

Eritrea: Scenarios for Future Transition

Africa Report N°200 | 28 March 2013

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
Recommendations.....	iii
I. Introduction	1
II. The Beginning of the End for President Isaias Afwerki?	3
A. The Incident at Forto	4
B. 2012: The President’s Annus Horribilis?.....	6
III. The State of Eritrea.....	10
A. The Foundation of a One-Man State	11
1. The Dream Disintegrates	12
2. The Stifling of Dissent	13
3. The Removal of Checks and Balances	14
B. The Role of the Military	14
C. The Radical Approach to Foreign Relations.....	16
IV. Scenarios for Post-Isaias Eritrea	21
A. A Refashioned PFDJ Maintaining the Status Quo	22
B. PFDJ, without Isaias, but Eritrea Sues for Peace with Ethiopia	23
C. State Collapse (Leading to Civil War).....	24
D. External Mediation or Domination	25
E. Peaceful Transition to Multiparty Democracy	26
F. Regime Change with Ethiopian Intervention.....	26
V. Conclusion	28
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Eritrea and its neighbours	29
B. About the International Crisis Group	30
C. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2010.....	31
D. Crisis Group Board of Trustees	33

Executive Summary

Events in the last twelve months indicate growing discontent inside Eritrea's tightly controlled regime, as well as deepening political and social divisions. While the mounting number of incidents suggests that President Isaias Afwerki's regime is vulnerable, with increasing concerns over its ability to stay in power, the country would face numerous institutional, socio-economic and geopolitical obstacles during and after any transition. A careful assessment of these, as well as the role neighbours and the wider international community could play, is urgently needed to help avoid a violent power struggle that could prove dangerous for the Horn of Africa and potentially – as Eritrea is a littoral state – for the Red Sea region.

Isaias's disappearance from public view for several weeks in April 2012 amid rumours of his illness and death made evident the lack of a succession plan. In March and May 2012, the Ethiopian army made incursions, revealing the Eritrean military's disastrous state. Subsequently, a number of defections reached media attention: pilots flying the presidential plane absconded in October, the information minister (a close ally of the president) vanished in November, and the national football team requested asylum in December. Meanwhile several thousand – predominantly young – Eritreans fled every month, preferring the danger and uncertainty of refugee camps and illegal migration routes to the hopeless stasis at home. Then, on 21 January 2013, approximately 100 soldiers rebelled in the capital, Asmara, taking control of the information ministry for a day.

It is difficult to predict what an eventually post-Isaias Eritrea will look like: after and in spite of 21 years of forceful nation-building, fault lines, especially of ethnicity, region and religion (Christians versus Muslims) are still there, some deeper than before. Since the state lacks any institutional mechanisms for peaceful transition of power or even a clearly anointed successor, instability is to be expected, with the corrupt army the likely arbiter of who will rule next. But even the generals appear split over loyalty toward the president.

To reduce the risk of instability in Eritrea and its neighbourhood, a broad coalition of international actors should take precautionary moves, including immediate and decisive efforts to promote dialogue on avoidance of internal power struggles and mediation of a peaceful transition. This could lead to opening of political space and normalisation, both domestically and internationally. Any opportunity should be seized to bring Asmara in from the cold. UN-imposed sanctions (imposed for support of Al-Shabaab in Somalia and other destabilising activities) should be kept under active review. The European Union (EU) and U.S. should work with others, such as Qatar and South Africa, that have better relations with Eritrea's ruling elite and could facilitate constructive engagement. Member states of the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) should welcome Eritrea back and encourage normalisation of relations.

If, as many believe, formal diplomacy remains blocked, Ethiopia, Sudan and Djibouti should engage with exiled opposition parties (including armed ethnic fronts) to encourage proactive engagement with dissidents in Asmara, promote dialogue and agreement by them not to use force that could lead to a protracted conflict and have repercussions for the entire region.

This report examines the regime's vulnerabilities, maps out six possible scenarios for a post-Isaias Eritrea and identifies the main risks and opportunities the country and the region would face. Concerned Western partners, neighbours and governments with special relations with Asmara could play a vital role in preventing a major humanitarian crisis or even the state's collapse.

Recommendations

*To avert chaos and further displacement of populations;
bring Eritrea in from the cold and promote talks with President
Isaias Afwerki and the current leadership*

To regional and wider international partners:

1. Accept Eritrea's request to rejoin the Intergovernmental Agency for Development (IGAD), and so reactivate regional dialogue as per the organisation's mandate.
2. Re-evaluate UN Security Council sanctions on Eritrea in light of the latest UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea report, so as to incentivise improvements in Eritrean behaviour.
3. Enhance the European Union (EU) Horn of Africa strategy to promote regional economic integration and dialogue through the mediation capacities of the EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa, and include Red Sea security in his mandate.

In the event of a transition

To the U.S., EU and countries with special relations to Eritrea:

4. Coordinate U.S. and EU efforts with countries that have special relations with Eritrea's current leadership (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Uganda, South Sudan and China).
5. Support a frank assessment of the country's socio-economic situation and development needs, including disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration and security sector reform programs, as well as projects for the reintegration of asylum seekers scattered around the world.
6. Engage Eritrea's direct neighbours, with African Union (AU) leadership, regarding their strategic response if a transition occurs, and seek to preserve Eritrean national unity.
7. Engage with the diaspora – including refugee youth and opposition groups – and promote their proactive engagement with an eventual new government.
8. Promote dialogue with the new leadership and encourage a national conference to open space for inclusive political developments.

Nairobi/Brussels, 28 March 2013

Eritrea: Scenarios for Future Transition

I. Introduction

Eritrea is a small, young and increasingly, fragile state. Crisis Group has previously argued that it was “under severe stress, if not yet in full-blown crisis”.¹ This report reflects recent events that signal internal malaise has become chronic, including a short-lived military protest at the information ministry, known as “Forto”, and longer-term trends, most obviously the accelerating exodus of working-age Eritreans via expensive and dangerous channels.

Social, religious and ethno-regional divisions are resurfacing that the years and culture of the liberation struggle underplayed and 21 years of forced nation-building have suppressed.² Following the Forto incident, the government arrested formerly ultra-loyal ministers, party officials and military officers, almost all from a Muslim background. The determination to forge a strong, “mobilised” nation under a single, presidential party has resulted in an ever narrowing leadership base. The last public demands for reform, including by regime insiders (the so-called G15) were silenced by arrests in 2001.³ Since then, change and reforms have been hinted at, but have never materialised, blocked it seems by the office of the president.

The report examines how the desire of the president to maintain pervasive power has neutered political debate, leaving a dangerous void where ideas and broad-based leadership might have flourished. It looks also at the question of whether the military – the only institution of any strength – is likely to be a force for genuine change and at what might be expected of a fractious and aging opposition largely hosted by self-interested neighbouring states.⁴ It likewise considers the impact of international players – notably Ethiopia, Sudan and Djibouti – and of the sanctions regime imposed on Eritrea by the UN Security Council in 2009 and 2011.

If Eritrea’s future proves to hold more confrontation and risk for itself and the region, the president may take ironic consolation from Mikhail Bakunin’s warning to a friend: “Beware of small states”: advice that while such nations are vulnerable, they are also a source of trouble, not least, but also not only for their more powerful

¹ Crisis Group Africa Report N°163, *Eritrea: the Siege State*, 21 September 2010, p. 26.

² “Eritrea contains enormous physical, cultural and ethnic diversity, from the highland plateau (known as the *kebessa*) in the centre to the hot coastal plains and the Danakil depression stretching to the south, to the western lowlands abutting Sudan (the *methait*). Within those regions are the distinctive but interconnected economic, cultural and linguistic groupings which comprise the nine official ethnicities. There is also the divide between Christians and Muslims, whose numbers are currently fairly equally balanced. Considering such diversity, and the presence of so many potential fault lines, a history of conflicts is unsurprising”. Ibid, p. 17.

³ See Section III.B below.

⁴ Eritrean opposition parties have been hosted for many years mainly by Sudan. Since the end of the Ethiopia-Eritrea war in 2000 and Eritrea’s warming relations with Sudan, they relocated to Addis Ababa. See Section IV below.

neighbours.⁵ Crisis Group's purpose below is to examine possible scenarios in which this dynamic might play out and to offer suggestions for alleviating the dangers.

In preparation for this report, Crisis Group made multiple requests to the government for permission to meet with the leadership and the widest possible cross-section of citizens. However, visas were never granted. Consequently, the extensive research conducted was obliged to concentrate from the outside on interviews with Eritreans and other long-time observers of Eritrea and the Horn of Africa, in addition to secondary sources.⁶

⁵ David Hirst, *Beware of Small States. Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East* (New York, 2010), p. 2.

⁶ Due to concerns for the security of interlocutors, most sources are not identified.

II. The Beginning of the End for President Isaias Afwerki?

The events of the last twelve months show that the regime is facing its most serious internal crisis since the dissent that followed the end of the war with Ethiopia in 2000-2001. Fractures and fissures are widening, especially between the president's inner circle, the military and the regime's other political wings. The defection of the once ultra-loyal information minister, Ali Abdu Ahmed, is an acute sign, and the "freezing"⁷ of devoted generals is further evidence of a distinct downward trajectory. Worries are increased by the economy's disastrous state.⁸ Many believe the situation, in its current acute form, is not long sustainable, even for a traditionally stoic and resilient population. Hidden behind disputable growth data,⁹ promises of implausible development and the expansion of mining investments (in partnership with state-controlled companies and international firms)¹⁰ is the grim reality that "there is no fuel and even finding daily meals for ordinary people is becoming a nightmare".¹¹

What exactly is happening within the regime remains unclear. However, Isaias is aging and his health is deteriorating rapidly, reportedly "not helped" by heavy drinking.¹² Allegedly, his authority is declining at a slow but steady pace, and the chain of com-

⁷ To be "frozen" (*midiskal*), is the Eritrean term for the unlawful dismissal, sidelining, or neutralisation of potentially critical regime members.

⁸ It is impossible to find affordable fuel and many other basic goods, "and the black market in Eritrea, everybody knows who controls it ... the generals and other high officers within the party". Crisis Group interview, Eritrea, August 2012.

⁹ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected that the economy would grow by a respectable 7.5 per cent in 2012. Growth was strong because of substantial mining investment, in particular the Bisha gold mine. This project, and the output from silver, copper and zinc mines, are expected to be the major sources of growth in 2012-2013. See "Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa – Sustaining Growth amid Global Uncertainty", World Economic and Financial Surveys (International Monetary Fund, April 2012), p. 88. "With the Zara and Koka gold mines both set for production in late 2013, Eritrea's economy will likely expand by double-digit figures next year". "IMF forecasts 7.5 per cent growth for Eritrea in 2012", *Asmara Time*, 20 April 2012. See also "Eritrea Economic Outlook", press release, Africa Development Bank Group, January 2012. Economic data and the state of business can be found at www.doingbusiness.org/data/exploreeconomies/eritrea.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch recently stated: "In recent years the country's largely untapped mineral wealth has provided a badly needed boost to its economic prospects. The Bisha project [one of the biggest mining prospects in Africa], majority owned and operated by the small Canadian firm Nevsun Resources, is Eritrea's first and so far only operational mine. It began gold production in 2011 and produced some \$614 million worth of ore in its first year. Other large projects led by Canadian, Australian, and Chinese firms are also in the pipeline, however. Numerous exploration firms are scouring other leases for new prospects". Human Rights Watch warned that mining firms run risks because of the government's use of military recruits as forced labour. Having interviewed several Eritreans who worked at Bisha during its initial construction phase, it reported: "Some said they were deployed as conscript labourers by Segen (a state-owned contractor). They described terrible living conditions and forced labour for paltry wages. A former conscript said that 'he had been arrested and imprisoned for several months after leaving the work site to attend a relative's funeral'". "Eritrea: Mining investors risk use of forced labor", Human Rights Watch, press release, 15 January 2013. Nevsun responded that "the use of conscripted labour at the Bisha site is not allowed", acknowledged that in early 2009 it had become aware of allegations that Segen might be using conscripts and in response obtained a "written guarantee from Segen that it would not use conscripts at Bisha". It also emphasised the economic contribution of the mine to the economy. "Nevsun comments on human rights matters", Nevsun Resources Ltd., press release, 11 January 2013.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Eritrea, January 2013.

¹² Crisis Group interview, Rome, August 2012.

mand he built around himself – with Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) commanders' support – is weakening as well. Some officers who helped build and consolidate the repressive system are losing – or have already lost – confidence in the president. He, in turn, appears to distrust almost everybody, abruptly turning against former comrades, removing them from power, “freezing” others or promoting rivals into overlapping positions of authority.

A. *The Incident at Forto*

On 21 January 2013, in Asmara, the capital, approximately 100 disgruntled soldiers, possibly accompanied by two tanks, entered “Forto”, the building of the information ministry, which broadcasts the state television (Eri-TV) and rounded up the staff.¹³ They forced the station's director, Asmelash Abraha, to read an announcement stating that the ministry was under their control and demanding the release of all prisoners of conscience and political detainees, as well as implementation of the 1997 constitution.¹⁴

Not much was heard by the public. After two sentences, the TV signal went off air. Troops loyal to Isaias quickly surrounded the building and secured the presidential palace and the airport.¹⁵ “In the centre of Asmara ... life continued much as normal”.¹⁶

Information on what happened afterwards is “still scanty and murky”.¹⁷ What is certain is that after several hours, Eri-TV went back on air (around 10pm), informing viewers of the severe snowstorm in Paris.¹⁸ The day's turbulent local event was not mentioned.

The government reportedly negotiated with the soldiers, and in the end the ministry's employees were released. The mutinous soldiers left the building and returned to their barracks outside the capital. Not a single shot appears to have been fired. The

¹³ The ministry is in an old Italian military building, called “Forte Baldissera”, on the Beit Georgis hill in Asmara's outskirts. There is conflicting information about the leader(s) and motives of the mutiny. According to Awate.com, a diaspora opposition website with good sources in the country, the “mutiny” was led by Colonel Saleh Osman, a hero from the 1998-2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian War, when he resisted orders to abandon the port of Assab, then under siege, and with a few hundred troops repelled the assault. According to Eritrean popular narrative, this was a major driver in the Ethiopian decision to accept negotiations shortly afterwards. According to Stratfor Global Intelligence, “some media outlets have identified [Major General Filippos] Woldeyohannes as being the leader of the possible coup in Asmara”. Reports suggest that he was “frozen” by the president from his position as head of the Asmara military district in November 2012, “to prevent rival military commanders from developing a sufficient base of support to challenge the president”. “A possible coup in Eritrea”, Stratfor, 21 January 2013. Others point to years of growing tension and fissures between the military and the political wings of the regime, and suggest it could have been a “well-orchestrated, targeted incident with senior level direction/guidance within the army. High-level military officials confronted President Isaias Afwerki twice before to raise grievances and demands. After being rebuffed twice by him, today's event happened”. Crisis Group interview, 23 January 2013.

¹⁴ Martin Plaut, “Seething discontent in the Horn of Africa: Eritrea's strange ‘coup’”, *New Statesman*, 23 January 2013.

¹⁵ “What really happened at Asmara's ministry of (dis)information?”, Reporters Without Borders, 24 January 2013; and Crisis Group interviews, 21-22 January 2013. The list of dissenters detained since independence, and especially since 2001, is long and multifaceted. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°163, *Eritrea: the Siege State*, 21 September 2010, pp. 7-8, and Section III below.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, 22 January 2013.

¹⁷ Martin Plaut, “Seething discontent”, op. cit. The information was also confirmed by Crisis Group phone interview, 22 January 2013.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, 23 January 2013.

¹⁹ “What really happened”, Reporters Without Borders, op. cit.

following day Asmara was “calm, shops were open and life was business as usual”.¹⁹ If no immediate punitive measures were taken against the soldiers, it was probably to downplay the incident and wait until international attention subsided.²⁰

Anti-government activists in the diaspora described the 21 January event as an “attempted coup d’état”, and managed to raise international media attention on a country that is normally overlooked.²¹ On 24 January, a protest took place at the Eritrean embassy in London, and in the following days similar demonstrations occurred at legations in Rome, Milan, Berlin, Washington and Tel Aviv, all capitals with significant diaspora presence. Demonstrators supported the dissident soldiers and went far beyond the troop’s demands by calling for an end to President Isaias’s rule.²²

Officials tried to whitewash the affair. The day after, the president’s adviser, Yemane Gebremeskel, stated “all is calm today, as it was indeed yesterday”.²³ Girma Asmeron, the ambassador to the African Union (AU), said coup rumours in Asmara were “wishful thinking”, “the president is healthy, and Eritrea is a peaceful country” where there would “never be a coup”, as it is a “society built on trust”.²⁴ According to numerous, substantiated reports, a round of arrests took place in the days following, involving some military but mainly political figures;²⁵ significantly most were report-

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, 22 January 2013.

²⁰ “The face-off was ‘solved’ when the government accepted his [Colonel Saleh Osman’s] terms”. “The uprising in Eritrea: A prologue, not an epilogue”, *Gedab News (Awate.com)*, 25 January 2013. There are no further details as to what then happened. “Calm returns after siege ends”, *Al Jazeera*, 22 January 2013.

²¹ Leonard Vincent, author of *Les Erythréens* (Paris, 2012), and co-founder of a Paris-based Eritrean radio station “stopped short of calling it a coup d’état and said it wasn’t immediately clear if the action was a well-organised coup attempt or what he called a “kamikaze crash”. “Possible failed coup attempt in Eritrea”, *Associated Press*, 21 January 2013.

²² “Eritrea Unrest Echoed in London”, video, *Al Jazeera: The Stream*, 24 January 2013, at <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201301252316-0022505>. Isaias has ruled Eritrea since May 1991. Eritrea achieved formal independence from Ethiopia in 1993, after a referendum. For background, see Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, op. cit.; and Section III below.

²³ “What really happened”, *Reporters without Borders*, op. cit.

²⁴ Girma also stated: “All over the world an armed, crazy, stupid and terrorist individual or group can take stupid actions such as kidnapping of individuals or taking hostages by raiding government and private institutions and offices. ... Such isolated incidents, which frequently occur in the West, are considered terrorist acts. I don’t understand why in Africa they are considered coups d’état. It is the highest form of double standard and hypocrisy”. “Eritrea says soldiers’ protest ‘stupid’, not coup”, *Agence France-Presse*, 26 January 2013.

²⁵ Richard Lough, “No sign of Eritrean mutineers as calm returns”, *Reuters*, 22 January 2013. Some sources speak of at least 63 people arrested. Among others, Colonel Saleh Osman; Abdella Jaber, the head of organisational affairs of the ruling People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and one of the president’s most trusted officials; Amanuel Haile “Hanjema”, another political party officer once very close to the president; Mustafa Nurhusein, Southern Zone (Zoba Debub) administrator; Osman Jemee Idris, former ambassador to the UAE; Suleiman Hajj, former ambassador to Saudi Arabia and currently Nurhusein’s deputy and mayor of Mendefera; and Ahmed Haj Ali, officially energy and mines minister (though those actually running the ministry are Hagos “Kisha” and Colonel Wedi Bayru, PFDJ heads of the economic department for mines and energy respectively). See “Les jours d’après”, *Les Erythréens Blog* (<http://erythreens.wordpress.com>), 25 January 2013; and “More arrests confirmed”, *Gedab News*, 30 January 2013. The government announced the death of Colonel Abdurahman Mahmoud Jasser, an official in the National Security Office and a veteran from the beginning of the liberation struggle, on 2 February 2013, after “his recent sickness”, but according to *Al Jazeera* his death was mysterious and may have been linked to the 21 January 2013 events. “Al Jazeera: Family says Colonel Abdurahman Mahmoud Jasser’s death Mys-

edly Muslims.²⁶ Various sources suggested the president is presenting the internal conflict as a terrorist “jihad” to buy time.²⁷

B. 2012: *The President’s Annus Horribilis?*

It is hard to tell what exactly happened, who was behind the incident at Forto and their exact intentions or final goals, since the soldiers neither demanded the dismissal of the government nor attempted a coup. What is certain is that this incident, while not unprecedented, was the most recent in a number of underreported events that began in 2012 and indicate growing internal dissent within the previously highly regimented regime, including the once vaunted EDF.²⁸

In January 2012, Ethiopia and Eritrea traded accusations after foreign tourists were attacked and five killed by insurgents in the Afar region, which straddles their joint border.²⁹ “Addis claimed they were under Asmara’s direction, justifying Ethiopian reprisals in March against rebel camps inside Eritrea.”³⁰ Further incursions were

terious”, *Gedab News*, 4 February 2013; and “Col. Abdurahman Mahmoud Jasser passes away”, *Shabait*, 2 February 2013.

²⁶ “Wave of arrests in the aftermath”, *Asmarino Independent*, 24 January 2013; and “Eritrean opposition claim political purge after mutiny”, Agence France-Presse, 26 January 2013. Some Christian religious leaders were also reportedly detained. Alex Murashko, “Eritrea officials arrest 10 church leaders; and Christians fear increase in persecution”, *Christian Post*, 24 January 2013.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, February 2013.

²⁸ With one exception, no foreign journalists are based in Eritrea, and there has been no independent press since 2001, when a government crackdown on dissent led to imprisonment of eleven journalists and closure of all private media outlets. The only independent reporter (self-proclaimed) the government allows is U.S. citizen Thomas C. Mountain, who says he is the “most widely distributed independent journalist in Africa, living and reporting from Eritrea since 2006”. He claims that, “*The New York Times* and its cult followers in the American media, amongst others, manufactured an attempted ‘coup’ that never happened in the small East African country of Eritrea”. Instead, “three disgruntled officers told their command that they were being transferred to the capital, Asmara, to guard the Ministry of Information. Excited to be leaving their remote location for life in the capital the citizen soldiers in the command packed their bags, loaded their two tanks on to their trailers, saddled up and headed for the big city... the unit arrived at the unguarded gates of the Eritrean Ministry of Information, unloaded their tanks and, according to neighbours, proceeded to engage in boisterous horseplay on and around their equipment. In the meantime the three miscreant officers barged their way into the television studios of Eritrean TV and waving a pistol around demanded a political screed be read over the air. A quick thinking technician in the broadcast system quickly cut off the signal and their plan was suddenly still born. In the meantime the youngsters in their command outside began to get wind that something was wrong, and when they found out what was going on inside the Eri-TV studios they ‘mutinied’, as in stopped obeying their commanding officers orders which eventually included a command for them to open fire on their fellow Eritreans. Seeing that the jig was up the three ‘mutineers’ absconded on foot from the Ministry escaping down the cliffs behind the old ‘Forto’, once the headquarters for the Italian Colonial Army in Eritrea. All’s well that ends well and the three ‘mutinous’ officers were duly found and arrested. The ‘mutinous’ national service citizen soldiers were taken out to a very tasty dinner at the Malobar restaurant (quite a treat for troops used to a diet of sorghum, chick peas and lentils), [and] spent the night in the daKorea apartments where they enjoyed hot showers, clean sheets and comfortable beds for a change. The next day they and their tanks returned to their base with a well-deserved thanks from the country’s leaders”. Thomas C. Mountain, “The Eritrean ‘Coup’ That Never Was”, *Countercurrents Blog* (www.countercurrents.org), 27 January 2013.

²⁹ “Ethiopia gunmen kill five foreign tourists in Afar”, BBC, 18 January 2013.

³⁰ Argaw Ashine, “Ethiopia, Eritrea trade accusations after deadly tourist attack”, *Africa Review*, 20 January 2012.

reported in late May — just after Eritrean independence day — with Ethiopian troops apparently occupying new positions inside Asmara’s territory. EDF forces, surprisingly, and perhaps ominously for the government, put up little resistance”.³¹ These incursions apparently shocked the army commanders, who looked to blame the political leadership.³²

In the midst of these military developments, in April, rumours of Isaias’s poor health and even death ran rampant through Eritrean communities across the world. It is widely believed, though not confirmed, that he suffers from a liver ailment and has experienced several health crises in recent years. He was not seen in public between 28 March, when he received the South African ambassador’s credentials, and 27 April, when he gave an interview on Eri-TV. Such an absence was unprecedented.³³ Since independence, he has appeared continuously on national television.³⁴

It was not the first time the president’s death had been rumoured, but it was the first time it prompted an information ministry statement that his health was “robust”.³⁵ It blamed the CIA for circulating false information about failing health, an accusation the president repeated during his Eri-TV interview and thereafter to the international press.³⁶ In his public appearances since April 2012, Isaias has appeared healthy.

The president’s absence created uncertainty, confusion and in some instances hope. However, it remains unclear what a future without Isaias would hold and whether Eritrea could be a stable state without its anchor and creator. His month-long absence exposed the government’s apparent lack of thought about the future and a succession plan, either in a clear institutional mechanism for transferring power, or in the person of an anointed successor.

A few months after Isaias resurfaced, Ethiopia’s prime minister, Meles Zenawi, vanished from public life for months, until his death was officially announced on 20 August 2012.³⁷ Although ties were severed by the 1998-2000 border war,³⁸ Eritrea

³¹ Crisis Group blog, “Eritrea: When is a mutiny not a mutiny?”, (www.crisisgroupblogs.org/african-peacebuilding), 24 January 2013.

³² The political leadership is centred on Isaias and his presidential office. See Section III below. “The Eritrean generals had a shock of their life when Ethiopia took two punitive actions – in Danakil and Badme areas [in March and May 2012]. They never thought the Eritrean army would crumble so fast. It is after that that the dissent began”; “... the Ethiopians are still sitting on Eritrean villages they captured then the Eritrean army tried to dislodge them without any success”. Crisis Group interview, January 2013.

³³ The only similar period of long absence happened during five weeks of intense fighting in May 2000. Then rumours of a possible coup d’état also ran high. According to various sources, Isaias underwent liver surgery in Doha, Qatar, during his absence in 2012. See Berouk Mesfin, “Where is Eritrea heading?”, *ISS Africa*, 5 February 2013.

³⁴ Live interviews are not common, but Isaias is often on national television for events – mostly national days or some world happening with impact on Eritrea, for example after sanctions were imposed by the Security Council or the Arab Spring. In the case of the latter, he waited a long time before reacting. After the fall of Egypt’s president, Hosni Mubarak, on 11 February 2011, Isaias gave a series of lectures.

³⁵ Press statement, information ministry, *Shabait*, 22 April 2012 (www.shabait.com/news/local-news/9242-press-statement).

³⁶ “Live interview with President Isaias Afwerki”, video, YouTube, 28 April 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZAcXf50tc. “VOA Interview: Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki has denied his country stifles freedom of speech”, audio, YouTube, 18 May 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_qgOJ6sQm4.

³⁷ See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°89, *Ethiopia After Meles*, 22 August 2012.

and Ethiopia remain linked – due to their ethnic, historical, socio-economic and psychological ties – and the political destinies of the two governments, which came to power together as allied rebel fronts in 1991, are still closely connected.

The Eritrean government studiously underplayed Meles's death, since it could have triggered debate on leadership and succession at home. Meles refused to move on Asmara near the end of the war in May 2000 and was generally perceived as supporting the country's independence.³⁹ In the aftermath of his death, many appeared worried about a new Ethiopian leadership's policy toward Eritrea; information emerged from Asmara that the Eritrean government was arming militias.⁴⁰

During the latter half of 2012, more rumours circulated about disagreements inside the regime on the direction of the country, as well as Isaias's leadership. Various high-profile ministers and military commanders were perceived as favouring a leadership transfer, disloyal to the president or trying to organise a coup d'état.⁴¹

Symptomatic of fading morale, in early October, two air force pilots fled with the presidential plane to Saudi Arabia, claimed asylum and issued a statement criticising Isaias.⁴² In November, rumours spread about the defection of the information minister, Ali Abdu, one of the most loyal servants of the president and the mastermind of almost absolute press censorship.⁴³ His brother confirmed the desertion months later.⁴⁴ In December, the entire national football team in Uganda, to play an international match, sought political asylum.⁴⁵ These were the only cases that reached international media outlets' attention, but they epitomise the experience of tens of thousands of Eritreans – mostly between twenty and 40, as well as an increasing number of

³⁸ Eritrea achieved independence from Ethiopia in 1991 at the end of a decades-long struggle. After some years of friendly cooperation, the two fought a bloody war (1998-2000), triggered by a border dispute. Since then, there has been "no war, no peace". See also the "Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundaries Commission Decision Regarding Delimitation of the Border between The State of Eritrea and The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia", 13 April 2002, www.haguejusticeportal.net/Docs/PCA/Ethiopia-Eritrea%20Boundary%20Commission/Decision_13-4-2002.pdf; Crisis Group Africa Reports N°68, *Ethiopia and Eritrea, War or Peace?*, 24 September 2003; N°101, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: Preventing War*, 22 December 2005; N°141, *Beyond the Fragile Peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea: Averting a New War*, 17 June 2008; and Briefing N°48 *Ethiopia and Eritrea: Stopping the Slide to War*, 5 November 2007; also, Tekeste Negash and Kjetil Tronvoll, *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War* (London, 2000).

³⁹ In May 2000, Ethiopia's largest offensive smashed Eritrean positions in the western lowlands, forcing its army to pull back to the hills west of Mendefera and south of Adi Quala which were easier to defend. These held, preventing an advance toward Asmara and producing a bloody standstill by June. Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, op. cit.

⁴⁰ It is a measure of the government's confidence that it was apparently unconcerned these weapons might later be turned against it. Some commentators have noted this may have been a counter-move against some generals. Crisis Group interview, January 2013.

⁴¹ In November 2012, there were rumours of a round of arrests and "freezing" of senior military leaders, including the defence minister, Sebhat Ephrem.

⁴² The two pilots are Captains Mekonnen Debesai and Yonas Woldeab. "Erythrée: deux officiers demandent l'asile politique en Arabie Saoudite à bord du jet privé du président", Radio France International, 4 October 2012.

⁴³ Mohammed Keita, "Where is Eritrean Information Minister Ali Abdu?", CPJ Blog (www.cpj.org/blog), 27 December 2012. Ali Abdu's father, speaking of his son, used to refer to him as PIA's (President Isaias Afwerki) son. Crisis Group interview, January 2013.

⁴⁴ Kassem Hamadé, "Ministern bekräftar: Har lämnat regimen", *Expressen*, 30 January 2013.

⁴⁵ "Eritrean football team seeks asylum in Uganda", *New Vision*, 6 December 2012.

unaccompanied minors – who fled during the year from unending military service and forced labour (see Section III.B below).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was said to have estimated that “3,000 Eritreans fled the country every month, mostly to Ethiopia or Sudan, despite a ‘shoot to kill’ policy for anyone caught attempting to cross the border. Many of those fleeing were young people escaping indefinite national service conscription. Families of those who fled faced reprisals, including harassment, fines and imprisonment”. “Eritrea”, in “Annual Report 2012”, Amnesty International, 2012.

III. The State of Eritrea

Isaias is the nucleus of the Eritrean state. His entrenched personal rule raises serious concerns about what will happen to the country, and by extension the region, should he be deposed or incapacitated. He developed his pivotal role during the 30-year struggle for liberation from Ethiopian rule, as the de facto leader of the Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF), the main front fighting for Eritrean independence. As president of the new country in 1993, he further centralised power and reduced it to an authoritarian siege state.⁴⁷

The president maintains control by keeping the country on a perpetual war footing; nullifying institutions and personalising all branches of the state; continuously fomenting rivalry; and constructing a system of patronage reliant solely on him. No institutional mechanism has been installed to resolve conflicts between the branches of government or between government and population. Governmental institutions have withered, replaced by informal governance by presidential dictate.

The exception is the military, which appears to have maintained a certain degree of autonomy, such that it has reportedly questioned Isaias's capacity to retain control and asked him to consider a transition at various points in the recent past. The president appears to have refused. Therefore, quite possibly with quiet approval of some senior officers, dissent within the ranks has started to grow. But it is a question whether this newly found desire for change is motivated by patriotic duty or by personal and financial interests.

The foreign ministry suffers from the overall weakness of the formal offices of state and the president's unilateral decision-making. The equivocal role that the international community, especially the UN, the old Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and "Western" nations played vis-à-vis Eritrea before its independence, has allowed the president to dismiss conventional diplomatic channels.⁴⁸ His position was vindicated when the Eritrean-Ethiopian Boundary Commission (EEBC) released its final and binding demarcation of the border in 2002, deciding Badme – dispute over which was a trigger for the war – was in Eritrea. Though they were guarantors of the peace agreement, major Western governments failed to ensure implementation, largely (as Eritrea saw it) because of U.S. and others' interests in maintaining good relations with their chosen regional ally, Ethiopia.⁴⁹

In 2009 and 2011 the UN Security Council imposed sanctions against Asmara, for actions in support of Al-Shabaab in Somalia, as well as other destabilising activities, including an attempt to attack the annual AU summit in Addis Ababa.⁵⁰ Once more,

⁴⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, op. cit.

⁴⁸ For more, see *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Eritrea has tried to offer itself to the West for almost a decade as a privileged counter-terrorism partner in the Horn of Africa and beyond. At the time of the invasion of Iraq (2003), Asmara "had made a vigorous and blatant PR exercise to sell itself as the ideal partner in other dimensions of the war on terrorism It claims its Red Sea port and its airport are within easy flying distance of Baghdad, and are thus an alternative base to a reluctant Saudi Arabia. ... One result of these competitive manoeuvres by Eritrea and Ethiopia to catch the eye of the U.S. was that when [the] U.S. unveiled its grand coalition against terrorism, just prior to the invasion of Iraq, they were two of the only four African countries that were listed". Lionel Cliffe, "Regional Implications of the Eritrea-Ethiopia War", in "Dominique Jaquin-Berdal and Martin Plaut (eds.), *Unfinished Business: Eritrea and Ethiopia at War*, (Trenton, 2004) pp. 163-164.

⁵⁰ "Eritrea accused of planning major bomb attack on African Union summit", *Global Post*, 28 July 2011; and "Eritrea denies support for Al-Shabaab", Reuters, 18 August 2011. The full UN Monitor-

the international community appeared to agree with Ethiopia's assessment of Asmara as "the prime source of instability for the whole region".⁵¹ However, the sanctions were aimed at punishing and isolating the leadership; rather than incentivising internal reforms, they likely inspired the opposite.⁵²

A. *The Foundation of a One-Man State*

The liberation struggle was often painted by international observers and Eritreans themselves as a victory of national unity, discipline and dedication over Ethiopian imperialism. There was an assumed unity between fighters and civilians (within the country and the diaspora) that for many years overshadowed the more complex reality that included centralised decision-making and the quashing of all internal dissent. In fact Isaias had become the EPLF's leader by "employing cunning subterfuges and brutal repression against political rivals" within it and against rival liberation movements.⁵³

At the same time, the EPLF leadership demanded unquestioning loyalty. In order to establish even greater cohesion in ideology, politics, organisation and national identity, it created a secret "party within the party", the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP).⁵⁴ In time, however, the EPRP became more "an instrument of control than one of leadership", and Isaias was at its epicentre.⁵⁵ The political culture that emerged in the years spent in the bush, fusing authoritarianism with devotion, sowed the seed of dictatorship and the political culture behind it.⁵⁶

When the EPLF liberated Eritrea in 1991 and achieved de jure independence in May 1993, Isaias made himself head of state and commander-in-chief. When the EPLF was transformed from a liberation front into the sole legal political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), he was appointed chairman.⁵⁷

ing Group Report on Eritrea (2011) can be found at www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2011/433.

⁵¹ "Security Council, by vote of 13 in favour adopts resolution [2023] reinforcing sanctions", www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10471.doc.htm, 5 December 2011. With two abstentions (China, Russia), "the Council demanded that Eritrea cease all direct or indirect efforts to destabilize States, and decided that States shall 'undertake appropriate measures to promote the exercise of vigilance' in business dealings with Eritrea's mining sector", Ibid.

⁵² "When I am challenged, I become more stubborn – more and more rigid. I am very emotional". President Isaias Afwerki's remark to Dan Connell, noted in Dan Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Lawrenceville, 1997), p. 173. See also "President Isaias Afwerki: The Eritrean President in a rare interview with al Jazeera's Jane Dutton", Talk to Al Jazeera, 22 February 2010. The full interview can be watched at www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2010/02/201021921059338201.html

⁵³ Petros B. Ogbazghi, "Personal Rule in Africa: The Case of Eritrea", *African Studies Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2011), p. 8. For more, see Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, op. cit.

⁵⁴ The EPLF was guided, both militarily and politically, by the EPRP, whose very existence was not known by the vast majority of both EPLF fighters and leaders until revealed by Isaias in 1994. The president said that the inner-party was a revolutionary vanguard, directing the organisation during the struggle until it was dismantled in 1989. Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Dan Connell, "Inside the EPLF: The Origins of the 'People's Party' & Its Role in the Liberation of Eritrea", *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 28, no. 89 (2001), p. 362.

⁵⁶ Gaim Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence: Social Capital, Associational Life, Religion, Ethnicity and Sowing the Seeds of Dictatorship* (Trenton, 2008), p. 277.

⁵⁷ David Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 163-171.

Despite this, hopes for an open society and democratic institutions remained high among Eritreans and the international community.

1. The Dream Disintegrates

From 1994 to 1997, it appeared progressive reforms would emerge. The government promised to produce a constitution, introduce multiparty politics and hold national elections. A constitutional commission drafted a charter that was ratified by a constituent assembly in May 1997. However, it was not implemented, and multiparty elections were never held. Instead, Isaias governed according to the political culture he had fostered during the liberation struggle. In the absence of a unifying common enemy (the role previously filled by occupying Ethiopian forces) and faced with an ethnically and religiously diverse population – especially the Christian-Muslim divide – the PFDJ sought to further entrench the notion of a single national identity as defined during “the struggle”.⁵⁸ This led to codification of the EPLF’s values in a national charter approved by the PFDJ’s Third Congress in February 1994.⁵⁹

The national charter expressed six goals for the new state: national harmony; political democracy; economic and social development; social justice; cultural revival; and regional and international cooperation.⁶⁰ “National unity”, “self-reliance in all fields” and a “strong relationship between the people and the leadership” were the paramount guidelines.⁶¹ Through the PFDJ, Isaias promoted a personalised relationship between the state and society, whereby the president secured power by extending his control over all state institutions and simultaneously cultivated the myth of the devoted leader.⁶²

The president retained the power of appointing, promoting and demoting at all levels and single-handedly made nearly all decisions regarding the country’s political trajectory. Former fighters (*tegadelay*) were appointed in all main ministerial capacities, but when some of these liberation heroes in the party and government criticised the way Isaias ruled, their membership was terminated and careers ended.⁶³ Only PFDJ members (and just those uncritical of the president) were entitled to the fruits of the liberation struggle.

⁵⁸ See fn. 2 above.

⁵⁹ “A National Charter for Eritrea: For a Democratic, Just and Prosperous Future”, EPLF, (Nakfa, 1994).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Kjetil Tronvoll, “The Process of Nation-Building in Post-War Eritrea: Created from Below or Directed from Above?”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1998), pp. 462-463.

⁶² Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 438; and Petros B. Ogbazghi, “Personal Rule in Africa”, op. cit., p. 2. Isaias personified the struggle and eventually came to epitomise independent Eritrea. He wanted to be perceived “as the only figure capable of holding Eritrea together”. The posters created for the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the liberation are a good example of this attitude. They portray Isaias in the image of Jesus Christ, the shepherd of the people, leading elders of both low and highlands. Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, July 2012. Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, op. cit.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, July 2012. The national TV and radio head from 1993 to 2001, Seyoum Tsehaie, publicly noted how, by 2001, there were two types among liberation veterans: those who were benefitting, and those who were forgotten. Some of these articles were published by *Setit*, one of Eritrea’s first and most relevant independent newspapers, founded by Fessahye Yohannes (who was arrested in September 2001 without charges and died in custody), and were responses to people complaining that the *tegadelay* were privileged. Seyoum was jailed in September 2001 and has been held incommunicado since.

Few early leaders of the “struggle” have remained in Isaias’s circle. “Second-or even third-tier revolutionaries or close associates of the president” guide the state.⁶⁴ The president also deliberately duplicates responsibilities: behind official department heads and ministers, he appoints shadow officers, who report directly to him and hold real power. Isaias tends to prefer figures he can easily manipulate – those who have little familiarity with the topic they have been asked to work on – and who retain a strong sense of loyalty and gratitude toward the president who has appointed them.⁶⁵

The outbreak of the war with Ethiopia in May 1998 not only allowed Isaias a strong reason to put off democratisation, but also provided him with justification to further concentrate power in his hands.⁶⁶ During the critical weeks of the third phase of fighting, May to June 2000, the president sidelined the defence minister and assumed direct control of military operations. The “imperiousness with which Isaias directed policy and strategy became a matter of grave concern” in the PFDJ leadership and created a deep sense of distress among senior liberation figures.⁶⁷ Yet, open criticism was delayed until the war ended.

2. The Stifling of Dissent

In October 2000, a group of academics and professionals in the diaspora wrote a letter to Isaias, the “Berlin Manifesto”, criticising the tendency toward one-man rule.⁶⁸ More distressing for the president were growing complaints by reformers in the leadership (known as the G15). The group later signed an open letter accusing him of keeping the country on a constant war footing and called for the long overdue national assembly meeting on the border conflict with Ethiopia and the constitution’s implementation. Isaias dismissed these demands and took advantage of the world’s preoccupation with the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the U.S. to quietly arrest eleven. They have been held incommunicado ever since.⁶⁹ He then closed all independent media outlets,

⁶⁴ Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, op. cit.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 8.

⁶⁶ For more on the conflict, see Tekeste Negash and Kjetil Tronvoll, *Brothers at War*, op. cit.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, op. cit.

⁶⁸ A copy of the letter is at <http://asmarino.com/time-machine/349-nine-years-later-oct-7-2001-the-berlin-manifesto>.

⁶⁹ Of the fifteen signatories, only eleven were detained, nine of whom are widely believed to have died in detention. Those reportedly still alive are Haile Woldetensae, and Petros Solomon, both former foreign ministers. The reported dead are Aster Fissehatsion, prominent EPLF member; Mahmoud Ahmed Sheriffo, Aster’s ex-husband and a former vice president and foreign minister; Ogbe Abraha, labour and social welfare minister, chief of logistics, administration and health in the defence ministry, and EDF chief of staff; Jermano Natti, social affairs head in the Southern Red Sea Region; Estifanos Seyoum, finance secretary and EDF finance head; Hamid Himid, department head in the foreign ministry and ambassador to Saudi Arabia; Beraki Gebreselassie, ambassador to Germany; Berhane Gebregzabhier, industry secretary; and Saleh Idris Kekya, director, office of the president, and ambassador to Sudan. “Eritrea: Prisoners of conscience held for a decade must be released”, Amnesty International, 15 September 2011; and “All but two of the 11 former senior government officials of Eritrea confirmed dead”, Eritrean Human Rights Electronic Archive (www.ehrea.org), 4 August 2009. Three were out of the country and one recanted. Shortly after their detention, Isaias called the detainees traitors and claimed to have evidence against them, but no charges were brought, and there have been no trials. According to a prison guard who escaped to Ethiopia, six members of the G15 and five journalists arrested in the 2001 crackdown on the private press died in detention. “Six Eritrean political leaders have died in prison: ex-guard”, Agence France-Presse, 6 May 2010; and Crisis Group analyst interview in another capacity, the former prison guard, Addis Ababa, May 2010.

arrested large numbers of journalists, repressed religious faiths he perceived as anti-state and restricted citizens' movements inside and outside the country.⁷⁰

3. The Removal of Checks and Balances

The judicial system has been simultaneously dismantled. If formal legal codes do exist, they are completely ignored.⁷¹ Presidential decrees have replaced the rule of law. Judges are not independent and are closely monitored by the office of the president. In 2001, several, including the chief justice, criticised increasing executive interference.⁷² They were promptly dismissed.

Along with a number of informal committees run locally by the secret service, army and police commanders,⁷³ the heart of the current legal system is the Special Court, a parallel jurisdiction unfettered by legal codes. Created in 1996, its original mandate was to halt the perceived decline in moral standards in the civil administration.⁷⁴ It now hears criminal, political and administrative cases. The court comprises PFDJ officials and army commanders handpicked by Isaias and accountable exclusively to him. Sessions are held in secret. According to Bereket Habte Selassie, the former head of the Constitution Commission, "the rule of law has gone to the dogs in Eritrea".⁷⁵ The president has granted enormous power to the police, intelligence services and the army to crush dissent. The country has been described as "a giant prison" where thousands of prisoners have vanished in a network of undisclosed jails.⁷⁶

B. *The Role of the Military*

Eritrea has evolved into a highly militarised society, shaped by war and run by warriors, in which citizenship is associated not with rights but obligations equated to indefinite national service.⁷⁷ After independence, as a continuation of previous EPLF policies,⁷⁸ Isaias created a system of military national service centred on the Sawa

⁷⁰ See "Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscriptation in Eritrea", Human Rights Watch, April 2009; and Kjetil Tronvoll, *The Lasting Struggle for Freedom: Human Rights and Political Development, 1991-2009* (Oslo, 2009).

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, July 2012. These codes were developed during Emperor Haile Selassie's rule (1930-1974), and are still formally in force.

⁷² In July 2001, Chief Justice Teame Beyene openly criticised the president's interference in civil courts and the creation of the Special Court and was immediately sacked. Gaim Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred* (Woodbridge, 2009) pp. 32, 61.

⁷³ Kjetil Tronvoll, "The Process of Nation-Building", op. cit., p. 43.

⁷⁴ The Special Court was initially welcomed by many citizens who did not realise its implications. Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, July 2012.

⁷⁵ Bereket Habte Selassie interview with Charles Cobb Jr., in: Petros B. Ogbazghi, "Personal Rule in Africa", op. cit., p. 6.

⁷⁶ George Gagnon, quoted in *ibid*, p. 9.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, op. cit., p. 9; and "Service for life", op. cit.

⁷⁸ "One of the greatest paradoxes of the Eritrean revolution is that it is not the largely voluntary army of the early and mid-70's, mainly composed of students and other urbanites but also of peasants, but the largely involuntary army of the 80's, mainly composed of helpless peasants abducted from their villages, that marched in triumph into Asmara; a phenomenon that puts the revolution's self-claimed participatory nature into question". The *giffa* (forced conscription, in Tigrinya) imposed dire consequences on the peasant population to sustain the revolution at a time of its direst need. "In its scope, it involved tens of thousands of peasants; in its duration, it lasted for about a decade and half; and, in its consequences, it ravaged entire rural areas". The national service policies that followed appear to be its continuation. See Yosief Ghebrehiwet, "Eritrea: Forced Peasant Conscripts that Sustained the Eritrean

training camp.⁷⁹ The official aim was to inculcate the younger generations with the spirit of the liberation struggle, but the impact was to cow society.⁸⁰ After war broke out in 1998, national service became in effect indefinite and youths (and more generally adults under the age of 50) were absorbed into the military machinery with little prospect of demobilisation. In 2002, the system was institutionalised in the Wefri Warsai Yika'alo development campaign.⁸¹

According to Isaias, national service is mandatory for nation-building, to imbue the youth with loyalty and discipline, as well as to stifle regionalism and create national consensus to build a national identity.⁸² It serves the dual purpose of eliminating dissent and reinforcing the army, which has become increasingly necessary for maintaining power. The result is an overwhelming militarisation of an already authoritarian regime, supported by the disastrous rhetoric that all problems have a military solution. Therefore, the military plays a leading role in coercing and intimidating the population.

To secure their loyalty and protect himself from internal dissent, the president bestowed increasing favours from the state, both financial and material, on high-ranking officers, thereby creating enormous corruption within the EDF.⁸³ National service is used as a source of free, forced labour for "parastatal" farms or companies directly in the hands of individual generals.⁸⁴ "The political ties between the military and the president are maintained through clientelistic networks of ... incentives".⁸⁵ By buying the support of the military, Isaias and his political elite maintain control but have also in effect made the EDF's highest echelons the arbiter of any future transition of power.

The practical implications are that the country has been divided into five military zones, headed by generals who have become the most important figures – after Isaias – in Eritrea. They hold absolute power over their regions, with little oversight from the centre. All are under the direct control of the president but have steadily built their own networks of loyalty and interests and appear to have gained significant independence.

Prominent generals and senior PFDJ leaders are reportedly raising the issue of presidential succession. Some sources claim that the generals have split into two groups: loyalists, totally aligned with the president,⁸⁶ and sceptics, who are losing

Revolution" (Asmarino.com), 18 December 2010.

⁷⁹ Petros B. Ogbazghi, "Personal Rule in Africa", *op. cit.*, p. 13. Over the years, other camps have opened in eastern Eritrea, and there is a distinction between those who come voluntarily and those who are forced into the military service, so even in the camps there are first and second-class citizens. Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, July 2012.

⁸⁰ "Service for life", *op. cit.*; and Kjetil Tronvoll, "The Process of Nation-Building", *op. cit.*

⁸¹ The phrase literally means "those who follow the powerful": the *warsai* are the young generation who have come of age since independence; the Yika'alo, "the all-powerful", are the EPLF fighters. Crisis Group Report, *Eritrea: The Siege State*, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10. Although a lot has been written around the campaign, a written plan called Warsai Yika'alo does not exist. It is an example of how a presidential slogan has become the reality of life for so many people in Eritrea.

⁸² Gaim Kibreab, "Forced Labour in Eritrea", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2009), p. 30.

⁸³ The benefits include villas, farmlands, luxurious cars and free manpower. Crisis Group interviews, June-July 2012.

⁸⁴ Gaim Kibreab, "Forced Labour in Eritrea", *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁸⁵ Petros B. Ogbazghi, "Personal Rule in Africa", *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁸⁶ The loyalists are reportedly led by Brigadier General Teklai Kifle "Manjus", commander of the

confidence in Isaias's methods, see the army's decline and understand that if Ethiopia attacks it would be impossible to defend the country.⁸⁷ The latter think the only way out is to have a transition and maybe deal with Ethiopia, and they are showing their discontent. But at the same time, the generals are compromised by their own stakes in the system; "they could make peace with Ethiopia Their problem is they do not know how to manage it. The dilemma comes because they do not want to demobilise, since all their power comes from the mobilised army".⁸⁸

There are rumours the sceptics have asked the president to step aside and support a smooth, internal transition, so as to avoid the country's collapse (and the loss of their clientelistic interests). Isaias appears to have resisted this pressure and responded with a new round of freezing and reshuffling of both the higher and lower ranks.⁸⁹ The challenge also may be behind reports alleging he has decided to arm various civilian militias in order to protect himself from parts of the army.

C. *The Radical Approach to Foreign Relations*⁹⁰

The president developed a militarised approach toward all neighbouring countries despite differing opinions in his government, including the foreign ministry.⁹¹ Isaias played on the general animosity between states in the region to promote the idea that Eritrea was surrounded by enemies in order to justify its militarisation and to promote the values and habits of the struggle as the foundation of national unity.

Hostilities with Ethiopia have dominated, and though the war formally ended with the Algiers Agreement of 12 December 2000, there was no settlement over the border and wider bilateral relations. Tension remained, and both leaderships acted as if overcoming the enemy was crucial to their regime's very survival,⁹² as well as to regional predominance. In fact, in the war's aftermath, both faced mounting internal

Western Military Zone. The July 2012 UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea report "described the involvement of senior members of the Eritrean security services, like Teklai Kifle 'Manjus', in the trafficking of weapons and people from Eritrea into Egypt (the Sinai) via Sudan, en route to Israel". "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2002 (2011)", UNSC S/2012/545, 13 July 2012, p. 20, para. 77. Another loyalist is said to be Major General Gebrezgheir Andemariam "Wuchu", former commander of Operation Zone 2, now head of the Eastern Command. Crisis Group interviews, January-February-March 2013.

⁸⁷ The sceptics are reportedly led by Major General Filippos Woldeyohannes, former commander of Military Operations Zone 2, later commander of military operations for Asmara, and reportedly "frozen", or under house arrest since last November. He is allegedly very independent and intrepid but also the most ruthless of the generals. Other sceptics are reportedly Major General Haile Samuel "China", commander of Operation Zone 4, and General Sebhat Ephrem, minister of defence. Crisis Group interviews, January-March 2013.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, February 2013.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, January 2013.

⁹⁰ For more on the complicated foreign relations, see Richard Reid (ed.), *Eritrea's External Relations*, op. cit.

⁹¹ The foreign ministry was de facto dismantled after the war with Ethiopia. In the interview given by Petros Solomon (former EPLF commander, then foreign minister) in August 2001, he stated that it was clear Eritrea could not afford to incite its neighbours, especially Ethiopia, Djibouti and Yemen. However, there were no institutions to contain Isaias. Dan Connell, *Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners* (Trenton, 2005), p. 129.

⁹² Michael Woldemariam, "Badme Border Dispute: Why Ethiopia Won't Back Down On Eritrean Border", African Arguments (<http://africanarguments.org>), 23 May 2012.

dissent that they moved to suppress.⁹³ In doing so, they strengthened de facto one-party systems, strayed from promised democratisation and closed political space, while respect for human rights deteriorated. Eritrea, however, experienced the sharpest and most enduring turn toward repression.⁹⁴

A war of words continued, and both governments gave support (political and financial, weaponry and training) to rebel groups to destabilise the other.⁹⁵ Direct involvement in the Somali conflict was part of this animosity. The strategy was not only to further regional strategic interests, but also, and perhaps more so, to overcome each other on the Somali battlefield by escalating that conflict to a “proxy war”, though in Somalia, Ethiopia was undoubtedly pursuing wider interests than just containing Eritrea.⁹⁶

In 2007, after Ethiopia’s contested intervention into Somalia to remove the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC),⁹⁷ Asmara suspended its membership in IGAD, accusing it of favouring Addis Ababa and U.S. policies in the region, and by doing so undermining regional security.⁹⁸ In 2008, Eritrea had a brief border skirmish with another IGAD member, Djibouti, and refused UN mediation, finally opting for Qatari-led arbitration.⁹⁹ Asmara openly realigned toward countries hostile to Addis (and in some cases hostile also to Ethiopia’s Western allies), in particular to Libya (during Qadhafi’s tenure), Iran, Egypt (under Mubarak) and Qatar.¹⁰⁰ Addis meanwhile gained the

⁹³ See Section III of this report; also, Crisis Group Reports, *The Siege State*, op. cit., p. 7; and *Ethiopia after Meles*, op. cit., pp. 4-6.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group Briefing, *Ethiopia after Meles*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Africa Reports N°153, *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and its Discontents*, 4 September 2009; and *Eritrea: The Siege State*, op. cit.; and “Horn of Africa War: Mass Expulsions and the Nationality Question”, Human Rights Watch, 29 January 2003.

⁹⁵ Jason McLure, “Ethiopia Plans to Increase Support to Eritrean Rebel Groups, Ministry Says”, Bloomberg, 15 April 2011; Abdiqani Baynah and Mohamed Gulaid, “Somaliland: Eritrea trained ONLF rebels”, *Somalilandpress*, 13 September 2010; William Lloyd George, “The Ogaden problem: Will an old insurgency tip the balance in East Africa?”, *Time*, 7 November 2012.

⁹⁶ Terrence Lyons, “Avoiding Conflict in the Horn: US Policy Toward Ethiopia and Eritrea”, Council on Foreign Relations Special Report, December 2006; Crisis Group Briefing, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: Stopping the Slide to War*, op. cit.; and “Is Somalia a proxy war between Ethiopia and Eritrea”, Voice of America, 1 November 2009.

⁹⁷ Ethiopia’s army entered Somalia on 24 December 2006, after a direct request by Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) President Abdullahi Yusuf. The TFG, though, was seen as Ethiopia’s creation. Prime Minister Meles stated that his country reacted to a direct threat to its own border. The legal status of Ethiopia’s intervention and three-year long operation remains contested.

⁹⁸ Eritrea declared the move was made after “a number of repeated and irresponsible resolutions that undermine regional peace and security have been adopted in the guise of IGAD”, and blamed the U.S. and Ethiopia for “irresponsible” interference in Somali affairs after Ethiopian and Somali government troops ousted Islamists in late December 2006-early January 2007. “Eritrea suspends its membership in IGAD over Somalia”, Reuters, 22 April 2007. The IGAD member states are Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda.

⁹⁹ “Djibouti-Eritrea border skirmishes subside as toll hits nine”, Agence France-Presse, 13 June 2008.

¹⁰⁰ “Service for Life”, op. cit. Eritrea has also continued relations with China. According to the private intelligence briefing publisher Stratfor, Israel maintains close military ties with Asmara. Both Iran and Israel, it says, have military bases on Eritrean coasts and islands. See “Eritrea: Another Venue for the Iranian-Israeli Rivalry”, Stratfor, 11 December 2012. According to a London-based newspaper, Iran trains Yemeni Houthi Shia militias inside Eritrea. “Iran Trains Houthis in Eritrea”, *Al-Sahwah*, 21 January 2013.

confidence and support of the West, especially the U.S. and UK, as they deemed Prime Minister Meles a staunch ally in their “war against terrorism”.¹⁰¹

In 2009, the UN imposed sanctions on Eritrea for supporting Al-Shabaab in Somalia and refusing to withdraw troops from the contested border with Djibouti.¹⁰² Certainly, it gave some help to the UIC and maintained ties with Somali Islamist insurgents, some of whom became Al-Shabaab after the split within the Alliance for Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) and the creation of Sheikh Sharif’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG).¹⁰³ However, this was a tactical, anti-Ethiopian move, typical of the EPLF, not a strategic or political alliance with jihadist groups.¹⁰⁴ Other states, including Ethiopia, gave arms to factions inside Somalia despite the Security Council embargo but were not sanctioned.¹⁰⁵ Ethiopia deployed effective diplomacy. Eritrea did not, and as a result its government appeared to consider itself abandoned by the

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group Briefing, *Ethiopia after Meles*, op. cit. Western security concerns aligned with Ethiopia’s national security interests in Somalia. The first Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) incursions were in 1996 against the radical Islamist group Al-Ittihaad Al-Islami, which wanted to unite the Somali region of Ethiopia to Somalia. Since then, Ethiopia has played a major role in fighting political Islam in the region. For analysis of its activity, see Crisis Group Africa Briefings N°74, *Somalia’s Divided Islamists*, 18 May 2010; N°45, *Somalia: The Tough Part Is Ahead*, 26 January 2007; Crisis Group Africa Reports N°95, *Counter-Terrorism in Somalia: Losing Hearts and Minds?*, 11 July 2005; and N°45, *Somalia: Countering Terrorism in a Failed State*, 23 May 2002. In 2010, Ethiopia received \$3.5 billion in Overseas Development Aid (ODA), the most in Africa. “Aid statistics, recipient aid at a glance – Ethiopia”, OECD, January 2012. Aid comes not only from Western donors; China and other countries provide assistance for specific development projects. In 2011 Ethiopia received \$4.4 billion in foreign direct investment, up from \$1.3 billion in 2001. “UN Conference on Trade and Development Statistics”, http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/tdstat37_en.pdf.

¹⁰² Security Council Resolution 1907 (23 December 2009).

¹⁰³ The Alliance for Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) was created in September 2007, when members of the dismantled Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) met in Asmara and reunited to oppose the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia, led by Abdullahi Yusuf and supported, politically and militarily, by Ethiopia. The ARS existed until January 2009, when it split as an aftermath of the Djibouti peace conference Part was incorporated in the TFG, and one of the UIC and ARS leaders, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, was elected as the new TFG president. The other group remained in the opposition camp, led by Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys and created Islamic resistance groups under the Hizbul Islam banner that later in large part were subsumed by Al-Shabab, voluntarily or by threat of force.

¹⁰⁴ In 2006-2009, Ethiopia had a large force in Somalia, supporting the then Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of President Abdullahi Yusuf. Al-Shabaab, supported by Eritrea and other countries, rose to prominence fighting the Ethiopian “occupation”. Isaias aligned Eritrea with the U.S. against terrorism during the first Iraqi war and fought an armed jihadist group in northern Eritrea, the Eritrean Islamic Jihad, in 1995, two years after independence. See Dan Connell, “Eritrea and the United States”, op. cit., pp. 136-138.

¹⁰⁵ Belachew Gebrewold, *Anatomy of Violence: Understanding the Systems of Conflict and Violence in Africa* (Farnham, 2013), p. 195. According to the UN monitoring group on Somalia, “[w]hat follows is a more detailed explanation of the operations of this group: they deal in different types of landmines (TM-46 and TM-57), which are reportedly being sold on a regular basis to the group by Ethiopian military officers”, “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1558 (2004)”, UNSC S/2005/153, 9 March 2005, p. 12; and “[d]uring the course of the mandate, the Monitoring Group has received numerous reports of Ethiopian assistance to both the Transitional Federal Government and ASWJ, without authorization in either case. ... Prior to 21 June 2009, Ethiopian assistance to ASWJ arguably constituted a substantive violation of the embargo rather than a technical one”, “Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1853 (2008)”, UNSC S/2010/91, 10 March 2010, p. 200.

international community over both the post-war dispute and broader regional issues.¹⁰⁶ In 2011, after Ethiopia gave the UN Sanctions Group evidence Eritrean agents planned to bomb the AU summit in Addis Ababa, more sanctions were added.¹⁰⁷

Asmara's relations have also been fraught with Sudan, the border with which remains undemarcated.¹⁰⁸ A year after independence, it broke diplomatic ties due to armed cross-border incidents linked to the activities of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad, a radical Islamic organisation that the government alleged was financed and supported by Khartoum.¹⁰⁹ Isaias subsequently hosted and trained the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which fought alongside other Sudanese opposition movements.¹¹⁰

Direct relations with Khartoum resumed in 2005, though both continue to exchange allegations of the others' support for rebel movements.¹¹¹ However, Asmara also brokered agreements reached by the Sudanese Eastern Front and the Sudanese government on 14 October 2006, and in exchange Khartoum cut off support to Muslim movements inside Eritrea.¹¹² The fragile internal situation of both regimes, as well as their antagonism toward the U.S. and Western policies generally in the Horn of Africa, created the basis for cooperation out of mutual self-interest.¹¹³

Eritrea's lukewarm membership in the AU has been guaranteed so far (previously by Qadhafi's Libya and Mubarak's Egypt, now by South Africa due to its interest in the mining sector). It had no formal representation at the AU, the headquarters of

¹⁰⁶ "Accusations against Eritrea: Pure fabrication and outright lies", foreign ministry press statement, 2 November 2011; and "Quiet confidence and determination in the face of US instigated sanctions", foreign ministry press release, 6 December 2011. See also Crisis Group Report, *The Siege State*, op. cit., pp. 19-25.

¹⁰⁷ "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea submitted in accordance with resolution 1916 (2010)", UN Monitoring Group, 18 July 2011. For information concerning Eritrea's official response, see "Eritrea's Response to the Report of the Somalia Eritrea Monitoring Group Report", foreign ministry, http://aigaforum.com/articles/eritrea_text_of_response-un-somalia.pdf, 12 October 2011. For critical reactions to the report, see "Eritrea denies sending arms to al Shabaab", Al Jazeera, 2 November 2011; and "UN Monitoring Group Report: Lies, Damn Lies, and Distortions", The Action Group for Eritrea, www.meskerem.net/un_monitoring_group_report.htm, 2 August 2011; and "Eritrea calls for lifting of sanctions, rejects UN accusations", Reuters, 8 October 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Manickam Venkataraman, "Eritrea's relations with the Sudan since 1991", *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2005), pp. 51-76. Historically, Sudan has been closer to the first Eritrean national liberation movement, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), founded in July 1960 in Cairo. Its leadership drew more from Eritrean Muslim intellectuals from the lowlands, thus was closer to the Sudanese than the Ethiopian world or to the trans-Mereb, Tigrinya speaking connections of the EPLF. Gaim Kibreab, "Eritrean-Sudanese relations in historical perspective", in Richard Reid, *Eritrea's External Relations*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁹ The allegations were made against the Sudanese National Islamic Front, led by Hassan al-Turabi, which was linked to President Omar al-Bashir and the ruling National Congress Party. "Sudan bans activities of Eritrean Opposition", *Sudan Tribune*, 1 June 2008.

¹¹⁰ NDA was an umbrella organisation made up of the main Sudanese opposition forces, including the National Umma Party, the Democratic Unionist Party, the Communist Party of Sudan, Sudanese Alliance Forces, Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) – operating under the name of the New Sudan Brigade – and other, smaller groups. "Eritrea-Sudan relations plummet", BBC, 15 January 2004.

¹¹¹ For example, "Eritrea, Chad accused of aiding Sudan rebels", Afrol News, 7 September 2010; "Eritrea attacks Sudan, deepens isolation", Afrol News, 19 October 2005; For information about Sudan aiding Eritrean rebels, see "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, 18 July 2011, op. cit.

¹¹² "Sudan bans activities of Eritrean Opposition", op. cit.; and Dan Connell, *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea* (Lanham, 2011), pp. 487-489.

¹¹³ David H. Shinn, "Eritrea's Regional Relations", *International Policy Digest*, 17 August 2012.

which is in Ethiopia's capital, from 2003 until 2011. Attempts have been made by some members for Eritrea to rejoin IGAD – so far without success, due to resistance from Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya.¹¹⁴ Despite its mandate to encourage inter-governmental cooperation and regional peace, IGAD has been unable to defuse the tension between Eritrea and its immediate neighbours, especially Ethiopia and Djibouti.¹¹⁵ However high-level – including presidential – contacts continue between Eritrea and Sudan, South Sudan and, more recently, Uganda.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ “Eritrea rejoins East African bloc IGAD”, Reuters, 28 July 2011.

¹¹⁵ Jason Mosley, “Ethiopia and Eritrea: Rising Tensions Amid New Opportunities for Engagement”, Chatham House website, Expert Comment, 19 July 2012.

¹¹⁶ Bashir visited Asmara on 2 February 2013, the first head of state to come after the “mutiny” in January. According to official Eritrean sources, the two presidents “exchanged views on the development of various Sudanese issues and issues of mutual concern”. See “Sudan’s Bashir concludes lightning visit to Eritrea”, *Sudan Tribune*, February 2013; also, “Eritrea and South Sudan to strengthen existing relations further”, *Shabait*, 5 May 2011; and “Afwerki Here for Serious Talks – Museveni”, *New Vision*, 18 August 2011.

IV. Scenarios for Post-Isaias Eritrea

Isaias's exit – whether by death, involuntarily or by choice – is almost surely a precondition for anything much to change. However, it is by no means the only obstacle, and to focus simply on it as the solution to Eritrean problems would be misguided.¹¹⁷ The problems are so systemic that the mere absence of their architect would not be enough to initiate reform. And whether the same figures who have grown powerful in Isaias's shadow, implemented his rule and profited from his clientelistic system could be the ones to make a difference is questionable.¹¹⁸

Government repression and the president's central role in it have meant that a conversation about life after Isaias is impossible inside the country. Outside, the diaspora is too fragmented and focused on demonising the president to present a persuasive vision.¹¹⁹ While it is impossible to predict confidently what will happen should Isaias die or be incapacitated, the absence of an institutional mechanism for power transfer and divisions and corruption within the army – the likely arbiter of who rules next – make for a high risk of instability.

No viable internal candidate to champion reform – and replace the president – has appeared, but the defections and high-ranking dissent have created unprecedented tension within the previously extremely loyal PFDJ ranks: "Whatever has happened in Asmara on 21 January, it could not have happened without some generals supporting it".¹²⁰ Beyond personal interests, there is awareness of the disastrous state of the military. They know that if Ethiopia launches new incursions, their careers and networks likely will end. Many observers abroad welcome these tensions and want to believe that the generals are fuelled by patriotic preoccupations.¹²¹

With no public debate possible inside Eritrea, the only alternative voices are in the diaspora, but they are divided, scattered and not relevant at home.¹²² Their only common goal is to get rid of Isaias. To achieve this, most have accepted Ethiopia's support, exposing them to accusations of treating with the historic enemy.¹²³

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Nairobi, June-July 2012; Rome, August 2012, January-February 2013.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, January 2013. A long-time Eritrea observer posed these existential questions: "Is the system reformable from within or not, after Isaias' removal? Is Isaias's absence from the Eritrean political system the answer to all the problems of the nation? Ultimately will Eritrea ever be viable as a nation?"

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, 1 February 2013.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Many in the diaspora simply want Isaias gone at any cost. "They would join anyone, and their attitude has influenced the misinformed international media. Now the army senior officers have become, incredibly, a bunch of reformers". Crisis Group interview, January 2013.

¹²² Most diaspora leaders left before implementation of the Wefri Warsai Yika'alo policy.

¹²³ The Eritrean People's Democratic Party (EPDP) was established in 2009/2010 as a union of three parties: the Eritrean People's Party (EPP), the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP), and the Eritrean People's Movement (EPM). It emerged out of the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA), which was formed in 1990 as an umbrella coalition of thirteen opposition groups, most of which are now based in Ethiopia. Reportedly the EDA did very little beyond providing a political forum for those groups determined to oust the PFDJ government. Members were the Democratic Movement For the Liberation of the Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK); Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization (RSADO); Eritrean Peoples Democratic Front (EPDF); Eritrean National Salvation Front (ENSF); Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF); Eritrean Peoples' Party (EPP); Eritrean Islamic Party for Justice and Development (EIPJD); Eritrean People's Congress (EPC); Eritrean Peoples' Movement (EPM); Eritrean Nahda Party (ENP); Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP); Eritrean Islamic Congress (EIC); and Eritrean Federal Democratic Party (EFDM). Desbele Kahsai, "Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA): A Partner

Over the long years of exile the opposition has failed to build a coherent front and form a plan for a viable political, social and economic transition. Its members would have great difficulty to take over if not brought to power by external forces.¹²⁴ They also do not appear to be considering – or to fully comprehend – the extent to which the economy has deteriorated and the social fabric been dismantled. Isaias is their enemy, and “contemporary Eritrea is a dreamland, not a real country”.¹²⁵ “They do not seem to know their people”.¹²⁶ They are especially distant from the younger people who have spent their best years between military service in trenches and forced labour in national service.¹²⁷ How to reintegrate entire generations condemned to lives in the military or exile needs urgent assessment and answers.

In light of the above discussion, a number of possible scenarios are offered that highlight some of the challenges and the main risks for conflict that an Eritrea without President Isaias Afwerki may face.

A. *A Refashioned PFDJ Maintaining the Status Quo*

The first envisages an agreement among senior military and civilian PFDJ figures to unseat Isaias, with the aim to preserve the regime. They would continue to use the threat of war to divert the people’s attention and maintain an extremely high level of military mobilisation. The new government would be an oligarchy, united by material interests, though each member with an eye on gaining ultimate power by securing the presidency. The generals would have the upper hand, and the political leadership would be weaker than ever. Such a succession could not bring real reform, since the main aim would be to keep power and access to resources for the same, even if re-fashioned, elite. It is unlikely such a marriage of interests among competing power centres (PFDJ, army, secret services, police, etc.) would be able to preserve political and national unity in the long run. It has also been suggested that Isaias may be grooming his 26-year-old son, Abraham. However, this dynastic solution would have the same weaknesses.¹²⁸

Because of the military’s increased power in this scenario, it would be very difficult to change policies vis-à-vis Ethiopia and the region. The generals would have a strong incentive to perpetuate the national service, also because they benefit from the steady supply of draftees who work in military-controlled parastatal companies,¹²⁹ some of which are eventually expected to do much of the work in rapidly developing gold and other mining projects.¹³⁰ Senior officers, notably the western zone commander, General Teklai Kifle “Manjus”, have been accused by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea of running a lucrative business smuggling people

or a Foe?”, Eritrean Human Rights Electronic Archive, April 2010. Another coalition to challenge the ineffective EDA, the Eritrean National Council/Commission for Democratic Change (ENCDC), based in North America, was announced in 2011.

¹²⁴ They have limited military capacity, Ethiopian support notwithstanding, and are almost absent inside Eritrea.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, July 2012.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, January 2013.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, January 2013.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Rome, August 2012.

¹²⁹ See Section III.B above; also, Gaim Kibreab, “Forced Labour in Eritrea”, op. cit.; and Petros B. Ogbazghi, “Personal Rule in Africa”, op. cit.

¹³⁰ “Eritrea”, Human Rights Watch, op. cit.

out.¹³¹ Long-serving lower ranks also profit from clientelism; they might fight to preserve the status quo and support officers undermining any reconciliation process with Ethiopia, since a real peace would trigger massive demobilisation.¹³²

Continued PFDJ rule would sustain the myth of self-reliance, and reject an opening toward regional economic cooperation and integration. There would, therefore, be an economic imperative for continuing the Wefri Warsai Yika'alo policy rather than demobilising. While a huge number of educated youths have sought political asylum abroad, at least 400,000 are estimated to remain in almost permanent military service inside Eritrea.¹³³

If conscripts were demobilised, the economy's disastrous state would immediately be revealed, as it could not absorb so many into civilian jobs. This, combined with the social impact of so many disillusioned young men and women returning to civilian life, would further undermine stability. Better educated, and skilled, émigrés who have left within the last ten years would not feel encouraged to return, since their oppressors would still be in power. The likely result of a refashioned regime would be a weaker government, needing to further repress its population lest it collapse.

B. *PFDJ, without Isaias, but Eritrea Sues for Peace with Ethiopia*

This scenario would be politically identical to the previous one, but with the new PFDJ leadership shifting from a policy of the "enemy at the gate" toward one of seeking peace with Ethiopia. The new leadership might do this to avoid risky direct military confrontation with a now much stronger enemy.

Should relations be normalised, it would mean the collapse of virtually the entire rationale for the argument that "this is not the time" for demobilisation, reintegration of recruits and opening of political space. That would in turn undermine the very basis of the PFDJ reign. Once a peace deal is signed, the Wefri Warsai Yika'alo policy would appear meaningless, so there would be consequent need to reform the national service, reduce the half-million-strong army that is around 10 per cent of the population and put in place a serious Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) program.¹³⁴

The current regime cannot do this, because it would necessitate rethinking the entire socio-political and economic system created after independence. The new re-

¹³¹ Phoebe Greenwood, "Eritrean regime cashes in on arms and human trafficking, says UN report", *The Guardian*, 17 July 2012; and "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea", 13 July 2012, op. cit. The government rejected these allegations. See also "Statement by Ambassador Araya Desta, Permanent Representative of Eritrea to the United Nations, during an informal consultation with Security Council committee established pursuant to resolution 751 (1992) and 1907 (2009) concerning Somali and Eritrea", Eritrean UN mission, 17 July 2012.

¹³² Crisis Group interviews, July, October 2012.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Rome, August 2012.

¹³⁴ After independence, Eritrea had some 95,000 armed guerrillas, who became the independent Eritrean Defence Forces. By 1997, some 55,000 had been demobilised. Demobilisation and reintegration were considered successful until war broke out in 1998. In 2002, two years after the end of the conflict, a huge DDR program was put in place and financed, among others, by the World Bank, the European Commission, Germany, Switzerland and Belgium. It aimed at demobilising some 200,000 soldiers by 2008 but failed because of the continuous recruitment of fresh troops. See, E. Sanz, "Eritrea (Demobilization and Reintegration, 2002-present)", in A. Caramés and E. Sanz (eds.), *DDR 2009. Analysis of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Programmes in the World during 2008*, (Barcelona, 2009); and Sally Healy, "Eritrea's Economic Survival", Chatham House, 2007.

gime would likely either have to find a soft way of ceding significant power to others – something for which the diaspora-based opposition is not prepared – or risk, with an unreliable army, a revolt likely led by trained former soldiers.¹³⁵

Ethiopia's response to peace overtures is uncertain following Meles's death.¹³⁶ In December 2012, the new prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, told Al Jazeera he was ready to go to Asmara to negotiate in order to enhance regional integration and development.¹³⁷ This was perceived as an unprecedented opening, but not everyone in Addis Ababa's political and military inner circle approved, especially in the ranks of the leading party, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF).¹³⁸ A few days later, Hailemariam had to return to his predecessor's track, making clear that policy toward Eritrea had not changed.¹³⁹ Considering the Ethiopian internal situation and the potential threat a broken Eritrea poses to its stability, Addis Ababa's instinct might well lean toward cautious containment.¹⁴⁰

C. *State Collapse (Leading to Civil War)*

If a political agreement between what remains of loyal senior PFDJ political figures and the generals does not follow, Isaias's death or departure from power might easily lead to an all-out militarised struggle for control of the country and its resources. Loyalty – if any remains – is likely granted not to institutions but to generals and other officers in order to gain advantages in a deteriorated economy. A confrontation between military factions could lead to a disastrous civil war. This is particularly worrying since existing ethnic and religious divisions have been exacerbated by

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, July 2012.

¹³⁶ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Ethiopia After Meles*, op. cit.

¹³⁷ "If you ask me, 'Do you want to go to Asmara and sit down and negotiate with Isaias Afwerki?', then, I will say 'yes' The most important thing for us is to fight poverty... to have regional integration. If we two do that, it will be much more productive". "Ethiopian PM willing to talk to Eritrea", Al Jazeera, 6 December 2012. Qatar could play a major role in trying to normalise the relations. It has significant relations with Asmara, has already mediated (with disputable success) the resolution of a border conflict between Eritrea and Djibouti in 2009, and after years of stalling, has resumed diplomatic ties with Ethiopia.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hargeisa, December 2012.

¹³⁹ "Hailemariam says no change of policy on Eritrea", *Awramba Times*, 2 January 2013. Ethiopia accepted "in principle" the Eritrean Ethiopian Boundary Commission's Decision, but refused to implement it and instead offered a five-point peace plan in November 2004.

¹⁴⁰ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Ethiopia After Meles*, op. cit. An alternative theory is offered by an Eritrea analyst who is convinced that the generals are against demobilisation at the moment but that, in the event of regime change, they could not last long without making peace with Ethiopia. A peace agreement would then be the only solution to preserve the nation, the analyst said, and in such a situation, Eritrea would propose negotiations on the status of Badme. If the new government decided to give away the contested village, it would blame Isaias, and the Eritrean people would not contest the decision, because the dire living conditions make Badme less important than stabilising the economy. "If the border would be open again, citizens' mobility will immediately resume. Therefore, if Addis Ababa wants to stabilise Eritrea, it has to invent new economic cooperation, developmental for both countries. There can be a land-for-common-market type of agreement". According to this reading, a peaceful environment would allow the ports of Djibouti and Assab to share the Ethiopian market and so both develop. "There is no way for the Eritrean nation to survive as it is, if it does not make peace with Ethiopia; simply, it will collapse", the analyst added. Crisis Group interview, February 2013.

Isaias's policies and might be exploited by competing forces.¹⁴¹ Some ethnic-based rebel groups already operate in border areas and are supported by Ethiopia and Sudan.¹⁴² There are also growing tensions between Christians and Muslims,¹⁴³ highlanders and lowlanders; the radical Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement operated inside the country in the early 1990s.¹⁴⁴

If rival generals decide to exploit these competing social, religious and ethnic forces to seize absolute power, the potential for something similar to the early years of the Somali civil war would be very high, with the prospect for extensive casualties enhanced by the expertise that universal military training has given young Eritreans.¹⁴⁵

D. *External Mediation or Domination*

A fourth possibility is a power struggle, but with direct intervention by neighbouring countries. A civil war in Eritrea could spill over into Ethiopia, Sudan and (to a lesser extent) Djibouti. They all have ethnic cross-border issues with Eritrea and an interest in its stability for their own strategic reasons, both internally and regionally.

Addis Ababa and Khartoum could be dragged into a civil war for various reasons, including to prevent conflict spilling over their borders, the contagion risk of existing internal dissent and economic and geopolitical interests. The two could either support specific militias or intervene directly, justifying any intervention on the threat posed by the civil war.¹⁴⁶ Intervention could play out in two ways: either a political agreement on how to establish peace (perhaps through IGAD and setting up a closely-mentored government, or by splitting the country in effect into zones of influence, as has happened in south-central Somalia);¹⁴⁷ alternatively, should a regional agreement over Eritrea not be reached, they could offer direct or material support to competing Eritrean factions in order to satisfy their own national and regional security interests.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, July 2012. The British, at the end of their mandate, proposed that western Eritrea, with a majority Muslim population, be annexed to Sudan. During Haile Selassie's rule, Ethiopia characterised the Eritrean issue as one of Christians versus Muslims.

¹⁴² These include the Eritrean Salvation Front (ESF), the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organisation (RSADO) and the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK) based in Ethiopia. There are also militias in Eastern Sudan that undertake operations inside Eritrea. Crisis Group interview, November 2012.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, July 2012.

¹⁴⁴ The Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM) is an armed opposition group based in Sudan that merged two political Islamic groups, the National Islamic Front for the Liberation of Eritrea (Al-Jabha al-Islamia al-Watania min Ajl Tahrir Eritrea) and the Islamic Vanguard (Al-Ruwaad al-Muslmin), in July 1982. According to the movement, it "was a manifestation of the grievances against the politics of the EPLF that were pent-up and finally burst in some Moslem communities". In an interview with *Nida'ul Islam Magazine*, the EIJM's deputy amir said it represents "the only military option against the Christian regime", which it accuses of "pointing its guns to the hearts of the unarmed Muslim citizens in order to forcibly conscript Eritreans into the army". The deputy amir added that "the regime regards every Muslim who practises his religion and adheres to its obligations and cares for his honour as a danger, so they filled their prisons with the pious Muslims, teachers, students, politicians, leaders and common people, in order to arrest their fear". "The governing regime is a terrorist regime which acts with enmity against the Eritrean people", *Nida'ul Islam Magazine*, February-March 1998. In 2003, Eritrea accused the EIJM of killing the British geologist Timothy Nutt. "Travel warning after Briton killed in Eritrea", *The Telegraph*, 18 April 2003.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, November 2012.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, July 2012.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, July 2012.

In either case, stability would be elusive, the potential for enduring conflict that could even trigger a wider conflagration extremely high.

E. *Peaceful Transition to Multiparty Democracy*

This scenario is feasible, but appears difficult to bring about. It would involve a PFDJ-run transitional authority that, with the army's consent, would initiate an unprecedented process of democratisation.¹⁴⁸ Such an inclusive transitional government could be expected to implement the 1997 constitution, restore the national assembly, revive the defunct legal system, open negotiations with Ethiopia and perhaps eventually end the Wefri Warsai Yika'alo policy. It would initiate DDR, reshape the army, open the country to returnees from the diaspora and schedule multiparty elections. These developments would produce a transition from authoritarianism to a more open society. The transitional rulers might seek an amnesty for some of those involved in the previous regime.

It is hard to imagine such a benign scenario, however, since the social divisions are so acute. At the very least, the political cultures of PFDJ members and diaspora leaders would be difficult to reconcile, and any power-sharing deal would be dependent on the army, which is clearly partisan. Typical generational divisions would almost surely emerge quickly, as most of the traditional diaspora leaders are old figures from the liberation struggle; the newer and younger refugees and asylum seekers might not be represented.¹⁴⁹ The new government would face the tremendous challenge of a fractured society. For example, the consequences of the return of large numbers of young people from the front lines and military training camps, who have had terrible psychological and physical experiences, would need to be carefully considered and dealt with sensitively.¹⁵⁰

F. *Regime Change with Ethiopian Intervention*

This scenario takes into account bilateral tensions that have not diminished since the June 2000 ceasefire. The subsequent Algiers Peace Agreements did not revive diplomatic relations. Ethiopia refused to implement the boundary commission's 2002 decision.¹⁵¹ Since then, troops have remained massed along the border, and both governments have engaged in proxy warfare to gain leverage. Covert activities

¹⁴⁸ According to some observers, it should also include participation of former dissenting leaders jailed in 2001, but this may be unrealistic. If any of these people are still alive after years of brutal detention, they are unlikely to be fit to re-enter active political life.

¹⁴⁹ Some of the old figures are former EPLF members, while others are ELF – the front that lost to the EPLF. Most opposition parties are based in Addis Ababa (with representatives in Europe or the U.S.) and are led by older men, who do not necessarily represent the feelings, vision and goals of the new generations in the diaspora, especially those who left after years spent in the military or to avoid conscription. These younger generations are now seeking to organise. Since their ideas are not shared by the older generations, it is far from a given that their perspectives would be represented in any transitional government established between opposition parties and the PFDJ – therefore creating doubts about the genuineness of the process and its long-term viability. “Within diaspora communities, a divisive process has emerged (partially fuelled by Asmara), making it very difficult for the young people who left the country in the last decade to connect and coexist with pre-existing diaspora communities”. Crisis Group interview, January 2013.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, 1 February 2013.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group Report, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: Preventing War*, op. cit.

have included supporting rebel actions inside the other's territory¹⁵² and indirectly targeting each other by meddling in other countries' affairs, for example in Sudan and, especially, in Somalia.

On 15 March 2012, following a decade-long war of words, Ethiopia conducted several incursions into Eritrea aimed at dismantling camps used by an Ethiopian rebel group (ARDUF) to launch cross-border attacks. In May, it again carried out military operations inside its neighbour's territory, occupying some villages. Though not confirmed, some claim the second round was aimed at exposing Asmara's declining military capacity; others point to attacks against other rebel (TPDM) bases.¹⁵³ Addis Ababa will also possibly have wanted to remind regional leaders of the balance of power in the region, at a time when Isaias was initiating a new round of regional talks. Presidents Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Omar el-Bashir of Sudan were visiting Ethiopia during the May incursions.¹⁵⁴

Should the situation in Eritrea worsen, Ethiopia's political and military reaction will be critical. Since almost all the organised (and armed) opposition parties are based in Addis Ababa and rely financially and logistically on the government,¹⁵⁵ the new post-Meles leadership could play a positive role by offering a transitional leadership in Asmara a fresh diplomatic start, reopening economic ties and providing support for a non-partisan, inclusive political initiative.

But given the close links between the two countries and especially the populations adjacent to the border, any democratisation in Eritrea would inevitably have implications for Ethiopia as well. Any Ethiopian intervention would likely have a security rather than democracy agenda. Hawkish responses are conceivable: Ethiopia could seal its border or seize the opportunity to support one faction in Asmara. It might even take advantage of instability to achieve one of the longstanding goals of hard-liners, control of the port of Assab in order to end the country's land-locked status. Otherwise, Ethiopia could decide to impose a government in Asmara, either directly or indirectly. It might be accepted at the beginning by a tired and confused Eritrean population but would not likely be viable in the long term given the history of struggle with Ethiopia.

¹⁵² Asmara has financially supported, trained and armed, among others, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unitary Front (ARDUF) and the Tigray People's Democratic Movement (TPDM); Addis Ababa hosts all forms of opposition to Isaias's regime.; for examples, see fn. 138 above.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, June 2012.

¹⁵⁴ Tesfa-Alem Tekle, "Eritrean, Sudanese leaders hold talks in Asmara", *Sudan Tribune*, 24 May 2012; "Uganda's President Museveni arrives in Asmara", *Ayyaantuu News*, 29 May 2012.

¹⁵⁵ Addis Ababa has supported an ethnicisation of Eritrean opposition parties in line with the Ethiopian model of ethnic federalism.

V. Conclusion

Even though some degree of turbulence appears inevitable whenever and however Isaias departs the scene, a wider coalition of regional and international actors should work toward a controlled transition, as much preferable to unmanaged change. If another authoritarian – but inevitably weaker – regime takes power in Asmara, or indeed if an externally dominated government is imposed, further instability is likely, with profound consequences for the entire Horn of Africa.

If a power-sharing agreement is negotiated, it should be kept in mind that Isaias is not Eritrea's sole problem. Dissident factions within the regime will want to keep real power, and diaspora-based opposition figures and groups do not really know – or represent – the population inside the country or most refugees. While political mediation should start as soon as possible, a concomitant assessment of Eritrea's various and interconnected problems should be part of a structured and proactive engagement by the regional stakeholders and wider international stakeholders.

Specific attention should be paid to new, younger leaders emerging in the diaspora, including refugee camps, since demand for real change is more likely to come from these quarters. Attention should also be paid to the socio-economic and psychological side effects of the crisis. Plans for specific DDR programs should be put in place for those who have been serving in the army; the security sector will need to be reformed; and projects will have to be created simultaneously that focus on reintegrating those who fled their country, so as to avoid fissures developing both in the immediate aftermath of transition and during the subsequent attempts at state-rebuilding.

In a historic moment for the Horn of Africa – with a leadership transition in Ethiopia; a decaying and embattled ruling National Congress Party in Sudan; recent electoral unrest in Djibouti; a new state in South Sudan displaying worrying ethnic divisions; a new government that still relies on foreign troops for survival in a Somalia vast swathes of which remain in the hands of armed groups; and physical proximity to a Yemen undergoing an unstable transition¹⁵⁶ – there is an urgent need to pursue stability in Eritrea. That would benefit the entire region. But the contrary could quickly spark instability well beyond Eritrea's borders, entangling not just the Horn of Africa, but even the Red Sea littoral, due to its strategic location.

Nairobi/Brussels, 28 March 2013

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group Africa Report N° 194, *Sudan: Major Reform or More War*, 29 November 2012; Middle East Report N° 125, *Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition*, 3 July 2012.

Appendix A: Map of Eritrea and its neighbours



Courtesy of University of Texas at Austin. *The map has been cropped.*

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes CrisisWatch, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Burundi: Ensuring Credible Elections, Africa Report N°155, 12 February 2010 (also available in French).

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Burundi: A Deepening Corruption Crisis, Africa Report N°185, 21 March 2012 (also available in French).

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