

21 Years and Counting: Eritrea's Independent Path Towards Sustainable Development, Peace & Cooperation

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I. Introductory background

In 1985, the late African revolutionary thinker and former Tanzanian minister of economic development under Julius Nyerere, Abdul Rahma Mohamed Babu, visited liberated Eritrea under the control of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front [EPLF]. In an article published in that same year in Africa Events magazine under the title, "Eritrea: Its Present is the Remote Future of Others" Babu wrote of his impressions of Eritrea under struggle in these words:

"I have just spent two weeks in the liberated areas, including the recently captured and recaptured town of Barentu. And I am not ashamed to admit that I have been overwhelmed by what I saw. Living, working and eating with these staunch revolutionaries I am tempted to echo the famous quote: 'I have seen the future of Africa and it works'."

Two year later, in 1987, Babu also attended the EPLF's Second & Unity Congress and witnessed the EPLF as a mature national liberation movement (quasi government) on the verge of victory, and preparing the groundwork for post-independence nation-building. The EPLF's National Democratic Program drawn up in that congress outlined the following:

- Building an Independent Self-reliant and planned national economy in the sectors of agriculture, industry, finance, trade, and urban land and housing;
- Safeguard Social Rights: workers' rights, women's rights,, families of martyrs, disabled fighters and other nationalities needing social assistance;
- Pursue a Foreign Policy of Peace and Non-Alignment.

On 24 May 1991, with the total military defeat of the Ethiopian military junta (aka the *Dergue*), Eritrea achieved its *de facto* independence. Two years later, on 24 May 1993, after a UN-monitored referendum, Eritrea became formally an independent state and joined the UN.

It cannot be over-emphasized that due to the long and bitter 30-year war of national liberation, with immense loss of human lives and property, what the EPLF inherited in 1991 after total liberation was a completely devastated country and society, with agriculture and industry in near to complete collapse, and a third of the population displaced or in exile. Thus, Eritrea at independence in 1991 was starting from way below zero. The EPLF quickly mobilized all its resources, and embarked upon a comprehensive nation-building process of recovery and rehabilitation.

Three years after independence, the EPLF held its 3rd Congress from 10-16 February 1994 at the historic town of Nakfa. At this congress, the EPLF changed its name to the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and drew up its National Charter, a roadmap with 6 basic goals and accompanying six basic principles:

The Six Basic Goals of the National Charter are: i) national unity, ii) political democracy, iii) economic and social development, iv) social justice (economic and social democracy) v) cultural revival, and vi) regional and international cooperation

The Six Basic Principles are: i) national unity, ii) active popular participation, iii) decisive role of the human factor, iv) [dynamic] relationship between national struggle and social struggle (struggle for social justice), v) self-reliance in all fields – political, economic and cultural, and vi) a strong relationship between people and leadership.

Essentially, the National Charter is a renewed commitment to the old tried and proved goals and principles of struggle that enabled the EPLF to achieve victory against overwhelming odds. Eighteen years later, the PFDJ and the Government of Eritrea (GoE) remain steadfast in their vision to build a democratic, just and developed society.

II. Post-independence Eritrea - Portrayal of in the Western mainstream media

A. The first “honeymoon phase”, 1991-1997

Lest some forget, the current relentless demonization of Eritrea in the Western mainstream media has not always been the case. I will cite a few examples of Eritrea's portrayal in mainstream Western corporate media to show the stark difference:

- "Africa's Newest Nation, Little Eritrea, ... has become an unlikely oasis of peace and civility wedged between the clan-fighting of Somalia and religious war in Sudan. Secretary of State Warren Christopher calls Eritrea, ... 'a beacon of hope astride the Horn of Africa.'... Eritrea is beginning to develop without the corruption so common elsewhere on the continent." [**The Wall Street Journal, 31May, 1994**]
- "Eritrea is virtually without peer in Africa as it pursues its own model of development and vision of democracy.... Who is to say that Eritrea will not again surprise the world as it seeks to liberate itself from poverty?" [**Financial Times, 18 January 1996**]
- "Eritrea is being seen as a model for the regeneration of a whole continent... This country could be one of the biggest success stories. The nationals' sense of purpose, the discipline of its people, the hard work, which is evident in the countryside, gives us cause for hope. The government has also been financially responsible in the use of its resources." [**Washington Times, 14 September 1996.**]
- "Eritreans are nationalistic and cohesive to a fault.... They don't want to be slaves to any foreign donor country. They want economic self-sufficiency and they want to do it their way and with their own blood and sweat." [**The Globe and Mail, 26 April 1997**]
- "Eritrea ... is embarking on a campaign to abolish food aid and stand on its own feet... From the ruins of war, which cost more than 250,000 lives (on the Eritrean side alone), the Eritreans are transforming their new nation into a country that works." [**Africa Today May-June 1997**]
- "Little Eritrea... has proved to be a model. Eritrea's success is all the more striking because the new government fended for itself for the most part--and succeeded." [**Los Angeles Times, 27 April 1998**]
- "In Africa, a continent racked with wars, revolutions and repression and increasingly regarded as an economic and social basket case, there is one country that is reversing the trend and today is the democratic hope of the continent. It is Eritrea. ... As one who has reported from a score of African countries over the past 40 years, I've no hesitation saying that Eritrea is unlike anything I've encountered in Africa. ... 'I'd just about given up on Africa as hopeless, until seeing this country. Now I have renewed hope.'" [**Toronto Sun, 27 December 1998.**]

B. The demonization campaign

While the above-quoted laudatory reports on Eritrea are by no means exhaustive, it gives us a general overview of a positive picture of Eritrea at peace with itself and focused on development. This brief honeymoon period of the West vis-à-vis Eritrea was to be short-lived, however. Shortly after the outbreak of war in May of 1998 with the Ethiopian minority regime of Meles Zenawi, a barrage of negative press against Eritrea started and continues to this date. I will not bore you with lengthy quotes of this demonization propaganda campaign against Eritrea. Suffice to say that Eritrea in the past 15 years, ever since the outbreak of war with Ethiopia in 1998, is being labeled as “pariah state”, “the North Korea of Africa”, “isolationist”, “spoiler”, “the most repressive nation on earth”, etc.

Why the change of tone? As far as Eritrea is concerned nothing has changed on the fundamental issues of its commitment to nation-building, development, social justice and democracy, peaceful co-existence with its neighbors, non-alignment and proactive engagement with the international community based on the principles of mutual-respect and non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign nations. In fact, the positive treatment of Eritrea in the first 6 years of its independence was a way to entice it from its independent national developmental path and turn it into “just another subservient client state in Africa”.

In 1995, addressing an international development conference in Washington DC, Eritrea’s President Isaias Afwerki pointed out that the relationship between Western donors and African countries should not be one that perpetuates dependency but rather should be based on “true partnership”.

“Symmetry should be the linchpin of this relationship. Donor-recipient relationships based on prescription and dictation of unsuitable antidotes will not do. Our independence of decision should not be encroached upon by conditionality of aid. This is a fundamental question of dignity which cannot be compromised by temporary necessity.”

President Isaias was clearly staking out Eritrea’s position that it would not abide by the neo-liberal economic orthodoxy known as the Washington Consensus. Hence, once it became clear that Eritrea would not budge from its steadfast commitment towards independent and self-reliant national developmental policies, the propaganda tone made a

sharp u-turn. For the past 15 years, demonization and vilification of Eritrea have become a staple diet of the Western mainstream corporate media. In the words of Noam Chomsky, the reason is simple: Eritrea was seen as “the threat of the good example”:

"No country is exempt from this treatment, no matter how unimportant. In fact, it's the weakest, poorest countries that often arouse the greatest hysteria. ... The weaker and poorer a country is, the more dangerous it is as an example."

III. What is the reality in Eritrea today?

In an article titled “We Should Learn from Different Development Models” (3 August, 2011), British development expert, Dr Gordon Peters, had this to say about the Eritrean experience -- and you will forgive me if I quote him at length because it provides sharp contrast to the demonization campaign against Eritrea:

In the past two to three years I have been in two very different countries, about both of which one hears very little in the discourses of development. One is Paraguay

The other country is Eritrea where the philosophy and practice of self-sustainability is being put in place country-wide, in semi-arid terrain in the Horn of Africa, following a brutal civil war with Ethiopia [and an unresolved border truce policed by the UN], and, significantly, without donor aid. Eritrea's current one party state [but with some evident participatory democracy] clearly does not fit with the geopolitical aims of the developed world governments, and at least as much the Eritrean government has said 'no thanks' to donor aid and dependency.

But the point is that in a region of Africa where millions are again starving and donor aid is large and 'complicated' in its distribution, and its onward value and re-direction, there is a country managing to restore its terraced agricultural land, to re-forest, to help returnees set up land holdings, to educate children and give women an equal say in economy and society - and to extract something like 6% of profits from mining companies for social development

Having lived and worked in Eritrea for the past 10 years, I can bear witness to the accuracy of Dr Gordon Peters take on Eritrea. Every year Eritrea steadily climbs up the ladder of the UNDP's human development index. Eritrea is one of the three Africa countries that is on target as far as reaching the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that was passed back in 2000 to be accomplished by 2015.

All these significant accomplishments by Eritrea were registered despite the brutal war that the Ethiopian minority regime unleashed on it in 1998 – 2000, and the recent US-imposed UNSC sanctions (2009 and 2011). I will not go into details about the harsh hostilities that Eritrea has been faced with in the past 15 years of its existence as they are too well known to this audience. Eritrea has abided by international laws and agreements and respects the sovereignty and independence of its neighbors. The pretext for the war against Eritrea that the TPLF regime of Meles Zenawi unleashed in 1998 – at a high cost over a 100,000 lives from both sides -- was supposed to be resolved by the peace treaty of Algiers which was signed in December 2000.

The US was the major force behind the peace process and the author and guarantor of the Algiers treaty itself. As a result of the peace agreement a neutral body of arbitration called the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission was set up, whose ruling in accordance with the Algiers treaty was to be “final and binding”. Eritrea has accepted EEBC's ruling which was rendered in April of 2002. The Ethiopian regime of Meles Zenawi rejected it with impunity, occupying to this date sovereign Eritrean territory and continuing its hostile provocations against Eritrea with US backing. In a typical fashion of “inverting the victim and the aggressor” the US and Meles Zenawi's Ethiopia, its favorite puppet regime in Africa, have brought to the UN bogus charges against Eritrea for aiding Somali insurgents and imposed sanctions on it, while Ethiopia that flaunts international agreements and invades Somalia is let off scot free and even rewarded to the tune of billions of dollars in economic and military aid by the US and its European allies.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Eritrea, however, remains engaged in its commitment towards regional peace and stability, which it sees as essential foundational building blocks to achieving

economic integration and cooperation. In the era of corporate-driven globalization, regional trade blocks and economic integration of the economies of Third World countries are necessary prerequisites to escape marginalization, poverty and underdevelopment. Eritrea's recent positive engagement with the Sudan is a good start and this needs to be expanded to include all the member countries of IGAD.

The way forward towards sustainable peace and stability in the Horn of Africa is clear. Post-Meles Ethiopia needs to immediately withdraw from sovereign Eritrean territory it is occupying, and allow physical demarcation of the border to take place based on the EEBC's final and binding ruling. The US needs to lift the unjust sanctions it has imposed on Eritrea through the UN Security Council. Furthermore the US and its European allies must reverse their misguided policies of propping up tyrannical client regimes in the Horn of Africa and play a constructive role of peace in the region by de-escalating their militarization of the region. These are the just demands of the Eritrean people – and the peoples of the entire Horn of Africa region too – who are finally awakening and determined to become masters of their destinies.

In the meantime, like its national symbol, the camel, Eritrea patiently and steadily marches forward, living up to the prophetic words of Abdul Rahman Mohammed Babu as “the future of Africa that works.”