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ERITREA'S DEMOCRATIC FAILURE

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As the Horn of Africa braces for one of its gravest security emergencies in a generation, the world's attention has turned to Eritrea. In February 2026, Ethiopia formally demanded that Eritrea withdraw its troops from Ethiopian territory, accused the Eritrean government of arming rebel groups in Ethiopia's Amhara and Tigray regions, and notified the UN secretary-general that Eritrea was "actively preparing for war." The International Crisis Group identified the Ethiopia-Eritrea dyad as a powder keg threatening to draw in regional and global powers across an already volatile Red Sea arena. Eritrea called these charges "patently false and fabricated" and placed its military on high alert. The threat of a renewed all-out war looms large.[1]

Behind this crisis lies a political system without brakes. Eritrea has no functioning constitution, no elected parliament, no independent judiciary, no free press, and no opposition parties. The president who built this system, Isaias Afwerki, who turned eighty in 2026 and has led Eritrea since 1991, has never submitted himself to an election, has buried the only constitution his country ever ratified, and governs by personal fiat from a rural compound outside the capital, Asmara. There is no succession plan, no institutional framework for transition, and no democratic tradition on which a future government could draw. The consequences radiate outward: Eritrea has been at war, or on the brink of war, with all three of its neighbors—Sudan to the northwest, Ethiopia to the south, and Djibouti to the southeast—as well as Yemen across the Red Sea, since independence from Ethiopia in 1993. The absence of democratic accountability at home has consistently translated into aggression

and destabilization abroad. Understanding how this came to be, and why it was not inevitable, matters now more than ever.

It is a common assertion, repeated in international policy circles and human-rights reports, that Eritrea is one of only two entities in the world, alongside the Vatican, never to have held a national election. The claim is wrong. Eritrea has, in fact, organized two electoral exercises and come close to a third. What that incorrect assertion inadvertently captures, however, is the near-total erasure from memory of the democratic experiments that the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) briefly attempted, and then methodically abandoned, in the years following independence. Those experiments, and the ideological reasons they were doomed from the start, warrant closer scrutiny now—both as history and as a key to understanding the political impasse that the country and its region now face, as well as the hazards they will likely have to navigate when the regime finally collapses.

As an anthropologist conducting fieldwork in the Eritrean highlands during the transition from liberation war to independence (1991–93), I was present during the preparations for an aborted set of local elections in 1992, the first such attempt in the newly liberated state. After studying the preparations for the referendum on independence, I served as a UN observer during the April 1993 vote. And in early 1997, I headed a two-person team sent by Norway, the only country to be invited by the Eritrean government, to observe Eritrea's first national elections for regional assemblies and the Constituent Assembly, as well as an indirect election for the inaugural National Assembly. No other researcher or reporter witnessed firsthand all three of these key moments in Eritrea's initial attempt to democratize. The account that follows draws on that singular access to offer what is, to my knowledge, the first published analysis of Eritrea's complete, if stunted, electoral history.

My argument is straightforward, though its implications are far-reaching: The EPLF, rechristened the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994, never possessed a genuine democratic culture. Its ideological foundations in Marxist-Leninist vanguardism combined with a Maoist self-reliance imperative, wartime habits of surveillance and discipline, and a conviction that the Front alone embodied the Eritrean national interest, produced a political organization structurally incapable of tolerating the uncertainty that real democratic competition demands. The elections it organized were not steps toward pluralism but instruments of ideologically driven nation-building and legitimation, exercises in controlled participation that systematically foreclosed the possibility of meaningful choice. When even those limited exercises threatened to produce inconvenient results, they were either aborted or redesigned. As Isaias's own words over the next three decades have confirmed, the democratic path was never genuinely open. And with unlimited power and no democratic accountability, the president has been

able to pursue his regional destabilization strategy and warring practices, no matter the harm to suffering Eritreans—or to regional peace and development.

Genuine Attempt or Symbolic Posture? The 1992 Elections

A year after the EPLF's May 1991 battlefield victory over Ethiopia's military junta, the Derg, and one year before Eritrea formally declared independence, the Front moved to reform, and politically capture, the traditional institutions of rural governance. Highland villages had long been administered by the *baito adi*, a village council whose members were selected through a deliberative process led by elders and priests, guided by reputation, moral standing, and community consensus. The institution was ancient, customary, and deeply legitimate in the eyes of the rural population. What the EPLF proposed in the spring of 1992 was to retain the institution while transforming its logic: Henceforth, membership in the *baito adi* would be determined not by communal deliberation but by individual self-nomination and secret ballot.

The response from villagers across the Eritrean highlands was swift and unambiguous. In village meetings I attended during this period, elders articulated the same objection repeatedly: A person who nominates himself for the *baito adi* demonstrates, by that very act, that he lacks the qualities the position requires. "Only fools and arrogant individuals," one elder explained to me, "will nominate themselves to stand in the elections for the *baito adi*." Leadership in the traditional sense was not claimed; it was recognized and conferred. The entire premise of competitive self-nomination inverted the moral logic of the institution.

EPLF administrators traveling from village to village tried to reframe this resistance as cultural backwardness. The liberation of the country, they argued, required the adoption of "modern standards" of rule. The villagers were unconvinced. Across the highlands, they refused to register as candidates. The EPLF faced a stark choice: proceed with elections that no one would stand in or abandon the exercise. By late spring 1992, the elections were quietly canceled.

The episode has never received scholarly attention, yet it is instructive. The EPLF's first democratic initiative failed not because of external pressure or logistical incapacity, but because the organization attempted to impose a particular, and culturally alien, model of electoral democracy onto an institution whose legitimacy derived from entirely different principles. More significantly, the episode established a template for what would follow: democratic form deployed in the service of state-building goals, with genuine participation treated as an inconvenience to be managed rather than a value to be cultivated.

It is worth noting that this early suppression of grassroots democratic impulses was not without precedent within the EPLF itself. As far back

as 1973, a group of educated fighters within the liberation movement's predecessor organization had called for democratic reforms within the leadership. The price of dissent was steep: execution for some and lengthy imprisonment for others. Isaias Afwerki, who was then consolidating his grip on the liberation movement, responded by creating the feared internal-security force known as Halewa Sowra ("guardians of the revolution"). Democratic instinct was suppressed at birth; not once, but twice before independence was even declared.[2]

Controlling the Democratic Space: The 1993 Referendum

In April 1993, Eritrea held an internationally observed referendum on independence. By any technical metric it was a remarkable success: 98.5 percent of registered voters participated, and 99.8 percent of those voted in favor of independence. This was said to be the most affirmative referendum in electoral history. The head of the UN Observer Mission certified the process as free and fair "at every stage." No other international observer mission registered serious objections. Yet a closer examination of the referendum process, which I witnessed firsthand having lived in a rural Eritrean village at the time, reveals a more complicated picture—one in which the EPLF's management and curtailment of democratic space was systematic and pervasive, even as it remained largely invisible to international observers focused on technical procedural compliance.[3]

The information campaign mounted by the Referendum Commission, itself a body appointed by and accountable to the EPLF, was technically efficient but ideologically saturated. Village briefings were conducted by EPLF cadres, whose role was officially defined as informational but whom the rural population uniformly understood as advocates for independence. The mock voting exercises conducted at village meetings uniformly directed participants to place the red-colored "no-to-independence" ballot in the rubbish bin and the blue "yes" ballot in the box. The possibility that someone might wish to vote "red" was not addressed. Radio dramas broadcast on the state station, the sole outlet reaching the rural population, depicted characters throwing away their red clothing and household objects in the weeks before the referendum, associating the color red with war, death, and Ethiopian domination.

A set of Joint Committee for Independence posters (an EPLF initiative), which polling-station officials and even many voters mistook for official Referendum Commission materials, depicted the red ballot alongside skulls, mutilated children, and bound prisoners, while the blue ballot appeared above images of abundant harvests and smiling mothers. A long-term civilian leader of the humanitarian wing of EPLF launched an initiative to establish an independent news magazine during this period to deliberate on the referendum options and visions for a

free Eritrea. Yet despite his longtime service for the Front, he was soon forcefully put under house arrest, and the prospect of an independent voice was crushed in its inception.

The information environment surrounding the referendum was, in short, not a neutral civic-education exercise but a comprehensive mass-mobilization campaign. Most rural voters understood themselves to be participating in the confirmation of a result the EPLF had already determined; and many believed, with considerable basis in their own historical experience of Eritrean governance, that the Front possessed the means to identify and punish those who voted incorrectly. "If they do not have a chance to control us and what we vote," one villager put it to me, "why on earth would they go through all this trouble and extra work?" The elaborate apparatus of registration, identification cards, fingerprinting, and written protocols was experienced not as a protection of individual rights but as a mechanism of state surveillance. This perception was by no means irrational: An EPLF security officer had warned me as early as July 1992 that the Front's security division had been quadrupled since military liberation and was closely monitoring any civil activity not under direct EPLF command during the transitional period.

This is not to suggest that the desire for independence was manufactured. Eritrean nationalism was deep, genuine, and hard-won through thirty years of the country's devastating war of independence. What the referendum management revealed was the EPLF's reflexive inability to distinguish between the legitimate popular mandate it held and the democratic processes through which that mandate was to be expressed. The organization simply could not conceive of a process it did not control, even when the outcome of a genuine process would likely have been identical. The conflation of the Front's interests with Eritrea's interests—the defining pathology of liberation-movement politics—was already fully operative in 1993.

Nowhere was this more visible than in the treatment of those who declined to register for the vote. Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who abstained from the referendum on religious grounds, were subjected to public harassment and intimidation that the authorities neither prevented nor condemned and were eventually arrested. In Asmara, I witnessed a crowd gathered around a human-sized manikin bearing the name Jehovah, positioned in the middle of a main street so that passing cars were forced to drive over it while onlookers cheered and traffic police watched from a short distance without intervening. Boycotting the ballot had been quietly equated with opposing independence—and opposing independence was equated with treason.

The referendum also exposed the early logic of what would later become Eritrea's dominant ethnic question. In the lowland Afar region of Danakil, where I observed polling operations as part of the UN mission, the gap between the highland, majority Tigrinya–dominated EPLF's na-

tional framework and the lived reality of Eritrea's minority communities was palpable.[4] The pastoral and seminomadic Afar community was generally viewed with deep skepticism by the Front, as their genuine identification as Eritreans was questioned. Armed EPLF combatants served as electoral police at polling stations, a systematic departure from the unarmed civilian personnel used throughout the rest of the country. Afar-speaking election officials were almost entirely absent, with most positions filled by Tigrinya highlanders. The 99.5 percent "yes" vote recorded in Danakil was certified as valid; what it actually reflected about Afar preferences remained, and remains, unknowable. Eight of Eritrea's nine ethnic groups are minorities by themselves, but together they likely constitute the majority of the population; their politico-cultural aspirations, however, are generally disregarded if they differ from the ruling clique's ideological preferences. Hence, the minority cultures provide a constant threat to the Front's conceptualization of what constitutes Eritrean nationalism.

The First and Only National Elections

By far the most significant, and least known, of Eritrea's electoral exercises were the regional assembly (*baito zoba*) elections of early 1997, which concluded in the capital region of Maekel on March 1. These elections have never previously been the subject of published scholarly analysis, and the international policy environment is generally unaware that the balloting even took place. The Norwegian observer team I led was the only international observer group present, as Norway was the principal sponsor of Eritrea's local-government reform process that the elections were designed to implement.[5]

The institutional context of the elections was shaped by a proclamation passed at the EPLF's Third Congress in 1994, which had redrawn Eritrea's internal administrative boundaries along deliberately non-ethnic lines, abolishing the nine historical provinces (*awraja*) whose boundaries largely overlapped with descent groups and ethnic territories. Isaias Afwerki had explained the rationale in characteristic terms, telling the Eritrean people: "No ethnic group is superior or inferior to any other group. Those who think otherwise are mentally sick and we should not allow them to impose their will on us."[6] The six new regions (*zobas*) were designed to dissolve the subnational identities that might anchor autonomous political communities, linking the individual citizen directly to the party-state in a structure that brooked no intermediate loyalties.

At the time of the elections, Eritrea had not yet adopted an electoral law. The juridical basis of the *zoba* elections was therefore to be found in the Proclamation for the Establishment of Regional Administrations (No. 86/1996) and the Proclamation Issued to Establish the Constitu-

ent Assembly (No. 92/1996). In addition to these legal instruments, the Ministry of Local Government issued in October 1996 formal electoral regulations describing the electoral system, the formation of election committees, and procedural aspects. These regulations had not, however, been discussed or ratified by the existing National Parliament (appointed by PFDJ), nor gazetted, and were thus not a legislative instrument in the strict sense.

The electoral system was a multimember-constituency system with majority vote, with representation determined on the basis of population concentration and size. In practice, there were actually two simultaneous elections conducted with two separate ballots, since 30 percent of the assembly seats had been reserved for women representatives. A pink ballot was used for the reserved seats and a blue ballot for the open competition, creating a double ballot that many voters found confusing. This affirmative-action provision was, in principle, progressive. Yet only six of the 42 women competing in the open election secured seats, a result that reflected the deep gender inequalities in Eritrean political society that no electoral regulation could quickly overcome.

An elected regional assembly would, in theory, give citizens a democratic voice in local governance. In practice, however, the proclamation establishing the new regional administrations had already hollowed out whatever democratic powers the *baito zoba* might have held. The body possessed no legislative authority, no independent fiscal power, and no executive capacity. Its mandate was restricted to hearing reports from government-appointed administrators, making recommendations, and rubber-stamping national development priorities emanating from the government party, by now renamed the PFDJ. Regional administrators, personally and permanently appointed by the president and accountable to him through the minister of local government, were explicitly empowered to suspend *baito zoba* resolutions if they were deemed inconsistent with national policy.

One candidate I interviewed in Asmara in the days before the election put it plainly: "We cannot advocate the cases of our constituency if it goes against the national politics and government decisions. The assembly assesses and gives recommendations only, which the administrator passes on to the minister of local government who confirms and decides." A public-information article in the government newspaper, *Eritrean Profile*, left no room for ambiguity about the intended nature of the *baito zoba*: "Our aim is to see to it that the election assumes a national character, and that the elected representatives adhere to the principle of national development."[7] In this framing, advocating for one's specific constituency became a form of narrow regionalism; candidates were expected to represent the nation's priorities, as defined by the PFDJ, not the concerns of the people who elected them.

Following the prohibition by law to establish political parties beyond

the PFDJ, all candidates ran as independent individuals, strictly forbidden from signaling or communicating any political affiliations with exiled Eritrean political groups. Tellingly, few former liberation fighters (*tegadelti*) chose to stand for election. As one candidate observed, the *tegadelti* "do not want to mingle so much with civilian life. They keep closely together and do not interact with the civilian population, and in a way they are a community within a community." The PFDJ's head of political affairs at the time (and still today), Yemane Gebreab, explained to me that the Front saw no need to endorse candidates formally, since it "would take all the seats due to [the PFDJ's] popularity," and, as he added with notable frankness, "it did not really matter since 90 percent of the candidates were party members anyway."

Yemane Gebreab was equally candid about the political purposes the elections were meant to serve. He identified three reasons for conducting them: to secure and teach people the importance of popular participation (in accordance with the PFDJ's priorities); to ensure that voters focused on national rather than ethnic, kinship, or regional candidates; and to enhance the representation of women, youth, and minorities. What was conspicuously absent from this list was any mention of accountability, responsive governance, or legislative power. The elections were, in other words, not elections for decisionmaking bodies. They were elections for symbolic consultative bodies bestowing legitimacy upon government dictates, and whose consultations could be overridden at any level of an executive chain running directly from the president's office to the village administrator.

The ballot itself encoded a complexity which Front officials acknowledged was inadequately communicated. In a single polling exercise, voters across the country elected 399 *baito zoba* representatives in the six regions. These 399 representatives would, together with 75 representatives appointed directly by the PFDJ and 75 representatives elected by Eritreans in diaspora, form the Constituent Assembly charged with ratifying the new constitution. Furthermore, the 399 *baito zoba* representatives would elect among themselves 60 representatives who would, together with 15 representatives elected by Eritreans in diaspora and 75 representatives appointed directly by the PFDJ leadership, constitute the new National Assembly, which would commence its work after the ratification of the Constitution. Very few voters or candidates we observed understood that three separate mandates were being determined by a single ballot.

The technical conduct of polling on election day was, by the standards of sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-1990s, genuinely commendable. Officials were competent and largely impartial. The security forces maintained a low profile. The system of ballot boxes bearing candidates' photographs, designed to serve an electorate in which approximately 80 percent were illiterate, was practically ingenious. Voter turnout in the

capital Maekel region reached 93.8 percent, a figure that reflected both genuine civic participation and a lingering ambient pressure, reported by multiple voters and election officials alike, that nonparticipation would be noted and reported to higher authorities.

The principal procedural concern was the placement of police officers inside polling stations in rural areas, ostensibly to assist illiterate voters in identifying candidates. However well-intentioned in practical terms, the presence of armed state agents in the polling space undermined any possibility of genuinely secret voting, and in a political culture where the boundary between assistance and surveillance was experienced as porous, it reinforced precisely the dynamic the referendum had established four years earlier: the sense that the state was watching, that the correct answer was already known, and that the formal exercise of choice was a ritual of compliance rather than an act of genuine self-determination.

The elections concluded without incident. The new *baito zoba* were duly constituted. In 1997, the Constituent Assembly ratified the new constitution—a constitution drafted under the nominal leadership of distinguished Eritrean jurist Bereket Habte Selassie but strictly controlled by senior party cadre Zemhret Yohannes; a constitution never to be implemented. By 2014, Isaias had dispensed with any remaining ambiguity, declaring publicly that a new constitution would be developed as a consequence of "hostile external schemes aimed at derailing our nation-building endeavours and processes."[8] As of this writing, no new constitution has been proposed.

The Ideological Roots of Dictatorship

To understand why Eritrea's electoral experiments all terminated at the same destination—formal completion, substantive hollowness, and eventual abandonment—one must trace the ideological formation from which the EPLF emerged. The movement's antidemocratic instinct was not a postindependence deviation; it was a founding characteristic, expressed consistently from the liberation struggle through to the present.

Eritrea is not alone in this trajectory. Across Africa, former liberation movements that won independence and inherited the state have displayed a recognizable and much-studied tendency toward authoritarian entrenchment. These include the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, the Tigray People's Liberation Front–Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (TPLF-EPRDF), the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo), the South West African People's Organization in Namibia, South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), Uganda's National Resistance Movement (NRM), and the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front. As scholars of these movements have observed, they share a foundational disposition

to conflate party, government, and nation; to treat themselves not as one among several political competitors seeking to represent a portion of the citizenry, but as the authentic embodiment of the national will, against which any opposition is inherently suspect or treasonous.[9]

What distinguishes Eritrea is the completeness of this logic's application. Where the ANC, Frelimo, NRM, TPLF-EPRDF, and their counterparts have, under varying pressures, preserved some degree of electoral competition, a partially free press, or constitutional governance, the PFDJ under Isaias has pursued the endpoint of the liberation-movement political logic without concession or compromise. Eritrea is not the aberrant case; it is the purest expression of a pathology that the comparative literature has documented widely. It is what these movements look like when nothing stops them.

The EPLF was a Marxist-Leninist vanguard organization before it was anything else. Its National Democratic Program, adopted at the First Congress in 1977 and revised in 1987, placed the Front, as the conscious advance guard of the Eritrean people, at the center of all political life. The concept of democratic participation this framework admitted was always organized participation: mass organizations for women, youth, farmers, and workers that the Front created, directed, and controlled. Spontaneous, competitive, pluralistic politics was not a value within this framework; it was a threat to the unity that liberation required. Independence and the rechristening of the EPLF as the PFDJ did not alter this disposition. The National Charter adopted at the Third Congress in 1994 made national unity, understood as alignment with the Front's development policies, the paramount political value, explicitly rejecting "all divisive attitudes and activities" in favor of the national interest.[10] In Isaias's own words, the PFDJ was "not a party," but "a nation."[11]

For a period, however, the president maintained a studied public ambiguity about democratic intentions, deploying the language of liberal governance for international audiences while dismantling its institutional prerequisites at home. In 2000, he was assuring foreign interlocutors that the 1997 Constitution would be implemented and elections scheduled, declaring that Eritrea needed "to eliminate official corruption, foster a culture of accountability, and cultivate the values and institutions for enduring democracy and constitutionality."[12] These assurances were offered even as the National Assembly was denied any real function, the *baito zoba* assemblies were stripped of authority, and the constitution gathered dust.

The double game ended abruptly in September 2001. A group of the most senior figures in Isaias's administration, comrades-in-arms from the liberation struggle, published an open letter demanding democratic reform, constitutional implementation, and the rule of law. Known as the G-15, they called for free elections and a transparent, accountable government. Isaias's response was to arrest them all and consign them to

indefinite detention without charge or trial. None of them has been seen or heard from since. On the same day, all independent newspapers were shut down, eighteen journalists were imprisoned, and the nascent civil society was crushed. The Eritrean people, Isaias declared, were "not ready" for multiparty democracy, and the constitution would be shelved indefinitely. In a 2001 interview, the president was direct: The democratic process, he said, was simply a "mess."[13]

The man who had spoken of free elections as "naturally the best institutional tools" now presided over a state with no elections, no independent media, no functioning civil society, and no constitutional framework.

From that point, the pretense of democratic intent was abandoned. When a Swedish journalist asked Isaias in 2011 why Eritrea remained a one-party state, he was adamant: "We have no other alternative," he claimed, adding that the country would stay that way for another two to three generations.[14] The remark was not the evasion of a leader embarrassed by delay. It was the authentic voice of someone for whom democratic accountability was simply not a concept he recognized as applicable to himself or his government.

Parliamentary elections, originally scheduled for 1998, were postponed due to the war with Ethiopia and later quietly canceled without explanation. The National Assembly, constituted in 1997 but seldom convened, was dissolved in 2002. By 2018, even the national cabinet had stopped convening regularly; ministries were either vacant or staffed by figures with no real power. The state had contracted to its most elemental form: one man and those who executed his orders. In 2014, Isaias formally buried the 1997 Constitution without any legislative process or public deliberation. The man who had spoken of free elections as "naturally the best institutional tools" now presided over a state with no elections, no independent media, no functioning civil society, and no constitutional framework. Former comrade and diplomat Andebrhan Welde Giorgis, allegedly dismissed for refusing an unlawful order in 2006, observed that Isaias had seized absolute power and considered himself to be the rightful "ruler of the country, behaves as its owner, and dispenses with the people, land, and properties at his discretion."[15]

Taken together, Isaias's various statements on his political aspirations and performances form a single revelatory arc. They are the statements of a man who understood democratic language well enough to deploy it strategically in the postindependence phase when facing Western audiences and donors, and who rejected democratic practice with sufficient consistency that his record constitutes something close to a candid confession of authoritarian intent. The PFDJ never built democratic institutions in good faith because it never believed in them. What

it built instead was a system designed to replicate, in peacetime, the total social mobilization of the liberation war; a state in which the boundary between citizen and subject was erased, and in which the Front's survival and the nation's survival were made, by design, indistinguishable.

The Democracy that Never Was—and What Comes Next

After 2001, Eritrea became what my book *The African Garrison State* describes in detail: a country in which the initial postindependence authoritarian trajectory consolidated into a permanent condition of political closure. Today it stands among the most comprehensively repressive states on the planet, having successively received a score of just 3 out of 100 in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* assessments, tied with North Korea.[16] The National Assembly has been dissolved. The constitution is dead. The independent press has been silenced since 2001. Thousands of political prisoners, including the G-15, have been kept incommunicado for decades. And the octogenarian president, who joined the liberation struggle in his late teens, rules from a rural compound outside Asmara, receiving visitors as a monarch would, with no institutional accountability and no constitutional constraints.

The democratic path of the newborn state in 1991 was never genuinely open. This is the lesson that Eritrea's electoral history offers, and it is one that travels well beyond the Horn of Africa. The assumption embedded in much of the democracy-promotion literature of the 1990s, that liberation movements, once victorious, would naturally transition toward pluralism, was empirically unfounded. The EPLF's trajectory was not an exception to a general pattern of postliberation democratization, but a confirmation that democratic practice cannot be grafted onto an organizational culture that has never internalized democratic values. President Isaias Afwerki's own declaration that multiparty democracy is a "mess," his contemptuous posture toward elections, and his summary abolition of a ratified constitution are not the expressions of a democratic leader who lost his way. They are the authentic voice of a movement that never found it.

The villagers who refused to nominate themselves for the *baito adi* in 1992 were, in their way, more clear-sighted about this than the international community that cheered the referendum result in 1993 and the EPLF's promises of democracy. Those villagers understood, in terms drawn from their own political tradition, that leadership without accountability to community is not leadership at all. The EPLF understood the same thing, and chose it anyway.

These historical failures now carry an acute prospective weight. As Isaias approaches the end of his long reign, whether through age, incapacitation, internal rupture, or external force, Eritrea faces a transition for which it is profoundly unprepared. There is no functioning

constitution to regulate the transfer of power, no elected legislature to provide continuity, no independent judiciary to adjudicate disputes, and no visible succession plan. Analysts warn that when the transition finally comes, Front members and political factions will race to fill the vacuum, with the military and the security apparatus as the most likely power brokers.[17] The country that spent the 1990s dismantling every mechanism of democratic accountability now confronts the price of that choice. The same institutional void that makes the regime immune to domestic challenge makes it uniquely dangerous in moments of fragility: A sudden power vacuum in Asmara, in a country bordering an already volatile Ethiopia and Sudan, with a heavily militarized border and a ruling apparatus without constitutional norms, carries obvious potential for regional catastrophe.

The path not taken in 1992 is now immeasurably harder to recover. Democratic transitions require, at minimum, some institutional memory; some residual experience of elections, of legislative debate, of civilian oversight, of law above personality. Eritrea has none of these. Three decades of deliberate institutional destruction have not merely postponed democracy; they have erased the foundations on which it could be built. This, too, is a lesson about liberation-movement states that we must absorb. The Eritrean case demonstrates that the question is not simply whether such movements democratize, but whether their authoritarian consolidation, pursued long and ruthlessly enough, renders future democratization structurally impossible. In Eritrea, the answer appears to be yes. The democracy that never was may, for a generation to come, be the democracy that cannot be.

Isaias Afwerki has long provided a ready answer to those who ask why Eritrea has neither democratized nor demilitarized: It is, he insists, not his fault. For more than three decades, Isaias has argued that U.S. hostility, expressed through sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and Washington's alignment with Ethiopia, renders political opening an existential luxury that Eritrea cannot afford. When Washington designated the country a state sponsor of terrorism and imposed targeted sanctions, Isaias cited both as evidence that Eritrea faced an external campaign of destabilization—one that justified the suspension of democratic norms in the name of national survival.

Likewise, Ethiopia's shifting postures—whether as adversary during the 1998–2000 border war, as unreliable partner during the 2018–22 rapprochement under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, or as renewed threat in the present crisis—have served a parallel function. The permanent state of military readiness, the indefinite conscription that has emptied Eritrea of its youth, the foreclosure of any independent political life: all of these, in the official framing, are not choices but necessities imposed by an implacable regional and global environment. This logic of permanent emergency is not incidental to Isaias's rule; it is its ideological

engine. A regime that cannot point to an election, a free press, or a functioning constitution must, by necessity, point to an enemy. The United States and Ethiopia have provided that enemy with obliging constancy, and Isaias has exploited every provocation, real or manufactured, to ensure that the Eritrean people remain soldiers first and citizens never.

This connects directly to the danger identified at the outset of this essay. The Ethiopia–Eritrea dyad is a time bomb that threatens to draw in regional and global powers across an already volatile Red Sea arena. Ethiopia has formally accused Asmara of arming rebel groups in Amhara and Tigray and notified the United Nations that Eritrea is actively preparing for war. With ambitions of securing access to the Red Sea, Ethiopia itself is adding to the tensions, as it is perceived as a threat to Eritrea's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

The danger of war is not separable from the domestic political system Isaias put in place over the last three decades. A regime that justifies its authoritarianism through the permanence of external threat cannot, by its own internal logic, allow that threat to recede. Peace with Ethiopia would dissolve the emergency that legitimizes indefinite conscription; a functioning constitution would create mechanisms through which Eritreans could hold their government accountable for the costs of perpetual mobilization; democratic elections would risk producing a verdict on thirty years of garrison-state governance. The absence of democratic accountability is therefore not merely a domestic tragedy: It is a structural driver of regional instability. So long as Eritrea remains a state in which one man can commit the nation to war without legislative oversight, judicial review, or popular mandate, the threat of renewed conflict with Ethiopia will persist not as an accident of circumstance but as a recurring product of design. The path not taken in 1992 not only foreclosed democracy for Eritreans but also condemned the entire Horn of Africa to live within the threat radius of a state that has no institutional mechanism for choosing peace.

What was aborted in the spring of 1992, in the dust of Eritrea's highland villages, was not merely an administrative exercise. It was the possibility, however remote, of a democratic culture taking root in the interstices between the state that the EPLF was building and the society it was building it upon. That possibility was not defeated by external enemies or structural impossibilities. It was ended by a political organization, and a man, that had won everything except the capacity to govern by any principle other than its own unchallenged authority.

NOTES

1. International Crisis Group, "Ethiopia, Eritrea and Tigray: A Powder Keg in the Horn of Africa," Briefing 210, 18 February 2026, *https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/africa/ethiopia-eritrea/b210-ethiopia-eritrea-and-tigray-powder-keg-horn-africa*.

2. Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941–1993* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 116–17.

3. For an extensive analysis of the referendum process as viewed from the villagers, see Kjetil Tronvoll, "The Eritrean Referendum: Peasant Voices," *Eritrean Studies Review* 1, no. 1 (1996): 23–67.

4. See Kjetil Tronvoll, "Camel-Dance and Balloting: The Afar Factor in the Eritrean Referendum," *Hovedfagsstudentenes Árbok*, Department of Anthropology, University of Oslo, 1994.

5. All information in this section is taken from the confidential election report submitted to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Kjetil Tronvoll, *Election Observation Report: The Maekel Zoba Election in Eritrea* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, 1997).

6. President Isaias Afwerki, quoted in *Eritrea Profile* (Asmara), 9 September 1995, from the author's personal archive. On the nation-building logic of the *zoba* reform, see Kjetil Tronvoll, "The Process of Nation-Building in Post-War Eritrea: Created from Below or Directed from Above?" *Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 3 (1998): 461–82.

7. *Eritrea Profile*, 19 October 1996, 2.

8. "President Isaias Afewerki's Speech on the Occasion of the 23rd Independence Day Celebrations," Ministry of Information Eritrea, 24 May 2014, *https://shabait.com/2014/05/24/president-isaias-afewerkis-speech-on-the-occasion-of-the-23rd-independence-day-celebrations/*.

9. The characterization of liberation movements as parties that "are the nation" is specifically explored in Norma Kriger's work on ZANU-PF; see Norma Kriger, *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-War Zimbabwe: Symbolic and Violent politics, 1980–1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

10. Eritrean People's Liberation Front, "A National Charter for Eritrea: For a Democratic, Just and Prosperous Future," Third Congress, 10–16 February 1994, 7.

11. Isaias Afwerki, quoted in Teklemariam Bekit, "Three Decades, One Leader: How Eritreans Had Their Hopes Dashed," BBC News, 20 June 2025, *https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2ekjvg17xo*.

12. Quoted in Isabel Linzer, "No More Excuses for Eritrea," Freedom House, *Perspectives,* 17 July 2018, *https://freedomhouse.org/article/no-more-excuses-eritrea*.

13. Isaias Afwerki, quoted in Teklemariam Bekit, "Three Decades, One Leader: How Eritreans Had Their Hopes Dashed," BBC News, 20 June 2025, *https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2ekjvg17xo*.

14. "President Isaias Afwerki's Interview with Swedish Journalist Donald Bostrom," Human Rights Concern–Eritrea via AftonbladetNews, 16 February 2011, *https://hrc-eritrea.org/president-isaias-afwerkis-interview-with-swedish-journalist-donald-bostrom/*.

15. Andebrhan Welde Giorgis, *Eritrea at a Crossroads: A Narrative of Triumph, Betrayal and Hope* (Houston, Tex: Strategic Book Publishing and Rights, 2014), 317–18.

16. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/country/eritrea/freedom-world/2025*.

17. Tessema Mebratu, "After Isaias: Eritrea's Inevitable Transition and Why Ethiopia Must Prepare," *The Reporter Ethiopia,* 27 December 2025.