

Crafting a Family Dynasty: The Dialectics of “Father-Son” Political Transition in Eritrea (Part II)

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Over the last quarter of a century, Issaias has consolidated immense personal power through neo-patrimonial policies that encourage corruption, rent-seeking, nepotism and clientilism at the expense of nation-building and constitutional governance. He created a predatory regime that exists to extract resources from the Eritrean people in order to continue its own survival. The regime has the power of aggressing with impunity and its hunting field is not limited only on its subjects inside the Eritrean territorial boundaries. It also asserts its predatory and coercive activities on its subjects within the Eritrean Diaspora communities. Generally, the relationship between the regime and the Eritrean people is not different from the relationship between a “predator” and its “prey”. As a predator cares less about the welfare of its prey, Issaias and his predatory regime care less about the Eritrean people. The Eritrean people have become “**captive prey**” and its bare survival is under threat from excessive extraction of resources. Given the asymmetric power balance between the regime (predator) and the Eritrean people (prey), the principal anti-predatory strategy of the Eritrean people has, however, become “*physical flight*” rather than “*fight*”. The mass exodus of Eritreans (particularly the youth), business enterprises and entrepreneurs, and human and physical capital during the last two decades is nothing but an exercise of this anti-predatory strategy on the part of the Eritrean people (the prey).

This continuous exodus of Eritreans in general and the Eritrean youth in particular, in essence, has deprived Eritrea of the vital resources for the rise and development of internal resistance against the dictatorial regime. Moreover, Issaias is a brilliant manipulator and he has skillfully



eliminated any kind of resistance from among his ranks. He is also famously known for his use of extreme brutality and exclusion as a means for punishing opponents and competitors. He has been trying to gain and stay in power through the application of ruthless coercion and repression at any cost. In such a manner, over the years, he has accumulated a high degree of concentrated political power and now he is using it to **craft a family dynasty in Eritrea** - he has been

preparing his son to replace him after he is gone (Read the quote from the Indian Ocean Newsletter below).

“The chairman of the **TPLF** (Tigray People's Liberation Front) and president of Tigray National Regional State (TNRS), **Debretsion Gebremichael**, has received a

helping hand from the Eritrean president **Issayas Afeworki** and the Ethiopian prime minister **Abiy Ahmed Ali** as he struggles to be re-elected as the head of his party. The two men have intervened to reassure TPLF leaders that the peace process will not be detrimental to their interests. In late September during the TPLF conference, Issayas Afeworki dispatched to Mekele his eldest son, **Abraham Issayas Afeworki**, who was recently promoted as his special advisor on issues including relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea ([ION 1482](#)). He was accompanied by the minister of mines and energy, General **Sebhat Ephrem**, who is an Issayas Afeworki loyalist. According to our sources, they discussed Eritrea's policy towards the TPLF and reassured the party's leaders." (**The Indian Ocean Newsletter, ISSUE 1483 DATED 10/12/2018**)

To get to this stage, Issaias had to hijack the cause of the Eritrean liberation movement, destroy the fabric of the Eritrean society, dismantle the "Eritrean Family" as a unity and structure of social life and existence, and to reside over an extremely extractive and exploitative predatory regime for the last 25 plus years. As if this were not a historical tragedy that has befallen on Eritrea and its people, many Eritreans are still living in illusion about the nature and the characteristics of the "**Evil Mind**" behind this national and societal disaster. Below is an article, written in 2015, which tried to explain this "Evil Mind". I will leave you with it.

Explaining the Evil Mind that Is Destroying and Burying the Legacy of the EPLF and the Eritrean Dream: Revealing the Nature (Core Values) of Issaias Afeworki

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The point is Eritrean people in a deadly historical mistake entrusted Issais with their public space, their fundamental freedoms, their power of citizenry and sovereignty, and their revolution that they achieved in the decades before independence.

The root causes of all contemporary Eritrean problems are political, inasmuch as the political philosophy of the dictatorial regime of Issaias, which is "*equality in poverty*". Just to make it evident, the dictatorial regime of Eritrean is organized to benefit the few in power at the expense of the vast majority of the Eritrean people. In effect, the political power and vast wealth amassed by Issaias and his elites is one that buys the support and

loyalty Issaias needs in order to stay in power while depriving the general populace of their basic rights. One might ask why the regime wants to impoverish the people. Cannot it benefit more from the prosperity of the people and the country? The answer is “No”, at least for two reasons. (1) Economic institutions that create incentives for economic progress may simultaneously redistribute income and power in such a way that a predatory dictatorship and those that support it may become worse off. Allowing such an economic progress and freedom of institutions that supports it – brings out to the open a conflict between democracy/freedom/equality and dictatorship, which could be instrumental in bringing down the regime of Issaias. For this very reason, the Issaias regime would not allow economic freedom because it threatens its power to the core. (2) The nature and characteristics of the dictator at the helm of power in Eritrea is not amenable to reform, let alone to a fundamental change. Thus, in order to effect democracy and all fundamental freedoms in Eritrea, removing the dictatorial regime’s political structure should be the first order of business for the Eritrean people. To that effect, an understanding of the nature and characteristics of the regime and the man at the helm of the power is crucial.

A cursory revisit to the history of post 1970s Eritrea reveals that the genesis of the dictatorial regime in Eritrea is closely associated with the nature and characteristics of its architect - Issaias Afeworki. Issaias is a narcissistic and greedy dictator. As a narcissistic leader, Issaias has been and continues to be obsessed with the desire to have an absolute power, as well as a grandiose sense of self-importance or uniqueness of his talent by exaggerating his achievements during the armed struggle and beyond. Not only that but also Issaias is a person who portrays himself as a superhuman who deserves a sense of entitlement in that he wants a special treatment from Eritreans without assuming reciprocal responsibilities – he thinks that he has the right to rule Eritrea without the consent of the Eritrean people as if the country is his own private property. To this end, he established a mythical narrative and fairytale about himself that keeps duping the Eritrean public until now.

Now majority of Eritreans know that two decades into Issaias’ dictatorship, Eritrean individuals, families, neighborhoods and towns and villages and other traditional institutions (religious groups, educational institutions, hospitals etc) became state-centered; the popular sovereignty of citizens, freedom and liberties, which are the bedrock of democracy are nonexistent. The message here is that Issaias is a prototype of evil dictator that rose to power on the ruins of democracy and freedom, a man who lacks the basic human capability and morality or sympathy to others. And if there is a piece of human trash in our midst, Issaias would be the one. Like many notorious dictators in history, Issaias’ politics of citizenry resides on division, fear, distortion, and demagoguery.

And to elaborate some of Issaias' egocentrism, brutality, disrespect and contempt to the collective wisdom of Eritrean people, here are few examples that the public is familiar with:

1. The extrajudicial killings of his close associates during and after the war of liberation period on the pretext of national security and other lies;
2. The imprisonment and subsequent disappearances of top government officials such as the G-15 on trumped up charges of treason;
3. Condescending comments such as "do the Eritrean people want us to slaughter lambs every Thursday and deliver them to every house" in his scornful reactions to the public complaints about the provision of public service where in reality there was little of it;
4. Condescending comments such as "let's count the number of pregnancies in Asmara and the number of pregnancies girls in the National Service" when the public complained about the nonconsensual sex and pregnancies for which young girls were being forcibly raped and impregnated by his army generals and officers;
5. Characterizing the 2013 Lampedusa tragedy that claimed over 350 Eritrean children, women and young people as "illegal African migrants" by his state media, which shows the depth of lack of empathy and mockery of Issaias; and
6. The utter disregard to the interest of the Eritrean people when Issaias declared the 1997 ratified Eritrean Constitution (legal document of Eritrean people) as dead before it was even promulgated in his 2015 New Year Interview.

In hindsight we know Issaias exploited the unique circumstances and the critical juncture that occurred in post-independence Eritrea. To put it differently, the fatigue of 30 years of destructive war and the subsequent euphoria of independence let the Eritrean people's guard down and helped Issaias to lay the foundation of his absolutist and extractive political, economic, and social institutions. Not only that but some also believed that giving the power to Issaias was correct and acceptable as a temporary arrangement. The point is Eritrean people in a deadly historical mistake entrusted Issaias with their public space, their fundamental freedoms, their power of citizenry and sovereignty, and their revolution that they achieved in the decades before independence. Using such an opportunity or call it the magnanimity of Eritrean people, Issaias went on consolidating his dictatorial regime by engaging in a scheme of depriving all political rights and atomizing Eritrean society by introducing a series of draconian measures that overtime brought the breakdown of our families and communities, erosion of our cultural values and freedoms, and the destruction of Eritrea's patriotism, harmony, courage, unity,

religious life, and perseverance, which we know such values are the foundation of Eritrean people that helped them withstand all enemies and foreign occupiers, and values that cemented their unity in the last century.

In order to ensure the success and continuity of his dictatorial rule in Eritrea, he pursued a policy of politics of fear and divide-and-rule strategy such as “giving positions as compensations that excluded the civilian workforce from the public life”, “rewarding public positions both civilian and military not on merit, but on the basis of political loyalty; remuneration and entitlements based on cronyism and not on merit, etc. In doing so, the regime accumulated enormous and overarching power through its regime-controlled public space that continues to squeeze and completely suffocate Eritrea’s political and socio-economic space to the extent that the public cannot do anything outside the terms and codes the regime has established. And this has been a major obstacle for any dissent or opposition to organize and flourish inside Eritrea. Under these circumstances, those who can take the risk of acting outside this area are the Diaspora-based individuals and political groups, but they are also weak and divided to the extent that the dictator views them as a nonexistent opposition and if there are, in the eyes of the regime, they are considered as a threat to the country – a claim that the regime is exploiting solely to maintain its political legitimacy in the country.

In sum, we should not underestimate the deceiving power of Issaias. Even now, he can hide his malevolent agenda and deceive well-meaning Eritreans. As a malignant narcissist leader, Issaias is adept at charming and manipulating others, camouflaging his malevolent agenda, and even sometimes appearing to be very a normal person. And yet, he is very skilled both at entrancing and putting other’s under his spell. Not only the disdainful interviews that he gives every New Year, but over the past decades, we saw Issaias portraying every trait of a narcissist leader such as lying, creating false propaganda, presenting exaggerated and dubious claims, including using nonexistent foreign threat to the country to instill fear in the minds of his followers/the public as a ‘controlling technique’. Hence, we should not assume that the people will understand Issaias’ malicious and malevolent behavior and expect them to easily shift loyalty. Chances are that many of his followers may not voice their opposition to his regime and may never exit and shift loyalty to the justice seeking forces (camp). After all, there is the so-called “herding” (just following the flow) that the justice forces need to understand. Thus, as crazy as it is, it is not unnatural for some people to follow the dictator to his grave and perhaps put flowers in his grave. Importantly, for many Eritreans the distinction between “a nation, a state, and a government” is not that clear. For many there is no difference and they consider any “opposition to the government as opposition to the Eritrean Nation

and Eritrean State,” which we know this political attitude is to the likening of the dictator. Our role must be to educate the public on the issue of democracy, rule of law, nation, state, and opposition as related to the process of democratization in Eritrea. With this, it is time that we say enough is enough and stop Issaias from destroying and burying the legacy of EPLF and our armed struggle and the dream of our people – a dream of democracy, rule of law, and constitutional governance that is accountable to the people of Eritrea. EPDP says the justice seeking forces need to stop empty boasting and bragging, and should begin “talk the talk and walk the walk” –backing up what we say with concrete action.