



Will Peace With Ethiopia Usher in a Political Opening in Eritrea?

Tanja Müller | Tuesday, Feb. 19, 2019

Back in July 2016, I was invited to a gathering late one night at a popular bar in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. The gathering was a traditional and quite elaborate coffee ceremony, the kind typically held in the afternoon in most Eritrean or Ethiopian households in order to discuss the day's events. It had been organized by a group of young people, mostly women.

The crowd of about 12 people in the backroom of the bar was visibly joyful; they giggled as they passed around a mobile phone that contained pictures of one of their close friends, a young woman I'll call Asmeret. Three months earlier, Asmeret had embarked on a dangerous journey out of Eritrea: Despite not having a passport or a visa, she had managed to cross the border into Sudan and, through trafficking networks, had made it across the Mediterranean.

The photos showed Asmeret smiling after having arrived safely in Germany, her destination. Still wearing clothes more evocative of Eritrea than her new home, she looked happy and wary at the same time. It seemed like the fact that she had made it—out of Eritrea, to Germany—had begun to sink in, but along with that realization came uncertainty about her life ahead. The coffee ceremony had been organized to celebrate her success, and her friends told me that, because I was a German citizen, my presence made it all the more special.

Such ceremonies have become a common feature of daily life in the past decade—not just in Asmara but across the country. Too many of Eritrea's young people take the route into exile. While concrete figures (https://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Fragility_Migration_Eritrea.pdf) are not always easy to come by, the United Nations refugee agency reported (<https://www.unhcr.org/5b27be547.pdf>) in 2017 that the ninth-largest refugee population worldwide originated from Eritrea. In addition to the ceremonies marking someone's successful arrival, there are also the mourning ceremonies that happen with only a little less frequency, organized after friends and relatives in Eritrea get word that a loved one has drowned (<https://www.europenowjournal.org/2018/02/28/behind-the-humanitarian-crisis-in-the-mediterranean-five-years-after-lampedusa->



Eritreans shout slogans during a protest in Brussels, Belgium, Sept. 28, 2018 (AP photo by Francisco Seco).

political-incoherence-and-dysfunction-continues-to-kill/) in the Mediterranean, or been kidnapped

(<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jan/19/everyday-thing-kidnappers-preying-on-eritrean-refugees>) in Libya or the Sinai.

Over the years, as a researcher who began working in the early 1990s in what was then post-liberation Eritrea, I've gotten to know numerous Eritreans whose loved ones have made the decision to leave. The most common reasons for this outflow are, for many, the inability to fulfill their aspirations due to mandatory national service and the lack of economic opportunities. There is also the lure of greener pastures elsewhere, which is particularly strong in a country like Eritrea that boasts a big diaspora all over the world.

In the deeply divided global perception of Eritrean politics, there are competing interpretations as to the precise nature of the administration of President Isaias Afwerki, who has been de-facto head of state ever since Eritrea broke away from Ethiopia in 1991 and achieved de jure independence in 1993, following a 30-year war for independence. Eritrea is often simply described as a brutal dictatorship

(https://www.proasyl.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2018_Eritrea_ACountryUnderTheSwayOfADictatorship.pdf) that needs to be toppled. However, others see this as a gross misunderstanding (<http://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/eritrean-economy/>) of the Eritrean polity and advocate in favor of more constructive engagement on the part of the international community to, in the words of former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen "bring Eritrea in from the cold." (<https://africanarguments.org/2013/12/16/time-to-bring-eritrean-in-from-the-cold-by-hank-cohen/>)

But there is one point that almost everyone agrees on: The border war with Ethiopia that broke out in 1998, and the stalemate that prevailed for nearly two decades after, have played a huge role in shaping Eritrea's short history as an independent state. The war was on the face of it caused by a dispute over a small piece of barren land around the hamlet of Badme, and quickly escalated into an all-out trench war along the border between the countries. It was also driven by diverging economic policies and conceptions of identity.

While Ethiopia gained the upper hand in the subsequent bouts of fighting, both sides agreed to a cessation of hostilities agreement in 2000 and demarcation of the entire common border by an independent International Boundary Commission. The commission's verdict was to be final and binding. When that commission awarded the by now symbolic hamlet of Badme to Eritrea, Ethiopia refused to acknowledge its findings, and a "no war, no peace" stalemate ensued. The oft-repeated view from Asmara became, with some justification, that instead of standing up to Ethiopian intransigence in defying a ruling that was to end hostilities, the international community accommodated Ethiopia and vilified Eritrea.

The war had myriad repercussions for economic and political developments within Eritrea. The ruling party increasingly captured all economic activity starting with the quasi-nationalization of the

construction industry. Politically, any form of dissent from within the ruling elite, or from independent media outlets that had only just sprung up, was crushed, and any moves toward elections or the implementation of a new constitution were put on hold. In essence, these developments turned Eritrea into a pariah state (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/16715/singled-out-eritrea-and-the-politics-of-the-horn-of-africa>), sometimes referred to as “Africa’s North Korea,” known for repression and human rights violations of the gravest nature. The effect was to reinforce a feeling on the part of Eritreans that they were being let down by the international community once again—perpetuating a pattern that dates back to when the Italians arrived in the 1930s (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2005/feb/05/highereducation.books>).

Last year, however, the unexpected happened. Following more than a year of widespread anti-government protests, Abiy Ahmed was named prime minister of Ethiopia, and he quickly moved to make peace (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-surprise-summit-in-militaristic-eritrea-could-bring-peace-to-horn-of/>) with Eritrea. His declaration (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-44381701>) in June 2018 that his country would finally implement the ruling of the boundary commission and withdraw Ethiopian troops from territory awarded to Eritrea initially took the government in Asmara by surprise (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/ethiopia-peace-offer-caught-eritrea-regime-surprise-180611083830015.html>). But after a few days of silence on the part of the Eritrean leadership, events started to unfold (<https://www.france24.com/en/20180620-eritrea-ethiopia-olive-branch-delegation-addis-ababa-international-ruling-badme-diplomacy>) at great speed. Abiy and Afwerki visited one another’s capitals and made a host of symbolic gestures of friendship. They opened a regional hospital together in Bahir Dar in Ethiopia, for example, and Afwerki announced that he was reopening the Eritrean Embassy in Addis Ababa. Various joint visits to the once-contested border were seen as further proof of the leaders’ new closeness.

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Much has been written about the significance of this breakthrough for the world beyond Eritrea’s borders. Afwerki, whose whereabouts had often been uncertain for long stretches even within his own country, was newly visible on the international stage, jetting across the Horn of Africa region for trips to Somalia and Djibouti. The role of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in facilitating the peace deal invited discussion of what it might mean for regional politics and stability (<https://africanarguments.org/2018/07/18/politics-ports-horn-war-peace-red-sea-rivalries/>).

Less attention has been paid to what the peace deal means for ordinary Eritreans. A number of commentators have argued (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/peace-deal-ethiopia-changed-afwerki-eritrea->

181010171517226.html) that, in contrast to Ethiopia, where the pace of recent reforms has been described as nothing short of breathtaking, nothing much has changed in Eritrea. While the peace deal might have ushered in change in the economic realm, there are few signs of a political opening that many Eritreans dearly hope for.

Beneath An Intact Status Quo, Profound Change

There is some justification for the argument that the status quo in Eritrea remains intact. An initial announcement by the Eritrean government that it planned to end (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eritrea-military/eritrea-conscripts-told-unlimited-national-service-will-end-sources-idUSKBN1KD1ZD>) indefinite conscription, instead limiting tours of duty to the originally stipulated 18 months, seems to have come to nothing. And while Abiy made a bold move in releasing (<https://www.dw.com/en/ethiopia-releases-high-profile-political-prisoners/a-42590273>) political prisoners and imprisoned journalists, Eritrea has done nothing of the sort. To the contrary, such arrests have continued: Berhane Abrehe, a former finance minister and one of the rare critical voices within the country, was arrested (<https://www.voanews.com/a/former-top-eritrea-official-arrested-after-criticizing-president/4579616.html>) in Asmara in September.

This is a missed opportunity. The fact that the country was officially at war with Ethiopia had been used to justify the arrest of politicians and journalists, so the end of the war would have been a logical time to release them. Moreover, those in the large Eritrean diaspora who long to return but are reluctant because they are on record as having stated critical views of the government will have little reason (<https://africanarguments.org/2018/07/23/eritrea-peace-history-aside-mean-loved-ones/>) to think they are welcome.

At the same time, there is no denying that the past few months have been a time of profound change for Eritrea, even if those changes are not the sort that grab international headlines. Some of the most fundamental of these changes can be witnessed at the border with Ethiopia, where I traveled to conduct research last October.

Throughout the conflict, the border was heavily militarized. But with the announcement of the peace deal, it transformed seemingly overnight into a far less formidable boundary, one that Eritreans could cross with ease, often without having to show any papers. While it has periodically been closed again for short periods, allegedly in order to manage the flow of people in both directions in a more controlled way, for the most part people have been able to move freely back-and-forth without much trouble.

One of the key crossings, Zalembassa, brings Eritreans to Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region in northern Ethiopia. Before the 1998-2000 war, Mekelle was a backwater, but in the years since, substantial investment and development have transformed the city. It now has a modern university and various suburbs dominated by modern apartment blocks. The city center is dominated by pleasant tree-lined streets newly furnished with cobblestones and full of small local coffeehouses. Mekelle, like all of Ethiopia,

has a young population and high youth unemployment rate, so many young people spend a good deal of time hanging out in these establishments drinking coffee.



Ethiopian militia fighters dance as they prepare to leave for the front line, Adigrat, Ethiopia, June 13, 1998 (AP photo by Sayyid Azim).

These days, the city is even more filled with young people, many of them Eritrean, though detailed figures are hard to come by. A sizeable number have checked into hotels or found other accommodation in Mekelle, and from there tried, via relatives in the diaspora, to get visas to third countries. Others have united with relatives living in Ethiopia. Still more have made their way to Addis Ababa to try and start a business—nearly impossible in Eritrea, where the economy is tightly controlled—or to make new lives for themselves in other ways.

In addition, according to the U.N. refugee agency (<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/66202.pdf>), the number of Eritreans registering to apply for refugee status around Mekelle in particular has increased dramatically since the border opening. Many are women and children following their husbands or other family members who crossed as refugees before the peace agreement, often to avoid military service or to seek economic opportunities.

However, not all these people are necessarily Eritreans. One Ethiopian researcher who studies migration and spoke to me on condition of anonymity says that many people who register with the U.N. are in fact Tigrayans posing as Eritreans because they think they'll have a better chance of being selected for a resettlement program in the West. "I actually have a distant relative who went to Australia that way," the researcher says. I have no means of verifying this claim, but I also have no reason to doubt it. One can easily imagine why would-be refugees, both Eritreans and Ethiopians, would try to take what they see as their last chance for resettlement, before political change potentially makes successful asylum claims more difficult.

Traditionally, Eritreans have a higher chance of being recognized as refugees than Ethiopians. While researching migration from the Horn of Africa to Tel Aviv, Israel, for instance, I learned that many Ethiopians pretend to be Eritreans to obtain the limited protection

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/25212/asylum-seekers-or-infiltrators-israel-s-identity-crisis-leaves-african-migrants-in-limbo>) the Israeli state has offered. These stories underscore the frustration and despair typical of youth in the Horn, who see no future in their home countries and feel that migration is the only path to a better life.

The Double-Edged Sword of Economic Opportunity

During my stay in Mekelle, I encountered numerous Eritreans whose reasons for being there were more nebulous. They came out of simple curiosity, or to stock up on items that are difficult or impossible to get in Eritrea, or a combination of both. After a while, some came to do business as well. Mekelle now has a thriving market for used shoes and fashionable clothes run by Eritreans who bring their wares mainly from Asmara. Others hawk high-end electronic devices.

But most Eritreans who come to Mekelle to engage in commerce are interested in buying rather than selling. In the streets, Eritrean women excitedly speak into their mobile phones to contacts in Asmara, taking orders of all the things they are to buy and bring back home with them. On the side of the road one afternoon, I saw a group of five Eritreans attempting to put a newly purchased refrigerator in the trunk of their old Toyota Corolla, which is one of the most common cars in Eritrea. The fridge was clearly too big and would never fit, but that didn't stop them from trying.

The most coveted goods to be brought back over the border into Eritrea are cement and other building materials. An Eritrean who I met in Mekelle told me that in recent years, it seemed like nobody in Eritrea could build anything because there were no available materials. Even the simplest projects, like a water tank, were out of reach. Now, suddenly, everything seems affordable, and people are excited to carry out long-dreamed-about projects.

The Eritrean government has not explained why it accepted Abiy's peace offering, nor has it articulated its vision for what its relationship with Ethiopia should be.

For now, these new trade opportunities and economic exchanges are quite ad-hoc and unregulated. This lack of formalization of the ties between Ethiopia and Eritrea should be cause for some concern. After all, even though it was downplayed at the time, disagreements (<http://life-peace.org/hab/back-to-square-one-between-eritrea-and-ethiopia/>) over trade and economic integration were key factors in the outbreak of the border war in 1998. One of the specific catalysts was the introduction of Eritrea's currency, the Nakfa, at an exchange rate that was perceived as advantageous to Eritrea, because its higher value than the Ethiopian Birr meant Eritreans could suddenly buy goods much more cheaply from Ethiopia. On the streets of Mekelle today, where one can again exchange Nakfa for Ethiopian Birr, money changers complain that the Nakfa is very expensive, with the exchange rate about 180 Birr for every 100 Nakfa. And while this might benefit some Ethiopian merchants, it has the potential to cause anger among the population at large, who feel Eritreans have been given unfair advantage—again.

As mentioned previously, the Mekelle of 2018 is dramatically different from the pre-war backwater of 1997. At the same time, like most parts of Eritrea, it experiences frequent blackouts and electricity shortages. The day I left, there were long queues at gas stations, and my taxi driver, an Ethiopian, told me that gas was often in short supply. He says this was because gas was being sold to Eritrea, where shortages were even bigger, “but nobody has asked us what we think of that.”

Whether or not this is true, it was a reminder of the hostility that Ethiopians and Eritreans can sometimes have for each other—something that was on display even before the war. Back in 1997, shortly before the war broke out, I crossed the border at Zalemessa into the Ethiopian town of Adigrat with acquaintances from the Eritrean diaspora who were also traveling with German passports. Those of us with foreign passports encountered no problems at the crossing, but other Eritreans on the same bus were harassed by the border guards, belying the amicable relationship that officials at the time were insisting the two countries enjoyed.

The Competing Narratives of War and Peace

Today, people on both sides of the border seem to value the new opening, including the economic opportunities it has brought. But some of the discourse—and the absence of discourse—around the peace

agreement should give us pause. On the Eritrean side, for instance, no public discussion has taken place about the thaw in relations with Ethiopia. The government has not explained its rationale for accepting Abiy's peace offering, nor has it articulated its vision for what its relationship with Ethiopia should be.

Meanwhile, some in the Eritrean diaspora are dismissive (<http://www.eritreadigest.com/eritrea-ethiopia-a-confederation-we-didnt-vote-on/>) of the peace agreement, accusing Afwerki of wanting to reintegrate Eritrea into a federal state with Ethiopia, thereby eradicating the heroic history of the Eritrean struggle for independence.

Even those who are in general supportive of peace with Ethiopia and relieved that the stalemate has finally come to an end have their doubts (<https://africanarguments.org/2018/12/19/eritrea-senior-government-sources-reveal-nothing-isaias/>) about the wider agenda of a government that seems to have become more secretive—particularly when it comes to relations with Ethiopia, other regional actors and the Gulf Arab states—rather than more open since the peace agreement was signed.

The Eritrean narrative of the stalemate of the past 20 years, but also the outbreak of war in 1998 in the first place, places the blame for the conflict (<https://tanjarmueller.wordpress.com/2018/07/17/ten-days-that-shook-the-horn-as-eritrea-and-ethiopia-make-peace-what-now-for-eritrea/>) solely on hard-liners in the Tigray People's Liberation Front—one of the parties in Ethiopia's ruling coalition and, until the death of former Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012, the dominant one. This interpretation, which has also been taken up by some commentators (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/12/ethiopia-and-eritrea-have-a-common-enemy-abiy-ahmed-isaias-afwerki-badme-peace-tplf-eprdf/>), is deeply ahistorical and one-sided, as it neglects the complexity of Ethiopia as a multi-ethnic federation whose different constituencies have very different political outlooks and approaches toward—and linkages with—Eritrea.



Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki stands during a military parade after being welcomed by Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed upon his arrival at the airport in Mogadishu, Somalia, Dec. 13, 2018 (AP photo by Farah Abdi Warsameh).

I did not find anyone in Mekelle repeating such propaganda. Rather, I witnessed a generally positive process in which people who had been separated by political dynamics were trying to come to terms with one another's presence again. Because the actual border demarcation is still to be undertaken—a demarcation that in theory could separate families and communities straddling the frontier—this process of mutual habituation is important in order to mitigate potential tensions and maintain peace. Afwerki might have been alluding to this when he reportedly remarked in an interview that the demarcation itself is not the most important issue the two countries face.

Ultimately, while many Eritreans view the peace agreement as the result of a top-down decision by Afwerki made without any public consultation, they nonetheless cherish the peace and have embraced it. At the same time, while people in Eritrea seem better off economically and more goods are available in the shops, there is a widespread feeling that this is necessary but insufficient. As one acquaintance in Mekelle told me, “We did not want peace to buy more products.” Instead, Eritreans were hoping for political change, implementation of the constitution, and the release of political prisoners as seen in Ethiopia. Ultimately, they want a say in how their country should be governed in the future.

‘Change Must Come’

Thus far there is no indication of a move toward a more democratic form of government, nor are there signs that Afwerki plans to enact the constitution that was shelved in 1997, officially due to the outbreak of war in early 1998. Were it enacted, independent media could once more emerge, elections would eventually be held, and many rights and freedoms would be guaranteed—at least on paper.

While the Eritrean government might for now bank on the widespread relief that peace has finally come and put off making real concessions, a failure to create more accountable structures of government means there will be no repairing the relationship between many Eritreans and the country’s leadership. Without such an internal realignment, the high rates of Eritrean out-migration are unlikely to diminish substantially, and coffee ceremonies like the one I witnessed for Asmeret in 2016 will remain frequent occurrences.

One day in Mekelle, I met a man I’ll call Abraham, a former Eritrean soldier who fought not far from Zalemessa during the war. He had just returned from the border, and he said it was “very emotional” to see Eritrean and Ethiopian soldiers leave their control posts and sit in bars on the Ethiopian side drinking beer together. Among nine siblings, he is the only one still living in Eritrea—the rest are in the diaspora. “I believe change will come, and I want to be part of it,” he told me. After a short pause, he added, “Change must come.”

Emotions are an important component of political developments, and in this case the emotions of the people on the ground, even if they were not asked or told about their leaders’ plans, have been quite overwhelming. While no institutions are in place in Eritrea that would pass the test of democratic accountability as commonly understood, the sense of joy and relief felt by so many people should not be underestimated. Something did really break free, and there is hope that this not only makes peace irreversible, but will also ultimately usher in wider political changes within Eritrea.

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