

## Review

## Foreign policy of Eritrea: Explained in the light of 'democratic peace' proposition

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During the past two decades since its independence in 1991, Eritrea's foreign policy had been characterized by conflict and confrontation. It maintained pretty much troubled and usually violent relations with all its neighbors. Likewise, its relations with major powers at the international arena had been strained, particularly since the beginning of the last decade. Its relations with donors and human rights agencies have also been extremely troubled mainly because of the regime's intolerance, fears of external subversion, and gruesome human rights record. An analytical approach based on conflict of interests may proffer a partial explanation, but it hardly explicates Eritrea's militarized foreign policy. This article contends that an account of the absence of democratic norms and institutions — that ensure accountability, transparency, and institutional checks and balances in policy-making — better explains the country's awkwardly troubled foreign policy. In line with the democratic peace (DP) proposition, it is argued that the ruling party's embedded authoritarian political culture and absence of democratic rule in post-independent Eritrea have seriously jeopardized the new nation's foreign policy.

**Key words:** Foreign policy, democratic peace, conflict, EPLF/PFDJ, political culture, institutions.

### INTRODUCTION

The foreign policy of Eritrea, a small country in the Horn of Africa, in the past two decades of its independence has been characterized by conflict and confrontation with its neighbors and other world powers. It maintained pretty much troubled and usually violent relations with all its neighbors, including conflicts with Yemen and Djibouti; more seriously, with Ethiopia and the Sudan. Likewise, its relations at the international arena have been strained, particularly during the last decade or so. Apparently normal relations with the US in the 1990s have been frosty since an alleged border war broke with Ethiopia in 1998. Its ties with the UN, African Union and the EU are troubled as well because of its outrage at these organizations' reluctance to force Ethiopia to accept a boundary commission ruling. The rogue behavior of Isaias's regime and its allegedly destabilizing role in the region earned Eritrea the tag of a regional 'spoiler' and

tightening sanctions by the Security Council since 2009. The regime's relations with donors and human rights agencies has also been extremely troubled since the country's independence because of its intolerance, fears of external subversion, and, more recently, gruesome human rights record.

This paper aims to explain Eritrea's foreign policy in the light of democratic peace theory; which contends democracies are less likely to go to war and a government's aggressive foreign policy has much to do with its nondemocratic-ness at home. An explanation of conflict of interests, may partly explain Eritrea's militarized foreign policy, but such an approach hardly explicates the fundamental factors underpinning Eritrean regime's warlike behavior. This paper argue the absence of democratic norms and institutions — that ensure accountability, transparency, and institutional checks and

balances in policy-making — gives better account of such awkwardly violent foreign policy. This paper, in line with the democratic peace (DP) proposition, argues that the ruling party's (EPLF/PFDJ) tradition of authoritarian political culture and the absence of democratic rule in post-independent Eritrea have seriously jeopardized the new nation's foreign policy.

In order to better elucidate the topic, it raises three inter-related historical and contemporary themes. First, the history of authoritarian political culture of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front — EPLF, the ruling front that renamed itself the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) — is briefly examined. Second, and related issue, is EPLF's fatally realist *Weltanschauung*, the understanding of history, and its cautious interaction with the outside world. Finally, the absence of democratic norms and policymaking institutions is examined to understand the new nation's foreign policy. This paper will address these with two questions in mind: first, how democratic states remain at peace because of democratic norms and institutions; and second, are democracies predisposed to peaceful methods of conflict resolution?

## THE DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY

The democratic peace proposition (or theory) finds its origins two centuries back in the ideas of Immanuel Kant who, in his seminal thesis *'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay, 1795*, asserted that 'republican states would enjoy a "perpetual peace" with other republics' (Lynn-Jones, 1996, p. ix). By republican, Kant meant a constitutional government based on "the political principle of the separation of the executive power (the administration) from the legislative", one "on which all juridical legislation of a people" is supreme<sup>1</sup>. In a similar fashion, today, neo-Kantians (Doyle, 1983; Russett, 1993; John, 1994) advocate that democratic states virtually never go to war with one another. This (near) absence of war between democracies has come to be known as the "democratic peace." There is some discrepancy; some refer to peace between democracies while others argue liberal states do not go to war against each other. Kant himself focused on what he called republics, not democracies. There is, however, substantial overlap between the two, though "liberal peace" may not be identical with "democratic peace" (Doyle, 1983; Russett,

1993; John, 1994, p. xi). It is logically impossible for (liberal) proponents or (realist) opponents (David, 1994; Christopher, 1994) of DP proposition to prove that democracies have never fought and will never fight in the future. At the same time, several empirical studies find that democracies are just as war-prone as other states. Others argue democracies are "Janus-faced," that they do not fight each other but are frequently involved in wars against authoritarian regimes (Thomas, 1995). Nevertheless, it still remains the case that democratic governments are in general more peace-loving than their non-democratic counterparts. If governments are constrained by domestic institutional constraints and are bound by public opinion that always prevents leaders from starting wars, then we should certainly expect that democracies are more peaceful than non-democracies (Michael et al., 1996; Russett, 1993).

DP theorists argue that democracies rarely, if ever, fight one another. But what explains the absence of war between democracies, or the peacefulness of democracies? There are several versions of the causal logic for the absence of war among democracies or their propensity to peace. Democratic norms and institutions are, nonetheless, two of the widely accepted normative and institutional attributes of democratic regimes on which the consensus on DP proposition is built. In his seminal work *"Why Democratic Peace?"*, Russett presents two causal factors for the absence of war between democracies. The first is the cultural/normative model, which argues decision-makers in democracies adhere to norms of peaceful conflict resolution corresponding to similar domestic norms and practice. In other words, since democracies resolve internal conflicts peacefully, they also try to settle international conflicts peacefully. Thus norms of peaceful conflict resolution and mutual expectation create peace among democracies but not necessarily with non-democracies (Lynn-Jones, 1996, pp. xvii-xviii).

In a similar fashion, (Doyle, 1983) argues that states that adhere to liberal principles/norms enjoy peace among themselves but are likely to go to war against non-liberal states. In this 'liberal zone of peace', Doyle regards liberalism — "a distinct ideology and set of institutions" — as a source of peace, because it is based (a) on principles that value the rights and "the freedom of the individual"; and (b) on institutions that guarantee rule by representatives, legal equality of citizens, freedom of worship and information, private property, and market economy. To Doyle, Kant's "perpetual peace" provides the best explanation of liberal peace — not public control over foreign policy but principles and institutions shared by republican regimes make war difficult — and of the big tendency of liberal states to wage war against non-liberal states (Lynn-Jones, 1996, pp. xiv-xvi).

The second explanation, which Russett calls the structural/institutional model, argues domestic institutional constraints including separation of powers, checks and balances and the need for public consensus generally

<sup>1</sup> In the Definitive Articles for Perpetual Peace Among states, Kant holds in the First Article that 'The civil constitution of every state is to be republican'; one governed by a republican constitution (distinct from democratic constitution) in which the 'prospects for creating perpetual peace are favourable', because '*In a republican system it must be the citizens, who are all legally on a par, who decide 'War or no war?', and in answering that they have to contemplate all calamities of war, in which they would have to fight, pay the costs of the war out of their own pockets, painfully repair the devastation war leaves behind, and, load themselves with a heavy national debt that would embitter peace itself and could never be amortised because of constant further wars. Faced with all that, it is utterly natural for them to be very cautious about getting into such a dangerous game*' (pp. 120-123).

constrain or slow down leaders in democracies from waging war. The mutual expectation that other democratic leaders are similarly constrained and the time to resolve conflicts peacefully can be causes for democratic peace (Lynn-Jones, 1996, p. xviii). Russett's structural/institutional explanation of how democracy causes peace is relevant to the theme of this paper and, hence, deserves further explanation. How democratic institutions and norms, therefore, affect the conduct of foreign policy by governments?

Risse-Kappen argues participatory and institutional constraints limit the possibility of going to war in democracies. Peaceful foreign policies of democratic states owe to "the rational cost-benefit calculations" of citizens. Since, as Kant earlier argued, "aggressive foreign policy and the cost of war" directly harm the economic interest and the general welfare of citizens, the public in democracies is unlikely to support military adventures and wars of aggression (Risse-Kappen, 1995, p. 497). The other factor Risse-Kappen identifies is institutional constraints and the complexity of decision-making in democracies. Democratic systems are characterized by 'an elaborate set of checks and balances' between the executive and the legislature, and between the political system, interest groups and the public opinion. Processes of decision-making, particularly those concerning issues of war and peace, need time for leaders to mobilize sufficient domestic support to go to war. The complexity of decision-making, therefore, makes it unlikely that leaders readily use force. The perceptions of leaders that "leaders of other democracies as constrained and, therefore, refrain from violence" plays a role here; making democracies more peaceful towards other democracies (Risse-Kappen, 1995, p. 498). The institutional setting is, however, a critical factor for the absence of war among democracies — "the more centralized the political system", Risse-Kappen argues, "the more likely it is that their leaders to go to war." Democratic systems are not characterized just by the rule of law and institutional constraints, but also by "norms, rules and procedures embedded in the political culture and institutionalized in the political system" (Risse-Kappen, 1995, p. 499). In domestic affairs, they emphasize civil liberties, political rights and the resolution of conflict peacefully through compromise and consensus. According to Risse-Kappen, democracies then could externalize their internal decision-making norms (nonviolence and peaceful conflict resolution) — if these norms regulate decision-making process internally, they could also shape "the motivations, perceptions and practices," in effect providing a framework of shared and collective understanding among democratic systems. Autocratic regimes, characterized by the absence of these very norms, are not bound by liberal norms of non-violent and compromise-oriented resolution of conflict (Russett, 1993, p. 35).

If perception, norms and political culture play a

role, Risse-Kappen argues further, then 'democratic peace' is socially constructed. Amity and enmity are socially constructed through mutual perceptions and interactions. This is very relevant to the case under study here. If the predisposition of leaders in democratic polities makes them trust other democracies or externalize their internal decision-making process in their interactions, is not it valid to argue that the warlike behavior of Eritrea is a corollary of the absence of these same perceptions and norms at home? The potential aggressiveness of autocracies is a direct consequence of their often oppressive internal power structures (Risse-Kappen, 1995, p. 507). For Risse-Kappen, a socially constructivist approach "combining domestic structural characteristics, perceptions and interaction patterns in the international realm" offers a better explanation of 'democratic peace' than conventional liberal accounts solely emphasizing democratic norms, institutions and the inherent peacefulness of democracies. This paper exactly utilize this approach to examine foreign policy of Eritrea. It attempts to explain it in the context of DP proposition through examination of complex causal factors seen above — internal power structure and norms, perceptions, and political culture that motivate an aggressive external posture.

While a consensus has grown that democracies do not fight each other, there is a parallel consensus challenging the DP proposition that democracies "are neither more nor less likely to make war" than other autocratic regimes (notably Write, 1942; Doyle, 1983; Dixon, 1994; Starr, 1992; Morgan and Campbell, 1991; Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman, 1992). But the criticism rests on rather 'dubious assumptions' and 'doubtful empirical analysis' (Risse-Kappen, 1995, p. 495) or a closer look of the studies underlying this consensus, in fact, imply that democracies are less warlike (Rummel, 1995, p. 458). After a careful reading of the studies underlying this consensus and his own 1983 work, Rummel comes with evidence that shows "democracies are in fact the most pacific of regimes," though sometimes involved in militarized disputes and threat of force that rarely escalate into war. Rummel's analysis is quite compelling and worthy of expanded treatment but space does not allow doing so here. In short, contrary to the claim that democracies are no more or no less warlike than other types of regimes, the findings on DP proposition are robust and it enjoys widespread consensus among scholars and policy-makers as well. Having seen the normative and empirical claims of DP proposition, this paper will now be redirected to its main theme and attempt to explain Eritrea's conflict-dominated foreign policy.

## **POLITICS AND FOREIGN POLICY IN POST-INDEPENDENCE ERITREA**

The post-liberation politics of Eritrea — which achieved

*de facto* independence from Ethiopia on 24 May 1991 and became *de jure* sovereign in April 1993 following an internationally monitored popular referendum that saw a remarkable 99.8 percent vote for independence — began by a four-year transitional period (1993-1997) highly anticipated to usher in a democratic political system. Within a few years, however, the EPLF/PFDJ regime began to fail its promises it heightened domestic repression and returned to another devastating war with Ethiopia in 1998. Eritrea weathered through troubled relations with Sudan since 1993; an armed conflict with Yemen in 1996 over a group of Red Sea islands; a major, yet unresolved, ‘border’ conflict with Ethiopia since 1998; and border disputes and a brief armed clash with Djibouti in the late 1990s and 2008 respectively.

Eritrea, today, is distinguished for a highly repressive regime at home and a dangerously militarized foreign policy abroad. At the time of writing, basic freedoms and liberties are curtailed, free press and dissent are oppressed, and human rights are violated at a gross scale. The process of decision-making is highly centralized and personalized, and institutional checks and balances and rule of law are totally absent. Most importantly, domestic repression and absence of accountable policy institutions has jeopardized the prospect for a sound and responsible foreign policy. But what accounts for such warlike foreign policy? It is argued that absence of democratic norms and institutions — coupled by an authoritarian political culture and realist worldview deriving from the front’s past experience — explains much about the nature and motivations of Eritrea’s foreign policy. This paper will first shed some light on the front’s past, which casts its heavy shadow on the nation’s politics, and then examine the internal institutional mechanisms shaping foreign policy-making.

### A tradition of authoritarianism

The need to examine EPLF’s experience of the liberation war is made all the more necessary because the present situation of Eritrea is not discernible without understanding its, and the EPLF’s, recent past. It is in the crucible of such experience that the ruling front’s political character formed; in fact, a front (and a society) ‘caught in the headlights’ of its past. The EPLF was born in a political atmosphere of intense revolutionary and ideological upheaval plaguing its predecessor, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), since the late 1960s. It emerged in the early 1970s from a coalition of three splinter groups, to evolve into an impressively well-organized, highly disciplined and militarily formidable guerrilla army in the 1980s capable to knock out the most powerful and modernized army in black Africa with huge military support from the former Soviet Union.

As a liberation movement fighting a conventional war against a mighty Ethiopian army, with virtually no external

military support, there is a reason for much wonder of its power. In reality, its power derived from its revolutionary ethos that enforced sheer discipline and organization and a secretive political culture. Deeply embedded Marxist-Maoist ethos of discipline, secrecy, sacrifice and patriotism pervaded its internal structures and decision-making institutions<sup>2</sup> (Pool, 2001, pp. 53-54). These revolutionary ethoses and the necessity of unity of a coalition force, military survival in the face of superior enemies, and tight hierarchical structures inevitably engendered extreme centralization of power in the hands of a coherent leadership. As a result, decision-making had never been valued in terms of its democratic quality but in terms of its political and military expediency.

The formation, structural organization and revolutionary principles of the EPLF are reactions to these historical incidents and political realities of the time. The core organizational principle instituted by the front’s leaders was strict democratic centralism, a Maoist strategy expected to ensure organizational unity with limited political pluralism. Dissent is unacceptable and the top leadership, particularly Isaias, exercised absolute power through these structures. The internal dissent and its violent crackdown in the 1970s were symptoms of this arbitrary exercise of power. The earliest and most powerful opposition came as early as 1973 when a group of fighters known as *manqa’e* (after the Tigrigna word for *bat*) targeted the undemocratic nature of the nascent front<sup>3</sup>, Isaias’s domination in particular, and demanded for increased democratic accountability, power-sharing, and respect for rights of fighters. The internal crisis ended with the liquidation of the group resulting in the triumph of a centralist conception of democracy, an approach advocated by Isaias, and the silencing of populist alternative forever in EPLF’s history of the liberation era. The same centrist approach triggered another internal opposition to the front’s leadership in 1976 known as the *yemin*, or rightist as EPLF official account, whose motivation, according to Pool, ‘is more obscure and less influential’ than the *menqa’e* movement. The denunciation of the dissent group by the front’s leadership as regionalist aside, its emergence and arbitrary suppression provided a further impetus for

<sup>2</sup> The EPLF’s top leadership; notably Isaias Afwerki, EPLF’s long-time leader and Eritrea’s current president, and Romodan Mohamed Nur, the front’s first general secretary from 1977-1978; was among a small group of ELF fighters sent to China in 1968-1969 for political and military training during the height of the Cultural Revolution. They came back to the ‘Field’ with radical Maoist political views and organizational techniques, the centrality of a vanguard front in particular, that set them in collision with rather a conservative leadership of the ELF. This tension would lead to their eventual splintering from the ELF, each of them leading a breakaway group, and merged their forces in the course of the 1970s to form a highly disciplined Maoist guerrilla army.

<sup>3</sup> The *menqa’e* crisis was an internal challenge mainly to Isaias-led People’s Liberation Forces (PLF), one of the three ELF splinter groups, aka *Selfi Natsinet* mainly representing Christian fighters under Isaias’s leadership. The *Destructive Movement*, the official EPLF account of the crisis, provides a good insight of the leadership’s views on democracy (that endures to this date), the secretive nature of the front, and intolerance to dissent.

centralization and marked the last organized internal dissent within the EPLF. The centralizing tendency represented and defended by the leadership finally succeeded, making the way for the consolidation of organizational ethos of a dominant, and often unquestionable, leadership; a top-down structure; and a centralized decision-making system (Pool, 2001, p. 87). A Maoist tradition of ‘criticism and self-criticism’ was institutionalized within the front, but in principle it ‘was for individuals and not for the front as a whole, and rarely for its leadership’ (Pool, 2001, p. 61). This tradition that is hostile to any form of individual freedom and dissent became a salient characteristic of the EPLF; and endures to this day, though less intact, in the political psyche of the ruling front.

The EPLF was characterized by a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology, organizational structure, and political pragmatism. According to Pool, its self-characterization has changed from presentation of itself as a Marxist revolutionary vanguard to a broad-based national front ‘reflecting a range of ideological tendencies’ later (Pool, 2001, p. 60). Although it underwent some ideological evolution at later stage, its vehement Marxist credentials that shaped its formative stage have, nonetheless, left a lasting stamp on its attitude, structure and internal power exercising mechanisms. The defining principles, policies<sup>4</sup> and features of Marxist-Maoist liberation movements (such as stringent discipline, hierarchy, tight control and secrecy) have endured EPLF’s political evolution and ideological shifts. They account for its development into one of the most powerful liberation movements in the Third world; but also explain its inevitable institutional hostility to democratic values and practices. The historical dominance of personal figures — like Isaias, and particular power centers — like the political executive — within the front has always remained as its defining organizational traits. Another lasting impact of its early Marxist orientation is its structuralist interpretation of the world; particularly its mistrust and perceptions of the West as dominant and exploitative.

The EPLF was a strikingly highly secretive organization. According to Pool (2001, p. 95), the ‘culture of secrecy’ was so high that “political discussions in the political bureau were secret from central committee members, and the latter’s discussions similarly secret.” The degree — or even *cult* — of secrecy is such an insurmountable organizational trait of the EPLF that many historical events remain shrouded in mystery to this date. For instance, the Eritrean People’s Revolutionary Party — a clandestine vanguard front which directed the front from behind the scenes since early 1970s — was made public only after independence in 1994, five years after its

supposed dissolution in 1989<sup>5</sup>. The secret existence of this party within the EPLF is arguably the single most important case revealing the political culture and inner working mechanisms of the front (Pool, 2001, pp. 92-93). It met in secret to decide on critical issues, to draft the front’s programmes prior to its congresses, and to select leadership slates prior to the front’s congress. Its central committee ‘doubled as the EPLF’s political bureau’ that run the front on a daily basis (Reid, 2006, p. 3). Such was the degree of dreadful secrecy, censorship, and control that crippled the front’s professed principles of democratic centralism or the prospects for openness, transparency, and freedom of dissent both before and after independence.

It is this weighty and entrenched legacy of the front bequeathed to the new nation intact. “No narrative”, Reid argues, “of the nation’s [post-independence] descent into dictatorship is complete without attention to the clandestine party that ran the liberation movement from its inception, for its shadow looms large over the contemporary political arena” (Reid, 2006, p. 3). The values and ethos of this glorious past are still highly extolled, cherished, and told and retold insofar as it engenders the belief that EPLF’s previous victory in liberating Eritrea and a successful navigation of the challenges of nation-building after independence would never ever be materialized without them. No doubt of the role these ‘Field’ values played in EPLF’s historic victory, the crucial question is how they affected the politics of the nation, and the prospects for democracy in particular, during the post-independence period? Before answering this question in the light of a legacy of the political culture and institutions of the front, a closely related historical factor defining EPLF’s view of the outside world and conditioning its relations with various actors will first be examined. No explanation of the nature of Eritrea’s foreign policy at present is complete without looking at the world outlook of a front that dominated national politics for over three decades. It is also an integral part of the autocratic political culture of the front that shapes the nation’s aggressive foreign policy.

To begin with, foreign policy of Eritrea is also a reflection of the leadership’s *worldview and its subjective foreign policy choices*. A society’s general, long-held perceptions and practices constitute its peculiar political culture. An important source of political culture is “the national historical experience”, or the cumulative sum of past events that has shaped a country and its citizens.

<sup>4</sup>Iyob (1997, 659), in contradiction to Pool, argues that ‘the [deeply Marxist-Maoist] ideological tenor of the Front’s written and spoken messages’, ‘attest to a well-organised political machine operating in accordance with socialist principles’ inspired by Chinese, Cuban, and Soviet ideologues.

<sup>5</sup>Dan Connell (2001, 2003) gives by far the best account of the clandestine political party founded in the early 1970s, lately known as Eritrean Socialist Party, that shaped and guided the front for almost 20 years and that it was allegedly disbanded in 1989, shortly before the end of the liberation war. Its structure, mirroring the democratic centralism of the EPLF, was extensive engulfing the entire front; and its membership selectively penetrated down into the military-administrative units of the front and outwards into the front’s mass organizations of women, workers, and youth and students. The political bureau of the front served as central committee of the party whose membership was very selective and secretly guarded.

[text omitted] Political culture is important in defining a country's broad sense of its national interest, hence pushing its leaders to a particular policy direction (Rourke, 1997, p. 96). The *Weltanschauung* of the EPLF and perception of its various actors is shaped by two enduring narratives: a perceived history of betrayal of Eritrea by the world; and a fatal realist understanding of the outside world, which is a corollary of the first worldview and EPLF's own historical experience. Its sense of betrayal by the outside world derives from historical events, actual and perceived, since the 1940s. These are critical episodes in the history of the nation that attest to the *realpolitik* power struggle among international powers over Eritrea during the early years of the Cold War. EPLF's general realist interpretation of the world is a direct corollary of realist calculations of great powers, its social construction by the EPLF, and the front's own survival in an environment of hostile superior enemies.

Here, space does not permit to look in detail at historical events that account for the EPLF/PFDJ's realist worldview. But briefly, EPLF's narration of a history of rival world powers colluding over Eritrea — 'a pawn in world politics' — has its roots in the immediate post-war power struggle among major powers (notably the US, the former Soviet Union, Britain, and France) that rocked the disposal of the Eritrean question (Yohannes, 1991). Three most important factors that shape this narrative are (1) the power struggles among major powers over a hapless Eritrea; and (2) the General Assembly's decision in 1951 to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, despite recommending independence for other Italian colonies; and (3) the silence of the UN, the guarantor of the federation, when Ethiopia unilaterally abrogated the federation in 1962. The front's own history of survival against superior powers (the ELF and Ethiopia) in complete isolation from the outside world in the ragged mountains of Sahel (its base, popularly known as '*Field*') is added to construct the narrative of 'a hostile world' to an unquestionable national historiography. Real or imagined notions of endangered survival, 'victimhood', a siege mentality, and a realist dogma of '*might makes right*' were constructed into a complete Social Darwinist doctrine of history to comprehend the world.

In her book, "*I didn't do it for you nigge*" — a title after a smearing remark by a victorious British officer to a ululating Eritrean woman after the 1941 victory over Italy — Michella Wrong aptly sums up the view of how Eritrea has been mistreated by the British, the US, the United Nations, and 'just about everyone else who had a say in the former colony's political status.' As Wrong (2006) sees it, this experience shaped the EPLF's Spartan warrior culture and its "rigidly puritanical lifestyle," out of which sprang both its military prowess and its intolerance for difference. The triumph '*against all odds*' — facing a country twenty times its size securing the patronage of the superpowers alternately — has a tremendous impact

on EPLF's mindset. With no consistent outside support, the EPLF mobilized the population — half-Christian, half-Muslim, from nine ethnic groups — into a highly motivated, well-disciplined military force that was able to bring successive US- and Soviet-backed Ethiopian governments to their knees, and eventually declare formal independence in 1993 (Reid, 2006, p. 6). In the eyes of the front, this is the rationale behind building a formidable guerrilla army, and it vindicated the leadership's entrenched realist understanding of power.

It is this fatal realist worldview to shape principles and policies guiding a new nation and its survivalist foreign policy in an ever 'hostile' world. The challenges and setbacks facing the new nation — be it hostility from neighboring countries or from the West, and the criticism of the regime's development policies by the World Bank, IMF, and development agencies — are all fitted into a single narrative of a world always hostile to Eritrea. Recent incidents are readily interpreted in terms of this historical narrative as well. The position of the international community in the aftermath of the border war, particularly its unwillingness to pressurize Ethiopia to unconditionally accept the boundary commission's decision, and Eritrea's perceived mistreatment, which is partly a result of the leadership's own diplomatic setbacks, reinforced such realist worldview. The UN and African Union (AU) perceivably not only betrayed Eritrea in its quest for freedom earlier but are yet hostile to its post-independence aspirations for prosperity and biased against it in the conflict with Ethiopia.

The AU — whose predecessor, the Organization of African Unity, had in principle opposed Eritrea's right of self-determination but willy-nilly accepted its sovereignty — is presumed an appendage to Ethiopia's hegemonic aspirations. Isaias's maiden speech to the OAU in 1993 shows this stance: that 'to mince our words now and applaud the OAU would neither serve the desired purpose of learning lessons from our past, nor reflect positively on our honesty and integrity' (Connell, 1997, pp. 282-283). Relations deteriorated as Eritrea's intervention in Somalia in the last decade became increasingly controversial. It vehemently opposed AU policies towards the conflicts in Somalia and Darfur, among others. Eritrea withdrew from AU in 2003 when the latter failed to condemn Ethiopia's refusal to implement the border ruling. Eritrea returned in July 2010 as the AU began to call for increased sanctions against it. The call for sanctions originated in the Inter-governmental Authority on Development, which is dominated by Ethiopia, prompting Eritrea to abandon the organization (ICG, 2010, p. 23).

The earliest views of the UN, as seen above, were shaped by its weakness to either grant independence to Eritrea or safeguard the provisions of the federation with Ethiopia later. EPLF's perception of this organization as the instrument of big powers, and its impartiality to Eritrea in particular, were again vindicated by its actions after

Ethiopia officially rejected the ruling of the boundary commission in 2002 which granted Badme (the ultimate cause and prize of the war) to Eritrea. The Security Council repeatedly failed to pressurize Ethiopia to comply and, instead, criticized Eritrea with Ethiopia for failing to cooperate. Relations with the UN deteriorated rapidly after the regime restricted movement of the UN peacekeeping force (UNMEE), until the peacekeepers withdrew in 2007, and condemned the organization of complicity for Ethiopia's incomppliance (ICG, 2010, p. 21). To make matters worse, the Security Council passed Resolution 1907 in December 2009 calling for sanctions over Eritrea. Again, following a UN report on Somalia, the Security Council imposed a second round of sanctions in December 2011, targeting the country's lucrative mining industry and its "Diaspora taxes" ostensibly collected through intimidation and blackmail from Eritreans abroad.

Relations with the US and other western powers, which space precludes to elaborate here have also been casted in this bigger realist framework. Diplomatic ties are always constrained with Western powers, and took confrontational turn after the conflict with Ethiopia. Whether for real or perceived and legitimate or illegitimate reasons, as Reid points, "the EPLF [PFDJ], and the Eritrean society more broadly, have been unable to escape its own past." Eritrea's foreign policy could not free itself from the chains of its history; and not the least because 'the current government is the product of much older historical dynamics.' The enormous vitriol and rant at the West poured by the government's media regularly evokes the big-power manipulations of the 1940s and 1950s. The bitterness and anger couching the allegations capture the perception of West's continuous hostility towards Eritrea. The isolation of the struggle has become a core component of the nationalist narrative — 'If Eritrea could win the liberation war solely through its own efforts, without significant allies and backers overseas, why would it need networks of friends in independence?' (Reid, 2006, p. 18). The '*Nakfa syndrome*' — a sense of isolationism, self-reliance, and importance of military power that were matured during the revolution based in its symbolic stronghold town called Nakfa in the Sahel mountains — defines how relations with the outside world should be conducted. Foreign policy is characterized 'by a readiness to employ force as a first resort' (Reid, 2006, p. 19).

Overall, it is this long and bitter history of the front and the nation — shaped by real and imagined narratives, a sense of betrayal and isolation, and a realist motto of might-makes-right — that serves as a reference book for the regime's external relations. This is further compounded by a syndrome that commonly afflicts external relations of leftist revolutionary movements after victory. Revolutionaries meet their greatest challenges — both internal and external — after the revolution, and usually fail to meet them with sufficient political adroitness and humanity. Having broken from a presumably unjust international order in their struggles for freedom, revolutionary governments fail to negotiate

reentry into that order while remaining true to their unconventionally radical principles. The niceties and intrigues of international diplomacy are contemptibly intolerable to the battle-hardened, principled freedom warriors who could hardly make for a good diplomat.

### **Absence of democratic political norms and institutions**

At the early stage, many envisaged Eritrea as a bright model for democracy and development in Africa. The post-independence political architecture of the new nation could, however, hardly escape the control-freak political culture of the EPLF explained above. The war-time ethos of discipline, secrecy, command and control, and arbitrary power became the *modus operandi* of how state business is done and ought to be done. The government hardly made efforts to 'civilianize' its mode of operations, in effect ignoring the need for transition from the 'command' mode to consensual politics. Principles of democratic centralism, equality, and collective leadership that characterized the EPLF in the past were never transformed into a set of checks and balances, institutional accountability, and transparency.

The architecture of post-independence politics has matured during the transition period, but it had definitely been on the making for decades before liberation<sup>6</sup> (Iyob, 1997; Tronvoll, 1998). Democracy, along with development, was a subject of some debate and discussion. While some prioritized development over democracy (a developmental dictatorship so to speak), yet many affirmed that both processes are inter-related and interdependent on each other. The current regime subscribed to the latter view, but its insistence to determine its scope, and to establish its own time-frame did not bode well (Iyob, 1997, pp. 649-650). Emphasizing principles of nationalism, national unity and secularism as guiding principles, the basic elements of democracy were pushed to the margins of the political system. Democracy, it was argued, 'has to develop gradually, taking root through a process of struggle and change.'<sup>7</sup> A number of legal-institutional measures reflecting these principles were taken and implemented. The most important, among others, are the (a) drafting of a new constitution and (b) the banning of political parties. After a two-year, highly participatory constitution-making process, the new constitution was finally ratified in May 1997 but never put to implementation yet.

<sup>6</sup> The principles to guide post-war Eritrea were outlined in the National Charter, approved by the front's third congress in February 1994, which, in fact, draws much from the front's National Democratic Programme adopted and revised at the first and second congresses in 1977 and 1987, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> The view on democracy is outlined by a constitutional commission responsible to draft a new constitution. Stressing the centrality of the liberation struggle for building the new nation, the preamble of the commission's proposal holds 'it is necessary that unity, equality, love for truth and justice, self-reliance ... which helped us to triumph must become the core of our national values' (Pool, 2001, p. 168).

The EPLF announced its commitment to political pluralism and a multi-party system at its second congress in 1987, a commitment reiterated once again in its third congress in 1994 (Pool, 2001; Iyob, 1997). After independence, too, the National Charter and later the constitution allowed for the creation of political parties with secular and nationalist platforms. Simultaneously, however, the government has declared that a proliferation of political parties or newspapers is not necessarily a condition for democracy. A multi-party system and competitive elections were viewed as 'procedural as opposed to an essential' aspects of democracy. As a result, the earliest measure was to ban political parties on ostensibly on ethnicity and/or religion grounds (Iyob, 1997, p. 655; Pool, 2001, p. 164). None of the opposition groups residing abroad were allowed to enter Eritrea. The EPLF, which renamed itself the PFDJ in 1994, was declared the sole legal party. Though it described itself as 'a broad national movement', or a 'national front' representing diverse political views and interests, in retrospect it was creating party structures and functioning as a ruling party (Iyob, 1997, p. 658).

Two contradictory trends, which came to the fore in 2000 at the end of the war with Ethiopia, coexisted during this period. While it declared its commitment to political pluralism, the government has placed restrictions on political parties, and has insisted on establishing a timetable for the announcement of multi-partism at the end of the transition period. This promise, as some observers were quick to point out that the government is not interested in a pluralist political system, would never come through to this date. Civil society institutions were regimented within 'the power structures and chapters of front-controlled organizations; in effect reducing them into instruments of social control in order to diffuse any form of organized resistance (Pool, 2001). National elections scheduled at the close of the transitional period were postponed after the beginning of a renewed war with Ethiopia. The failure to implement the constitution — fully a year before the war with Ethiopia broke out — was, in fact, a clear sign of the government's lack of commitment to democracy.

The transition period characterized by remarkable progress towards political pluralism — involving the ratification of a popularly-drafted constitution and a thriving private press — was brought to a jarring end by the war. The democratic charade and pretensions were halted in excuse of a war. It also created cracks in the government and the front, to have the decisive role in closing the chapter and marking the transition to an effective dictatorship. The crackdown on opposition in late 2001 was fateful in sealing off the democratic prospects in the state. Starting from the early 1990s, internal dissent and opposition were dealt by force; in a way similar to suppression of internal critics to the front's leadership in the 1970s. In 1993, an army revolt of disaffected fighters was suppressed; in 1994, a

demonstration by disabled veterans was forcefully ended; and in 1995, the regime jailed hundreds of Islamic clerics and school teachers for alleged connections with an Eritrean *Jihadist* movement operating from neighboring Sudan (Iyob, 1997, p. 649). Like the *menqa'e* and *yemin* crises, the protests were resolved through brute force and little accommodation.

*Foreign policy* was expectedly an expression of challenges and opportunities of a new, ambitious nation. It ought to benefit the process of nation-building through regional and international cooperation. Unfortunately, it did not. The early promise that Eritrea would be the beacon of regional peace was short-lived; and Eritrea's relations with its neighbors quickly turned contentious. In the process of asserting sovereignty and defining the borders of the new nation, the country has clashed with three of its neighbors — Ethiopia, Yemen and Djibouti — and maintained a complex, but yet turbulent, relationship with the Sudan. During its first decade of sovereign existence, Eritrea "careened from one armed conflict with its neighbors to another, while sliding ever deeper into political repression and economic malaise. One but one — and at times simultaneously — Eritrea trained its guns on the Sudan, Yemen, Djibouti and Ethiopia to resolve outstanding conflicts" (Connell, 2005b, p. 98).

EPLF's worldview that Eritrea was repeatedly "betrayed by the international community and then won independence on its own" — though much of ideological rhetoric than reality — was at the heart of the new nation's foreign policy. At first, this mindset manifested in some audacious actions that involve Isaias's rebuking address to the OAU and the rejection of international donor conditionalities. But it was soon clear that these actions were more than boastful maneuvers of a victorious force, as Asmara clashed with each of its neighbors in the 1990s, culminating in a major war with Ethiopia in 1998 (Crisis Group, 2010, pp. 19-20). Relations with the Sudan quickly soured after the National Islamic Front took power in 1989. Diplomatic ties were cut in 1994 and tensions continued for the rest of the decade, each government hosting and backing one another's armed opposition groups (Connell, 1997, pp. 282-283). Relations began to improve after mid 2000s but still remain below cordial.

Then relations with Yemen deteriorated, culminating in a brief but intense war over Hanish Islands in 1996 in the southern Red Sea waters. Though the dispute was referred to an international tribunal and both parties abided by the ruling, relations has ever remained in an on-and-off, and occasionally tense, situation. There have also been disputes with Djibouti, including minor border clashes in 1996 and 1998. Relations deteriorated during the war with Ethiopia, when Eritrea considered Djibouti an Ethiopian stooge, and were restored only following the Algiers Peace Agreement in late 2000. While the countries signed cooperation agreements in 2004 and 2006, there was once again border clash in 2008 when



Eritrean forces allegedly occupied a disputed border area (Reid, 2009). Though the Asmara regime denied the existence of the dispute, it later accepted mediation by Qatar in June 2010.

The war with Ethiopia, however, overshadows Eritrea's relations with regional and international actors. It is also a good example to scrutinize Eritrea's foreign policy in light of DP proposition. Relations with Ethiopia have been most fraught, though it is historically most valuable economic partner to Eritrea. The strategic cooperation between EPLF and the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) against the Derg regime — though plagued by fundamental differences ranging from military strategy to ethnicity and national identity — has continued into the 1990s (John, 1996; Reid, 2003). In 1993, both governments signed a number of agreements, and there was collaboration on a number of economic and political issues, including ports, banking and defense. But escalation of tensions on the border and the introduction of Eritrea's own currency in 1997 culminated into a full-scale war in May 1998.

Seen from the viewpoint of the DP proposition, two points in the democracy-peace correlation are clearly evident. First, the war, in whatsoever the causes were, lacked popular backing in Eritrea and was the final act of war endorsed by parliament or made public. A publicly accountable government goes to war only after endorsement by the people who never or less likely brook the deaths and destruction of war. Second, the over a decade-long military stand-off with Ethiopia, a much superior power, is even unacceptable to Eritreans; not least because of increasing economic hardships and political repression justified by war. In terms of long-term consequences, the war has proved much more devastating for Eritrea and much more unpopular. It served rather the regime's continued internal repression and its reluctance to introduce democratic reforms and restore basic freedoms. In general, neither the war nor the post-war economic hardships are sustainable in a democratic political system where the citizens have the ultimate decision-making powers.

The controversial origin of the war is another case that gives credence to the DP assumption that democracies less likely use force to resolve conflicts. Since democracies externalize their internal norms of compromise and peaceful conflict resolution, as Risse-Kappen argues, the first resort of democratic governments is peaceful method to conflict resolution. Here both the Ethiopian and Eritrean regimes are devoid of these norms, albeit at varying degrees, and both rather resorted to use of force when the conflict began. Looking into the ideological and historical intimacy of the major protagonists to uncover the root causes of the war, Lata holds both the ruling EPLF/PFDJ and TPLF have no past conviction to principle of peaceful conflict resolution. Both leaderships 'are rather a battle hardened lot in which military expediency dictates the order of things' and the

notion of peaceful conflict resolution is hardly part of their political epistemology (Lata, 2007, p. 71). Compromise and consensus are seen as signs of weakness and capitulation. Besides, the turbulent historical relations between both fronts are dominated by mutually hostile perceptions, ideologies and mutual mistrust.

Few analysts try to explain the war and its causes in terms of authoritarian versus democratic political systems in Eritrea and Ethiopia, respectively. For Paul Henze, the leading proponent of this argument, for instance, the existence of democratic pluralism in Ethiopia and "an authoritarian one-party state" in Eritrea was a main cause of the conflict. Many other scholars disagree on claims that the regime in Ethiopia, too, was not truly democratic, and hence the conflict cannot be seen as one between democracy and authoritarianism. Varying only in terms of differing national conditions than in substance, the regimes in both countries were undemocratic, secretive and hostile to open public debate (Lata, 2007, pp. 70-71). Hence, 'democracy versus authoritarianism' is not a significant cause but, on the contrary, it was 'the absence of openness and democratic accountability' in both states responsible for the outbreak of war (Lata, 2007, p. 71). The lack of public accountability, and the absence of transparency and public debate, has blurred the understanding of the conflict and hence its resolution. The tensions boiling beneath the surface were not made public or debated by both governments openly. This is clearly seen in the degree of surprise that took the public, scholars, and even the governments themselves when the war broke out. With the Ethiopian government too, the dispute was never brought to the government council but dealt hidden by the front's top leaders until hostilities broke out in 1998 (Sarbo, 2007, p. 45).

The most serious issue underlying relations between both states from the beginning was the lack of any public awareness and absence of public accountability of the ruling fronts. To the Ethiopian public and its elites, the Eritrean issue was never resolved in official manner, leaving grudging doubts including within the TPLF leadership, who openly supported Eritrea's separation. The sudden outbreak of war in 1998 was a result of the absence of official arrangements governing bilateral relations, which were premised solely on personal ties between both leaders. Even after the outbreak of hostilities, the Eritrean president still tried to address personal letters to the Ethiopian prime minister, apparently still confident that these informal personal relations would work. He was again angry when the latter brought the issue before the Ethiopian government and parliament (Sarbo, 2007, pp. 48-49).

It was after the end of the war — by the Algiers Peace Agreement signed on 12 December 2000 — the issues of responsibility and accountability for the war and its conduct came to the fore in both countries, opening deeper fissures in the ranks of the leaderships of both ruling parties. In Eritrea, the rift emerged between

President Isaias and high-ranking front and government officials (known as the G15), sparking a brief but open public debate and demands by the latter for quick democratic reforms and national elections. But things suddenly turned against the gathering momentum for democratic openness. In a typically palace *coup d'état* from above, Isaias cracked down the force demanding change and banned the private press. None was held accountable for the war nor does the public, which suffered severely under the harsh economic and political conditions stemming from a permanent war footing with Ethiopia, have a say on the regime's policy that alienated Eritrea in regional and international arenas ever since. Such foreign policy is a symptom of increasing brutalization of domestic politics since Isaias's regime failed to implement the constitution in 1997. Today, as it was for the last decade or so, Eritrea lingers under the most autocratic regimes in the region: a constitution ratified in 1997 is gathering dust; all political parties are banned; national elections were repeatedly postponed and recently declared impossible for even some decades; all non-governmental organizations and civil society associations are prohibited; independent media remains shut down; public criticism has been silenced and dissenters indefinitely detained; and freedoms of association and worship curtailed.

### **Polymaking and policy institutions**

Foreign policy of independent Eritrea hardly escaped norms of arbitrary exercise of power deeply embedded in EPLF/PFDJ's authoritarian political culture. This, and the obsession with national unity in a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society, has contaminated the political process after independence. If these authoritarian values were modest during the liberation era, thanks to principles of collective leadership and front institutions of power, they were intensified in a political system morphing into Isaias's autocratic personal rule after independence. Next is an examination of the political system in Eritrea; and the democratic institutions and norms,<sup>8</sup> if any, that could hold the government accountable to the public.

### ***Are there any democratic structures of power?***

Eritrea's contemporary political culture has been an authoritarian one predicated upon arbitrary exercise of absolute power. This pattern of behavior, established in the liberation movement in the 1970s and 1980s as explained above, has been the hallmark of how foreign

policy is pursued. During the liberation era, the front institutions were the main instrument of policy-making, though in reality it is a secret party that ran the front from behind the scenes. In the third congress in 1994, the front and its institutions were restructured to lead the new state. Thereafter, however, Isaias rarely used the Front's newly elected bodies to decide issues. Instead, the PFDJ's nineteen-member executive committee spent most of its time discussing how to implement policies determined elsewhere. The PFDJ is a replica of the EPLF "but with a singular difference: there was no organized party providing guidance – no collective body, however secret, operating behind scenes. There was only one man and his personally selected advisors" (Connell, 2005a, p. 73).

The same was true of the state. Though the new government had the semblance of separation of powers, it was an illusion. The cabinet does not provide a forum for debate or decision-making. It, too, serves as a 'clearing-house' to determine how policies hammered out elsewhere could be implemented. Even the military remains under the president's personal control, as Isaias 'leapfrogs' his own servile defense minister to exercise direct command through zonal commanders. Throughout the 1990s, Isaias expanded and strengthened the President's Office with specialized departments on all policy sectors that duplicated (and effectively overrule) similar ministries. He staffed these departments with loyal individuals who reported to no one but him. Ministerial portfolios were frequently shuffled to keep rivals from developing their own power bases. High-ranking officers and government officials who questioned the president's judgment found themselves unceremoniously removed from their posts, kept on salary but not permitted to work (Mao's strategy called *'freezing'*), and then abruptly brought back into the fold when they were perceivably rehabilitated.

The system is literally a one-man show steered by a megalomaniacal 'big man.' Isaias, who officially assumed total control of the front in its 1987 second congress, has long been the mastermind and in control of a system of interlocking set of state and front institutions governing the country today. The last decade has demonstrated his obsession with total control and personalization of power. The system is the embodiment of his personality, his decisions are unquestionable and he is accountable to none. According to Reid, "power rests in the narrow — and doubtless increasingly surreal — confines of the president's office, where a coterie of former brothers-in-arms" control an entire nation's fate (2006, p. 7).

It is clear that absolute power lies in the hands of the president, yet it is hard to decipher how it is exercised. The main problem is because power "is exercised through layers that are increasingly opaque as one approaches the centre, like a set of Russian *matryoshka* dolls nesting one inside the other" (Connell 2009, p. 24). President Isaias "operates through organizational and political mechanisms that are nested one inside the

<sup>8</sup> In terms of democratic governance, Eritrea has been consistently placed on the lowest ranks. The 2011 Ibrahim Index of good governance in Africa ranks Eritrea 47 of 53 countries; Freedom House describes it 'Not Free', the 'worst of the worst', "one of the most repressive regimes in the world"; and a Human Rights Watch Report for 2012 describes Eritrea as "one of the world's most repressive and closed countries."

other” and invisible to all but those who are inside them (Connell, 2009, p. 25). This is done through the creation of ‘parallel channels within both the state and front’ that allows Isaias to override formal institutions and to check each institution’s power at large. The formal structure of the state — the three government organs — is paralleled by a pyramid-power structure in the PFDJ. In reality, in fact, the front, which has not convened a congress since 1994, became more a mechanism of economic and political control. There appears to be no structured secret party today, yet decisions are made clandestinely and power is exercised through organized, covert institutions and instruments. The formal political institutions of power are little more than a façade. These state and front institutions do not have real decision-making powers, but serve instead as instruments of implementation and enforcement of decisions made elsewhere (Connell, 2009, pp. 28-29).

The informal channels vested with real powers are special appointees in the President’s Office, a handful of military generals and officers, top leaders of the intelligence services, directors of the fronts major departments, and aspiring individuals elsewhere (Connell, 2009, p. 29). The President’s Office is the most powerful and it constitutes departments parallel to the council of ministers and advisors on critical political and economic policy issues accountable to no other than solely Isaias. The ministries are asked to rubber-stamp and implement the decisions and directives that undercut ministerial authority. The president ingenuously uses all these offices, shadowy institutions, and individuals at different times and for different purposes; and sometimes with overlapping responsibilities and often plays them off against each other.

Another problem is Isaias’s strategy of exercising power through ever-changing conduits by shifting institutions and individuals to carry out particular policies and tasks. Isaias’s another power strategy is constant reshuffling of institutions and sudden movement of higher officials — notably the cabinet ministers, the regional administrators and the generals — from one post or region to another without public consultation or notification. The motive here is to keep them off balance and prevent the consolidation of power not only by particular individuals but also in a single institution or region over long period of time (Connell 2009, p. 30). The structure is further complicated by the fusion of front and state institutions and their mandates. The front dominates the government and it has its bodies overlap with government institutions — its central council of 75 constitutes the council of ministers and one-half of the national assembly; its executive council members were leaders of the women’s, youth and workers’ organizations; and other longstanding EPLF members control local and sub-regional government and councils and regional assemblies. In reality, there is no meaningful demarcation between the front and state institutions (Connell, 2009; Ried, 2006).

Therefore, separation of powers, which is an essential institutional element of any democratic system, is nominal at best and a caricature at worst. With an all too powerful executive body embodied in a single person, the other government organs — the legislature and judiciary — are virtually absent from the picture. The constitution, ratified in May 1997, did not enter into effect, pending parliamentary and presidential elections; parliamentary elections were scheduled in December 2001 but were postponed indefinitely; and an interim parliament has not met since 2002. *Judicial independence* and rule of law are virtually absent.<sup>9</sup> The law and unimplemented constitution provide for an independent judiciary; however, the judiciary is extremely weak and subject to executive control never issuing rulings at variance with the latter. Executive control over the judiciary is high with the President’s Office often serving as “a clearinghouse for citizens’ court petitions, where the President personally interferes in the court’s jurisdiction, passing decisions based on personal favours or in accordance with EPLF ‘fighter culture’ and not the letter of the law” (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 40). A Special Court created in 1996 under direct control of the president, independent and above the High Court, handles matters of national security, corruption and political opposition. It is neither ‘bound by the Code of Criminal Procedure or the Penal Code, nor precedents set by earlier court decisions’, and ‘has the power to re-open and adjudicate cases’ set by civil courts, override court decisions and give new rulings. The untrained Judges “generally base their decisions on ‘conscience’ — in relation to the particular history of the Eritrean struggle and EPLF fighter culture — without reference to the law” (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 42).

This *modus operandi*, mirroring his exercise of power over the liberation movement through a clandestine party, makes a travesty of the very idea of *institutional checks and balances*. It is mainly this intriguing mechanism of exercising power and decision-making that accounts for the country’s erratic foreign policy. Its covert regional security operations is symptomatic of “the systematic subversion of [state] and party institutions by a relatively small number of political, military and intelligence officials, who instead choose to conduct the affairs of state via informal and often illicit mechanisms, including people smuggling, arms trafficking, money-laundering and extortion” (SEMG Report, 2011, p. 13). Tracing accountability in such amorphous institutional setting is all the more impossible task. Reid (2009, p. 18), for instance, cogently shows the absence of institutional mandate and blurring of responsibility in foreign policy implementation when he curiously alludes that;

*the Ministry of Information has become the Ministry of*

<sup>9</sup> In its 2009 World Report, Human Rights Watch states that the Eritrean ‘judiciary exists only as an instrument of control’ (HRW 2009, 66), and Amnesty International reported in 2008 that “there was no recognizable rule of law or justice system, civilian or military” in the country.

*Foreign Affairs, in that it conveys the message of President Isaias Afwerki and his associates to the wider world and encapsulates the Eritrean government's view of the region and the international scene – and does so much more effectively than any diplomat could ever do.*

Therefore, the institutional checks and balances that ensure accountable policy in democracies are watered down by this amorphous system of power structure. Petros Solomon, member of the opposition G-15 group imprisoned by Isaias in September 2001, recounts that he, as a foreign minister, learned only later after Isaias cut ties with Sudan in 1994 and after conflict broke with Yemen over Hanish Islands in 1996. He also anecdotally highlights Isaias's arbitrary diplomacy: "You know they called our ministry the fire brigade. We always said the president throws a bomb past us, and then we have to move in and put out the fire" (Connell, 2009, pp. 30-31). The foreign minister's office, and the institution at large, is a ceremonial figure without due policymaking powers. It serves as no more than an official channel to communicate Isaias's policy to the world. In fact, Yemane Gebreab, the presidential advisor and PFDJ's political affairs head, is the face and de facto diplomat of Eritrea's foreign policy.

Similarly, the institutional values of *transparency and accountability* that constrain democratic governments are hardly traceable in the system. In terms of policy accountability, the standard practice of the government is always disdain, dismissal and derision of its critics. Its *modus operandi* is no admission for its utter policy blunders; and the cliché "*where is the evidence?*" is the president's face-saving gimmick when critical questions are often raised by foreign journalists. In railing criticism to its policies, the government paradoxically blames others, like US administrations, the *Woyane* (a derisive reference to the minority Tigrean group ruling Ethiopia), and the Security Council, for the ills of the country. This is clearly reflected in the government's long-winded and escapist response to the UN monitoring group's report on the government's clandestine operations (MFA, 2011). Concerning the exodus of youth to neighboring countries to escape the government's repression and indefinite military service, for instance, the president — who once disdainfully responded to a foreign journalist that they are leaving for a honeymoon — blames the CIA for conspiring to deny the country of its human assets. In what is least visible to the general public, that is its covert foreign activities, the government denies the existence of a proxy war with Ethiopia or disputes with others. In June 2008, for instance, when Eritrean and Djiboutian forces briefly clashed over a disputed border area, the government decided to conceal the issue through sheer denial; and portrayed it as a concoction by hostile powers (particularly Bush administration and *Woyane*) to drag Eritrea to another war. The same was true when the government silently accepted in June 2010 mediation by

Qatar to resolve the issue.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of transparency, the government has been operating in complete darkness after its crackdown on dissent and private press in 2001. Reflecting the front's tradition, the internal workings of post-independence Eritrean politics have been secretive. In the amorphous structure of power explained above, critical decisions are made clandestinely by individuals or small power circles led by the president. There is no fiscal transparency on government activities; and particularly for all the front's complex financial operations. Freedom House criticizes that there "is no public record of the party's economic operations, no published line-item national budget for the state, no detailed accounting for tax collection or remittances — essentially no fiscal transparency for state or party finances. In fact, the line items for the national budget remain a well-guarded secret — not only from the public but from most members of the cabinet and the ruling party" (2011, p. 11). Since 2001 in particular, no questions about tax collection or government expenditure have been raised in public, nor is there any independent auditing body.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, domestic political systems — democratic or undemocratic — greatly determine the nature of a country's foreign policy. Eritrea's external behavior reasonably owes to historical grudges with the international community and external challenges like external hostility; or its strategic location at the southern end of the Red Sea, close to the Persian oil resources; or adverse regional circumstances like inherent instability and conflict in the Horn of Africa. But all these may only partially explain its violent foreign policy. By and large, it is the internal political system that has to blame for Eritrea's poor relations and for a policy that recently reached a crisis point after nearly two decades of tension, conflict or even wars with the neighboring states and various other actors.

The political culture and political system of independent Eritrea is an inheritance of a luggage of liberation politics. A culture of arbitrary power and decision-making are deeply entrenched in EPLF's evolution from a guerrilla movement to a national government. The norms and institutions that happen to govern the new nation are those of a liberation movement that won the war through arms and took the reins of power without public consultation after independence. This tradition engendered, and was further exacerbated by, an

<sup>10</sup> The government's denial and vitriolic responses in its press editorials and statements to criticism of its policies is indicative of its unaccountable behavior. See, for instance, an interview by al Jazeera's Jane Dutton with President Isaias (at <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2010/02/201021921059338201.html>) on February 2010 who dismissed the journalists question by his standard answer; "This is a deliberate distortion of facts, where is the evidence, these are fabrications, where is your evidence?"

authoritarian rule and personalization of power in post-independence Eritrea. It is, thus, a combination of factors — perceptions, political culture and undemocratic institutions — internal to the autocratic regime that determine policy-making process and the regime's greater propensity to force for conflict resolution. A relatively better explanation of the regime's aggressive foreign policy can, hence, be provided only by looking at the domestic political setting of the state. After a little over half-decade of democratic pretensions, the government has forsaken the nominal democratic norms and institutions it touted to consolidate. Its increasing political repression and brutality at home has been matched by its increasingly intense violence abroad during the last decade. The correlation between domestic political structures and foreign policy behavior are clearly evident. Foreign policy of the regime was fully militarized and has readily employed force particularly after it shook off its democratic façade in 2001.

In line with DP proposition, Eritrea's foreign policy is thus mainly of its own internal making; a product of oppressive domestic politics and the absence of democratic norms and institutions that ensure transparency, accountability and institutional checks and balances in policymaking and implementation. Cost-benefit calculations of citizens in participatory politics and the price of war constrain democracies from fighting wars. In autocracies like Eritrea where public participation is absent even in nominal terms, however, there is nothing to prevent the regime from engaging in military adventures. The regime continues to operate largely through informal and unaccountable structures of power, behind a façade of ineffectual public institutions. Its foreign policymaking process is bereft of Russett's normative/cultural norms of peaceful conflict resolution and the structural/institutional constraints that limit the chances of leaders to go to war. It is also not informed by Risse-Kappen's perceptions and political culture that shape the foreign policy of democratic regimes; that 'democratic peace' is socially constructed through positive perception of others.

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