

‘We didn’t Fight for this’: The Twilight of the EPLF/ PFDJ’s Political Project of State and Nation Building for Eritrea

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On May 24, 2010 Eritrea celebrated its 19th anniversary of independence. President Isaias Afewerki claimed that Eritrea continued to follow a policy of “constructive engagement” (Shabait, May 2010). The President’s speeches have continued to focus on domestic, regional and global issues. Although Eritrea was internationally recognized as a sovereign state after the April 1993 referendum, it gained *de facto* independence on May 1991 upon the overthrow of the *Derg* regime by the combined forces of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front/ Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (TPLF/EPRDF) (Styan, 1996, p. 80). The alliance between the Eritrean and Ethiopian insurgents against a common enemy and their successful final offensive against the *Derg* resulted in their victorious take-over of Asmara (the Eritrean capital) and Addis Ababa (the Ethiopian capital). This alliance although based upon tactical and pragmatic considerations (Young, 1996) assured that once in power the EPRDF, as the new ruling party in the predecessor state (Ethiopia), would not pose further obstacles to the successor state’s (Eritrea) formal path towards independent statehood.

Failure to recognize the correctness of Eritrea’s claim to self-determination at the time of African independences resulted in the three-decade war for independence which led to 65,000 military (Pool, 1998, p. 19) and between 150,000-250,000 civilian (Jacquin-Berdal & Aida Mengistu, 2006, p. 97) deaths on Eritrea’s side.

This paper will first look at secession in Africa in order to understand the international response vis-à-vis Eritrea’s claim for self-determination and independent statehood. The paper will then focus on the war for independence and at the success of Eritrea’s separatist insurgency in order to understand the legacy of this period to the process of state and nation formation in Eritrea. In the second part, the paper will focus on the ruling party, the EPLF/PFDJ’s political project of state and nation building for Eritrea after independence. The final section will analyse Eritrea’s isolation in the regional and global political arenas. The paper will argue that the EPLF/PFDJ political project has led to an erosion of its domestic legitimacy. Despite the President’s rhetoric of constructive engagement, the increasingly authoritarian path and the mutation of the principle of self-reliance after independence have led to the isolation of the EPLF/PFDJ in the domestic, regional and global political arenas.