

## Reflections on relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea

Monday 3 December 2012

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December 2, 2012 - Historically, Ethiopia and Eritrea have not been united in one country. However, first Eritrea then Ethiopia have been occupied as Italian colonies, which imposed upon them Italian culture.

Another link between the two regions is the fact that the Tigrian peoples, who inhabit a region north of the Mereb in Southern Eritrea, and south of the Mereb in Northern Ethiopia, belong to the same ethnicity and speak the same language, Tigrinya, and have a common Axumaite heritage.

Another link between the two Regions is that the Christian population in both Regions belongs to the Orthodox Coptic Church.

A third link between Ethiopia and Eritrea is the fact that the main languages spoken in them, namely Amharinya and Tigrinya, are both Semitic languages and are written in the same alphabet.

The fourth link is the existence of a substantial Muslim community in both countries. However, developments from mid-twentieth century have driven the two Regions apart, and today, hostility between them is at its zenith.

In what follows, I reflect on the issues of War and Peace and future relations between the two countries.

1. As an expression of appreciation for the support of the Emperor of Ethiopia for the allies in the Second Atlantic War (1939-1945), the allies, as led by the USA and the UK, decided to join Eritrea to Ethiopia in a Federal unity without the due participation of the peoples of Eritrea in 1952. That measure constituted a grievance for the peoples of Eritrea. The Eritreans who experienced sixty years of Italian administration were more modernized. Under the Federation they suffered dissolution of their political parties, of their trade unions, and lost the relative press freedom. And to add insult to injury, the Federation itself was abolished by Ethiopia in 1958. In 1961, an armed Eritrean resistance to Ethiopia came into being.
2. Under the Emperor, Ethiopian administration was a backward Feudalism. It exercised forced Amaharization, and addressed the Eritreans in provocative language. The Emperor said in reference to Eritrea: we need its land, not its peoples. After the coup d'état against the Emperor, a power struggle developed between the coup makers, in which Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged victorious. He proceeded to establish a Stalinism, which I described as the Fascism of the Left.
3. That Stalinist oppression further alienated the Peoples of Eritrea. Their resistance developed in several stages but ultimately Eritrean resistance was led by the EPLF. The Mengistu Regime exercised similar oppression against the Peoples of Ethiopia particularly the Tigryan ethnicity, which organized its resistance in the TPLF.
4. Several movements with different identities participated in the struggle but the TPLF came on top.
5. The leaders of the two Fronts, whom I came to know personally, were articulate Revolutionaries, who had much in common; the late Meles Zinawi and President Isaias Afwerki belonged to the same ethnicity, Tigryan, they spoke the same mother tongue, Tigrinya, they belonged to the same ideology, Marxism. During their period of struggle, they both enjoyed refuge in Sudan and came to have similar great appreciation for the peoples of Sudan. All these similarities would have been expected to make the TPLF and the EPLF close allies against the Mengistu Regime, and to establish a close relationship after they defeated the Mengistu Regime and came to power in Addis Ababa and Asmara.
6. Apart from the similarities between the TPLF and EPLF, there are several common features between the Peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea, namely:
  - The two main languages in the two regions: Amharinya and Tigrinya are both Semitic and written in Geez Alphabet.
  - Yes there are numerous language and ethnic groups in both countries more so in Ethiopia than Eritrea, they both need stability for the management of diversity.
  - Beyond the language, there are close cultural affinities, in the cuisine, in national dress, in music, in marriage and mourning traditions and so on.
    - More importantly, the geopolitical imperatives cannot be overlooked.
7. In spite of all these factors drawing them together, in 1998, over a border dispute around Badme, the two states confronted each other in a bloody war.
7. Since the sixties of the twentieth century, events have increased interchange between peoples of the Horn of Africa in an unprecedented way, particularly in terms of refugees, and sanctuary for opposition movements. As members of the Sudanese NDA we were freely residing in and travelling between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Similarly, Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees and

opposition movements had access to the Sudan before their liberation. Therefore we were shocked by the 1998 war and I led an NDA mediation delegation to stop it. We met with the political and military leaders of both countries, they all received us most cordially, but we could see no avenue of reconciliation between them. We even offered a mechanism of mediation to no avail. My impression, which was substantiated by further events was that Badme was not the real issue, which caused all bloodshed and carnage. Successful revolutions, when they come to power, usually become ultra-nationalistic to consolidate their legitimacy, this phenomenon may be seen in the cases of East Timor and Kosovo.

This factor explains the behavior of the Eritrean leadership and the need to stand up to Ethiopia.

For Ethiopian leadership, there was an added reason for ultra-nationalism. The TPLF was a secessionist movement, which was pushed into an all Ethiopian role by the vacuum created by the speedy collapse of the Dergue. It had to prove its Ethiopian identity for example Napoleon who was identified with a secessionist movement, before he qualified for FRENCH leadership, the same goes for Mustafa Kamal of Turkey. Therefore, the two leaders and their movements were painted in an ultra-nationalist corner. By now, 14 years after the war, so many things have changed, namely:

- It is not possible to settle differences unilaterally, and war provides no solution but loss in blood, wealth and lost opportunities.
    - The Regional African Agenda has moved towards aspirations for African Unity.
  - The International Human Rights Agenda has developed towards the guaranteeing of Human Rights as a basic duty of all sovereign states. In fact, Human Rights have become the real basis of legitimacy in the eyes of the International Community to the extent of intervention, if necessary, for the purpose of Responsibility (R2P).
    - The majority of African states have become democratic.
  - The Arab spring, which I call the new dawn, has turned a new page in the direction of the empowerment of the peoples.
    - The need to eschew an attitude of hostile independence in the two states of Ethiopia and Eritrea and recognize the compelling factors of interdependence is more than ever obvious.
8. Attempts at violent change will only lead to greater internal polarization, and greater external interference, to the detriment of National interests.

What is needed in both countries is a broad based inclusive movement for democratic transformation. Such a transformation is necessary to reconcile Government with its citizens. Such reconciliation will be consistent with the march of history, and would lead to state to state reconciliation, even further; it would allow the forces of mutually beneficial integration towards the two Sudans and other neighbors.

I don't know how receptive the Peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea will be to my opinion, but I hope they consider them in the light of a sympathetic and fraternal brotherhood.

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