



ROLE AND DILEMMA OF ERITREAN DIASPORAS IN THE PROCESS OF THE ERITREAN POLITICAL REFORMS DURING THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

Nuguse Bahre G.

Research Scholar , Centre for African Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University – New Delhi.



ABSTRACT

The statehood of Eritrea is apparently going through “No wars No peace” condition, UNSC imposed sanction, immense international pressure for human rights violations and most importantly under a state of an imminent outbreak of war with Ethiopia. Such standoff resulted into internal dismay, inconceivable influx of refugees with grave alarm that provoked the reaction of Diaspora which yet remain bizarre to fathom on the role played out to that effect. Understandably, the role of Diasporas is acknowledged not only in sustaining and winning war of liberation but also in the reconstruction and development process following independence.

This paper therefore, seeks to examine the role of Diasporas under the condition and hope of the government opening up/ undertaking restructuring and reform endeavors. It argues, that diasporas conscious driven approach was/ is in disarray as the very organization per se is pathetically structured in a narrow line and largely remain a mere virtual transnational networking that lacks effective power to leave marks on the ground. Besides, the paper endeavors to highlight on the practices and conflicting take of diasporas that had ramification on deconstructing, or and reforms in the political developmental process that invariably cries for.

KEYWORDS : Eritrea, Diaspora, sanction, reforms/ political development.

INTRODUCTION

Eritrea is strategically located in the horn of Africa bordering Sudan in the west, Ethiopia in the southern part, Djibouti in south east and Saudi Arabia in the north across the Red Sea. It possess of more than three hundred island, and nearly 1200 km coastal sea that could boast tourism industry in Eritrea and the region alike. Besides, being rich in mineral resources as Gold, Potash, Salt, and silver which is not yet fully utilized to the development and benefits of its own people, has immense potential for providing services to the hinter land of the horn of Africa.

Like any other country Eritrea has passed through different historical discourses and its present political entity is the product of colonialism as is true virtually to all states in Africa and Asia. Eritrea has been a colony of Italy for fifty years (1890-1941) to be placed under British Military administration for ten years soon after the defeat of Italy during the Second World War. Hence, it has undergone deeper socio-economic transformation due to liberalization and industrialization process as well as a distinct identity has evolved throughout the years. Contrary to Italy, British rule in Eritrea has undermined the development that had been cultivated by Italians and introduced a system of governance upon which Eritreans were acquainted or encouraged to participate in politics and allowed to form associations (Alemseged Tesfay, 2007).

As argued by many scholars that the geopolitical importance of Eritrea since time immemorial has left the country in a vulnerable situation. Being guided by their own interest the big power states and the

regional hegemonic powers has jeopardized Eritrea's fate during the decolonization period (Ogbazghi 1991, Bereket Habte Selassie 1989). Consequently, in 1950s the United Nation General Assembly decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia against the will and aspiration of the people. And in no time the federal arrangement that was sought as a middle road satisfying both Eritrea and Ethiopia on one hand and America's interest in the region on the other has been dismantled unilaterally by Ethiopia without receiving any reaction from the international community (Anwar Seid 2005, Habte Selassie 1989, Ruth 1995). The abrogation of federation and the denial of rights to live in peace and harmony on equal footing have forced the people of Eritrea to embark on a long journey for liberation

The Eritrean struggle that wrought independence at the end of 20th C, has its own peculiarity, intensity¹ and equally the revolution for independence was subjectable to trial and many obstacles which was surprisingly sustained due to the well organized revolutionary army under a visionary and dedicated vanguard as well as popular participation of the masses inside the country and the diasporas for that matter which distinctively stood up united beyond the challenges and has consistently supported the struggle materially and politically via its lobby in the international forum, and exposed the blight of Eritrean suffering and denial of rights. The Eritrean struggle for independence claimed 65 thousands martyrdom and other thousands were badly injured not to mention life claimed subsequent to the border dispute with Ethiopia in 1998.

Thus if history is defined as a tragedy, as often is, there is no more tragic history than that of Eritrea (Ogbazghi 1993). Ogbazghi, endeavor to narrate the historical discourses Eritrea went through and maps out how the stability of the horn and the success of the newly independent state of Eritrea, by and large, depends on the mutual understanding and friendly cooperation with the states of the horn in general and Ethiopia in Particular. It is of common knowledge that the tragedy inflicted upon Eritreans as a people starts soon after the Second World War when the fate of Eritrea became increasingly a subject of the geopolitical and pig powers interests (Ogbazghi, 1991). Hence, having experienced betrayals, and denials of basic rights as people for self determination during the decolonization period, Eritreans set on for bitter and long struggles without any help of whatsoever from the international community who firmly stood in favor of the imperial state of Ethiopia (Ogbazghi 1991, Ruth Eyob 1997, Amanda Poole 2013, Bereketeb 2007 & Nicole Hirt 2013). Thus, the perception of isolation, denial and experiences of the thirty years of struggle has shaped the attitudes and practices of the post war Eritrea.

The triumph of Eritrea Militarily in 1991 culminates in an independent Eritrea in 1993 after a popular participation of Eritreans in and outside the country in the referendum conducted under the auspices of UN and international observers.

The first five years of independence witnessed remarkable achievement in terms of building up the necessary institutional capacity and infrastructure that meant to provide equal access to all and a cautiously designed pragmatic policies and decision has also been taken up to establish good neighborhood relationships that aimed for a greater regional understanding and integration in a long run². Eritrea's self reliance, industriousness of the people and its leader refusal³ to accept international monetary fund loans and World Bank conditionality has been source of appraisal to be emulated by many African states on one hand and an irritating move for other as it represent a workable blueprint (Ruth Eyob, 1997: 649). Alas, to the dismay of many observers Eritrea entangled into another phase of unfinished war of liberation (Lionel Cliffe 2008). Lionel has attributed Eritrea's failure for not adequately defining its position or playing its

¹ H.E. President Issaias Afewrki speech on the 23rd Anniversary of Eritrean Independence, May 24 2014.

² It is believed that Ethio-Eritrea bond and commitment soon after independence as a noble natural course for integration .See H.E. Haile Woldetensae perspective on the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict, American Foreign Policy Interest, 8 April 2011.

³ The President proudly stated on public seminar in 2011 to the Eritrean Diaspora in USA that his country is not indebted to IMF/ WB as others are trapped under their mercy.

assumed role in the world as per the ordering principle of international system and for its contested identity, which has not yet evolved completely.

Despite the fact that Eritrea's foreign policy aimed at friendly relationships for enhancing common interest based on win-win situation fail short of implementing it partly of the complexities of the regional and sub regional systemic structures compounded with the geopolitical significance of the regions that attracts many traditional and new partner for either sharing the spoils or influencing it . Ruth 2000, Cliffe 2008, & Ried 2005, rightly points to the conflicting role of dominance between the self acclaimed and increasingly aid addicted or (pampered) hegemonic regional power of Ethiopia against the diasporic state of Eritrea.

In 1998 Eritrea went to war against Ethiopia over a disputed territory **Badme**, which later escalated to a conventional war covering many claimed or unclaimed territories in which evidently triggers an ordinary observer to question the motive of the war. The war brought solidarity and unity among Eritreans both inside and outside the country where thousands of dollars has been pumped to succeed the war efforts against Ethiopia. In other words, the Eritrean Diasporas representing approximately one third of the total population of 5.6 million were very vital for the survival of homeland. Historically, the Diasporas acknowledged for their common commitment to the project of Eritrean independence, a shared sense of pride and the revitalization of the nationalist sentiments during the border war with Ethiopia in 1998. However, ever since the war cleavages have become apparent within the party and the Diasporas alike⁴. While the right of freedom of expression in Eritrea has been curtailed since 2001, the Diasporas communities experienced diversification and the emergence of remarkable civil society organization abroad following an increase in refugee influx.

This paper seeks to look into how the practices or position of Diasporas has taken different direction and tries to explore the motive behind it? In what way the Diasporas reacted to the governments' action of halting the political development towards democracy and policies following the war. Besides it endeavors to examine the role of diaspora soon after the president's declaration of drafting the constitution and spreading hope of reforms? Do they serve as stabilizing agent as Nicole pondered during the imposition of Sanction in 2009 or would they play negatively and add fuel to the vulnerability of the state or would they assume the role of remapping and restructuring the political road of the State of Eritrea?

BORDER DISPUTE WITH ETHIOPIA

The paper has tried to examine the role and dilemma of Eritrean Diaspora in the political reforms or changes of the home country, in light of the nature of the state creation, dynamics of the region and the border dispute that followed, as well as the imposition of sanction in 2009, which inadvertently all served perfectly to invoke certain feelings and reactions. It is beyond the scope of this paper though to properly examine the root causes of the border dispute with Ethiopia, nevertheless as highlighted by many scholars that it is driven by multifaceted and complicated dynamics deeply rooted in history, contested identity, project of nation building compounded with the un embraced path/ discourses of politico- ideological and economic reasons, not to mention the geopolitical sensitivity that made a coordinated move for a common vision hard to realize (Richard Reid, Mengisteab and Ogbazghi 2005, Lionel Cliffe 2008, Bereketeab 2009 , Meal Tesfeamichael 2011, Ruth E, 2000, Tekeste & Tronvoll, 2001). The two liberation front of EPLF and TPLF had deep rooted differences from the outset pertaining methods and objectives⁵ . The TPLF manifesto of 1976 was not accepted from the Eritrean side as it advocated for the creation of the Republic of Tigray which

⁴ Clara Schmitz-Pranghe, (July 2010), Modes and potential of diaspora engagement in Eritrea, working paper No 3, accessible at diaspeace.org

⁵ The President of the state of Eritrea has clarified the issues related to the manifesto in an interview to Eri-TV, 1997 and is well documented in a number of official archives. See also Young 2006 for details pertaining EPLF and TPLF's relation during the struggle period.

deemed as unviable and incompatible with the struggle of other oppressed Ethiopian nationalities seeking for justice and democratization in Ethiopia and in fact the notion has been suppressed or temporarily compromised for a pragmatic outcome that made it necessary to forge alliances and win the war. After defeating the *Dergue*⁶ regime both EPLF and TPLF dominated EPRDF came to power to constitute two separate governments in Asmara and Addis Ababa respectively. Relations between the two had been cordial and many understanding agreement signed between the two countries to revitalize the war torn economy and lead the region into different trajectory. However, their divergent vision for the post liberation agenda re-emerged quickly to undo the widely acclaimed achievements. And unexpectedly to the surprise of many at least, in 1998 the border dispute with Ethiopia broke out in *Bademe*.

It is not the task of this paper to narrate the course of the war nor is it motivated to put the blame on either, however, many argue and still withhold the belief that Ethiopian expansionism and inherent violation of the noncontroversial and clearly defined and internationally recognized boundaries between the two countries rendered intractable circumstances⁷. The war that seems trivial at the outset manipulated by local war mongers escalated beyond control causing immense destruction⁸. The outbreak of the war dashed the hope of progress, development and stability in the region and conversely has caused displacement, human lose on both side close to 100,000 and emergence of dissidence questioning the legitimacy or outcome of the war within their respective country which by far had severe consequences in Eritrea. As explained above the war among other things had stirred sentiment being utilized by the government efficiently for which the Diasporas played decisive role by contributing financially and condemning Ethiopia's aggression internationally via different means. Kibreab (2007) noted that the diasporas has in fact independently created civil society that advanced the cause of the nation positively on one hand and equally produced negative impacts on due time at home as it is consciously or unconsciously structured along ethnic, religious and regional lines. Hence, the war in particular is deemed as a turning point where the legitimacy of the EPLF as a ruling party was questioned and divisions within the party became evident when a group of fifteen members of high ranking officials (including ministers and Generals) criticized and openly demanded for reforms, democratization and implementation of the 1997 ratified constitutions.

The government stance to the demands and suppressing the voices of the people by shutting down all private medias under the pretext of state of emergency brought an ease relationships with people in general and diasporas in particular who later on opted to express their grievances via different social media and blogs. The very act of diasporas for or against has rendered both positive and negative impact as the diasporas information and circulation was not subjectable for strict censorship, verification and its practices in return breeds hatred and polarization (Redie 2007, Betina 2006). Concomitantly, the opposition movements has intensified and mushroomed with little effect on ground as it bases itself in Ethiopia an enemy of Eritrea and equally engages in the politics of distortion, confusions and forging alliances one against the other than sorting out their differences for viable alternative of changes⁹. Such practices, therefore enabled the state/ governments to act freely with less accountability that culminates into jailing any dissidence a matter that cries for various international human rights concern and Diasporas activism¹⁰

⁶ Is a Socialist Junta that came to power in Ethiopia through coup d'etat in 1974.

⁷ For instance Badme a flash point of the conflict without ambiguity fall under the Eritrean colonial boundaries, properly defined by the internationally recognized colonial treaties, confirmed by the UN ill-fated federation and lately decided as Eritrean territory by the EEBC in 2002 as final and binding to remain yet under the occupation of Ethiopia.

⁸ Andebrhan Weldegiorgis,(2014), p 511.

⁹ Most of the diasporas based website with the exception of very few disseminate unreliable information that contradicts the very purpose it stand for leaving subscribers / viewers hopeless

¹⁰ In the past ten years and so a diasporas based Human rights activist flourished such as End Slavery Campaign, Eritrea Human Right Concern(UK), EHREA, Eritrean Global Solidarity based in USA and Canada, and Eritrean Movements for Democracy and Human Rights in South Africa etc..

The outbreak of the war justified state action for silencing voices, dissidents and by and large the constitution was shelved or hijacked for unknown periods. Yemane Gebreab, head of political affairs of PFDJ and Political advisor of the president hints his governments excuse and actions:

*“The war created obstacles and in some aspects did not enable us to move at the pace we would have wanted to move. Now there is relative peace and even in the last two years (after the war) there has been a lot of progress in terms of elections for local government and we do embark on similar situations whenever we got opportunity but at the end of the day survival is paramount. It depends on whether we are allowed to live in peace or not. Preoccupation of peace is imperative and we cannot think of democracy or others in isolation. The way the country organize itself in times of hostility is different to when there is normality. The situation now is mixed. The clouds of war are still hanging over us. It is a question of priorities for a young nation”.*¹¹

This clearly shows bleak hope and as also noted by the prominent scholar Yohannes and Mengisteab Kidane (2005) that the constitutions and the political development of the country remain of second priority unless the Eritrean- Ethiopian border demarcation of Algiers agreement respected and implemented in good will and spirit. The situation has therefore, moved far worst when the government puts a strict control by militarizing the entire society for undefined period of time compounded with self imposed isolation (Hirt 2010& October 2013, Kibreab , 2009, David M Bozzini, 2013)

UNSC SANCTION ON ERITREA

Sanction is one of the challenges the state of Eritrea encounter following the war with its arch enemy Ethiopia in 1998. This unjust episode as many infers, has put the people in uncomfortable situation and the diasporas at a cross road despite the fact that they unanimously condemned it¹².

On the ground of Eritrea’s technical, financial, logistical and military support to armed group in Somalia that is considered as undermining peace and stability in the region and her refusal to negotiate and withdrew from the status quo ante with Djibouti led to UNSC to adopt resolution 1907 on 23 December, 2009 that imposed sanction on Eritrea. The call has been cooked/ initiated by IGAD and AU and passed against Libya’s rejection and China’s abstention. Later on in 2011 under resolution 2023, the smart sanction has been extended targeting other essential backbone of the regime; such as the mining revenue and diaspora’s tax levied under the pretext of rehabilitation program¹³. The resolution perceived as an extension of USA misguided policy, hostile stance and betrayals that aimed at weakening Eritrea’s sovereignty and by doing so enable its ally Ethiopia to have the upper hand in the balance of power¹⁴. The legality and fairness of its adoption contradicts the accepted norms and has been instantly condemned as unjust and unacceptable¹⁵. Looking into the motives behind the resolution and considering the overall scenarios of the regions, hints that the problem overlaps and is attributable to the balance of power on one hand and the unresolved Eritrea- Ethiopian border disputes on the other. Eritrea accuses Ethiopia of not abiding by the Algiers agreement of 2000 which has been signed between the two conflicting party under the presence or guarantors of AU, EU and USA. Hence, inline of this all (guarantors) and AU in particular is fully mandated to follow up the implementation of the final and binding of 2002 delimitation and 2007 virtual demarcation and essentially obliged to request or pressurize Ethiopia to withdraw from the occupied territory of Badme.

¹¹ Quoted in, Kjetil Tronvoll,(2008) the lasting struggle for freedom in Eritrea: Human rights and political development, 1991-2009, P. 35.

¹² Virtually all Diaspora in Europe, USA and Australia expressed their discomfort/ discontent in a large demonstration carried in the cities of Genève, Washington DC, and Melbourne.

¹³ 2% tax has been introduced voluntarily by the diaspora to rehabilitate the war torn economy and is deemed as a duty , duly paid annually to the government as part of the nation building project.

¹⁴ See E-SMART, December 23, 2010 and also see Ephraim Sneh , Iran role in Yemen draws Israel & Saudi Arabia closer, 12/12/2014, accessed @ www.al-monitor.com

¹⁵ A number of Eritrea’s official press statement condemned the act as illegal and pointed out to the regional organization as inefficient and an organ hijacked by US to serve the interest of others. See also Redie Berketeab 2013

Besides, Eritrea's support of Somalia and not recognizing (TFG), under the pretext that it lacks comprehensive inclusiveness of all Somalis on one hand and rejecting the interference of USA in the region under the principle of Somalis are capable of solving their own problem brought Eritrea into confrontation with USA interest in the region¹⁶.

From the outset sanction is deemed as subtle as deadly weapon used to punish, humiliate and isolate or surrender the targeted state so as to behave and respect international community interest/ordering principle in general and USA primacy in particular. The justification for the imposition of the sanction explicitly meant to achieve desired outcome and seems hastily decided merely pushed by Ethiopia led IGAD to fulfill its hegemonic interest in the region (Redie Bereketeab 2013). Eritrea's withdrawal from the membership of IGAD as noted perfectly served the organization to pass the resolution without any sort of opposition, leaving Eritrea once again a victim to Ethiopia's and US regional interest. Further Redie questioned the feasibility and Eritrea's capacity to carry out the job of smuggling arms to Somalia due to Eritrea's economic hardship going through and proximity factor, which after all is not an immediate neighbor to Somalia, nor is there any evidence to substantiate the allegation of Eritrea supporting arms¹⁷. Concomitantly others have equally supported certain factions which fall short of being condemned by the UNSC (see E-SMART 2010). A recent report released by SEMG on October 2014, stated that Eritrea as a marginal actor without completely ruling out the possibility of providing help to Al Shabab:

The monitoring group has found no evidence of Eritrean support to Al- Shabab during the course of its present mandate. The monitoring group does not, however, rule out the possibility that Eritrea may be providing some assistance to elements within Al shabab without detection, but it is the overall assessment of the Monitoring Group that Eritrea is a marginal actor in Somalia and increased public scrutiny by the international community has made any direct support to Al-Shabab much riskier (SEMG report, 23 October, 2014, S/2014/727)

The report acknowledged Eritrea minimal role in destabilizing the regions without recommending for relaxation rather the sanction was extended for another one year¹⁸ and equally sensed and pointed out to the support made to those armed group linked to Ethio- Eritrean rivalry in the Horn of Africa and the unsettled border disputes that shapes its foreign policy¹⁹.

Smart sanction is an alternative of war that aims at putting pressure upon the targeted regime who violates the norms of international law and is merely aimed at maximizing the cost of none compliance while minimizing the suffering of populations. There is no concrete study on the impact of the smart sanction in Eritrea so far, however, based on the experiences of similar sanction on other country and looking into current Eritrea's socio-economic and political situation that smart sanction has a repercussion on civilians as the regime devised a counter plan to adjust.

For instance, Michael Brzoska notes that an arms embargo increases the costs of weapons procurement, leading "to a major shift in government spending priorities and a consequent reduction in the

¹⁶ Eritrea in principle believes that it has a historical and moral obligation to extend its support to Somalia reconstruction and stability and constantly advocated for "Somali-driven and owned reconciliation process". the recent report by the Danish immigration service (November, 2014) conceded to the fact that Eritrea thrives for regional peace and stability for which it has been punished with sanction

¹⁷ Herman Cohen, How Ethiopia and Eritrea forge new relationships, <http://africanarguments.org/2018/06/13/how-ethiopia-eritrea-forge-new-relationship>

¹⁸ See ambassador Girma Asmerom statement to the informal consultation with UNSC committee established pursuant resolutions 751(1992) and 1907 (2009), 10 October, 2014, New York

¹⁹ See Somalia-Eritrea Monitoring Group reports of October, 2014. It is worth noting that the report hinted out of the Eritrea's government all kind of support to the Ethiopia opposition group based in Eritrea. A mandate seems not necessarily relevance to the very reason the SEMG created for. Because it failed equally to bring into light the Ethiopian side support against Eritrea and the risk it entails for destabilizing Eritrea and the region at large.

economic wellbeing of the general population in the targeted state²⁰. Moreover, travel sanction essentially disturbs the shipment of food and cold storage medicine which has far severe impact on the innocents civilian²¹. Despite the fact that smart sanction targets individual travel ban and freezes assets of the leaders and regime owned institutions restricts/ hampers proper engagements and encourages illegal practices such as smuggling and contraband solely controlled under military personnel²². Most importantly, such an act serves a government to mask its failure and increasingly become abusive to its own citizens²³.

closely looking into Eritrea's socio- economic condition since the imposition of sanction in particular the very state of Eritrea seems in real trouble as there is an increment in the flow of refugees²⁴, economic hardship ranging from high inflation and constant cut of electric power and scarcity of supply not to mention the constant preparedness for possible threat of war which in fact has played decisive role in channeling the energy for unnecessary endless standby. Despite the commendable achievement Eritrea registered in the past 20 years in the health sector in particular, the acclaimed progress is at stake as dejectedly the well built hospitals and widely spread one run short of medicine and man power²⁵. Education wise has been militarized as the student constantly called up for military training and brain washing cadre school so as to inculcate spirit of nationalism and tune them for possible threat/ eventualities.

DIASPORAS REACTION AND SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS

The imposition of sanction has been instrumentalized by both Diasporas and the government (Hirt, 2013). It is of common knowledge that diasporas has been consistently a source of power, and pride that made Eritrea a reality without which the struggle for independence could have been difficult to validate. Over and again the preparedness was reactivated and intensified upon which the government has adopted a mechanism that changes the meaning and practices of donation or contribution (Samia Tecele 2013). UNSC Resolution 1907 and 2023 therefore invokes certain reaction among Diasporas with a mixed feeling. Some endeavored to take advantage of to advance their own benefit of putting pressure on the government to democratize or open up while others (known as the Silent group) partly were in illusion despite the fact stood against the very act (Bereketeab 2013, Hirt 2013, See also Dr Gebre interview with *Demtsi Ertra- Naz* 2014). The outright reaction of Diaspora for the imposed sanction reflected in the various demonstrations carried out in the big cities of Europe, USA and Australia and also expressed their stance via the social media groups, and blogs²⁶. The imposition of sanction by and large benefited the arch enemy Ethiopia while leaving Eritrea in a vulnerable situation (Redie 2013). A recent global fire report placed Ethiopia second following

²⁰ Daniel ,W. Drainer (2003), How Smart are Smart Sanctions?, International Studies Review, P.108

²¹ Ibid

²² Despite the fact that Eritrea is divide into six Zoba's , all fall under a military command that presided the power of civilian, the military commands not only engages in supervising the work of zoba's but also involve in business and agricultural activities as part of the nation building project and see Nicole Hirt 2013.

²³ Anonymous, interview with Author, October 2014, New Delhi. He conceded that the more pressure a government has from the international community in the form of sanction gives the government upper hand to justify its pressure upon the civilians in general and youth in particular instead of resolving its differences and come up with effective solution to the prevailing problems.

²⁴ In the month of October (2014) alone an estimate of 37,000 Eritreans fled the country according to UNHCR and in 2013 close to 13,000 made their way to Europe (<http://www.unhcr.org/5465fea1381.html>). Nevertheless it is worth underlining that those groups left their country at different time span and could be an exaggerated figure to bring the blight of Eritreans into lights.

²⁵ In the past three to four years attendants seeking medical treatments in a broad such as India and the neighboring country Sudan in particular have increased significantly that warrant the paralyzation of the existing one despite Eritrea ranked among the top five on track for meeting development goals.

²⁶ Action against sanction and E- SMART are exemplary move aimed at defending the unjust decision and uniting all to sign for petitions.

Egypt in Africa that evidently reflected her unrestricted access to purchase military arsenal fulfilling Ethiopia quest for hegemony in the region²⁷.

Apparently the polarization of Eritrean Diaspora along ethnic and religious line is the product of the protracted war and the current imposed sanction which after all seems of a subtle design meant to humiliate Eritrean pride and achieve the twin goals of either installing a submissive regime (Regime Change) or dismantle Eritrea and restructure it in a way that guarantee Ethiopia outlet to the Sea²⁸. The structural transformation following 1998 war with Ethiopia, the practice of Diaspora transnationalism or (distance-nationalism) and the parallel virtual practices in social media increasingly became subjectable to distortion or various interpretation as opposed to the established truth or narratives of the past (Betina Conrad 2006& Bernal 2006), not to mention the countless opposition parties and mushrooming of the civic society with flawed idea all has triggered further confusion, and consequently made it difficult for a joint venture to take proper move for national salvation or push for political reforms.

Feasibility of Reforms in Eritrea and the impasse of diaspora

Independence of Eritrea was not seen as an end per se, rather an immediate cause for a higher, noble and sustainable goals of achieving a prosperous, stable and democratic state which after all was well envisioned and embedded in the principles of EPLF²⁹. Soon after independence, the state of Eritrea embarked on pursuing pragmatic policies internally and externally. Many reforms has been introduced to cope with the reality of the new state among which land was declared as a state owned property so as to alleviate the potential element of conflict on one hand and redistribute the wealth in return equitably. Education wise a similar move has been made for various reasons which are beyond the scope of this paper. The government of Eritrea under the single party of PFDJ has consistently claimed the right to define its own path of democracy³⁰. This means the Eritrean government not utterly embraces the universality of democracy and has attempted to re conceptualize democracy in terms of context and experiences has gone through. In light of the existing reality on ground, and looking into the transformation of Diaspora based opposition movements and the contradicting views, and claim of the civil society on the other hand made it feeble to act sensibly. This partly substantiates and reinforces PFDJ conviction of positioning itself to act wisely in accordance with the priority without losing sight on the regional contradictions. In another words, what matters most for PFDJ is not casting votes but ensuring a genuine popular participation in the form of having equal access to opportunity and obligations, and equally upgrading people's life economically by providing basic infrastructure and good institutions to that effect³¹, which at the moment seem far from complete realization.

The border dispute with Ethiopia and the conspiracy of isolating Eritrea on one hand and the volatility of the region on another has produced an environment not conducive for any substantive structural changes, in contrast halted/ aborted the very early signs of democracy in Eritrea. The daunting challenges of Eritrea as state is not only confined to the unease/ strained relationships with its neighbors in general and Ethiopia in particular, but also to the domestic policy which in turn has exacerbated the

²⁷ See Global Fire Report, 2014 accessed @ www.globalfirepower.com

²⁸ Tesfatsion Medhanie (2014), *Ezi do deyizi Ertra Moyta : Kalsi N'tensae Hager!*, Bremen, accessed at Ethiomeia.com, and see Dinesh Mahtani (August 2013) letter which clearly hints regime change. See also manifesto 1976 of TPLF that clearly aimed at establishing a republic of Greater Tigray incorporating a large part of Eritrean territory and ethnic group, however it is difficult to conclude whether the mission is still on motion despite many speculation.

²⁹ See EPLF charter of 1977 & 1987 and also see Gaim Kibreab (2009), *Eritrea a dream deferred*

³⁰ EPLF renamed itself as PFDJ in the third congress in 1994 and assumed the role of defining the future of Eritrea. While the national charters envisage the emergence of other political party nevertheless it sees PFDJ at the centre of gravity that ensures peace, stability and progress in Eritrea.

³¹ Interview with H.E. President Isaias Afwerki, on 28/11/2014, accessed at www.eastafro.com.

situation further. Suppression of dissidents, crackdown of the G15³², open ended national service or militarization of the society and dwindling prospect of peace and most importantly not harvesting the benefits of mining among many other things has produced a counter force in and outside the country that cries for fundamental changes or reforms.

In the past seventeen years of Eritrean politics, an ever increasing demand for change has been manifested in different forms and evidently Journalist, Intellectuals, University Students and others collectively or individually voiced for policy changes and implementation of the constitutions³³. Most importantly Diaspora based civic societies endeavored to cater a platform for dialogue among the divisive opposition parties so as to push for reforms which seems preferably in the best interest of both side³⁴. In line of this, "*Medrek*", which literally means a stage or platform in Tigrinya was founded by a group of mysterious Eritreans in exile, under the guidance of concerned individuals, a former EPLF fighter, Intellectuals and consumed former diplomat such as Andebrhan Weldegiorgis which at the moment is proactively engaged to bridge the gap and exert pressure for change or prepare the ground for peaceful transition. Forum for National Dialogue (FND) a Diaspora based initiative, primarily aimed to promote democracy, human rights and reconciliation in Eritrea and stable peace and cooperative relationships with neighboring state Ethiopia as well as serve as a catalyst to bridge the gap between pro-democracy Eritrean forces abroad and the forces of change inside the country so as to accelerate smooth reforms and orderly transitions³⁵. Similarly, Eritreans for facilitating National Dialogue (EFND), created mainly by an Eritrean intellectual in USA with the aim of charting out strategies and bridging the gap among all other Eritrean forces seeking justices and changes.

The current trend and geopolitical configuration in the horn of Africa, as well as shift or a fresh engagement policies of certain European countries to alleviate the exodus of Eritrean refugees reaching Europe provides an opportunity or a wakeup call for the state of Eritrea to unlock isolation and redress its internal domestic challenges gradually and most importantly in a manageable manner. Similarly, as it is noted, that former USA ambassadors and expert called for bringing out Eritrea from the cold³⁶, a move therefore either vindicate the pseudo and futility of sanction on one hand or failure of regime change or models of politics that has been expected for years on another. Nevertheless, of whatever the reasons could be and irrespective of the timing it lends venue for revisiting US- Eritrean relations and incentives for inward looking strategies. Jason Mosley (2014) argued that Eritrea's engagements with the West gives the country confidence to move on for democratization and respect of human rights and equally believed the positive role Eritrea can play in fighting terrorism in the region, without which the intended/ desired change in whatever forms renders futile.

Party leader or PFDJ officials has always invoked the imperative of survival and endeavored to balance between development, stability and sustenance of the party rule by giving a proper heed to political changes and as expounded earlier that providing equal access to opportunity is believed as the only way to stability and democratization in a long run. Thus, a serious of change in personnel (which is known as re-

³² Are a group of high ranking officials and members of cabinet ministers who criticized the president unilateral acts or absolute power and demanded for the implementation of the constitution and transition to democracy.

³³ The most notable call was of G 13 or known as "Berlin Manifesto", and the recent one of 22diaspora based intellectuals petition demanding policy change and reforms soon after Lampedusa incident in October 2013, besides the various civic organization, human rights concerns and also opposition parties which still remain divided for reforms or complete removal of the PFDJ.

³⁴ Head of Eritrea's people Democratic Party (EPDP), once conceded to the inability of the opposition party to bring fundamental change through violence and considered negotiations as best options provided the government shows willingness to act (M. Hagos, Demtsi Hizbi, TV, 29 December, 2013)

³⁵ Andebrhan Weldegiorgis (2014) cultural diplomacy in the promotion of democracy and peacebuilding. Accessed @ www.culturaldiplomacy.org/.../Cultural_Diplomacy_In_The_Promotion

³⁶ Herman J. Cohen, Time to Bring Eritrea in from the Cold, An African Argument editor, 16 December 2013. Retrieved from www.africarguments.org/2013/12/16

shufflement) is apparent as opposed to real restructuring in terms of institutions. Following the war with Ethiopia in 1998 and until recently no attempt has been made to address structural and constitutional issue. Though not formal, a spokesman of the Eritrean government representative in USA stated of government plan to reverse the national service to its actual duration of eighteen month, a cause partially considered behind the exodus of Eritrean youth³⁷

Surprisingly, in May 2014, the president officially declared the commencement of drafting the constitution leaving the masses and Diasporas in particular in illusions. In contrast the majority of diasporas (known as silence group) has showed little reactions while few outrageously reacted, yet endless conferences, public meetings and organizing festivals became a norm to harness their capacity for common goals. As noted earlier that diasporas has intensified their efforts individually and collectively and has been connected to one another virtually via social networks. Hence, many blogs, news websites and broadcasting programs affiliated to different diaspora based opposition groups and civic societies made little success than exposing the governments malfunctioning and contradicting each other. In contrast, such outnumber of civic association structured a long regional and religious line at times or a cross professional background in a part time mode of engagement made it less effective to push for the desired outcome.

CONCLUSION

Unlike other African countries, the birth of Eritrea as a state has been complicated and subjectable to the interest of big powers geopolitics which made it necessary for Eritreans to pay the highest price ever in terms of life, materials and opportunities. With such an experiences of denial of rights betrayals, and little confidence and trust on the help of West, the government of Eritrea opted for self reliance by engaging the youth on reconstruction and development and effectively taping the diaspora resources as part of the endeavor. The diaspora constitute the backbone of the state of Eritrea contributing almost 30 % of the country's GDP per capita. Based on World Bank report of 2002, Remittances made up nearly one third of GDP, reaching US \$ 1.37 billion in 2007, and according to these estimates, Eritrea ranked fifth in Africa in remittance received per capita, and first in proportion of remittances in relations to GDP³⁸. Nevertheless, despite the acclaimed contribution the diaspora enjoys during the liberation and after independence in sustaining the state, they failed to make substantive changes in the political development of their home country. The reasons are multifaceted; ranging from systemic outplays of the government on one hand, reluctance and opportunism for others as well as lack of a coordinated move for a common goals. As explained, war with Ethiopia, and sanction of 2009 invoked the imperative of state survival and accordingly the diasporic engagements characterized by double standard; while some utterly support the government, others for that matter, the majority passively shows empathy irrespective of the domestic puzzles the state goes through, rather they are inclined and firmly believe on the internally motivated changes either via restructuring and reforms or whatever forms of changes with little cost. The opposition groups, civic societies and activist on the other hand remained virtual, divided and manipulated by the host country as is partially true in Ethiopia lacking the ownership of its own policies and agendas.

REFERENCES

- Alemseged Tesfay,(2007). *Aynefelale*, Asmara: Hidri publisher
- Alemseged Tesfai, 'The Cause of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border conflict', paper presented at conference organized by Heinrich Boll Foundation, 15-17 March 1999, Nairobi, Kenya.
- Andebrhan Weldegiorgis, (2014), *Eritrea at A crossroads A Narrative of Triumph, Betrayal and Hope*, Huston: Strategic Book publishing & Rights Co.

³⁷ Despite the fact it is informally announced in a seminar to Eritrean community in USA (2014), it signifies a change of policy on one hand and acknowledgement to the demand and pressure made by diaspora based advocacy on another.

³⁸ See Schmitz-Pranghe cited in Poole (2013)

- Amanuel Eyassu, debate on what change Eritrea require, 8/12/2014 accessed at Radio Assenna. www.assenna.com
- Betina Conrad (2006), Out of the 'Memory Hole': The Re-Emergence of Competing Narratives of the Eritrean Revolution, *Afrika Spectrum*, Special Issue No. 2.
- Bereket Habte selassie, Wounded Nation: How a Once Promising Eritrea Was Betrayed and its future Compromised, *Red Sea Press, 2010*
- David M. Bozzini,(2013).The Catch-22 of Resistance: Jokes and Political Imagination of Eritrean Conscripts, *Africa Today*, Vol. 60(2)
- E-SMART, (December 23, 2010), UN/US Sanctions on Eritrea: Latest Chapter in a Long History of Injustice, accessed at www.eritrean-smart.org
- Gaim Kibreab, (2009), Forced Labour in Eritrea, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 47(1).
- Gaim Kibreab, 2009, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred* (Eastern Africa Series)
- Jason Mosley, Eritrea and Ethiopia: Beyond the Impasse, *Africa Program, Chatham house*, April 2014.
- Kidane Mengisteab and Ogbazghi (2005), Anatomy of an African tragedy: political, economic and foreign policy crisis in post independence Eritrea, NY: The Red Sea Press
- Kjetil Tronvoll,(2009) the lasting struggle for freedom in Eritrea: Human rights and political development, 1991-2009, HBO AS, Haugesund, Oslo.
- Habteslassie (1989), *Eritrea and the United Nations*. Trenton, N.J: The Red Sea Press.
- Lionel Cliffe, (2008), *Eritrea 2008: The Unfinished Business of Liberation*, Review of African Political Economy, Routledge.
- Meal Tesfeamichael (2011), The Causes of Return to Conflict and the Geopolitical Dynamics in the Horn of Africa: The Eritrean-Ethiopian Border Conflict, MA thesis, London: SOAS.
- Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (MGSE).2014, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant to Security Council resolution 2111(2013), S/2014/727.
- Nicole Hirt, (October, 2013), The Eritrean Diaspora: Savior or Gravedigger of the Regime? Diaspora Responses to the Imposition of UN Sanctions, *Working Paper*,(23), GIGA.
- _____, (January 2010), "Dreams Don't Come True in Eritrea": Anomie and Family Disintegration Due to the Structural Militarization of Society, *Working Paper*,(119), GIGA.
- Ogbazghi Yohannes (1991), *Eritrea: A pawn in world Politics*, University Press of Florida.
- _____, (1993) *Eritrea: A country in Transition*, *ROAPE*, No. 57, The Politics of Reconstruction: South Africa, Mozambique & the Horn.
- Poole, Amanda (2013), Ransoms, Remittances and Refugees : The Gatekeeper State in Eritrea, *Africa Today*, Vol. 60 (2).
- Reid,R., ed. (2009), *Eritrea's External Relations : Understanding Its Regional Role and Foreign Policy*. London: Chatham House.
- _____, (2005), Caught in the Headlights of History: Eritrea, the EPLF and the Post- War Nation-State, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 43 (3).
- Redie Bereketeab (2007), *The Eritrean Diaspora: Myth and Reality*, in Ulf Johansson (edition), Research Report in Social Anthropology, Lund.
- _____, (2009), The Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict and the Algiers Agreement: Eritrea's road to isolation, in Reid, R., (ed.), *Eritrea's External Relations: Understanding Its Regional Role and Foreign Policy*. London: Chatham House.
- _____, (2013), The Morality of the U.N. Security Council Sanctions against Eritrea: Defensibility, Political Objectives, and Consequences, *African Studies Review*, Vol. 56,(2).
- Ruth Eyob,(Dec, 2000) The Ethiopian-Eritrean Conflict: Diasporic vs Hegemonic States in the Horn of Africa 1991-2000, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol, 38 (4).
- _____, (1997), *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: domination, resistance, and nationalism 1941-1993*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Samia Teclé & Luin Goldring, (May 2013), From 'remittance' to 'tax': the shifting meanings and strategies of capture of the Eritrean transnational party-state, *African and Black Diaspora: an international journal*.

Tekeste Melake ed, (2005) *Proceedings of a Workshop on Aspects of Eritrean History*, Asmara: Hidri Publisher.

Tesfatsion Medhanie, *Tinsae Ertra*, 2014 accessed at www.Ethiomeia.com

Victoria Bernal, (Feb, 2005), Eritrea Goes Global: Reflections on Nationalism in a Transnational Era, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol.19 (1).

_____, (2006), Diaspora, cyberspace and Political imagination: the Eritrean diaspora online, global network, Vol. 6, Issue 2.

www.dehai.org.

www.eastafro.com

www.meskerm.net

www.tesfanews.com



Nuguse Bahre G.

Research Scholar , Centre for African Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University – New Delhi.