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Isaias Afwerki's gamble in Ethiopia is endangering Eritrean sovereignty

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Since the conflict in Tigray started in 2020, Eritrea has become further entangled in Ethiopian politics. Young Eritrean conscripts assigned to the region have been killed, and Eritrean refugees have been displaced. Yohannes Woldemariam argues that the state's actions under President Isaias Afwerki show a pursuit of regional integration over Eritrean independence, with little regard for its citizens.

Eritrea achieved self-determination after a devastating 30-year war and a **referendum** that demonstrated overwhelming support for independence. Yet the country's President, Isaias Afwerki, a homegrown dictator, has **hijacked Eritrean aspirations** and perpetuated his personal rule through a vicious series of assaults upon real and imagined opponents.

The entire Eritrean youth has been on war footing ever since the 1998-2000 "border war" with Ethiopia, who are put into an **indefinite military service** and used as unpaid mercenaries for Isaias' military adventures – in the Congo,

Sudan, South Sudan and Yemen. Since November 2020, Eritrean conscripts **as young as 16** have been **killed in the Tigray region** of Ethiopia for a war that has little to do with them. Meanwhile, **Eritrean refugees** have been victimised by **all sides** of the conflict.

Abiy Ahmed has done a personal favour for Isaias, with the conflict helping him to assert himself and prolong his despotic rule. But the same **cannot be said** for the Eritrean people. Before the war, the country was a **pariah**, both regionally and internationally. Qatar was once Eritrea's **only significant lifeline**, but Isaias has now fostered closer ties with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, **Russia** and **China**, while under **sanctions from the United States**. At the United Nations General Assembly in March 2022, Eritrea supported **Putin's invasion of Ukraine**, advocating against human rights investigations directed at Russia, **distinguishing itself** as the **only African country** to provide the country unequivocal support.

This is set against a backdrop of Abiy in Ethiopia feeling squeezed economically, fearing the potential impacts of the **HR 6600 Bill** in the US Congress, which would require sanctions on persons deemed to threaten peace and security and violate human rights in the conflict. In contrast, Isaias appears less concerned with HR 6600 because he believes staying the course in the Tigray is worth more than the Bill's consequences. For one, a resurgence of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) political party in the neighbouring region is seen as an existential threat.

China is worried that Eritrea's involvement in the conflict will affect its large **investments in Ethiopia** and has moved to strengthen ties with Isaias. Further, its renewed interest in the Red Sea, for political and economic reasons, can be used by Eritrea as a potential shield. At the same time, Eritrea's closer ties with China through an embrace of the **Belt and Road Initiative** also risk a **debt trap**. Simultaneously, by allowing regional powers like the **UAE** to use the Eritrean port of Assab for its war effort in Yemen, it situates itself in complex geopolitics.

By antagonising Western countries and the United Nations, Eritrea is relying on **a few actors**, such as Russia and China, to bring it lucrative rents, particularly from arms and other hidden investments. The result is that in addition to the cost of lives, Isaias's participation in the Ethiopian civil war is gambling with

Eritrean self-determination. Making himself a useful pawn for regional and international actors, which he in turn exploits by switching sides – as in a survival game – is risky business.

It can seem paradoxical, however, that someone like Isaias who fought for Eritrean independence can possibly betray this vision.

Isaias, in fact, has a history of **ambivalence** about Eritrean sovereignty – second to his grandiose ambitions of using the country's strategic location to pursue regional hegemony over the Horn of Africa. Meles Zenawi, former Ethiopia Prime Minister, once gave an **interview** to the CIA agent Paul Henze in which he stated that Isaias had not been as committed to Eritrean independence as the Eritrean people – a view corroborated by **Mesfin Hagos**, a former Eritrean defence minister and a founding members of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. In a central committee meeting in 1991, Mesfin says he was stunned to hear Isaias floating the idea of joining the **Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front** political coalition that was governing the country. Isaias quickly retreated from the idea, perhaps biding his time for a more opportune moment.

Mixed signals from Isaias about Ethiopia's use of Eritrea's ports have rekindled the landlocked country's expansionist ambitions to become a naval power, which **alarms Eritreans** concerned with territorial expansion. In Ethiopia, a desire to use the ports is shared across the political spectrum, from Tigrean activists to Ethiopian elites. Immediately before the Tigray war, the Tigrean General Tsadkan Gebetensae **stated on record his ambitions** of incorporating the Eritrean port of Assab. Likewise, Professor **Gelawdios Araia** of Lehman College argued for Tigray's control of parts of the Red Sea, either by collaborating with "progressive Eritreans" or by force. Abiy in Ethiopia has openly stated his desire for a **single army** for Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Ambassador Dina Mufti, spokesman for the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry, further said: "If you ask each and every Eritrean today, they don't like or celebrate the day they separated from Ethiopia and Ethiopians feel the same way."

The lack of insistence from Isaias on demarcation, and instead the suggestion of promoting regional integration, would only steam ahead if his personal power and influence was seen to grow. To this end, Tigrean resistance is a problem.

For over 20 years, Eritreans were told that the impasse between the two countries arose from the TPLF's refusal to **demarcate the border**, but when Isaias realised that Abiy Ahmed had turned against the political party, he declared that "borders do not really matter".

Faced with such a helpless situation, the Eritrean diaspora opposition is in a state of paralysis. Some feel that creating an alliance with the TPLF against Isaias is of strategic necessity. Others do not trust the TPLF to respect Eritrean sovereignty.

With Abiy's questionable control over the Amhara militia, which is adamant to continue the war against Tigray, even if Abiy pursues a negotiated end, Isaias has developed separate parallel relationships with subnational groups, including the Amhara and the Afar. Isaias is now **deeply involved** in Ethiopian politics in **complex** ways and committed to the elimination of the **TPLF leaders** seen as blocking his ambitions.

Amid these political manoeuvrings, Eritreans are among the major losers of the Tigray conflict, more so because the war is not about them. An Eritrean leader who cared about Eritrean lives and sovereignty would have produced a very different situation.

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