

“Red of the sea”

Playing a strange game

By Amen Teferi

In John Hopkins University, at the School of Advanced International Studies (Sais) in 1988, a distinguished Eritrean anthropologist, Professor Asmerom Legesse gave a talk on Eritrea's potential for economic self-reliance and viability. As in soccer, he asserted, Eritreans have internalized technology, and their country would have little difficulty developing an industrial economy. Illustrating his point, he said, when he left Asmara as a young man for education in Addis Ababa, he had a screwdriver with him. Not knowing what it was, his Amhara schoolmates called it tabanja mafcha (a tool for dismantling guns). For the professor, this was an indication of how much more Eritreans had internalized Western technology than the Ethiopians. And, thus, come independence, Eritreans could build a viable economy based on the industrial infrastructure.

A participant in the conference, Professor James McCann, asked the panelist what the Tigrinya word for a screwdriver was. Smiling in embarrassment, Professor Asmerom said there was no word for it in Tigrinya, without mentioning cacciavite, the Italian word used in the language.

Eritrea is said to derive its name from the Greek word *erythra*, meaning ‘red’. Historians tell us that it was coined from the famous *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*. And *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* is a trade or shipping manual written by a Greek-speaking Egyptian sailor or merchant around the 1st century AD. The *erythra* (or ‘red of the sea’) is so named because the water turns a vermilion shade as a result of newly spored algae during certain periods.

Covering about 125,000 sq km and with a population of some 5.5 million, Eritrea is a fraction of the size of its main neighbors, Ethiopia and Sudan, but it contains considerable diversity. Broadly, it is divided between the highlands – including the central plateau (the *kebessa*) and the

rugged mountains to the north – and the lowlands to the west, the coastal plain and the Danakil desert to the south. It is ethnically and religiously mixed, with nine official ethnic groups and large Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Roman Catholic and Protestant communities. The bulk of the population lives in the central highlands. Regardless of its small size, it occupies a critical geopolitical position in the region, including some 1,150km of Red Sea coastline – and it is this which has shaped much of its troubled history.

Delusion and confusion

As Pateman argues, "the struggle for independence also involves a struggle over history and the interpretation of the past." Eritrea had struggled for independence. Hence, there was a struggle over history and the interpretation of the past. Accordingly we have the claim of the *Shaebia* leaders who argue Eritrea being colonized by Ethiopia and this position was challenged by a thesis that goes directly against it. This is how the late Emperor Haile Selassie, in his speech made at the occasion of his visit to Eritrea on 27 June 1962 described his anti-thesis affirming the ties between the two countries:

"The relation of the people of Eritrea with Ethiopia is not confined to the political aspect. Not only are the two people joined by culture, geography and language, but historically the Adoulis heritage shows that the other Ethiopian tribes originated from Eritrea. Throughout Ethiopia's long record as an independent entity, Eritrea was separated from us for only 60 years and even if we were separated by political and artificial barriers during this short span of time, we were un-separated in our way of life and mutual feeling."

I must stop flocking this dead horse. Granted it is a case involving a colonial question. And be assured that Eritrea had drawn its unique identity which separates it from the “rural Ethiopia” out of its colonial experience. This is the case with many African and Asian countries. However, a scholar whose name is Alemseged Abay has described the Eritrean case unique. According to

Alemseged, what makes the Eritrean case so unique is that colonialism did not engender Eritrean-ness.

The French and British colonizers were trying to produce black French man, black British man. Consequently, the Anglophone and Francophone elites did not only adopt colonial languages as official tongues but also appreciated the literature of their masters. The Leopold Senghors, Chinua Achebes and Peter Abrahams from mainland Africa as well as the Aime Cesaires and Franz Fanons from the Antilles are products of colonial education.

The Italians, on the other hand, were not interested in producing black Italians or educated Eritreans. They built several substandard primary schools for native children to study only up to the third grade. Even children of mixed race, recognized by their Italian fathers, could not attend Italian schools. On the morrow of Italian departure, therefore, whilst thousands of Italian children attended private schools, only a few hundred native children attended substandard primary school. Such limited education, therefore, could not give natives even basic language skills in Italian. Thus, unlike the rest of Africa that was given Lusophone, Francophone and Anglophone identities, Eritrea was far from being Italophone. The kind of Faranshi (French) and Iglishi (English) identities observed, for instance, among the Hausa did not exist among...” the Eritrean people.

Native and Italian quarters not only were different from each other, but also had little to do with each other. As if the Italians colonized only the land but not the people, the two communities followed what Fanon called a 'principle of reciprocal exclusivity.

However, the Eritrean elite entertain a farfetched notion of Eritrean-ness that born out of the colonial womb. Unlike many African nationalist leaders, the Eritrean elite value and even fell proud about the scanty colonial legacy they claim to have. What is most puzzling in this regard is the current political elite who despised one colonial ruler (Ethiopia) are really fond of the other (Italy). They even went further to make the colonial legacy as a national brand to attract tourists. In a publication titled as “*SNAPSHOT ERITREA*” (Lonely Planet Publications, 2001) you will read a line that run as follows,

“Eritrea is a heartbreaker. It was once heralded as a good place for travelling and, with a bit of luck, it could soon be so again. But as long as the country is at odds with its neighbor Ethiopia (again!), its sworn enemy, tourism development won’t be a priority. One of the most secretive countries in Africa, Eritrea seems doomed to remain a hidden gem. On the bright side, unlimited opportunities for off-the-beaten-track exploration abound. Who knew that Asmara, the capital, boasts the most shining collection of colonial architectural wonders in Africa? It is like a set from an early Italian movie, with vintage Italian coffee machines and outstanding examples of Art Deco architecture.

Brace yourself for another emotional roller coaster. And the truth will make you mad and red. Without any respect for the anti-colonial Eritrean nationalism the elites pride themselves on their colonial legacy. While they ask “Who knew that Asmara, the capital, boasts the most shining collection of colonial architectural wonders in Africa?” writers like Dawit decries Italian colonialism, for decreeing that "natives must take their shoes off when they go into government offices".

Nonetheless, Italian rule ended with British occupation in 1941. When the British left, they dismantled and took with them port facilities, railway rolling stock, factories, and equipment. In return they engineered a UN General Assembly recommendation that Eritrea should "constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown".

Summoning the past again we can find the same delusion on the part of the elite. One among the many instances is an interesting anecdote recounted by a scholar named Alemseged Abay. Alemseged in his article entitled as “*Not with them, not without them*” (2001, 465) stated that, the current political actors have self delusional myth of a more 'developed and modernized Eritrea.' In relation to this he mentioned what he called The Cacciavite Factor.

He further commented that, “Identity is an imagined and abstract concept that does not necessarily correspond to the reality of language, culture, etc. It is subjective. Yet, it is not imagined out of a thin air. The British and the Swiss do not imagine their identities *ex nihilo*. The Irish, Welsh, Scots and English are attached to their Crown, Parliament and rule of law. The Italians, French and Germans of Switzerland have their democratic traditions under the Swiss political roof. Eritrea did not get such symbols of identity out of colonialism, not even a *lingua franca*.

For both the Metahit and the Kebessa, Italian was arcane and, for the former, Tigrinya too was remote. Thus the Metahit preferred Arabic for an official language (67). A language they could not understand, Arabic was elevated to a symbol of their Islamic identity. To the peasantry, thus, Eritrean-ness had little meaning.

The post 1960 political elite, however, tried to make Eritreans out of the peasantry by claiming colonial experience and exposure to the Western civilization. Whatever residues of modernity were available have been used as the basis of imagining a 'developed Eritrea'.

For instance, in a conference on the political economy of Ethiopia held in John Hopkins University, at the School of Advanced International Studies (Sais) in 1988, a distinguished Eritrean anthropologist, Professor Asmerom Legesse gave a talk on Eritrea's potential for economic self-reliance and viability.

As in soccer, he asserted, Eritreans have internalized technology, and their country would have little difficulty developing an industrial economy. Illustrating his point, he said, when he left Asmara as a young man for education in Addis Ababa, he had a screwdriver with him. Not knowing what it was, his Amhara schoolmates called it *tabanja mafcha* (a tool for dismantling guns).

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This was how the post- 1960s Eritrean elite, unlike the 1940s 'organic intellectuals', began to perceive their distinct identity vis-à-vis the 'rural' Ethiopian others. A little exposure to Western culture became as dangerous as a little knowledge; so much so that the yardstick for modernity became knowledge of small things such as *cacciavite*.

Indeed, Professor Asmerom's perception was representative of a widely shared image of a 'developed Eritrea'. When an anthropologist, who knows modernity entails much more profound and broader social changes, entertains such an image, it is not difficult to figure out the layperson's imagined Eritrea. Not surprisingly, the Professor did not say why he and other Eritreans who 'internalized technology' had to trek to Addis Ababa for schooling.

The elite constructed such a perception that serves their cynical identity by which the current political leaders in Asmara are nurtured.

Nonetheless, the enduring impact of colonial rule was the fostering of some sense, often ill defined, of a distinctive Eritrean identity. The Italian era was the main reference point for later efforts by nationalists to emphasize distinctiveness from the neighboring Ethiopian empire.

In the early- and mid-1930s, tens of thousands of Italian soldiers arrived in the build-up to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia. This period also witnessed significant urban development and the imposition of race laws regulating "native" society. Those laws notwithstanding, many Eritreans served in the Italian forces that invaded Ethiopia in October 1935. Urbanization and military service contributed to the development of an Eritrean national identity.

He further continued, "Statehood provided the necessary matrix for the gestation of nationhood by inventing unique symbols of identity such as adopting the Gregorian calendar. The economic question, however, has been more difficult. Unlike symbols of identity, economic blueprints can hardly be invented out of a thin air. Thus the plan to transform Eritrea into the 'Singapore of the Horn of Africa and a regional 'economic hub' is a far cry."

In Eritrea, the buzzing word has long been 'self-reliance'. At first, this meant a sense of responsibility. Now this has transformed into utter paranoia. Every outside influence is viewed with suspicion, be it a western NGO or a UN staff. The regime in Asmara labeled them as 'ants that undermine the stability of the country.' Asmara considers towards foreigners as "the nasty beasts". And these "nasty beasts" were arbitrarily expelled in 2005. The BBC correspondent – the last Western journalist based in the country – is only tolerated."

Humility without despair

The sense of isolation is overwhelming in Eritrea. "Foreigners feel like they are setting foot on another planet." The government has laid restrictions on most foreigners that they are not allowed to travel outside of Asmara.

However, one writer described the current mode of Asmara saying "Eritreans show an exceptional resilience and have not abandoned their dreams of a renaissance. To top it off, they have not lost their appetite for life. And Asmarans still surrender to the daily ritual of *passeggiata*. And they are still *macchiato* (espresso with a dash of milk) addicts. As one Eritrean realistically puts it, 'Governments come and go, but the people stay the same.' Eritrea will bounce back." And one may be forced to label this mold as "humility without despair and hope without illusion"

At any rate, the only question that haunts the minds of the Eritreans is: when will this hope and dream be realized? Today Eritrea is not exactly in wonderland. The country has one of the most restrictive economies on the planet, and it's in a morass. The state has taken control of all private companies. Power cuts, food shortages, skyrocketing prices and rationing of staples are the order of the day.

However, "Eritreans have refined the art of belt-tightening and suffer in near silence" my unnamed writer continues, "in 2003, 1kg of meat cost Nfa20, 1kg of sugar was Nfa5, and they were easily available. Today they cost Nfa98 and Nfa20 respectively and Eritreans have to wait in queues at state-run stores to get their monthly ration or buy them on the black market." And Eritreans tell their burdensome life in plaintive whispers. As if that was not enough, freedom of speech is nonexistent. Eritrea is one of the world's leading jailers of journalists.

The un named writer further wrote, “A heroic guerrilla commander, President Isaias Afewerki has metamorphosed into a stereotypical dictator, quashing hopes for democracy in the name of ‘protecting national security’. He has curbed civil liberties, shut down Eritrea’s free press and jailed domestic dissenters.”

The other day I read an article that left me melancholic for a while. Going through it will give you a privy to how life is going in the “red of the sea.” “I have no future,” deplores a female student, whose sole ambition is to get pregnant as quickly as possible to escape conscription,” the article goes on saying, “incidentally, the army is also used as cheap labor for construction works” which I guess is owned by government.

Blind denial

The political elites in Asmara are always suffering from delusional thinking. This is evidenced by the response of the Eritrean government to the Report of the *Somalia Eritrea Monitoring Group*.

This report, of course, detailed Eritrea’s involvement in a wide array of activities aimed at destabilizing the Transitional Federal Government in Mogadishu and in support of terrorists and extremists in Somalia, as well as other actions aimed against Ethiopia and Djibouti. However, as the Eritrean regime's foreign ministry promises, its response does not made attempt to rebut the UN report point by point, it rather indulge itself in futile attempt to produce an image of Eritrea entirely different from the one most people are aware. “It is not a picture that other states in the region can easily recognize.”

In this document the regime portrays itself as the only power in the Horn of Africa that has been working for peace and stability in the region, consistently prepared “to go against the international current to publicly pronounce its views and opinions with honesty and candor”.

And you will completely be at a loss when considering the reaction of the Eritrean government to new UN sanction which as usual is addressed with the customary signature of the regime, that is, a blind denial.

Without inferring to its ethical or moral traits, the so called foreign policy of *Shaabia* exhibits consistency in that it takes violence as a means of accomplishing what it identifies as its national interest. Its actions could not be rationally conceivable and its self-serving goals are not achievable.

And I have a piece of advice here, that Eritrea should outlaw war as an instrument of what it conceives as its “national policy.” Practical wisdom teaches us that war as an instrument of a ‘national policy’ didn’t last beyond a moment of madness. It is possible to learn from how others have made their own hard choices, paying the costs and achieving their gains. In my opinion, the problem lies in the character of the statesman, for ‘character is seen as a key component in the ability to act morally in the political world.’

Coming again to the recent event the government of Eritrea ironically stated that its regional policy has been “squarely and firmly rooted on promoting a conducive environment for good neighborliness and cooperation.”

It unashamedly identifies “Eritrea's politics as the envy of the world. Its economic system is the most effective and efficient, lifting Eritreans out of poverty and setting them on the path to development and prosperity.”

The claimed policy of self-reliance has more than proved its value, but it has also brought about the antagonism of the world’s major powers towards the government and people of Eritrea.

Reacting to this defiant statement made by Asmara one writer commented that “all this is detailed without any sign of irony or cynicism, and at the same time the Eritrean penchant for the superlative is given full rein in the part of the response defining what the statement calls the fundamental pillars of Eritrea's foreign policy.

Without even the faintest satirical indication these are defined as the cultivation of peaceful relations with all its neighbors; the promotion of development at home; and the pursuit of peace and stability throughout the region. It seems the government in Asmara is seriously trying to pretend that it hasn’t heard any of the numerous, and factually accurate, reports that have been

leveled against it in the last few years, and against which this response is supposed to be directed.”

This is, after all, a regime that has literally gone to war with all its neighbors at various times and which has consistently armed, trained and supported opposition forces in Sudan, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia. It suggests a quite extraordinary degree of self-delusion from a regime that has embroiled itself in conflict throughout the region.

As one can easily understand today, reaching a final peace agreement with Ethiopia and getting out of poverty are the pressing issues for Eritreans. But President Isaias Afewerki can't relinquish his fighter mentality and adopt a policy of good neighborliness.

Eritreans want peace. They're weary of this never-ending state of war with Ethiopia. “We just want to live a normal life” they lamented. They have a growing resentment against their intransigent leader. And their anger towards their mulish rulers is simmering.

Created in a contested and volatile region, first as an Italian colony and then as an Ethiopian province, Eritrea's defining experience has primarily been violent instability and political conflict. The political culture of the EPLF has its roots in the liberation struggle against Ethiopia (1961-1991). Engaged in a life and death struggle, its leadership has long been intolerant of internal dissent and external opposition, and it forged its political program – essentially that of a state in waiting – during the years when its rear base was in the harsh northern mountains.

Economically crippled at birth, Eritrea is a poor country from which tens of thousands of youths are fleeing, forming large asylum-seeking communities in Europe and North America. But I believe, Eritrea is an extreme reflection of its region's rough political environment, not its sole spoiler.

The militarism and authoritarianism which now define the political culture have their roots in the region's violent history. Isaias's supporters, diminishing in number, assert that only he has the vision to guide it through difficult times; the growing ranks of his critics argue that he has hijacked the nation-building process; betrayed the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands who achieved and defended independence, and brought ruin to the country.

It is to be recalled that in the interests of peace and stability, many Eritreans and foreign observers alike, reserved judgment even on the early human rights abuses and authoritarian tendencies. However, worrying trends and problems soon became more obvious. The government increasingly clashed with foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and neighboring states and displayed an alarming tendency to fight first and talk later. Initially admired as feisty, self-sufficient and un-beholden to outside influences, the country quickly came to be seen as bellicose.

Particular groups were persecuted, and the state attacked those it regarded as non-citizens. The once admired tight leadership was becoming an oppressive regime with clear disregard for due process, disinterested in rights and only concerned with obligations.

The EPLF was still behaving like a guerrilla movement with absolute power of life and death over its constituents, and its foreign policy was often conducted aggressively, even naively. Squeezed in a generally hostile neighborhood, the EPLF did have much to do to make the country secure. But its liberation skills needed to be augmented by new political and diplomatic proficiency.

More and More Rigid

But what makes a revolution is not the destruction of the old order but the construction of the new one of a new political order. Christopher Clapham holds that the primacy of the political is equally central to post revolutionary institutionalization: " It is organized political power, in the hands of the new rulers of the state, that has to be used ... to bring about a deliberate transformation of economy and society which would not take place on its own"

The primary reason for examining a revolutionary regime with more specificity and more attention to the conduct (as opposed to the outcome) of politics is to understand it more accurately

The political power in the hands of the EPLF/ PFDJ does not bring political, social or economic transformation. The aspiration and dream of the Eritrean people was tarnished by what they saw

after independence. The outcome of the thirty years war of independence has glaringly illustrates a situation of no progress in the “red of the sea.”

Now, conditions are worsening dramatically. Since the 2001 crackdown that ended a brief period of public debate, jails have been filled with political prisoners and critics, religious dissidents, journalists, draft evaders and failed escapees.

Isaias waited several months and made his move a week after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S., when the world’s attention was diverted. Over the weekend of 18 - 19 September, the crackdown swung into action. Eleven of the fifteen open letter signatories were imprisoned, including such senior figures as Petros Solomon (a former military commander who since independence had served, successively, as defence, foreign and marine resources minister) and Haile Woldensae (ex-foreign minister, recently shunted to trade and industry). Three, including Mesfin Hagos, an architect of the EPLF’s victory in 1991, were out of the country, so escaped detention; one recanted.

Those arrested are now either dead or remain in jail without trial at an unknown location. In addition, the offices of the private press were raided and closed and a number of editors and journalists incarcerated indefinitely. None of those arrested in September 2001 have ever been charged, let alone tried.

The public debate which had flourished all too briefly was over as quickly as it had begun. The affair was entirely predictable for a president who once reportedly declared: “When I am challenged, I become more stubborn – more and more rigid”. In many respects, these events marked the completion of a process begun in the mid-1970s, whereby the destiny of the revolution – and thus of the nation itself – was increasingly in the hands of an overly powerful executive that brooked neither dissent nor debate. While the war with Ethiopia brought forward the endgame – in effect, the G15 forced Isaias’s hand – the hardening of presidential authority had been evident for several years, and the G15 had waited too long to move.

Since 2001, the political system has ossified, and while the state cannot strictly be considered totalitarian, since it lacks the bureaucratic and technological resources to control its citizens quite so effectively, the regime has become highly authoritarian. EPLF/PFDJ members dominate state

institutions. From the early 1990s, all the main ministries – defense, interior, education, health, labor – have been headed by leading ex-fighters. Many of the lower rungs in the administrative structure have likewise been occupied by *tegadelay*.

Posts were reserved for ex-fighters, and only exceptionally – notably in the banking sector – were key figures brought in who had not seen combat. It was axiomatic that there was no job – technical, commercial or administrative – that an ex-fighter could not do. This created a gulf between ex-combatants and everyone else, for whom there were relatively few opportunities. An independent, professional civil service is virtually non-existent, and those who work in the lower levels of an increasingly stultifying bureaucracy are demoralized, underpaid and inadequately trained. Civilians predominate in only a few areas, such as teaching. The university was led by a non fighter between the mid-1990s and early 2000s and for a time was harnessed to the nation-building process, but as a key institution that is potentially a seedbed for alternative views, it has never been trusted. Even before the crackdown, the president frequently rotated ministers. Individuals who were out of favor were sidelined in largely meaningless posts.

Today, those who criticize or question presidential edicts are “frozen” from their posts for lengthy periods, permitted to do little but collect their salaries and not much else. Few of the early leaders remain in high public office, and the country is mostly run by second- or even third-tier revolutionaries or close associates of the president. Moreover, there is often duplication of responsibilities, with the president creating what are in effect shadow ministries; run by people who report to him directly, while the official ministry is left to compete for attention. Isaias increasingly appoints malleable individuals who lack a sense of direction or even discernible abilities but are eager to do his bidding. Therefore, there is no revolution in “Red of the sea”, no destruction of the old order and hence no construction of a new political order.

The aggressive approach and abrasive tone have left it increasingly isolated. The willingness of potential friends to consider the legitimacy of at least some of its concerns is diminished by Eritrea’s unwillingness to demilitarize its foreign policy and to make concessions on any level.

The economy has been shattered by the vagaries of regional rainfall, the state’s destruction of the private sector and the huge costs of military mobilization. Society more broadly is under

enormous strain. Remarkably, there have not yet been serious protests, but pressure is building, both inside the borders and in the extensive Diaspora, whose remittances have been a major financial support. A range of external opposition groups – though still deeply divided – are lining up against the regime.

All this is a preview to emergence of another failed state in the Horn. That outcome is otherwise distinctly possible given the widespread lack of support for the government within the country and the deteriorating state of the army, whose ability to either sustain Isaias Afwerki's regime or to successfully manage regime transition is increasingly questionable. Eritrea's internal stability and external relations will have much wider implications in north-east Africa and the Red Sea region. Examining both internal autocracy and aggressive foreign policy would indicate the frustrated political transformation.

No transition

Eritrea, until now, is an able to go through a political transition. Things embedded in a democratization process are the breakdown of authoritarian system, democratic transition and democratic consolidation.

Democratic consolidation is an analytically differentiated aspect of the process of democratization. The processes of transition and consolidation overlap and sometimes coincide, but they are conceptually distinct. Transition to democracy is concerned with the installation of democratic institutions, whereas consolidation is concerned with making democratic institutions enduring and functional and connecting them to civil society.

Eritrea has never entered into a democratization process. This hope remained unrealized and no light is seen at the end of funnel. Studies of transition emphasize factors such as the absence of a strong middle class, the prevalence of an authoritarian political culture, economic dependency, and the role of political elites. Consequently, the transition process becomes the product of strategic calculation by political elites. However, this is not the case in Eritrea. The political elites are not only ambivalent or poorly disposed for this task, but it is also opted to go against the stream.

Based on a distorted interpretation of its position the Eritrea's regime wants to enforce its interest by force. So the politics of Eritrea is reduced to nihilism. It is all about dependency or ideology and war: war 'by pen and gun, by word and bullet, by tongue and teeth.' Eritrea has an ideology that is motivated by a philosophy of insurgency with no real political agenda that serve the interest of the Eritrean people. The regime can be said a nihilist supporter of terrorist groups such as OLF, ONLF and Ginbot 7 etc. because its only aim is to spread terror to change the region and make it conform to its views by fomenting resorting to violence.

The French ambassador to Ethiopia told to ETV weeks ago that "Eritrea is playing a very strange game in the region" recalling that the *Derge* regime had expelled the political staffs of the embassy following a statement made by his country declaring its position that Eritrea must be granted independence. Yes, a "strange game"

For one thing, we cannot say that the regime in Asmara has a structured or intelligible foreign policy framework to govern its international relation with its neighbors and beyond. Its policy is formulated on the conventional paradigms or customary practices of countries of the world. Hence, I would say, even a person who is endowed with a towering talent cannot construed its action characterized by a morally or otherwise, reprehensive conduct.

One would expect some kind of coherence in the practice of international relation. But there is nothing of this sort in Asmara. Therefore, one would ask himself whether this should be considered as an instance where the regime is striving to make a novel moves and on accident goes across the established norms of the international relation.

Without any ambivalence, I would readily say and unequivocally declare that it is operating in an autocratic fashion, devoid of a slightest prudence and practical wisdom of international rules and guidance or customary practices.

The regime generally does not operate within the bounds of agreed international rules of diplomacy. We have plethora of examples to support this claim. We can say that the Eritrean government is one that has not only a tendency of laxity toward terrorism, but also it practiced terrorism. It even took terrorist path as an instrument to advance a national policy.

The business of foreign affairs, observably, has little to do with violence. This is especially true in the world that operates under the new world order called globalization. “Globalization is ...the dividing line between the old era of national suspicion, economic hostility, and isolationism, and the new era of mutual cooperation.” Then what happening in Eritrea?

I would say, that the problem is directly related with the personal ethical disposition of its rulers, specifically Isais Afeworki's.

My approach here suggestively hints that there is, in fact, a linkage between ethics and foreign policy. And in this context I take the word ‘ethics’ to be roughly synonymous with ‘morals,’ and ‘morality.’ Therefore, we need to strive for a better understanding of the role ethics can and should play in deliberations about policy choices, and especially about the implementation of policies ultimately decided upon.

In order to go about this in an intellectually structured way, instead of merely lurching to policy choices of preference or, for that matter, corrupt and self-serving policy choices, the discussion needs to be anchored in some level of common understanding as a basis for rational discourse.

This is a new age of internationalism and a world in which nation states are interdependent. This supplies an ethical content to a foreign policy and strategy. And it also recognizes that the national interest cannot be defined only by a narrow real “politik”. Weigh up this percept of international relation against the conduct of the Eritrean regime.

For instance, the British PM Robin Cook placed the ethical dimension to foreign policy in the human rights context. He argued that an ethical foreign policy must support the demands of other peoples for the democratic rights on which we insist for ourselves and that henceforth, human rights would therefore be placed at the heart of British foreign policy.

Thinkers well before the advent of Christianity and well after believed that these qualities must be supplemented by additional skills, or ‘practical wisdom,’ otherwise known as ‘prudence’ – by which we do not mean mere ‘caution.’

As Alberto Coll has observed that the notion of prudence or practical wisdom is basic to a way of thinking about the ethical dilemmas of foreign policy. It has two hallmarks. First, ‘it recognizes the considerable difficulty of translating ethical intentions and purposes into policies that will produce morally sound results. And second, it places heavy emphasis upon the character of the statesman, for ‘character is seen as a key component in the ability to act morally in the political world. The examination of prudence in the realm of decision-making takes two modern forms, as in the classical divide between ‘rational idealism,’ as Reinhold Niebuhr identified it, and ‘historical realism.’

A leader must be someone for whom prudence is the central attribute. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle attributes to Pericles ‘and men like him a practical wisdom, because they can see what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general; we consider that those can do this who are good at managing households or states.’

It is not just a matter of possessing prudence, or good judgment, as an abstract virtue, independent of the real world. Rather, it is a matter of formulating and implementing, of persuading and leading. Then Aristotle says, ‘practical wisdom...must be a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regards to human goods....plainly, practical wisdom is a virtue and not an art.’

Thomas Aquinas, the interpreter of Aristotelian thought, spends considerable time on the question of virtue, and properly considers prudence, in the identical sense that Aristotle understood it, noting that prudence is both true and perfect ‘for it takes counsel, judges and commands aright in respect of the good end of man’s whole life; and this alone is prudence. Prudence is a ‘right reason applied to action.’

The components are (1) *Memory*, because prudence requires the memory of many things; (2) *Understanding* or *Intelligence*, since prudence is right reason applied to action, the whole process of prudence needs to have its source in understanding; (3) *Docility*, or the capacity to be taught by others of great experience and wisdom; (4) *Shrewdness* or *acumen*, the ability to respond and decide correctly in sudden and unexpected circumstances; (5) *Reason*, denoting not the power of reason, but its good and proper use; (6) *Foresight*, which he argues is the most

important part of prudence, because while the past and the immediate present are beyond our ability to change, a statesman must have the clear capacity to weigh carefully the consequences his actions may bring ; (7) *Circumspection*, which compares the suitability of the means with the end; and (8) *Caution*, particularly because ‘of the evils man has to avoid, some are of frequent occurrence...and against them caution is directed either that they may be avoided altogether, or that they do less harm.’

The timeless wisdom elaborated by Aristotle and Aquinas is, in essence, embodied in every modern democracy in some form as the ideal, if not always the norm. It surely expresses the desired characteristics of the ideal leader, and all those who serve in elected or appointive positions of power and influence.

However, the regime in Asmara is a rogue state that absolutely devoid of all these norms and ideals. It is an autocratic regime that took war, violence and terrorism as an instrument of its foreign policy. The problem of Eritrea lies in the personal conduct of its leaders who mistook politics as a sheer lying.

At the moment, the expectations of the worst come not from without but from within. And my question at this point is, will Eritrea be another failing state in the Horn? As a matter of course I may react yes! But heaven knows what tomorrow has in its store for the “red of the sea” and its people. Wait and see.