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# A Once Promising but Now Wounded Nation: A Review of Dr. Bereket Habte Selassie's Book on Eritrea

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## A ONCE PROMISING BUT NOW WOUNDED NATION: A REVIEW OF DR. BEREKET HABTE SELASSIE'S BOOK ON ERITREA

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*It was so vulgar that even those of us who are opposed to his (Isaias Afewerki's) dictatorial rule are ashamed of him because he is Eritrean (Bereket Habte Selassie, 2010, p. 60).*

Upon the pretext that Eritrea is the creation of European colonial history and ultimately received the blessing of the Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Front (EPRDF), which believed in the principle of the right of colonized peoples to self-determination (Bereket 2011, p. 37), Eritrea obtained its independence from Ethiopia on May 27, 1993. However, some time before Eritrea achieved its official independence, a number of Eritrean supporters were spreading the news that after the post-liberation period, the Eritrean economy would not only be self-sufficient but Eritrea would become, economically, the Singapore of Africa. As narrated by an anonymous writer, the group's talking heads went door to door with their fictitious stories and "...told Eritreans about the legend of the phoenix mystical bird that was made of ashes and promised them that they will produce gold out of wood. Some walked around with virtual pictures of the future of Eritrea showing skyscrapers and villas and had swindled the people" (sic) (September 15, 2008). Based on its current political space, assessing the Eritrean's standard of living, and estimating the dependency of Eritrea on the amount of remittances it gets from the Eritrean Diaspora, others would like to depict post-independence Eritrea in a severe

crisis and surviving on an artificial life support system. In current Eritrea, things are worse than before and its people have lost their fortitude and are not hoping any longer. They are rather yearning to skip out of the country more than they wish to see the promise coming true (Anonymous, September 15, 2008).

On the other hand, Bereket Habte Selassie (hereafter referred to as Bereket), author of "Wounded Nation: How a Once Promising Eritrea was Betrayed and Its Future Compromised," is currently the William E. Leuchtenburg Distinguished Professor of African Studies and Professor of Law at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Bereket was Ethiopia's former Attorney General, and a prominent member of the Dergue's Enquiry Commission. Recently, Bereket has been the Chairman of the Eritrean Constitutional Commission. In the "Wounded Nation..." Bereket argues that in its post-independence Eritrea could have been a "promising nation" had it not deteriorated into a state of paralysis because of the anti-democratic, one-party regime led by Eritrea's President Isaias Afewerki (hereafter referred to as Isaias) and a few determined power-hungry men (2011, p. 3).

The purpose of this article is to: 1) review the validity of Bereket's book and explore the fundamental basis upon which the writer, who was not only a member of the Eritrean Relief Agency but also an ardent supporter of Eritrea's fight for self-determination, arrived at the conclusion that Eritrea is now a wounded nation; 2) learn from Bereket's conceptual framework, data collection, and analysis how the author of the "Wounded Nation..." arrived at the conclusion that Eritrea could have been a promising nation had it not been betrayed by President Isaias and a few of his collaborators. The book is a combination of anecdotal personal memories and a continuation of his first volume, *"The Crown and the Pen (2007)"*, including an analysis of "How did we Eritreans get into the present mess?" (2011, p. x). The review of this book is mainly based on the chapters that deal with an analysis of the country's past, its current geo-political space, and the soundness of the author's projections for Eritrea's future.

In the chapter *"Introduction: From the Past Back to the Future,"* Bereket's memories trace briefly how he was saved from the "perilous situation in Ethiopia in 1974 (p. 12) and was taken from Addis Ababa to Mekele by the ever-generous former classmate of mine, Desta Wolde Kidan (2010, p. xii)." Before Bereket left the country, he was hunted to be arrested or shot or slaughtered by Ethiopia's Military Junta led by Mengistu. This was the fate of his personal friend, the late General Michael Aman Andom, then Ethiopia's Head of State. Miraculously, Bereket arrived in

Mekele, where he was taken by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) to join the Eritrean freedom fighters. Once he joined the ELF fighters Bereket took the initiative to become a member of Eritrean Relief Association (ERA).

Later Berkete decided to be a neutral mediator (though since lawyers like to play with words, he calls it "conciliation efforts") to mediate between the two rival factions of the liberation force, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF). He was determined to assist them to overcome their mutual distrust and arrive at a beneficial resolution to two years of fighting among themselves. Though unethical, after the mediation was aborted, Bereket then decided to join the EPLF group because the "... EPLF seemed a better-organized and better-led group to liberate the Eritrean people" (2011, p. 23 and 2011, p.12). In retrospect, though Bereket did not fully elaborate, he admits that it "proved to be a momentous decision with serious consequences for my life and my career" (p. 12).

Also, in his book the "Wounded Nation..." Bereket admits his regrets, openly telling his readers that he feels a sense of guilt for his "self-imposed censorship," and why he at times failed to expose some of the hideous physical abuses that were committed against some fighters by the EPLF cadres (2011, P. 12). But Bereket also blames the freedom fighters for trusting too much in the leadership of EPLF because the fighters were "consumed by a burning desire for freedom and absorbed in efforts to realize

the fruits of the struggle” (2011, p. 3). However, the question to raise at this juncture is, if Bereket is an advocate for human rights, why did he fail to utter a word in his book about the innocent Ethiopians residing in Eritrea when their properties were confiscated, when they were abducted and suffered considerable and flagrant atrocities in numerous concentration camps, and were inhumanely thrown into the scorching deserts of Eritrea to vanish when they were half alive?

In the chapter, “*Post liberation Musings*,” Bereket boldly reveals to his readers that while being a high government official in Ethiopia until late December 1974, he had “Eritrean leanings” which “eventually culminated” in his becoming a freedom fighter (2011, p. 21). In addition, Bereket states that under President Isaias, he attended the July 1991 Conference in Addis Ababa as a member of the Eritrean observer delegation. Though some would like to describe Bereket’s activities to be nothing more than window dressing, personally, I would like to give credit to Bereket because in 1993 he convened a conference in Addis Ababa, titled “From Conflict to Concord: Regional Cooperation in the Horn of Africa,” reasoning that sovereign equality could gradually lead to regional integration (2011, p. 32-34).

In chapter 3, “*The Gold and the Base Metal: Leadership and the Fate of a Nation*,” Bereket chronicles in his book that in 1993 “the Eritrean people were asked to decide the future of their nation in an internationally supervised plebiscite” (2011,

p. 16). However, even if politically unacceptable, Bereket seems not to tell his readers that the Eritrean electorate at that particular time were heavily pressured and coerced to choose independence, or live in slavery or serfdom under Ethiopian rule. Given that the Eritrean people were wounded by Haile Selassie’s regime and plundered by Mengistu’s military junta in Ethiopia, living under desperate conditions the Eritrean people would not have chosen anything short of independence. Nevertheless, it would have been more honest had Bereket mentioned in his book that the electorate was never given the chance to entertain the three choices as stated in United Nations book, that is: independence, regional autonomy within Ethiopia, or in federation with Ethiopia. In addition, it was inappropriate for Bereket to say “may God cure you” to an ELF supporter when the objectors said to Bereket that “he was not ready to accept independence secured by Isaias Afewerki” (2011, p. 232). Personally, I think that the ELF supporter then was better informed and that seems to bother Bereket now.

In Chapter 4, titled “*Immaculate Deception: The Original Sin of Eritrea Politics*,” Bereket illustrates the difference between what Isaias Afeworki promised during the pre-independence period and the realities of Eritrea’s environment during the post-independence period. During pre-independence, Bereket states that the Eritrean masses were promised that “...their lives would be better off after they shake off the shackles of oppression of the dominant classes, be they feudal lords or exploiting

merchant classes. Many in my generation, myself included, fell under the spell of Marxism because of this appeal” (2010, p. 45). However, immediately after independence, Bereket states that though the EPLF Government promised to pursue a market-based economy and even professed to harness the disciplined and hardworking Eritrean people to pursue a Singapore-style developmental model, the promises never materialized because Eritrea’s scarce resources were wasted on non-profitable policies and programs, including the never-ending “national service” that pinned hundreds of thousands of youths in the wilds of *Sawa*. Some of those who thought they were buried under Isaias’ empty promises, managed to escape to Ethiopia, Sudan, and other neighboring countries. In addition, Bereket asserts that the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice established in February 1994 (EPDJ) as the Eritrean ruling political movement has an anti-intellectual bias and shows a determination to discourage educational attainment and entrepreneurial initiatives (2010, p. 53).

To support his argument, Bereket maintains that while Ethiopia’s GDP grew at about 10 percent per year for the last five years, Eritrea’s GDP growth rate was below 2 percent and he projects Eritrea’s growth rate in the future will be rather bleak. As a result, Bereket contends that “A proud and hardworking people have become dependent on the generosity of external donors for their survival in items as basic as food” (2010, pp. 54-55). Therefore, though they are reluctant to show it, the Eritrean people no longer

have confidence in the Eritrean ruling Party, PFDJ.

In his chapter “*Immaculate Deception: The Original Sin of Eritrea Politics*,” Bereket considers the dynamics of power developed and sustained by the architects of the EPLF, and the crimes committed against well known freedom fighters during the period of armed struggle. Bereket states that deception and an aura of mystery have been the defining characteristics of the EPLF guerrilla leaders in the Sahel wilderness. They mastered such deceptions from the ELF from whom they broke away in 1969-1970 (2011, p. 59). In addition, Bereket recounts that Isaias had formed a well-trusted “secret party” placed above the echelon of the PFDJ central committee. Based on psychological analysis or what he calls “sociopathic” block, Bereket concludes that the power of Isaias originates out of the barrel of a gun because as he puts it “all dictators are chips from the same block” (2010, p. 73).

In his Chapter, “*Concord and Discord: The Tangled Web of the EPLF-TPLF Relationship*,” Bereket’s book describes the relationship between EPLF and the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) as a tangled web, characterized by concord and discord. To illustrate this type of relationship, he quotes Lord Palmerston who said that in international relations, nations don’t have permanent friends and permanent enemies only permanent interests (Lord Palmerstone as quoted by Berkete (2011, p. 75). For the conflict between PFDJ and the Ethiopian Government, Bereket hopes that

“...time will heal the mutually inflicted wounds...” though he shows that there are differences in the styles of leadership of the two sides. While Prime minister Meles Zenawi (here after referred to Meles) consults with his parliament and Cabinet of Ministers, President Isaias has no time for such formalities (2011, p. 92, p.158).

Chapter 6 of Bereket’s book entitled “*The Constitution and the Broken Promise*,” is the core chapter of Bereket’s memoir. According to Bereket the Constitutional Commission of Eritrea selected by the PFDJ Party, organized a wide-ranging public debate, solicited expert opinion domestically and internationally, and placed an usually heavy emphasis on direct and active involvement of people outside government during the drafting phase (2011, p. 110). What is remarkable is that the ratified constitution was heavily based on village democracy, “where village communities governed themselves democratically through periodically elected village assemblies,” (2011, p. 111). Though the draft constitution was reviewed by a large portion of the public, Bereket describes some of the delicate challenges the task force faced in preparing the constitution. For example, some of the outside-based political parties openly criticized the way the drafted constitution was made under the aegis of the Isaias government and deliberately made captive to the will of the PFDJ, excluding other political and social forces (2011, p. 126). In the final analysis, though the constitution was ratified in 1997, President Isaias used the Badame war and other

excuses not to implement the ratified constitution.

In Chapter 7, Bereket expresses his objections to both the border issue between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the proxy wars the two governments accuse each other of pursuing (2011, 16). Finally, he concludes by asking if there could be a common ground for finding a lasting solution to the problems associated with national borders (2011, p. 150). Chapter 8 of Bereket’s book refers to the Badame war waged from 1998-2000 and his concerns about the protracted negotiations between the Ethiopian and Eritrean government in Algiers and The Hague.

In Chapter 9, entitled “*Neighbors that Share Fire: Border Disputes and Proxy Wars*” Bereket forcefully argues that “...there will be no border demarcation as long as Isaias is in power. On the other hand, if Meles is also wedded to the same strategy with the belief that it will eventually lead to the fall of Isaias, this too will ensure a continued tension with the consequent problems for the Eritrean people” (2011, p. 182). The question that needs to be asked of Bereket is, what role will his Party, the Eritrean Democratic Party play to liberate Eritrea from Isaias’ atrocities? In addition, is it because Bereket has a desire to attack Isaias’ government from Ethiopia that he uses various sweet adjectives to describe Prime Minister Meles? Or is Bereket paving the way for other Democratic opposition movements to use Ethiopia in order to disrupt Isaias’ government?

Chapter 10 discusses the Berlin Manifesto. The G-13 (thirteen well-versed individuals, composed of academicians and professional people) and the G-15 (high ranking members of the government and PFDJ party members ) who not only challenged President Isaias' government, but a majority believed that not implementing the constitution could be a potent force to mobilize the opposition. Bereket considers the events surrounding the action taken by the people, who have become known as the G-13 and G-15, as a squandered opportunity for the salvation of post-independence Eritrea. In chapter 11, Bereket tells us that he has launched what he called the Eritrean Democratic Party to voice his opinion and denounce the Isaias government (2011, p. 131). Given this, is Bereket's party well organized at its base? As a well-versed politician Bereket seems to be aware that consciously or subconsciously, a large number in the Eritrean Diaspora support the PFDJ regime because of material interest, as downright opportunists, "based on psychic need to be associated with the center of power" (2011, p. 222).

Chapter 12 of Bereket's book deals with historical and socio-cultural perspectives and the issues of state and religion in Eritrea. The Eritrean Government has been blaming Ethiopia for allowing the self-determination of nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. In chapter 13, Bereket, rightfully argues that the PFDJ government plan of resettling highland Eritreans in the lowland areas of Barka might cause a "turf war," then, what is not clear to me is: is

Bereket in favor of autonomy for the lowlanders in Eritrea? .

In the concluding chapter, though Bereket is primarily concerned with Eritrea and Eritreans, he ponders that in the era of globalization "it is also necessary to think in regional terms going beyond national boundaries" (2011, p. 279). Diametrically opposed to the thesis which he delivered at Stanford University in the early 1980 that secessions are a prerequisite for Pan-Africanism, I was very glad to read in chapter 14 of his book that Bereket now is advocating that "the need, in Africa in particular, to think beyond national borders, most of which are artificial creations of former colonial rulers, is a prerequisite for peace and stability as well as for sustainable development. In the final analysis, a mutually advantageous regime of cooperation would be irresistible to all neighboring nations" (2011, p. 279). In particular regarding the relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, as a mature and elderly intellectual, Bereket suggests "...both countries bear an awesome responsibility to reexamine what went wrong and make serious efforts to encourage a policy of reconciliation and cooperation" (2011, p. 282). For Eritreans, Bereket's insightful advice is that Eritrea has suffered too much from putting its trust in Isaias. As a result most Eritreans have no confidence with PFDJ rule. Therefore, the only way to solve this dilemma and bring justice to Eritrea is through a cooperative struggle to bring about transparent democracy in order to usher in accountability, the rule of law, and regional economic integration

In order to understand Bereket's book titled "Wounded Nation...", the reader needs to have read Bereket's first volume of memoirs, *"The Crown and the Pen (2007)." Taken as a whole, Bereket's second volume is very provocative and has many good ideas, including a thorough analysis of current Eritrea's political arena. In simple terms, Bereket puts forth a solid argument that, as presently constituted, the Isaias government is autocratic and based on deception. The day to day activities of Eritrea are managed by a few freedom fighters, loyal to Isaias. However, it needs to be pointed out that Bereket's concept of autocracy is more in keeping with Western legal theories and his analysis is based on psychological analysis rather than on class analysis. This is because the previous freedom fighters in Eritrea knowingly or unknowingly see themselves as a group who labored and fought for more than thirty years and would like to treat the non-fighter Eritreans as second class citizens. Initially, those Eritreans who sympathized with and supported the EPLF during the struggle period were embraced so that they could deliver monetary gifts and their intellectual talents. However, by now the previous EPLF fighters feel that they have acquired the necessary skills to run the country and they need the Eritreans in the Diaspora only for their two percent annual income contribution and other monetary contributions frequently delivered to rulers of the country.*

I feel that Bereket fully supports and documents the first thesis of his book that

Eritrea is now indeed a "Wounded Nation..." In short, his analysis is convincing that the already wounded Eritrea before independence is now in a state of paralysis. The chapters of the book are presented in chronological order. His exposition presents the Ethio-Eritrean border conflict in an impartial way. However, he seems to be too obsessed about the constitution which he authored. It gives a picture to the readers that Bereket would have been satisfied and grumbled less if Isaias like any other dictator would have used the constitution to serve his own interest. I hope I am wrong. Bereket in all honesty would not say that the Eritrean masses had not capitulated when the constitution was drafted and ratified.

As a reader of his book, I was interested to find out on what basis Bereket was arguing that Eritrea could have been a promising nation? I am sorry to say that the second portion of the book that the now wounded Eritrea could have been a "promising Nation" was not adequately covered. It gives the impression that Bereket has subtitled his book by using "promising nation" for marketing purposes. I feel that the second part of the book, could have been adequately done if Bereket attempted to show in addition to adhering to democratic principles (assuming like Sen that democracy can play an instrumental role in giving people a voice and constructive role in shaping values and norms) and following the rules of law, Eritrea could have achieved economic growth, if Eritrea was willing to cooperate and live at peace with its neighbors. For instance, to effectively utilize its ports and



excavate its mineral resources by taking into consideration environmental factors, Bereket should have established that Eritrea needs to be politically stable. Now, as shown in Bereket's first portion of his book, political stability is non-existent in Eritrea. Also, what has become very dazzling to me is, given the fact that Bereket is well-versed and has been seen as role model by a number of Eritreans, how is it that his educational background and well-versed experience failed to determine in advance what he saying now, that President Isaias is an autocrat. His rule is based on immaculate deception and is full of unmitigated disasters. Finally, for objective analysis, I would have liked to see on the cover of Bereket's book that other Eritrean and Ethiopians scholars had been included in the review of this book.

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