

The Great Illusion (Part II)

Isaias Afwerki's dictatorship in Eritrea and democracy in Ethiopia

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Some political organizations that are committed to democracy and national unity in Ethiopia seem prepared to accept assistance from and to ally with the dictator. Although some have attempted to sanitize his autocracy, to beautify his oppression, to conceal his faults, by emphasising his alleged positive personality traits and his visionary leadership, none has come out openly and declared him a democrat.

We have been told that he leads a modest life; he is revered by his people; unlike most governments in Africa, he is free of corruption; he is undertaking a massive transformation of Eritrea's economy and society along egalitarian lines; in contrast to the children of African elites, his children are educated in Eritrea; he travels freely throughout Eritrea unescorted by an army of secret service agents and a column of tanks, contrary to African dictators, and so on.

Even if all of these assertions are correct—though his opponents will dispute all of them—they are irrelevant. They cannot be the basis for forming a political alliance with a dictator. Political alliances are formed on the communality of strategic objectives. And Isaias Afwerki's strategic goals in Ethiopia are irreconcilable with democracy and national unity in Ethiopia.

Asked about his government's support for political groups opposed to the regime in Ethiopia, including those that are fighting for democracy and national unity, he responded, "...we are making our modest contribution." This declaration about supporting democracy and national unity is, to say the least, hypocritical.

Can a leader who practices dictatorship in his own country really support the struggle for democracy in another country? Can an autocrat who suppresses democratic freedoms, denies civil liberties, and violates human rights against his own people, and imprisons his own comrades (the 15 leaders of the EPLF) advance democracy elsewhere, particularly in a neighboring country? The answer is a resounding no.

When questioned about the lack of democracy and freedom in Eritrea, he dismissed the question by saying it is "... a distortion of the reality..." Adding, "...crooks have mastered the art of distortion..." Who is distorting reality, the reputable international organizations who report that there is no democracy and freedom in Eritrea or the dictator who is saying it exists when it does not? [Human Rights Watch](#) in 1994 reports: "... human rights conditions remain dismal. Indefinite military service, torture, arbitrary detention, and severe restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and religion provoke thousands of Eritreans to flee the country each month... Eritrea has no constitution, functioning legislature, independent judiciary, elections, independent press, or nongovernmental organizations; it does not hold elections. All power is concentrated in the hands of President Isaias Afewerki, in office since 1991"

Further [it says](#),

“Children as young as 15 are inducted and sent for military training, according to recent interviews by refugee agencies. They and other recruits are regularly subject to violence and ill-treatment for raising questions or for other perceived infractions. Beatings, torture, and prolonged incarcerations are common. Women are subject to sexual violence from military commanders, including rape. No mechanisms for redress exist”.

Therefore, he is intrinsically incapable of supporting democracy in Ethiopia for obvious reasons. First, supporting the struggle for democracy in Ethiopia is tantamount to sowing the seeds of his own destruction. It will be a suicide pact. Suppose, a democratic government is formed in Ethiopia, with the assistance of the EPLF regime (a most improbable outcome), such an outcome will threaten the very survival of the dictator himself; the establishment of democracy in Ethiopia will inspire Eritreans to struggle for democracy as well.

Second, in general, ideological considerations contribute to the type of assistance a government gives to a foreign political organization. Governments provide political, diplomatic, and military assistance to a foreign political organization often for ideological reasons, yet he lacks the ideological commitment to liberal democracy. His ideology, authoritarianism infused with a great deal of militarism, is incompatible with democracy. An autocrat cannot champion democracy, any more than a democrat bolsters authoritarianism.

However, governments, irrespective of the ideology they pursue, do assist a foreign political organization to advance their interests. They may support political organizations that espouse a different ideology than theirs, as long as the recipient promotes their political and economic interests. This is politics 101. So, it is possible that he could support the struggle in Ethiopia but for his own ends.

The reason the EPLF provides assistance to political groups fighting the regime in Ethiopia is simple: to further its objectives. It has nothing to do with democracy. Like all governments, the EPLF regime expects something in return for the assistance it offers. As economists often say, “there is no free lunch”.

The EPLF’s strategic interests in Ethiopia and national unity

What are the EPLF’s interests in Ethiopia? What Isaias Afwerki really cares about is his political survival in the short run and his legacy in the long run. In the short-term, Isaias Afwerki would like to stay in power as long as possible. To stay in power, to rationalize his dictatorship, to suppress dissent in Eritrea, he needs external enemies, sometimes manufacturing excuses for enmity.

He has used the conflict with the regime in Ethiopia to deny freedom, to imprison his opponents, to outlaw political parties, to postpone holding elections and the adoption of the constitution indefinitely, to continue with his forced labour of Eritrean youth, among some of the draconian measures he has introduced so far.

This perpetual desire for an external enemy, along with his erratic personality, explains the armed conflict he has initiated with the Sudan, Djibouti, and Yemen, and the verbal barrage he has directed against Western governments (especially the US), NGOs, human right organisations, international financial institutions; and against many African

countries, including Egypt, Uganda, and Kenya over the last 24 years. The border conflict with Ethiopia is partially because of the same reasons, but most importantly because of his desire to access Ethiopia's economy.

In the long run, Isaias Afwerki's wants to leave a legacy of a country that has started economic development in earnest. Yes, he is a dictator; he is also an Eritrean nationalist. But to undertake its development, Eritrea needs resources. The EPLF regime, realizing that Eritrea lacks adequate natural resources, covets Ethiopia's rich resources for Eritrea's economic development that can be used either as inputs for its manufacturing sector (for example, animal hides and skins) or for re-exporting Ethiopia's products to earn foreign exchange, for example coffee and live animals. Eritrea also needs Ethiopia's larger market for its manufacturing sector (for example to sell Asmara Lager Beer). (I will discuss this point further in one of the remaining parts).

In the next part I will argue that his short-term and long-term strategic objectives are incompatible with promoting national unity in Ethiopia.

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The Great Illusion (Part One)

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