

## INTRODUCTION: ERITREA’S UNEASY FUTURES AND THEIR HISTORICAL CONTINGENCIES\*

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**Abstract:** To introduce this special issue of *Modern Africa*, the editors review Eritrea’s current condition and consider its historical roots: they place this Horn of Africa state in a broader historical context, one where neither relevant comparative cases nor past precedents are limited to its region. Hopes that were once invested in Eritrea as a model developmental state have now, thirty years since its independence, been thoroughly disappointed. The human rights violations and persistent underdevelopment that make an Eritrean transition necessary are very real: equally real are the risks and dangers that would be involved in any such transition. Recent cases of failed transition are discussed here: so too are the possible routes Eritrea might take to a “developmental democracy.” This issue’s various contributions are then introduced and summarised.

**Keywords:** *rethinking transition, state-making, developmental democracy, sociality, Horn of Africa*

“War is the health of the state”: these cynical words of a long-forgotten American pacifist (Bourne 1919) seem to be amply confirmed by the recent history of states in the Horn of Africa, which have secured their survival by acts of war and repression that weigh heavily on their populations. This includes the state of Eritrea: there, thirty years of liberation war (1961-1991) were followed by a brief period of “uncommon promise of egalitarian growth”

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(Connell 2011: 419), peace, a constitution-building process (Selassie 2019) and an attempt at socio-economic reconstruction during the 1990s. Hostilities with neighbouring Ethiopia then resumed, in one of the bloodiest border wars fought on the continent between 1998–2000. Scholars<sup>1</sup> such as Richard Reid (2014; 2005), however, have located the root causes of the border war in a long history of political and social repression, an already stark urban-rural divide, and a continuation of the secretive politics of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the force dominating Eritrean society today under the name of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Reid writes that, even as Eritrea's leadership was optimistically praised and invested with hopes for the future within the country and in the Eritrean diaspora beyond, the EPLF remained "obsessed with the past, and necessarily so, as it was also driven in large part by the notion of *destiny*" (Reid 2005: 471). Tensions over how to define the period between Eritrea's independence and the outbreak of the border war persist, and contestation continues over whether that period represented a possible opening for change, or if its contours were just a form of "path dependency" resulting from EPLF politics.

On the surface, the legacies of the border war have shaped and informed the rise of a militarisation of the Eritrean society (Kibreab 2017; Riggan 2016). Moreover, rapid economic decline in Eritrea seemed to hit a turning point after the peace overtures launched by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018. This led to the relaxation of tensions between the Ethiopian government and that of the PFDJ, the ruling, and only, political party in Eritrea (Wrong 2018). These developments were not only praised by the international community as a new beginning in East Africa, but led to the award, in 2019, of the Nobel Peace Prize to Abiy Ahmed for his efforts to broker peace – an award that was not, however, also granted to Isaias Afewerki<sup>2</sup>

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1 Scholars working on Eritrea have written extensively on some of the country's most pressing concerns. Topics they have addressed include the migration and refugee flow nexus (Tewolde 2020; Treiber and Redeker Hepner 2021; Massa 2020; Poole and Riggan 2020; Belloni 2019; Campbell and Afework 2015; Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001), the politics of remittances and self-reliance (Massa, Belloni, and Fusari in this issue; Beyan 2021; Poole 2013), the regime's modes of coercion such as forced national service and its associated ideologies of sacrifice (Kibreab 2017; Plaut 2016; Riggan 2011; Connell 2005; Makki 1996), and the forms of surveillance and authoritarianism on which that regime has relied (Hirt 2022; Bozzini 2015; O'Kane and Redeker Hepner 2009; Hedru 2003; Pool 2001; Iyob 1997) as well as the importance of transnational ties between Eritrea, its people, and the Eritrean diaspora (Müller and Belloni 2021; Hirt and Mohammad 2018; Redeker Hepner 2009, 2008; Bernal 2005).

2 Also spelled "Isayas" and "Afwerki," or "Afeworki" respectively.

who had led the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front to victory in 1991.

This apparent normalisation of Ethio-Eritrean relations was equally welcomed by citizens of the two countries and their respective diasporas, who began to express hopes of the beginning of a new, transformative, politics. Many inside and outside Eritrea allowed themselves to hope that there might even be a successful transition or process of reform within the country, a transition away from political autocracy and endemic human rights violations, and towards a democratisation and renewal of a political landscape that had been dominated for so long by one man, President Isaias. The ironic sequel to these peace moves of 2018, which inspired the project which has led to the present special issue, was provided by the Ethiopian civil war that began in November 2020 in the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray. This conflict involved direct participation by the Eritrean military from the beginning, and remains unresolved at the time of writing.

That war has involved collusion by the regimes in Asmara and Addis Ababa in an attempt to crush the political power of Ethiopia’s former ruling party, the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), and has made the province of Tigray, the heartland of the TPLF party, a target of the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments. Both governments have been accused of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch 2022; Eritrea Focus, Oslo Analytica 2022). The course of the current conflict has placed the continued existence of Ethiopia as a unitary political entity in doubt, as more and more ethno-national movements have become involved in the war; at the same time, the present struggle has also seemed to restore the political vigour and stability of the PFDJ regime in Eritrea, with adverse results for the Eritrean people. Before its current involvement in Ethiopia, the State of Eritrea had been seemingly trapped in a hell of its leaders’ own making, one that imposed unending national military service on its people and made them suffer exploitation by both an emerging local ruling class and the foreign, multinational corporations it has invited into Eritrea. The human cost of that hell has been extreme: an entire generation of young Eritreans has braved the dangers involved in moving beyond the state’s borders, and traversing human and natural hazards, in an attempt to reach asylum in safer lands (Belloni 2019; Treiber 2017; Poole 2013; Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001).

The Isaias regime may not have fully secured its political position in the Horn (especially as the Ethiopian government under Abiy has started to “tilt” towards the United States and is pressured to engage in a national reconciliation), but the overall crisis allowed the Eritrean leadership to

momentarily gain political strength, making their regime seem more politically healthy than it did before. The persistence of its political crimes, however, will continue to make transition from dictatorship as necessary as it was before the present crisis. The papers collected in this special issue are contributions to the theorising of not only why this transition must come, but, also, of how it might come about. Transition in Eritrea will be an inevitable pathway of the future (even if only because of Isaias' age).<sup>3</sup> It will also be a highly risky and dangerous enterprise, not only because of the tense geopolitical context of the 2020s,<sup>4</sup> and the continuing difficulties of inter-state relations in the Horn of Africa, but also because of the complexities of Eritrean society, both at home and in the diaspora. Transition will be complex and risky. Therefore, an important part of the task that this special issue is concerned with is to help inspire better thinking on the subject of transition. The Eritrean situation, presently, is comparable with other cases where eras of political tyranny and autocracy were followed by attempts at transition that failed. This can currently be witnessed in Sudan's ongoing and unequal struggle between an urban protest movement and various security forces. Libya, Somalia, Mobutu's Zaire – these countries, also, all experienced forms of autocratic rule whose fall inspired hope among those who suffered under that rule. In all those cases, hopes were dashed when the sequel to authoritarian statism transpired to be state collapse. In Somalia, Zaire, and, later, Libya, transition to a post-dictatorship order did not entail genuine liberation but, instead, a collapse into lawlessness, disorder, and what can best be described as the privatisation of crimes against humanity. Where once the masses were tormented by systems of terror that pervaded the entire territory of their states, and at whose apex points sat individual dictators, they now found that they were threatened by different actors such as rival gangs and warlord leaders.

Just as, in the early 1990s, Okbazghi Yohannes' crucial piece on "Eritrea: A Country in Transition" (1993), raised questions about the future prospects of a new emergent nation-state on the Horn of Africa (see also Makki 1996), almost three decades later the present special issue probes to explore modes of a potential transition in Eritrea by engaging with structural dilemmas, internal and external socio-economic forces, historical contingencies, as well as the

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3 Born in 1946, Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea will soon be approaching his 80<sup>th</sup> year. We should not overestimate the imminence of his inevitable death: nearly a decade ago, the Eritrean president was known to be in bad health, but he has survived so far.

4 As this special issue was being prepared, armed forces of the Russian Federation invaded neighbouring Ukraine. The outcomes of this unjustified aggression are unknown, but they are unlikely to be positive, for either those countries or the rest of the world.

shifting nature of Eritrea’s political economy. One of the biggest challenges for concerned people outside of Eritrea (activists, scholars, and, simply, Eritreans) is that they cannot influence the country’s internal politics. Our aim, in any case, is a more modest one. We are not experts that were hired to report on transition by people inside the country or politicians, nor are we activists on the frontlines of struggle against autocracy: we are scholars interested in thinking about, and thinking through transition and the possibilities of change. Our aim, in other words, is to contribute to the literature on transition in Eritrea (be it conceptual or empirical) in the hope that this will be useful not only for scholars, but also for activists and other actors in the political sphere. What are the possibilities a transition in Eritrea would entail? Unintended outcomes such as the breakdown of political systems that overtook post-dictatorship Libya and Somalia could potentially also occur in a post-Isaias Afewerki. The papers assembled in this special issue have been brought together to attend to these multiple modes of transition. In combination, they provide a synoptic discussion of Eritrea’s historical pathway, its present condition, what these conditions consists of, and where the paths to social reconciliation and a better life for all might lie. In the remaining sections of this introductory paper, the editors provide more details on the Eritrean case and set the scene for where it lies in contemporary political phenomena, what the implications for present-day political and social theory may be, what resources for successful transition there might be, and how the people might access those resources.

Eritrea’s annexation by Ethiopia in 1962 represented the replacement of an old European imperial master, Italy, with a new, American imperial power and its new local client, the restored Ethiopian empire of Haile Selassie. For the United States, the prize was control of the Eritrean plateau, where technical surveillance equipment could be placed. With such equipment at Asmara’s Kagnew station, the entire Eurasian landmass could be monitored for radio broadcasts (Yohannes 1991: 211). For Haile Selassie, the acquisition of Eritrea meant the expansion of the Ethiopian empire to its greatest ever limits. Although the Eritrean “people” has always been culturally diverse and politically heterogeneous, their frustration over this denial of demands for full sovereignty grew. They were meant to be compensated for this denial by the emperor’s grant, to Eritrea, of a regional parliament with limited powers. However, even that promise was broken when, in the early 1960s, that parliament was unilaterally closed by Haile Selassie. That closure was ordered a year after a revolt had broken out in the western lowlands of Eritrea, and it helped ensure that this revolt would bloom into a full-scale war of liberation, one that would not end until 1991, when Asmara was liberated by the

Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Like many contemporary nation-states, it is true to say that the state of Eritrea emerged through war. While not asserting that the course of social evolution in this region has been solely determined by war and conflict, we do believe that the state's capacity to make war has been central to processes of state-making in the region, with obvious social consequences. The state is nothing abstract or distant in Eritrea and Ethiopia, biographies in this region essentially mirror political histories. War, therefore, has also formed society and since long ingrained a political "culture of violence" (Galtung 1990). As early as 1927 Gebreyesus Hailu had, in his novel *The Conscript*, portrayed the Italian use of Eritrean *ascari* in Libya as an experience of drastic abuse, guilt, and suffering, which returning veterans then brought back into Eritrean sociality (Hailu 2013, see also Dirar 2004). How state and society were made, however, and what the implications of that are for transition in Eritrea, remain vital questions.

Over a decade ago, some of the editors and contributors to this special issue worked on the book *Biopolitics, Militarism, and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century* (O'Kane and Redeker Hepner 2009). This was partly inspired by a paper of Patel and McMichael (2004), which, in the early 2000s, had sounded the alarm over what it called "global fascism" and linked the re-emergence of that political phenomenon to the "biopolitics" of post-colonial states who still bore the traces of colonial rule and the formers of power over human life which persisted into post-colonial political orders. To quote from the introduction to that book:

It is Foucault who has probably done the most to popularise the concept of biopolitics in contemporary social theory, but Agamben has analysed its most disturbing features. For Foucault, biopolitics arises when life itself becomes the object of structures of power [...] Foucault's analysis implies a view of the subjection of life to power as a product of modernity.

Agamben's analysis of the dark side of modernity suggests otherwise. He traces the roots of the modern state and its forms of biopolitics back to the beginnings of the western tradition that shaped the world order into which the Eritrean state emerged in the early 1990s [...] States from the time of the Greeks down to the early twenty-first century are by definition sovereign states, and the essence of sovereignty, Agamben argues, lies in the power to decide who is and is not a member of the political community whose institutional expression is the state

itself. Those that lie outside that community are reduced to the status of “bare life”. (O’Kane and Redeker Hepner 2009: xxxi)

It is not necessary to hold decisively to either Foucault or Agamben’s theories in order to believe that they may have identified a real defect in human political life, a defect that does seem to breed the kinds of outcomes that have overtaken Eritrea since 1991. The editors of this special issue believe, however, that it is necessary to transcend those perspectives if we are to properly understand those outcomes, which have by no means been confined to Eritrea or the Horn of Africa. The papers in this special issue, then, are written with the conviction that there is more to that analysis than the “bearing of witness” or the mere “holding accountable” of human rights violators (the former is an important part of any response to the mass violation of human beings and their rights: the latter seems to be so vague as to be conceptually and politically useless). The failed transitional attempts of the Arab Spring have revealed the real difficulties that lie behind any such efforts. The relatively bloodless events of 1989 in Eastern Europe are not, it now seems clear, representative of transition in general. During most of the period after 1991, it was assumed that Eritrea’s liberation from external domination would lead to some form of democracy, liberalisation, and social progress. Even after religious minorities such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses were denied citizenship, when it should have been clear that the trend in Eritrea was towards a new authoritarianism, it was widely assumed that all would inevitably be well in that country.

This assumption was shared in global mass media, much of academia, and in international diplomacy. The 1990s was the era of the Washington Consensus, the neo-liberal orthodoxy that seemed unchallengeable wherever policies for economic growth and political democratisation were being made, and, in the African context, the allied concept of “new African leaders,” whose rise (assiduously fostered by Washington) would, it was implied, redefine Africa’s political paradigm – and thus, after 1990, revolutionary vanguards with progressive agendas seemed to grow into local representatives of a thoroughly neo-liberal world order. From a Western perspective, the regimes of these new leaders seemed entirely suited to a technocratic notion of politics, but this overlooked the authoritarian ways in which leaders of former liberation movements often consolidated their rule once in power – and the fact that they didn’t come into power with absolute autonomy. Even where all power was not concentrated in a single pair of hands, there would still remain the problems produced by the concentration of genuine decision-making powers in small oligarchic circles. Such were the political settlements in which the masses might enjoy a choice of oligarchs every few

years. Political problems are rarely matters of deficient leadership alone, and the mere replacement of one set of rulers with another may be insufficient, on its own, to foster a new and better alternative to what older rulers represented, or to how they ruled.

In most cases the political scene simply did not improve. In Uganda, for example, Yoweri Museveni rapidly turned into a classic gerontocrat, one whose armed forces committed grave human rights abuses in the northern region of Acholiland (Meinert and Whyte 2020: 171). The regimes built by the “new African leaders” who came to power in the African transitions of the 1990s, in other words, transpired, in more than one case, to be much like those regimes that had preceded them; and this highlights a problem at the heart of the concept of transition itself. It would be very easy to observe a state in apparent change from one regime to another, and to assume that this apparent change was as genuine as it appeared to be. But to make that assumption would be to assume that surface realities were mirrored by less observable trends, and to ignore the persistence of global asymmetries which made those less observable trends stronger than many would have assumed. Such persistent asymmetries tend to trap less developed countries in external and internal relationships that hold their national and personal incomes at near subsistence levels (Nelson 1956). These first appeared in Africa’s history with the continent’s incorporation into world systems of exploitation and imperial control, and continue to play a role in the continent’s external relations and internal history.

It is this context which requires the PFDJ regime to insist that it is following a policy of national independence and self-reliance while either consigning its youth to the exploitation of the country’s mineral resources or to the elevated hazards of refugee flight. These far-reaching features, among others, will have to be incorporated into any theory of transition in Eritrea. In this special issue we discuss that incorporation, and in the following sections we set the scene for that discussion.

### **The Role of Eritreans in the Diaspora**

A famous narrative of Eritrea long before it became a sovereign state, during the years of the independence struggle, was that of its strong ties to the diaspora. Given that currently one third of the Eritrean population lives abroad, and that one-third of the state’s budget is derived from remittances (Hirt and Mohammad 2018), one can go so far as to argue that Eritrea, Eri-

trean nationalism, and Eritrean citizenship are configured transnationally, enabling new forms of political and social action, and the emergence of new political and social formations (see also Bernal 2014; Redeker Hepner 2009; 2008). Forms taken by this transnational nationalism can range from the substantial revenues collected by the state through its so-called “diaspora taxes” on Eritreans living abroad, as well as remittances sent home to ordinary citizens by those diasporic Eritreans (Müller and Belloni 2021; Poole 2013; Graf 2018; Shea 2013; see also Belloni, Fusari and Massa in the present issue); the historic political headquarters of guerrilla movements such as the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in Cairo and in Sudan, including the political involvement of activists online as well as in the diaspora (a process Victoria Bernal has described as deterritorialisation of Eritrean nationalism 2014; 2005; Tewelde 2020), to forms of state surveillance in the diaspora (Bozzini 2015). These kinds of transnational ties also entail changing ideas of youth and adulthood, gender, kinship and migratory ties (Treiber 2021; 2017; Belloni 2021; Massa 2020; Grabska 2020; Mengiste 2018) that Eritreans in the diaspora relate, in intricate ways, to Eritrea and Eritreans in the country.

These realities are also mirrored in scholarly output that often needs to address internal as well as external actors and factors, when describing social phenomena and concepts emergent from studying in and outside Eritrea. This includes the massive exodus in recent years and the large refugee camps in Northern Ethiopia that comprise tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees (Treiber and Abebe 2021; Tufa et al. 2021; Poole and Riggan 2020).

The constant play between outside and inside is significant to understand the current socio-economic and political landscape in Eritrea. Currently, there are numerous political opposition parties and movements active in the diaspora, as well as a group that politically supports the PFDJ regime. The opposition is not a unitary pole, but highly fragmented and heterogeneous, and its alliances are dynamic and volatile (Mohammad 2021): It has tried to think through the establishment of a diaspora and transitional government or council (ባይቶ, *bayito* in Tigrinya),<sup>5</sup> if the government of Isaias ever comes to a sudden end through regime collapse, military coup, or popular uprising. This requires a conceptualisation of transition in the double bind of an inside and outside.

5 When, throughout this special issue, we include words in Tigrinya language, we employ spellings from the ITYOPIS-transliteration and transcription table: see “ITYOPIS – Northeast African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities” [http://www.ityopis.org/Guidelines\\_files/ITYOPIS-I-Transliteration.pdf](http://www.ityopis.org/Guidelines_files/ITYOPIS-I-Transliteration.pdf).

## **Transitions in Africa since 1991**

When the EPLF entered Asmara in May 1991, it seemed that this was one of the final battles in the events that had led to the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1989). The Berlin Wall had fallen less than eighteen months earlier, and a few months later the USSR itself would disappear. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela had been released from prison on Robben Island, and in what was still then Zaire a burgeoning protest movement was threatening the rule of Mobutu. Due south of Eritrea, a new Ethiopian administration organised around the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) was taking power, bringing with it a new system of governance in Ethiopia, one of “ethnic federalism” (Cohen 1995: 163–164; Mohamed 2021). The liberation of Asmara, in other words, seemed to be a part of a global trend towards an optimistic future. Across Africa, it was possible to think that the continent was joining a general trend of transition to a new world of free democracies, free markets, and free people. To quote Raymond Williams (writing in a different context), “a set of bearings held, or for many years seemed to hold” (1984: 90–91). We now know better: this set of political bearings only seemed to hold.

It is not that every struggle for democracy was defeated. It is simply that the struggles remain ongoing, and the answer to the political question is still not obvious. In some cases, parts of Africa did struggle through to new political orders, but those struggles remain ongoing. In Zambia, the hopes raised by the Movement for Multiparty Democracy were disappointed by Frederick Chiluba’s corruption conviction; in Zimbabwe the courage of the Movement for Democratic Change ran into the determination of ZANU-PF to retain power. That party remains in power in Zimbabwe today, after years of violent repression and a land reform that was as necessary as it was compromised by corruption and violence. In Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea, civil war and political repression in the 1990s gave way to peace building and reconstruction in the twenty-first century. The genocide in 1994 Rwanda was followed by reconstruction as well, in this case under the tutelage of an authoritarian developmental government: that government’s human rights record can only look good by comparison to the genocidal record of the regime that preceded it.

While all these political manoeuvres were unfolding, international powers and external forces continued to “scramble for Africa,” with everything that scramble has implied since the Berlin conference thirteen decades ago. To the networks of capital that penetrated Africa from the West were added new

links and connections that directed African resources eastwards, to the People’s Republic of China. The geopolitical implications of the rise of that Eastern power remain uncertain (as do its political implications: does east still mean red?). What is certain is that the new international linkages Africa possesses may provide opportunities for reformed futures, as much as they imply continuity with the worst forms of colonial exploitation of the past. Equally certain is that the political implications of these new economic relations remain latent. China’s influence on African politics may yet come to be as explicit as that of the United States and the old European powers – but already it is clear that there is a new relationship between the networks of economic and political power that hold Africa in their grip (Large 2021; Amin 2004).

It is also clear that these global shifts including, in particular, Chinese investment, are having substantial effects on Africa’s political economy. However, it is less clear what these effects are, and what their long-term consequences will be. During the 2010s, a global boom in commodity prices allowed many observers to posit a new state of being for Africa, one of “Africa rising” to use the debatable phrase coined by *The Economist* magazine (Mkandawire 2014: 171). Fortunately, calmer perspectives and more realistic assessments of Africa’s rise and its direction soon emerged (Obeng-Odoom 2015; Pillay 2015). There was something new and positive going on in various African countries in those years, but it was, and remains, far more ambiguous than it appeared to be at first sight (Kroeker, O’Kane and Scharrer 2018). The promise of an African renaissance (brought forward by the likes of Thabo Mbeki) built upon free trade markets, global inclusion in capitalist economies, free and fair elections, a promise closely attached to the ideologies of neo-liberalism has only ever been partly realised at best – and probably can be realised only partially (Emeagwali 2011).

Nevertheless, even a partial realisation of the promise of middle classes and democratisation is worth something. In today’s Eritrea, the tedious construction of micro-dams and the rebuilding (during the 1990s) of the picturesque, but ineffective colonial railway cannot disguise the numerous and deliberate damage done to the people, and therefore, to their development (Hirt 2022). What does a reduction of infant mortality mean, when families are put under severe duress (Hirt and Mohammad 2013), education is neglected (Riggan 2016; Treiber 2018), and youth are sent to either war or exile (Kibreab 2017)? If the only real alternative to a developmental dictatorship (of the kind found in today’s Rwanda, or, at least nominally, in today’s Eritrea) is some kind of developmental democracy, then a democracy of that sort needs to have some kind of identifiable social base, and identifiable

social actors who can fight for it.

Thus, the strength of the “middle classes for democracy” model is that it allows for, or at least *should* allow for, the mapping of smoother transitions out of democracy via efforts at identifying such bases and actors, even if that mapping might ultimately force recognition of relevant political forces other than the vaunted (but, all too often, mythical) middle class. If such efforts are successful, and are placed at the forefront of political debate and political planning, it should be easier to avoid the kind of spectacular disappointments that befell the revolts of the “Arab Spring” over the past decade. In case after case, the overthrow of dictators such as Muammar Gaddafi has ended in disaster, and in the betrayal of the peoples whom revolt was intended to help. It does not appear to be the case that the Arab Spring was a “colour revolution,” an exercise in manipulation by foreign powers, but it is clear that a genuinely popular movement for change in the Arab world (a movement which raised many hopes in Eritrea and its diaspora) was subverted and crushed (El-Affendi and Al-Anani 2021). Its fate was due to a number of factors, including external intervention – and also to a facile and underdeveloped theory of transition, in which all that would be required would be the assertion of popular will through mass demonstrations, followed by the exile, or execution, of local dictators. The assertion of popular will that took place in the central square in Cairo was followed, a few years later, by the re-assertion of oligarchic power under a new dictatorship. The execution of Muammar Gaddafi must have been one of the events that encouraged his Syrian counterpart, Bashar al-Assad, to retain power in Syria via the wholesale destruction of his country, and the mass murder of its citizens.

Our review of forms of state collapse and disappointments by popular movements over the past thirty years is helpful to rethink transition itself. Such forms of transition need a focus on the concrete and changing realities of the societies where they are a necessary outcome of political change. These concrete realities need to be focussed on, also, because they are cited by dictatorial regimes as the justifications for their power and their programmes. Still, in 2000, Haile Woldetensae, the then Eritrean Foreign Minister (he would later become a political prisoner) envisioned a “healthy and constructive transition, as long as it allows free discussion of different political opinions within that same movement” (Connell 2005: 54–55) in an interview with Dan Connell. Dangers inherent in transition are also cited by those regimes, such as the PFDJ regime, to legitimise their retention of power, and their pursuit of crimes. Developmental dictatorship, they say, is a concrete necessity emerging from concrete realities. Is it?

## Historical Roots of Developmental Dictatorships

In order to focus on concrete realities, we need to address the conditions that underpin developmental dictatorships and the transitions that allow people to escape from them – or the absence of such transitions. The unpleasant, but concrete reality, is that developmental dictatorship appeared with the emergence of modernity and norms of democratic rule itself (Escobar 2012). It was by no means inevitable that the problems of development would be solved by resorting to political dictatorship. Yet in an asymmetric world of centres and peripheries, in which political and economic survival depends on the mastery of technologies of governance and economic progress, and where that mastery had to be gripped rapidly and firmly, the outcome of dictatorship was one of the most likely outcomes of any processes. The problems of development and the challenges of modernity formed the field on which political questions were posed. What kind of development is desired, should be promoted and pursued in today’s asymmetric world, after all (Escobar 2018; Cante 2016; Naty 2002)? In the early 1930s, one twentieth-century dictator summed up this problem as it applied to his own land-based empire:

We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries.  
We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it,  
or we shall go under (Stalin 1954: 41).

The regime Stalin built retained its developed status after his death, but this could not save it from chronic stagnation and decline, and, ultimately, the dissolution of the Stalinist state itself. The sense of crisis and threat in this quote from his speech to technical managers of the new planned economy, however, sums up the kinds of environment in which actors such as him perceived themselves to be working. Even in the case of an earlier, less malign case of state-led development, such as Cavour’s regime in nineteenth-century Piedmont, early success in economic growth was followed by unexpectedly adverse outcomes.

Conforming to classically liberal (but not democratic) political nostrums, Cavour built infrastructure and modernised agriculture in his corner of northern Italy (Thomson 1966: 289). This allowed the kingdom of which he was prime minister to become the central force of Italian unification; but that political triumph had both economic and political costs. The integration of southern Italy into the new Italian nation-state has still not been fully completed more than a century and a half later: and the initial repre-

ssion of recalcitrant southern elements would cripple Italian liberalism, and drive Italy to participate in imperialist and colonialist adventures in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Libya. The developmental state strategies of Cavour's Piedmont were paralleled, in his era, by the much more openly (and brutally) authoritarian policies of Mohamed Ali in Egypt. From the 1840s onwards, this former functionary of the Ottoman empire carved out a niche of *de facto* sovereignty for that empire's Egyptian province. Within that niche, the first efforts at autonomous industrialisation occurred in Egypt, with (apparently) results that persist in the Egyptian economy even today (Panza and Williamson 2015). Ultimately, however, the developmental authoritarian state in Egypt – an early example of a developmental dictatorship – could not overcome the pressures exerted on it from without, pressures, which reached their final conclusion with Egypt's subordination to European powers in the 1870s and 1880s (Hunter 1998: 197). As for the Italian case, the liberal developmentalism of the nineteenth century would find an ignominious end in the regime of Benito Mussolini – which was a dictatorship, though not, as Cohen (1988) argues, a predominantly developmental one.

This historical digression is necessary to underline the dangers inherent in the responses to the challenge of modernity, dangers that are an important part of the concrete realities to which leaders like Paul Kagame or Isaias Afewerki often allude in justifying their policies (see also Treiber 2019). If these dangers are ignored, those justifications can be much less effective than they might at first appear. Attempts to escape from peripheral, subordinate, and subaltern positions in a potentially fluid and transforming “world system” (Wallerstein 2004) are driven by the stresses and strains experienced by populations that occupy such positions. Such escape attempts, however, impose new strains and stresses on those populations, and on the political elites that claim (sometimes with credibility, in other cases, without) to represent those populations.

The outcomes of the competing developmental state strategies that have persisted in the Korean peninsula since 1953 are one illustration of this. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea), decades of commandism have been followed by a slow trend of gradual marketisation: this does not yet seem to have ameliorated the poverty of the North Korean masses, and it has certainly not won them any human rights (Izatt 2010). In the Republic of Korea (South Korea), a democratic system has emerged from years of military dictatorship, and the population now enjoys some of the benefits of the march for growth which that dictatorship has imposed on it. South Korea, in fact, seems to be a good example of the developmental

state model: it repeated, in just a handful of years, a doubling of gross domestic product that took other regions (including the core economies such as the United Kingdom and the United States) many decades to achieve (Green 1997: 45). Even there, however, problems of political authoritarianism persist, even if they are not equivalent to the extreme violence of the North Korean regime. A comparison of the two regimes, in fact, provides a good case study in the roots of competing developmental dictatorships in the world system’s periphery.

During the Cold War, that world system appeared more static and internally divided: the political contradiction between East and West coexisted with economic exchange, and sometimes even economic cooperation across the iron and other curtains. North Korea was a rare case of a Second World country that shunned any contact with the First World; South Korea was heavily incorporated into the world system and able to make good the distance that separated it from the First World in a short time, if not in a decade, at least within the lifetime of most of its citizens (Green 1997: 45). It also produced conditions for transition from dictatorship which simply could not exist in its northern neighbour, and which were, ultimately, made use of by the South Korean masses.

Interestingly, Eritrean post-independence policies have displayed affinities with both Koreas; South Korea offering a vision of rapid modernisation and economic prosperity, North Korea of political and military national autonomy and control of the masses. When Isaias Afewerki himself labelled Eritrea in the 1990s as the new Singapore in the Horn of Africa, he was evoking the whole development experience of the East Asian economies, including South Korea, while still insisting on the kind of aggressive nationalism that characterised North Korea’s “military first” policy. In doing so, he was highlighting his ambition to put the new nation-state not only on the map in terms of political independence, but also in terms of economic trade and geopolitical importance. This is what makes the tendency of the international mass media to label Eritrea the “North Korea of Africa” so irritating (Treiber 2021: 14). While this comparison may be made to highlight the closed nature of twenty-first century Eritrea, and the extreme level of human rights abuses that its people are subject to within its borders, we find it to be a fundamentally superficial one, and inadequate for analysis: Eritrea’s position within the world system is very different from that assumed by the DPRK, either today or in the past. A comparison of the two cases, in fact, suggests that the political project of developmental dictatorship in Eritrea should not be taken at face value, especially when attempting to analyse its

likely outcomes. A better comparison for Eritrea might, in reality, be that of South Korea – that is, if Eritrea can someday achieve the progress to economic growth, social modernisation and political democratisation that the latter country experienced. South Korea, founded in the wake of the Second World War, and the Korean war, was for most of its existence a brutally repressive military dictatorship, one that was fully penetrated by foreign capital. Its local bourgeoisie was able to develop a strategy for national development, which would, ultimately, make local capital not only important within the borders of South Korea itself, but which would also make South Korean corporations formidable powers on the global economic stage (Harris 1987). That modernisation process also produced a backlash from the South Korean masses, one that was ultimately forced a transition to some form of political democracy.

Eritrea is ruled by a repressive military dictatorship and also penetrated by foreign capital (such as Canadian mining multinationals, for example) in a way that is very different from that of North Korea (Eritrea Focus, Oslo Analytica 2022: 112-128; Plaut 2016: 133-148). As such, it is unlikely to display the long-term tenacity displayed by the governing power in Pyongyang (Weston 2017). Some kind of transition will be more likely and it will, in the end, be forced by those most adversely affected by the PFDJ regime's policy (this is so if only because no independent economic elite seems to have emerged in Eritrea during the thirty years of that regime's rules: the most successful companies in the post-independence private sector seem to have been owned by the ruling party itself). Entrepreneurs outside the PFDJ appear to have struggled to stay in business, while linkages to the patronage of the ruling party allowed use of the labour power the party and its regime commanded, tilting the balance of power in the economy towards those who enjoyed such access (Wrong 2018: 56). As one Eritrean researcher has pointed out, such a system will find it difficult to change, as the networks on which it relies would be threatened by even a partial relaxation of the controls which it relies on (Goitom Gebreleul, quoted in Wrong 2018: 56).

### **Associational Life and Developmental Democracy**

If the developmental state has all too often been a developmental dictatorship that does not even deliver development, this raises the question of whether or not a developmental democracy is even possible, and, if so, under what circumstances. The ongoing struggle of Eritrea's people for an end to human rights violations, and for democracy, is also part of their struggle for develop-

ment, a struggle to overcome deep-rooted and destructive poverty. The solution developmental dictatorships offer for such a struggle, is, as we described above, often no solution at all, and even if it, in some cases, does provide a basis for transition to democracy at some unspecified future date, this is only true of some cases and not all. The South Korean movement from third to first world levels of economic affluence, for example, only occurred thanks to that country’s peculiar geopolitical position in the context of Cold War Asia, and the access to Japanese and American markets which that position provided. A point that should not be overlooked, either, is that people suffering today should not have to wait for decades for their suffering to be over. That being the case, it would be a good idea to consider those cases of developmental democracy where human rights in both the social and political spheres were assured from the beginning.

Kerala, the southern Indian state created after India’s independence in 1947, may be the world’s best example of a developmental democracy. There, although rates of economic growth have not been extreme, progress in spheres such as mass literacy, the reduction of infant mortality, other developmental indicators have been very impressive (Parayil 1996; 2000). This record of success has been ascribed by many to Kerala’s strong civil society, and the associational life that it involves. Does a similar form of associational life exist in Eritrea?

Gaim Kibreab has argued that it does, citing the existence of collective self-insurance practices like the *mahber* or *'iqub* rotating credit associations (2008). This, he believes, may provide the basis for the democratic transition which Eritrea sorely requires. Kibreab’s argument relies on an analysis of the cultural heritages of the various ethnic groups that make up Eritrea’s population of around 3.5 million. He sees these groups as possessing cultural practices of co-operation and mutual aid that allow them to build the relationships of trust which are vital to the transition he seeks in Eritrea. Trust is the proper concept to introduce here: it is vital to the kind of cooperative interaction on which everyday politics of transition must build. It is also the case, we feel, that the existence of social trust cannot be either inferred or assumed from the existence of social network ties, including ties of the kind that have assured community cohesion and survival through crisis in most of Eritrea’s communities (O’Kane 2015; Tronvoll 1998). At the same time, solidarity and social responsibilities have transformed under repression, poverty, and transnational migration. Maybe more than ever, social ties have become a field of claims and expectations, of contestation and continuous conflict (Treiber 2017; Belloni 2016). And it is here where social, economic, and political spheres enmesh inextricably. Beyan’s recent article on the effects of remittances on communi-

ties in Eritrea highlights this last point (2021). For him, the very widespread reliance on monies remitted home by members of the Eritrean diaspora has allowed for an unexpected step in the evolution of the relationship of Eritrean communities to land, which has come to be seen as less vital to individual and community survival than it was before. The implications of this for transition are likely to be various and many. They will also be unpredictable. It might be that the access of communities to financial capital via social capital may help stabilise the situation in Eritrea, and thereby stabilise and secure, even consolidate, the PFDJ regime's hold on power. It might also be that enhanced security for the communities at the base of Eritrean society will mean a less certain future for the regime that rules over them. At least for the time being, regime and society cannot be easily separated. The regime is built on the society it engineered, including national service and diaspora ties. The claim it makes of a shared *destiny* of Eritrea's people and its government, referred to in the beginning of this introduction, has grown into an everyday national identity and people's notion of sociality beyond cultural diversity and also beyond political approval (Cole 2019). Even fleeing the regime is termed ካልኣይ ገድላ, *kal'ay gedli*, a "second struggle" in Tigrinya, and suffering has become a national identity across borders and generations, somehow even a source of pride. Labelling Eritrean sociality as intrinsically "resilient" or "self-reliant" would, however, ignore the plight of very existential personal experiences and disguise the continuous, though changing effects of complex and diverse social and regional histories. Here, further study and understanding are pressing issues, also to back and support exchange and dialogue, participation, and social reconciliation – without *a priori* imposing unity as the ultimate goal (Negash and Weldemichael 2018; cf. Torres 2018). The mere reference to Westphalian sovereignty, to multiparty democracy, market economy and human rights will not be enough to understand the State of Eritrea, neither now nor in future.

This is why the kind of work this special issue represents will be important, as we face the uncertainties of the near future and the medium term. The articles assembled in this issue of *Modern Africa* deal with selected aspects of the problem and come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. For the problems we discuss here, broad interdisciplinary debate and much more academic work are most welcome. We hope to help inspire both.

### **Contributions to this special issue**

Amanda Poole and Jennifer Riggan sketch the historically and semantically rich, changing and at times contradictory relations between Eritrea and the

regional hegemon Ethiopia. Looking through the lens of “Oscillating Imaginaries” allows them to see and reflect upon the region’s political complexities throughout time, to understand the fragile nature – and “slipperiness” – of political belonging and citizenship in a historic context which is both volatile and tenacious. Competing political visions and changing alliances are not bound to respective governments in a faraway capital but intrinsically tied to people’s life-worlds across the region. Inherent political tension, alerted vigilance, and the dynamic potentiality of what could be give rise to repeated eruptions of violence, to vulnerability, migration, and political rearrangements.

Often enough Asmara appears as *pars pro toto*, a part for the whole, but it is in the countryside that landscapes and lifeworlds are most diverse and infrastructure rudimentary. Despite its industrial colonial history, current resource extraction and diaspora support, agriculture and pastoralism actually feed the country. Greg Cameron looks back into rural development projects of the post-war period. These suffered from top-down implementation and, then, disregard and unconcern. He pleads to learn from past experiences – and obvious mistakes – and rely on rural expertise in doing and developing agriculture as well as on established forms of political decision-making in the village. National and regional development aspirations that aim for food sovereignty and rural modernisation will have to take the perspectives of smallholders and rural co-operatives into account.

Milena Belloni, Valentina Fusari and Aurora Massa substantially enrich our predominantly technical idea of transnational remittances. These are “Much More Than Just Money,” as they are also sent back and forth in multidirectional ways, establishing, and expanding cultural and social ties across the globe and enabling a transnational Eritrean life as such. On the other hand, incoming goods and imported fashions – most recently the *niqāb* from the Arab peninsula – inform about latest migration movements and provide imaginaries of possible lives elsewhere to those left behind. Remittances from abroad have certainly changed Eritrean society in multiple ways. While the 2% tax has become the Eritrean regime’s reliable backbone throughout times of crisis, isolation and war, informal support may help siblings to finish school or parents to get necessary medical treatment. At the same time, families inside Eritrea sell off gold and property in order to enable their offspring’s migration or pay the ransom in case they are kidnapped on their way through the desert. Such exchange of money, goods and ideas proves once more that and how Eritrea has been enmeshed in larger regional and global contexts beyond political isolation and extractivist penetration.

Finally, Tricia Redeker Hepner and Daniel Rezene Mekonnen explore the “landscapes of the dead” and forensic investigation’s potential contribution to political transition, social rehabilitation and reconciliation as well as the reestablishment of law and human rights. In their article on “Justice Futures” both authors address Eritrea’s necropolitics, highlight exemplary incidents of killing since Eritrea’s independence, as well as the condoned loss of life during migration in the Sahara and the Mediterranean. Far from being naïve on the subjects of objective truth and justice, they suggest making deliberate use of the tools that forensic investigation offers, now and in the future, not least to reclaim Eritrean and Eritreans’ history, to allow mourning and future optimism alike.

Throughout this introduction, the editors have provided contextualisation for Eritrean issues that have tended to look to historical precedents. In her afterword, Sabine Mohamed complements these perspectives by looking not only to the past but also to the future – a future that remains highly uncertain. She concludes that reflection on the past and contemporary condition of Eritrea can provide insights into the country’s possible futures to come – but only if that reflection goes beyond the institutions of the developmental state to the alternative knowledge and experience of those who, whether at home or in the diaspora, are most affected by it.

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