

Eritrea's Struggle for Independence

by Andre Vltchek / December 12th, 2014

Qohaito is a mysterious, ancient, pre-Aksumite settlement in the Eritrean highlands, with several impressive monolithic columns rising towards the sky. It is said that right there, under the surface, exists another entire lost city. As you walk, the earth shakes, and somewhere deep below; you can hear the echo of your footsteps.

Just a few minutes drive from the columns, the plateau suddenly ends. There is a cliff and a breathtaking view into the deep valley. This place is called Ishka. And this is where thousands of Eritrean freedom fighters and civilians used to hide from the brutal Ethiopian occupation forces.



I set up my cameras right near the cliff, asks my local cameraman to roll, and then put the first question to a local mountaineer, Mr. Ibrahim Omar: “How was life here, for you, before and after the independence?”



“There were two separate lives”, he explained. “The first one, before independence – that was harsh, brutal. And then came the other life, a totally different one, after we won. This is when our basic human rights got recognized and respected. The schools, health posts and roads were built. Everything was suddenly transformed.”

I ask Mr. Omar for an example and he readily replies:

“Before, a pregnant woman would have to ride on a camel, for long hours, to reach some medical post, in order to give birth. Many women would die during the journey. Now medical posts are readily available in this area...”

He thinks for a few seconds, then adds: “And this is what I call life.”

As we drive back to the capital city – Asmara – we can see new roads, some paved, some not yet, cutting through the rugged, mountainous terrain. And parallel to them, new electric wires are stretching out towards the horizon.

In the car, I am thinking about what Mr. Omar defined as ‘human rights’. Here, it is in direct contrast to what the expression stands for in the West. In the United States and in Europe, ‘human rights’ were created as an ideological tool, a weapon in the Cold War period. In Eritrea, it has a very simple meaning: feeding the people, giving them free education and medical care, building new roads, supplying them with electric power.



To understand Eritrea is not easy. But outside Asmara, everything is exposed; nothing can be hidden. Both poverty and the heroic attempts to eradicate it are right here, in my face. Farmers are working hard; many roads and electric grids are under construction.

But Western propaganda against Eritrea is so mighty, that often even I catch myself recalling its slogans, instead of concentrating on observing the reality with my own eyes. And I am professional: I have dedicated my life to uncovering Western indoctrination campaigns!

I film and photograph, in order to capture the truth, through my lenses.

After just a few days, a very clear portrait emerges: Eritrea; the African Cuba – country that stands on its own feet.

Eritrea – a proud and determined nation, which fought for a long 30 years for its independence, and in the process, losing hundreds of thousands of its sons and daughters during the struggle.

Eritrea – a country with its own egalitarian development model, working relentlessly for the welfare of its people.

Eritrea – a nation unwilling to sacrifice its citizens for the whims of the Empire and its corporations.

All this is in direct contrast to the propaganda that is emanating from London and New York, smearing the country, and trying to portray it as an outlaw state which supports terrorist groups in East Africa, oppresses its citizens, and violates all basic ‘human rights’.

On this journey, on my search for the truth through the country which the West describes as perhaps the most hermit place on earth, I am accompanied by only three people – Ms. Milena Bereket, (Director of *African Strategies*, an independent research and outreach think tank based in Asmara), by a local cameraman Azmera, and by a driver.

African Strategies is hosting me in Eritrea, but practically it is responding and accommodating my requests, arranging interviews and transportation to the places that I want to visit. We are planning together, working shoulder to shoulder. African Strategies is an independent research think-tank, established online in 2011, initially created to respond –

virtually – to the growing demands of the Diaspora and continent-based Eritreans, as well as other Africans for fact-based and localized information regarding the Horn of Africa region, and more specifically Eritrea.

In a relatively short time, I have managed to visit three regions (zones) of the country, and I would have been allowed to visit all six of them, were I to have more time. As it is, in eight days in the country, I hardly sleep, but I encounter people from the mountain villages and from the port city of Massawa, I lead a roundtable discussion with several prominent young intellectuals, and I discuss politics and the development model of Eritrea with officials from the Ministry of Education and Health, as well as with former liberation fighters, and Eritrean diplomats.

All of my encounters are spontaneous. Eritrean people are well informed and educated. Our political discussions are open and often passionate. I cannot believe my own eyes, or more precisely: I cannot believe the lies that are being told about this country.

In the Hotel Asmara Palace (former Inter-Continental) I met a distinguished Ethiopian author and researcher Dr. Mohamed Hassan, a former Ethiopian diplomat in Washington, Beijing and Brussels, as well as an MP representing the militant Belgian Labor Party. He now spends a substantial amount of time in Eritrea, which is extremely close to his heart and to his ideological beliefs.



Without wasting much time on formalities, we began working together, almost immediately, filming and recording the discussion.

Dr. Hassan offered his well-defined thesis, right from the start:

“I am from the horn of Africa, and I saw the of Eritrea’s point of view, even in the time of their struggle, which was not just the national independence struggle for Eritrea, but for the whole Horn of Africa in general. It is true that Eritrean people’s strife for freedom had been denied and the Eritrean people had to embark on a very long journey to reach their independence... it took them 30 years to defeat the enemy, which consisted also of my country – Ethiopia – that was supported by many powerful forces... At one point it was the United States and all other Western countries... then Israelis supported special troops fighting against Eritrea... In 1991 the struggle ended, and we thought that we would build, all of us together, the new Horn of Africa, on the basis of equality, as brothers and sisters, with no differences between us and no hierarchy... 1991, I thought, was the best moment that our region ever had. Eritrea defeated the neighboring regime, and it was supporting

revolutionaries in Ethiopia; people like us... There were great changes taking place in Ethiopia, then. We hoped that our economies would get integrated, and that we would establish new people to people relations...

But it was not meant to be. There were huge changes in the world, as Mr. Hassan recalled. The Soviet Union disappeared and the balance of power had tipped to one side.

Mr. Hassan continued:

“Suddenly, in the United States, an officer, one of the very important officers in the Pentagon, wrote for a military journal called *Parameters*, his memoranda and his understanding of what should be done to Africa. It described the US interests in Africa, and it divided Africa into 4 regions... One region was to become the Southern part of Africa, all that huge area from South Africa to Congo; the region full of minerals; that region that was ‘very important for the US military and the US companies... Second region was Horn Of Africa, which was supposed to be integrated with East Africa and ‘greater Middle East’, which G.W. Bush was later trying to create. Western military bases located in the Horn of Africa were supposed to be ready to intervene in the Middle East and in other African countries...”

The 3rd zone was to become West Africa; rich in oil that is extracted in order to satisfy demand in the North America. 4th zone was to cover North Africa, from Egypt to Mauritania.

All 4 zones had to be, of course, fully controlled by the West.

“Immediately after this document was published, Mr. Anthony Lake, who was then a national security advisor under Clinton Administration, published his new theory

called 'Anchor States'. He also divided the African continent into 4 bases; defining 4 'anchor states'. One: South Africa, 'responsible for southern Africa, two: Ethiopia, 'responsible' for the Horn of Africa, three: Egypt for northern Africa, and four: Nigeria 'in charge of' western Africa. Very soon, Nigeria intervened in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and Ethiopia accepted its role as well, becoming the base for Western aggressiveness in the region."

Eritrea never sold out. It did not accept the imperialist's games in the region. It stood patently in the way of the Western domination of the region, because of its principles of national independence, non-interference, no military bases in the Horn of Africa, and its desire to build the new Horn of Africa... All this was considered by the big powers as 'negative', according to Dr. Hassan. This is why Eritrea was identified as pariah state.

How brutal, how consistent could the punishment be – retribution for attaining independence and for taking care of the people, for social justice?

Embargos against Cuba are a very good example of how far the Empire is willing to go. Or 'making the economy scream', under the socialist government of President Allende in Chile, who was obviously having an extremely 'bad influence', according to Mr. Kissinger and the corporate bosses, on the entire Latin America and even on the far away Mediterranean countries. Or maybe direct military attacks, as those that were performed against Indonesia during the reign of the independent-minded President Sukarno.

Both Indonesia (in 1965) and Chile (in 1973) were bathed in blood, in the Western-orchestrated coups. Chile recovered

recently, Indonesia never did. Cuba stood firm, at a tremendous price and with incomparable determination and courage.

And so Eritrea has been as well— standing and fighting against constant subversions, attacks, propaganda, embargos and provocations.

That is why it is often called the “African Cuba”. Or maybe it should be compared to Vietnam, or to both. But to be precise, Eritrea has developed its own model of resistance. Its courage, its struggle, is its own. It is a totally unique place, and its people are proud to be distinctive.

But can Eritrea survive, while much bigger and richer countries, like Libya, Iraq, and Syria are falling one after another, simply because the Empire decided that they were giving too much to their own people, and too little to its corporations?

“We do not want to be boxed”, I am told over and over again, whenever I ask whether Eritrea is a socialist country.

“Look at Amílcar Cabral, from Guinea-Bissau”, I am told by Elias Amare, one of the most accomplished writers and thinkers of Eritrea, who is also a Senior Fellow at the ‘Peace building Center for The Horn of Africa’ (PCHA). “Cabral always said: ‘judge us on what we are doing on the ground’. The same can be applied to Eritrea.”

Most of the leaders of Eritrea, most of its thinkers, are either Marxists, or at least their hearts are very close to socialist ideals. But there is very little talk about socialism here, and there are almost no red banners. The Eritrean national flag is

in the center of all that is happening, while independence, self-reliance, social justice and unity could be considered as basic pillars of the national ideology.

According to Elias Amare: “Eritrea registered success, substantial achievements, in what the United Nations defines as ‘Millennium Development Goals’, in particular ensuring primary education for all, free-of-charge; ensuring women’s emancipation and equality of women in all fields. In healthcare – it achieved a dramatic reduction of infant mortality, as well as the reduction of maternal mortality. In this regard, Eritrea is considered exemplary in Africa; few other countries have attained that much. So, despite all the obstacles that the country faces, the picture is positive.”

“Eritrea continues on the national independent path. It has progressive view in building national unity. Eritrea is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. It has 9 ethnic groups, and two major religions: Christianity and Islam. Two religions co-exist harmoniously, and this is mainly due to the tolerant culture, that the society has built. There is no conflict or animosity between the ethnic groups or religious groups. The government and the people are keen to maintain this national unity.

This is in stark contrast to the rest of Africa. Ethnic and religious conflicts are plundering Sudan, Kenya, Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and many other nations. Behind them often stand the old colonialism and neo-colonialism.

What Eritrea has accomplished is not some minor achievement, but an essential breakthrough.

Then why, I ask Elias, is the West so aggressively against the Eritrean path? He replies: “I go back to Noam Chomsky’s view on this: whenever a small country tries to pursue an

independent national path, and does credible work on development, Western countries do not like it. They want their 'client states'. They want states that are submissive to the global capitalist interests.... All this is no-no in the eyes of the Western imperialist countries. They want neo-colonial regimes that obey the diktats of the World Bank, IMF, WTO, and so on."

The port of Massawa, is still in ruins. Ethiopia bombed this historic city to the ground, during the last stage of the Eritrean war for independence.

Since then, the reconstruction work is progressing, slowly but surely. And the port is now functioning well; it is modern and efficient. Cargo vessels are sailing to all corners of the globe, while passenger ferries are connecting the mainland with the Dahlak Islands.

Still, in this city itself, the horror of war is visible at every step. Many historic buildings stand like ghosts, with nothing inside. At the entrance to the port, there is a massive stand. I ask, what statue used to be placed on it, in the old days? "Haile Selassie", I am told.

We stop at the ancient coffee shop, which is known for its lengthy coffee ceremonies. Life is slowly returning to normal. People are drinking, and chatting.

Two ladies are cooking in front of their house. We approach them. I want to know whether their life has been improving.

Ms. Maaza, 55 years old, replies: "It is definitely better than when the Ethiopians were here. Adults are being educated... Kids are being educated as well: all for free. Medical care is

also provided, when we get sick. We are optimistic, hopeful about the future.”

Then she invites us home, for lunch.

Massawa is, once again, waking up to life. There is a new college (College of Marine Sciences and Technology), new international airport, and a free-trade zone.

Hotels are opening their doors. The countryside is still dotted with war relics, with monuments, with destroyed tanks and armored vehicles.

What this country went through is mindboggling. The fact that it is here, that it survived, that it won, managed to move forward, is itself a miracle. Or more precisely: it is proof of the heroism of its people.

In Asmara, I sit down for a talk with a senior Eritrean diplomat, Tesfamichael Gerahtu, a former Ambassador to the United Kingdom. But Mr. Gerahtu is not just a representative of Eritrea abroad; he is one of the national heroes, who fought, for long years, for the independence of this country, against all the odds. And he has been helping to build his nation, to this day:

“Eritrea is peaceful and stable because of the government’s ‘integrated development paradigm’ – equal opportunities for all, with a special concentrated focus on rural areas and areas that were previously particularly disadvantaged. We are improving the general and overall quality of life... we are working on a cultural transformation that would lead to the creation of a ‘knowledge society’, where every person is an owner of

the development process. We are trying to build cooperation based on dialogue, respect and ownership of the development programs and the process.

I ask about the way the United States has been treating this country – this African rebel.

“The US pattern of behavior towards Eritrea over the years has been full of conspiracies.”

He quoted the then US ambassador to the UN (later to become US Secretary of State) John Foster Dulles: “From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless the strategic interest of the United States in the Red Sea basin and the considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country has to be linked with our ally Ethiopia.”

I mentioned that the United States used and continues to use different pretexts and mechanisms to destabilize Eritrea, to which Mr. Ambassador replied, passionately:

“They have actively promoted an economic blockade ... when that failed the US used Ethiopia to start the war in 1998 ... when that failed, it injected political dissent and tried to create divisions and cleavages along ethnic lines... when that failed, it used religion – Pentecostals ...when that failed, it actively began luring youth out of the country, even issuing visas, illegally, to people without the passports ... and then it turned around and accused the government of “human trafficking” ... when that failed, it actively pushed different neighboring countries to pick fights with Eritrea and also to encouraged them behind closed doors to encircle Eritrea out of IGAD ... It used the ‘client’ states to promote its own strategy for this region... And when that also failed,

it used the infamous “terrorism” label to engineer illegal and unjust sanctions ... Finally, when everything failed, it used and continues to use “human rights” and “democracy” as a battle cry for intervention...



“See what we are doing and tell us whether we are socialist country or not”, is repeated to me, by many.

The more I see, the more I am convinced that the Eritrea’s plan, its process, its revolution, are extremely close to what is being fought for in Cuba, in Venezuela or Ecuador.

But there is great pride and also great modesty, here. The Eritrean process is shy, unvocal. As a result, the world knows very little about this remarkable country.

Dr. Taisier Ali is a Sudanese who lives in Eritrea for 15 years. He is the director of PCHA. We sit down in his office, and try

to analyze, why the Eritrean model is so misrepresented abroad, or why it is ignored by the Western mass media:

“When you talk about Eritrea, to the international community and the outside world, I think it is one of the most misunderstood countries on the whole globe... After coming here, I soon realized that here, they have a sense of purpose, a ‘national project’, conceived and developed during the 30 years of struggle. We don’t have to accept it, but at least they are determined to take their country from the point A to point B. They face many challenges, but they have always stayed on course. The rest of Africa is similar to my country – Sudan – no sense of purpose.”

One disturbing factor in Sudan and in Africa in general, is corruption. Eritrea is nothing like that. For me it was always a reminder that if Eritrea could focus on its development; bottom-up development, rising from the real needs of its people, then why can’t we, the rest of us, do it, too?

I asked, “Is the national project and ‘purpose’, what is actually bothering and scaring the West, the most? The fact that Eritrea could influence, positively, the rest of the region?”

“The international community, imperialism, neo-colonialism – they cannot perpetrate any society, unless the society is divided, unless it is weak, and clueless about where it wants to go; unless it does not have a national project. The national project galvanizes all natural resources, national actors, the human capital, to achieve the level of development that would improve the living standards of the people.”

“Like in Cuba?”

“Cuba is a very good example, yes! I also think that one of the reasons for this misunderstanding of Eritrea has to do with the self-reliance attitude of the party and the ordinary citizens. It is simply not seen almost anywhere in the world.”

Mr. Ali says that many other countries have talked about self-reliance, including Tanzania, but it was mainly rhetoric. Eritrea did it. And when he speaks to local comrades, they realize that with this approach, the journey will take longer, but it will be achieved on Eritrean terms.

And that is definitely not what the West wants.

“Eritrea is not a neo-colonial state. Eritrea is an independent state. Eritrea does not host any military bases, any external forces. Eritrea has the vision, and not only for Eritrea, but also for the region. It is also promoting self-reliance and regional integration. It is also built on the ideal: ‘let us use our own resources, and let us build our independence. It means elevating the life of Eritrean people, particularly those in the rural areas. This approach was considered in the West, as Chomsky said, as ‘a rotten apple’.”

There is Dr. Mohamed Hassan, again.

I ask him as well: Is it the main thing that the West is afraid of? A domino effect: an influence Eritrea could have on the rest of Africa?

“Of course”, he replies. “Africa has some 50% of the world natural resources... Then consider this: the leadership of this country – they don’t steal. They are living a normal life, that of normal people. No leadership in any other country in Africa

lives like ours here. You go next door – the Prime Minister of Ethiopia who just died, left his family some 8 billion dollars.”

I see the point: the lack of corruption could also be considered as ‘very dangerous’. John Perkins explained to me, a long time ago, that corruption is one of the most effective tools used by the West in its quest to control the entire planet. It gives power to the elites, and it makes indebted and divided countries totally defenseless.

“Eritrea didn’t attack anybody. But their views were considered very dangerous. And as you said, Eritrea is considered a virus contaminating much bigger nations,” concludes Dr. Hassan.

A great Eritrean intellectual, Elias Amare, adds more, along the same lines: “Eritrea has been insisting that its independence would be a genuine independence. It insists on self-reliance.” It doesn’t mean that Eritrea rejects direct foreign investment, for example. No. But when direct investment enters, Eritrea wants it to be on equitable terms. For example: Eritrea has huge natural resources. Gold, copper, zinc to name just a few. But it does not want to replicate what happened in DR Congo, or in Zambia. It wants an equitable partnership. Many Western countries do not see all this favorably. And that’s the main reason for the hostility Eritrea is facing.”

But Elias, the West is also constantly using the accusations that Eritrea is supporting terrorist movements all over the region.

Elias replies vehemently: “That is totally baseless and false. First of all, because of the nature of how Eritrea gained its independence, the country is totally against any religious extremism. It has been actually targeted by Islamist extremist

groups for many years. Eritrea is a secular state: it does not mix politics with religion. It had been proven by many credible investigative journalists, that there is no support for terrorism, coming from Asmara; no support for Islamic extremist groups, or for Christian extremist groups.”

“Big powers do not want the Eritrean example to be replicated in Africa. I say again, Africa has huge natural resources. Big powers are now trying to grab these resources. What will happen if other governments in Africa were to try to follow Eritrea’s example? It would definitely not be beneficial to great powers.”

In the days that I am spending in Eritrea, I see dams and irrigation systems, villages working and the building of strategic food reserves. I see schools and medical posts, new roads.



I stop the car and talk to several girls walking on the new Domhina Road, some hundred kilometers from Asmara. They

are all from the 5th and 6th grades; cheerful, laughing, optimistic: “In our village we already have an elementary school, and now we are walking to a secondary school, in a bigger village. We are good at school; we love English and math.”

The girls want to be teachers and doctors, but one resolutely aims at becoming an engineer, in order to build bridges, roads and power grids for her country.



Eritrea is still very poor, but it is neat, and orderly.

Crime is extremely low. I spoke to a Laotian eye surgeon, Dr. Soukhanthamaly Phonekaseumsouk, who has been performing cataract surgeries, for many years, in the deep countryside of Eritrea, where batteries that are charged using the solar system have been mainly powering her equipment. Eritrea is number 2 in the world, per capita, in terms of the use of solar energy. The Doctor explained that she never felt unsafe, living alone, in the countryside or in the city; she was never harassed.

The adviser to the Minister of Health, Dr. Ghebrehiwet Mismay, took me on visits to the hospitals in Asmara. The neat institutions were in shocking contrast to the monstrous hospitals that I saw in several turbo-capitalist countries like Kenya and Uganda.



In Eritrea, medical care, including medicine, is virtually free. Wards are clean; those hosting children are overflowing with stuffed animals.

The country has managed to dramatically reduce child mortality through vaccination programs and constantly improving medical care.

China has just completed several specialized blocks of the hospital in Asmara, including those for cancer treatment and for heart surgery. Several Cuban doctors are teaching here, and treating the patients.

New housing projects are going up in several parts of the capital city, as well as in Massawa and elsewhere.

The day before my departure I met 2 education experts from the government, Mr Tquabo Aimut and Ms Mehret Iyob, who explained to me, clearly, how seriously adult literacy is being taken here.

Eritrea is now one of very few African countries that will be able to meet many of the Millennium Development Goals.

At Independence, life expectancy stood at only 49 years, at the last census it was up to 63 (very high by African standards). In 1991 adult literacy stood at between 20% to 30% and only 10% for women. In 2008 it climbed to 65% and in 2010 to 74%, 2015's (realistic) goal being 80%.

We are talking about post-literacy and functional-literacy programs, but above all, about how democratic the system really is. Not 'democratic' in terms of the Western perception, but democratic in terms of the participation of the people in decision-making; in developing the curricula, and the blocking of projects that would bring no benefits to the communities.

Both ministries – those of Health and of Education – agree that while Eritrea is repeatedly praised by several UN agencies, including UNDP and UNESCO, very little of it is ventilated in the mainstream Western press.

For all these days, it has not always been a smooth ride. One evening I hold a round-table discussion with young intellectuals. We shout, argue: about socialism, about the fight against imperialism, about whether Eritrea should be more engaged; whether it should be closer to the socialist countries or not.

I film, photograph, and record.

I am introduced to Mr. Zemhret Yohannes, Director of the Research and Documentation Center at PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice), and we have a long discussion about the turbulent Eritrean history and on the country's right to improve the life of its people. We talk into the night, until the tapes are gone and my memory cards are full.

During my last night I speak at a hall full of people. I address the local intellectuals and youth. And just few hours earlier, the ERI-TV interviews me.



It is all totally interactive; it is all one huge “process”; nothing is staged, everything spontaneous.

Eritrea is under fire; it is clearly on the hit-list of the West, because it serves its people, and because it is refusing to aid the Empire and the corporate world.

The West is using its toxic propaganda to the maximum, in order to smear the country. It is also systematically boosting, financing and manufacturing ‘the opposition’, as it does all over the world.

Periodically, huge campaigns from the BBC and other sources of Western propaganda get pointed, directly, at Asmara.

For instance, at the height of the “coup” that never was (January 2012), African Strategies served as a defying force that helped patriots around the world counter the barrage of disinformation regarding Asmara and the Government of Eritrea spread by the so-called “experts”.

That is the time when the Western news channels and Al-Jazeera were reporting on the ‘rebellion’ in the capital city.

My local camera-person, Mr. Azmera, summarized the event: “As the ‘coup’ was taking place, I was just leaving the Presidential compound, after working there for some time. I walked out, ate lunch... Then at 4PM I was called and told: ‘Al-Jazeera is reporting that there was a coup in Asmara!’ I just ignored them, and walked home.”

After my intensive work in Eritrea, I testify: I came to my conclusion: the country is socialist!

It is socialist, if the definitions of Latin America were to be applied.

At the same time, it is socialist in its own way. It will never take any diktats from anybody: from the West, or even from the friendly countries of Latin America, South Africa, China or Russia.

Eritrea belongs to its own people.

I have worked in 150 countries of the world, and I never encountered a nation like this.

My first three days there were confusing. I tried to place Eritrea in a box, somewhere. Later, I just let go and smiled... And enjoyed the ride, so to speak.

What a beauty she is! And what strength, courage, and resilience she radiates!

As my plane was taking off, for Cairo, at 4 in the morning, I was humming some tune, happily. I was leaving behind a country that I truly could admire.

Inside, in my heart, I felt much richer than when I arrived.

If this was, for Western capitalism and imperialism, a virus – political and economic, social Ebola – then I was ready to be infected by it, gladly over and over again!

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