

Eritrea: The Great Illusion (Part IV)

Isaias Afwerki's Disparagement of Amharas and Tigryans

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Eritrean strongman Isaias Afewerki

In [Part III](#), I have argued that ethnic fundamentalism divides the political arena into two simple camps: the ethnic in-group and the ethnic out-group, in which members of the in-group are endowed with positive characteristics and members of the out-group with negative characteristics.

I have also attempted to show how one of the variables in Isaias' formula of destabilizing Ethiopia constitutes "raising awareness", Element # 1, as he has described it in the interview. In practice "raising awareness" has meant enhancing ethnic or national identity by attacking, discrediting, and dehumanizing members of the dominant ethnic out-group in the regime. This has resulted in the political derogation of Amharas and Tigryans.

Claims of Tolerance

Isaias claims that he has been telling his Eritrean compatriots not to generalize, not to blame one ethnic group for the injustices perpetrated by the past and current regimes in Ethiopia. He says it is wrong to demonize the Amharas for the wrongdoings of the previous governments, just as it is incorrect to demonize Tigryans for the actions of the current government. He says that he detests hatred, arguing that "*it is only a weak person who is hateful*". On the surface, his pronouncements sound reasonable, but the EPLF's actions betray his words.

The EPLF's Construction of Eritrean Identity: The Italian Influence

The EPLF, during its quest for independence and since Eritrea became independent, has attempted to construct a common Eritrean identity relying on Eritrea's colonial experience of 50 years as its basis. The claim that Italian colonialism provides an overarching unifying social and cultural mechanism is exaggerated.

What percentage of Eritreans had become Italianized by the time Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1952? Was the Italian cultural, artistic, and linguistic influence stronger than the Ethiopian influence in Eritrea, especially among the highlanders? I remain sceptical. (This is another topic that deserves to be explored).

Ethiopian Influence is Dominant

But the problem facing the EPLF's identity construction has been that almost all of the ethnic groups in Eritrea are also found in Ethiopia. The shared experiences, values, and cultures of the various ethnic groups who are found in Eritrea and Ethiopia are stronger than the Italian influence that is allegedly unifying all the ethnic groups in Eritrea. For example, Eritrean highlanders have much more in common with Tigrayans than with any other ethnic group in Eritrea. A Kunama or an Afar in Eritrea rarely identifies himself/herself as an Eritrean because of the Italian experience. In fact, even today, many members of these two groups see themselves as Ethiopians.

Mengistu Haile Mariam: An Ally of Isaias

Isaias and the EPLF needed contributions from others in constructing Eritrean identity. There have been plenty of willing partners to cooperate on the project. If Eritrean artists, musicians, writers, and intellectuals provided him with the bricks and mortar to create Eritrean Identity, the Ethiopian regimes supplied him the hammer, mallet, and axe with which to chip away at Ethiopian identity in their suppression, missteps, and crimes against the Eritrean people. Isaias' best ally was Mengistu Haile Mariam.

Ethnicising the Political System

In its march towards independence, the EPLF, faced with competing national identities and loyalties, had to attack Ethiopian identity to achieve its objective. To attack Ethiopian identity, the EPLF had to ethnicise the political system, political discourse, and the struggle for independence, by labelling the previous two governments as "Amhara" governments.

As stated earlier, the ethnicization of the political system deliberately confuses individuals with their ethnic groups; it intentionally attributes the behaviour of leaders to the "basic characteristics" of their ethnicity. For an ethnic fundamentalist, ethnicity is political destiny. This explains why the EPLF has vociferously engaged in anti-Amhara and anti-Tigrayan propaganda.

Stereotyping the Amharas as Oppressors

A cursory examination of the EPLF propaganda in the 1970s and 1980s reveals how the EPLF, having labelled the previous governments as "Amhara", described every major crime they committed against the Eritrean people as an "Amhara crime".

In the debate over independence, the EPLF branded anyone opposed to its agenda of separation, as "an Amhara chauvinist", irrespective of his/her ethnicity. In the 1980s, when some of its own dissidents, former activists in the Ethiopian student movement who had joined the EPLF, questioned the need for Eritrea's independence, among the other issues they raised, it executed them for being "Amharas".

Intellectualizing the Stereotyping of the Amharas

The anti-Amhara propaganda was not conducted just by the members, cadres, and operatives of the EPLF—and sadly but understandably echoed by ordinary Eritreans—but also by some Eritrean scholars as well. For example, Okbazghi Yohannes, a professor of political science at the University of Louisville, Kentucky, writing in a peer-reviewed academic journal, labels the EPRP as an "Amhara" organization.

Multi-ethnic Organizations Presented as the Dreaded Amharas

He writes, “*The Amhara opposition, too, has an organisational framework as the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP)...*” (p.22, here) . Of course, the EPRP has always presented itself as a multi-ethnic organization. Any of the splinter groups can testify to that, but the professor attempts to discredit the EPRP not because of its ideology, mistakes, or leadership but because it is an “Amhara” organization.

Behind the labelling lies the warning about the dreaded Amharas. The message is that if by any chance the EPRP were to come power, it would be another oppressive Amhara government that would bring about chaos in Ethiopia, similar to the pandemonium in Somalia (p.22, here).

He concludes, by paraphrasing Talleyrand, a French politician from 18th: century, “... *the main problem with the Amhara elite is that; 'they learned nothing; they forgot nothing.'*” (p. 27) here).

Implicit in the paraphrasing is the conviction that a non-ethnic political group, which he labels “Amhara”, fighting against the TPLF-controlled regime , is by definition fighting to restore the oppressive monarchy or the blood thirsty Derg, no matter its political program. The implication is clear: only an EPLF-sanctioned, blessed, and certified separatist ethnic political group enjoys the legitimacy to wage the struggle against the regime.

It is a technique most frequently used by supporters of the TPLF-controlled regime to stifle political discussion, to intimidate opponents, and to discredit non-ethnic groups fighting for democracy and national unity.

Denigrating the Tigryans

Similarly, the EPLF has been disparaging Tigryans since the border war of 1998-2000, resorting to old stereotypes. For example, when Dan Connell, an ardent supporter of the EPLF, asked EPLF officials why they underestimated the Ethiopian army, he writes, “*But few were asking this question. Instead, people were flinging bitter recriminations at the Tigryans for being innately duplicitous.*” (Emphasis added, (Here))

As mentioned earlier, to destabilize Ethiopia, the EPLF has provided financial, military, and propaganda assistance to separatist organizations that engage in acrimonious ethnic propaganda. By placing its state-owned media at the service of separatist organizations, it has partially outsourced the anti-Amhara and anti-Tigryan propaganda work to its surrogate ethnic organizations.

However, there is a problem. Eritrea, as a multi-ethnic country ruled by a dictator, is also an easy target for divisive ethnic propaganda; his own ethnic fundamentalist model of destabilization can be applied to Eritrea as well. Not surprisingly, since the border conflict started in 1998, the TPLF has successfully created a few ethnic organizations to undermine his rule, modeled in the EPLF’s own image, to direct ethnic propaganda against the Hamasiens. What is good for the goose is good for the gander.

In reciting the above, my intention is not to harp on the past or to open old wounds, but to hold Isaias accountable for the EPLF’s past and current divisive propaganda and to underscore the hypocrisy of his statement about tolerance.

Honesty, decency, and integrity require that Isaias accept that the EPLF has engaged in odious propaganda against the Amhara and Tigryan people, yet he shrugs off any responsibility by saying “... *we never made mistakes...*”. The dictator does nothing wrong!! The hand wringing severely damages the sincerity of his statements.

We all have our opinions, views, and even biases about each other. Or else we would not be humans. What is unconscionable is that ethnic fundamentalists have exploited these universal human foibles for their narrow political objectives. In the process, they have legitimized stereotypes, rationalized prejudices, and justified discrimination against an entire ethnic group in the name of fighting to liberate another ethnic group. Naturally, politicians of the victimized ethnic group react in a similar manner, and so the vicious circle of ethnic recrimination perpetuates itself, inflicting serious damages to the Ethiopian body politic. We need to find to find a way of out of this cycle.

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