing to their emotions, it shows that leaders respect each citizen’s mind. Thus consent and reason confer legitimacy on a movement and its leadership. They are also crucial elements that help the growth of democratic traditions in which ordinary citizens develop the mechanisms to control their future rulers.

Nonviolent struggle has further benefits in bringing about a just, equitable, inclusive and democratic system in a multicultural society such as ours. As mentioned above, the success of a nonviolent resistance depends on the participation of all sectors of the society. It is the solidarity of all rather than the heroism of a few that leads to success.

In our region, people are fragmented across ethnic and ideological lines, making it very difficult to unify and coordinate a campaign against dictatorship. In violent struggle, as long as there is repression and grievance, a rebel can rely on a narrow base to wage an effective campaign. But in nonviolent struggle, where broad-based participation is necessary, movement leaders have to ascertain every group's grievances, not just their own narrow base. A movement can truly understand everyone's grievances only when members of each group are represented in it. Having everyone on board requires negotiation and compromise, which can lead to the development of a shared objective. Humility, rather than hierarchy, is the most effective strategy in bringing about a movement's necessary solidarity.

Though often difficult and exhausting, exercises to build solidarity on a voluntary basis - which are practically impossible within a violent movement - allow for the development of mechanisms and traditions that can address many of the competing and contentious issues that exist in multicultural societies, both during the struggle and after transition. When nonviolent resistance brings about regime change through popular participation, everyone is a stakeholder. The fact that no one group has disproportional force to impose its will over others means that negotiation and compromise remain the most effective means by which interests are advanced – this is the birth and consolidation of consensual democracy. While it might be true that the end can justify the means, we should be aware that the end always reflects the means.

Nonviolent struggle is not only the most promising strategy to bring about durable democracy, but also can have a positive impact on the Ethio-Eritrean bilateral relationship. For one, as nonviolent resistance by nature is a struggle for self-reliance whereby movements and their leaders can succeed only when they effectively mobilize from within, it will help us curb the rush to seek assistance from the two adversarial regimes. This will deny each tyrant the excuse of terrorism, national security and sovereignty as a means of justifying repression. The political tradition of negotiation, compromise and tolerance within nonviolent movements of each country will be of immense importance in working towards peace, reconciliation and healing between the people of the two countries. There is also a greater likelihood that regimes which come to power through nonviolent movements will be able to reach a negotiated settlement between the two states compared to those who achieve power through violence.^{viii}

Conclusion

As the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia begin the journey to reconstruct their broken relationships, we should make sure it is done in a way that does not leave any room for spoilers that might aim to disrupt the process. Priority should be given to improving functional, or people-to-people, relationships; there should not be a rush towards immediate structural reunion of territories and institutions. While it is true that the twin

authoritarian regimes in Asmara and Finfinne are the major obstacles standing in the way of speeding up reconciliation, it's important to understand that removing dictatorship is just part of the journey rather than its end. With this understanding, progressive forces of each country can build a strategic partnership based on the long-term vision of a mutual coexistence – instead of short-term tactical alliances that prolong the lifespan of dictatorship and could lead to the birth of new ones. As violence discourages dialogue and compromise and increases polarization, citizens of the two countries should seriously consider nonviolent resistance as a means to help them advance freedom, liberty, and prosperity through reason and consent.

ⁱMorgenthau, Hans J. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 5th Edition. New York, NY: Knopf, 1973. and Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley. 1979

ⁱⁱ The theory was first articulated by Immanuel Kant in 1795 in his essay “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” For recent debates see James Ray Lee's “Democracy and International Conflict: An Evolution of the Democratic Peace Proposition (Studies in International Relations)” 2009

ⁱⁱⁱ Evidence for this is that while fully supporting Eritrean rebels position, the EPRP was vehemently opposed to southern ethno-nationalist movements. This decision to support Eritrea's claim and dismiss the Oromo nationalists aspiration likely to be due to disparity in what each group, Eritrean and Oromo nationalists, could offer the EPRP at the time.

^{iv} For a detailed account of the fast paced political changes of the time see Andargachew Tsigie's “ Beachir Yetekechew Rajim Guzo” and Kiflu Tadesse's the Generation Part I & II

^v For a discussion on the strategic problems OLF faced by moving to Eritrea see my article “ Failure to Deliver: The Journey of the Oromo Liberation Front in The Last two Decades”. Available at <http://dhummuugaa.wordpress.com/failure-to-deliver-the-journey-of-the-oromo-liberation-front-in-the-last-two-decades/>

^{vi} For the nature of the OLF-Eritrean relationship, see an article by Bariitee Gadaa “Eritrea-OLF Relationship and its Impact on Oromo Struggle” http://www.oduu.com/news/index.php?news_id=1469

^{vii} *Adrian Karatnycky and Peter Ackerman . How Freedom Is Won: From Civic Resistance to Durable Democracy*. Available at http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/29.pdf

^{viii} For theoretical discussion and empirical evidences on nonviolent conflict see Sharp, Gene. *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice And 21st Century Potential*. Extending Horizon Books., 2005