

THE ERITREAN EXPERIENCE AFTER INDEPENDENCE

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Eritrea: A Dream Deferred. By GAIM KIBREAB. Oxford: James Currey and Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2009. Pp. xxvi+420. £50 hardback (ISBN 978-1-84701-008-7).

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This hefty tome of more than 440 pages in small print is a quite exhaustive and solid evaluation of the Eritrean state, independent since 1993 (de facto since May 1991). The author, an Eritrean-born British research professor, has done a good job in presenting a comprehensive review of the political, economic, social, and also psychological development of the new state. The title reveals his conclusion, shared by so many Eritrean and foreign observers before him, that the whole experience is a deep disappointment in view of the high hopes, if not euphoria, in 1991 for establishing a 'democratic', 'just', and economically viable society. The victorious branch of the Eritrean armed liberation movement, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), in 1994 renamed with the Newspeak epithet 'Popular Front for Democracy and Justice', is still in power under President Isayas Afewerqi, who in practice rules alone. No 'democratization process' or even any meaningful debate on alternative policy options is in sight, unless we accept the leader's view that better health care, infrastructure building, 'self reliance', and the like are (real) democracy. Economic development is deeply problematic, with lagging production, suppression of the private sector, massive food insecurity, and negligible export revenues. Relations with all its neighbours are tense. Needless to say, the 'unexpected' war with Ethiopia in 1998–2000 and the resulting no war/no peace situation has not contributed to improving things, and in fact for the leadership it functions as a convenient excuse for the lack of political and economic change.

Is the author right in his judgement? Is the current state of Eritrea as bleak as he describes? In reading this book (which will take at least a week), with eight lengthy chapters with plenty of relevant facts, citations, and documentary evidence, and set in a well-conceived historical context, one cannot escape the conclusion: yes. Even the most staunch regime supporters would have to say that something is amiss, and that Eritrea's current state 'was not what one had expected'. But still, these predictable questions are wrongly put. The Eritrean fronts fought for self-rule and independence from the restored Ethiopian imperial state after a period of nascent autonomy and civic freedoms under British post-war rule (1941–52), and not primarily for a fully fledged democratic system, for which the social, economic, and cultural conditions were not present in the country. In addition, the actual unfolding of the liberation war was marked by heavy repression and persistent violence within the ranks as well as against the population (Gaim mentions the infamous episode of the elimination of the 'Menkae' opposition within EPLF in the early 1970s), and by a lack of commitment to liberal ideas and rule-of-law thinking. The practice and reputation of the *Haläwa Sawra* (the rather ruthless security department of the EPLF) was also enough of an indication that Eritrea would hardly enter a period of human rights bliss after independence. In fact, one could even term the Eritrean fronts – influenced and supported by the Chinese communists and by leftist Arab regimes such as Syria and Iraq – as a variety of the 'Baathist' parties in the two latter countries. As far as the current economic problems and the stifling state control over national economic life are concerned, it should not have come as a surprise to see that the party business interests and companies already built up in the liberation struggle (e.g., the Red

Sea Corporation), and actively and naively supported by Western (often church) NGOs, would be maintained after independence: they were an obvious form of economic and political power that the EPLF leaders would never relinquish.

Be that as it may, in 1991 after the military victory over the Ethiopian Derg regime (achieved together with the Tigray People's Liberation Front in Ethiopia), the challenges for Eritrea were indeed great – the country's economy, infrastructure, and social fabric had to be rebuilt and the human and psychological devastation of the long war had to be addressed. Among the ordinary population, there was relief and pride and a sense of an impending better future. The auspices of the new state were good: no national debt, international goodwill, a very favourable new regime in Addis Ababa, and an upbeat atmosphere in the country. In that sense, the 'promise' was not to be fulfilled. Worrying – but historically nothing new – was that Western fellow-travellers and supporters had made a naive, if not basically wrong, analysis of Eritrea and its society and history, and, led by their own ideology, cherished the illusion that a blooming democratic and economically developing society under an enlightened government would simply emerge. Anyone who had followed the history of the liberation war and knew the deep-rooted problems and the authoritarian nature of the EPLF would have thought twice.

Gaim Kibreab in this book documents and analyses the entire Eritrean experience after 1991 in amazing detail and broad scope, and this book review cannot but scratch the surface. He has put together the many strands also found in other critical literature on the country (although, incomprehensibly, he misses a number of very essential references) and, despite repetitiveness and length, fuels the debate on the future of the country and on the objective need for change. What he recounts in the book about the political, social, and economic conditions of the country gives little hope for immediate improvement, however. One gets the impression of a state that in recent decades has missed all the important opportunities and has always chosen the wrong turn in the road. For a country whose leader was once – hastily and naively – categorized as one of the 'new breed of leaders' of Africa, this is quite an achievement, but one that takes a heavy toll on its hard-pressed citizens.

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THE DISPLACEMENT PROCESS IN ETHIOPIA

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Large-scale human population movements, characteristic of human societies throughout their history, have gained added salience with the growth of a global economy, increased pressure on resources (and especially land), and the assertion of special status by those who claim to be the original inhabitants of any particular territory. In north-east Africa, such movements have most evidently been driven by the twin scourges of famine and conflict, to which the whole region is tragically subject and which have given it one of the highest numbers of refugees in the world. This volume seeks to move beyond these two drivers of migration, without in any way neglecting them, and to integrate them into the broader understanding