From rebel governance to state consolidation – Dynamics of loyalty and the securitisation of the state in Eritrea

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A B S T R A C T

This paper discusses Eritrea as a contemporary case of state-making grounded in war, a fact that has resulted in the emergence of one of the 'hardest' states in sub-Saharan Africa. The state-making process in Eritrea is looked at with a focus on the legacies of liberation movement governance in the changing dynamics of state consolidation from 1993 to this day. Those dynamics are analysed by reverting to Hirsch-man's categories of 'loyalty', 'exit' and 'voice'. Hirschman's framework is chosen because the category of loyalty and resulting dynamics illuminate particularly well the transitions within the Eritrean state making process.

It is shown that the parameters of war that have resulted in the creation of the Eritrean state have led to a particular kind of state characterised by a high degree of loyalty, visible in the propensity of large segments of the population to associate with state activities. Over time and partly based on military defeat in renewed warfare, the exit option has gained prominence particular among the young generation. This has resulted in a drive towards state securitisation combined with measures to make exit a pillar of power consolidation. Those dynamics have not considerably altered the loyalty of Eritrea's transnational citizenry to the wider project of state consolidation. The paper concludes that state consolidation in Eritrea can thus far be analysed as a successful shift from fostering voice via politics of mobilisation to controlling exit and voice in ways that keep citizens tied to the state project.

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1. Introduction

War has served as an important cause of state formation and consolidation in geographical settings as diverse as Western Europe and East Asia. Concerning state consolidation in those settings warfare has been crucial for fostering or enforcing loyalty. The latter is grounded in the development of nationalism and becomes a material reality in the creation of efficient structures for revenue collection and military conscription (Herbst, 1990a; see also Creighton and Shaw, 1987; Tilly, 1975, 1990). In contrast, the process of state formation in sub-Saharan Africa was often a product of negotiated decolonialisation, not the outcome of warfare. Nationalism played an important part in nego-

tiated decolonisation as one means of collective mobilisation (for examples see Cooper, 2002), but this did not result in making the nation-state 'into a symbol that inspired loyalty' (Cooper, 2002, p. 157) in the same way as war had done in other geographical settings. As a result, many African states were considered weak (Migdal, 1988).

In post-colonial Africa any adjustment of boundaries by war or other means was explicitly declared illegitimate in the founding statement of the Organisation of African Unity in 1963 (renamed African Union in 2002). This stipulation does not mean that boundary disputes did not occur in Africa, but secessionist movements have been given short thrift because state boundaries were guaranteed by the global political order (Cooper, 2002; Herbst, 1989; Shelley, 2004). The latter only changed with the attainment of juridical statehood by the State of Eritrea in 1993 as the result of military victory in a war of insurgency combined with the changing geopolitical order at the end of the Cold War (on the Eritrean state-making process through war see Clapham, 2000; Iyob, 1997a; Müller, 2006; Pool, 2001; on juridical versus empirical statehood see Jackson and Rosberg, 1982).

Eritrea is thus an interesting case-study in relation to the assertion that successful state consolidation is positively connected to

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patterns of warfare. More generally it has been suggested that the categories of 'liberation movement government' (Salih, 2007) or 'post-liberation state' (Dorman, 2006) are useful labels in order to understand the specific nature of African states consolidated after protracted liberation wars or other armed insurgencies. In addition to Eritrea, those comprise such diverse examples as the former Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda, of late Southern Sudan, and to various degrees South Africa (Dorman, 2006; Branch and Mampilly, 2005; Melber, 2003; Salih, 2007). And while the concrete politics of the resulting states show marked differences, underlying strategies of post-rebel-government are based on a continuation of core features of rebel governance. Prominent among those are extra-constitutional methods of governing based on mobilisation or indoctrination combined with a drive by former rebel leaders to use war credentials to legitimise state ownership and 'delegitimize others in competition for power and resources' (Kriger, 2006, p. 1151). As a result post-liberation states have emerged as unusually strong within the geographical context of sub-Saharan Africa, and Eritrea has been labelled 'Africa's strongest post-colonial state' (Dorman, 2006, p. 1099).

With particular reference to Eritrea a strong state is defined here by the ability of its leaders to establish transnational social control. The latter depends on the appropriation of resources through taxation for state purposes, as well as the capacity to regulate citizens' behaviours in ways beneficial to the state. The aspect of transnational (as opposed to national) social control is important here not only because Eritrea is a classic 'diasporic state' (Iyob, 2000), but more so because the liberation war was waged by transnational means and dependent on the loyalty of the diverse Eritrean diasporas.

To investigate further the dynamics behind the consolidation of Eritrea as a strong state, Forrest's (1988) concept of state 'hardness' combined with Hirschman's categories of loyalty, exit and voice (Hirschman, 1970, 1978) provide useful frameworks.

Forrest (1988, p. 423) goes beyond the notions of appropriation and control that characterise a strong state and proposes four parameters to judge state 'hardness': structural autonomy, political penetration of society, extraction of resources from productive sectors, and ideological legitimation. His concept of 'state-hardness' thus combines political, economic and ideological categories. The inclusion of the latter as an important component along the lines of Gramsci's definition of hegemony is significant here, as an important dimension of 'state-hardness' in Eritrea is grounded in ideological legitimacy.

Taken together, Forrest's parameters relate to the ability by those in power to establish long-term hegemony and control over the means of accumulation, coercion and cognition, a control that may allow 'state-hardness' to persist even in the face of declining legitimacy of particular political leaders at a given point in time. Such persistence can be captured in investigating patterns of loyalty and the dynamics of exit and voice.

Voice and exit are here not regarded as mere opposites. Voice, defined as 'a positive commitment to further [the] welfare' of a collectivity by 'working for it, fighting for it and [...] seeking to change it' is clearly grounded in loyalty (Barry, 1974, p. 98). This seems to suggest that when exit, defined as leaving the collectivity either physically or through quiet resistance, is the prime course of action, then loyalty has disappeared, often together with the hope that any means of exercising voice will lead to desirable transformation. But as will be discussed in detail in due course, choosing exit does not necessarily imply diminished loyalty or questioning the ideological legitimation of the state project. It is merely a sign that the political leadership has lost legitimacy, a fact that does not automatically lead to substantially less leverage over the parameters important in attaining state 'hardness'.

Hirschman's framework is thus chosen because changing patterns of loyalty illuminate particularly well the transitions within the Eritrean state consolidation process and the emergence of Eritrea as a 'hard' state. This state 'hardness' can, it is argued here, to important degrees be traced back to the specific dynamics of rebel government structures exercised during the years of war, combined with the resulting emergence of a specific type of transnational nationalism. Due to the fact that only after the establishment of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) as the sole relevant force in the war for national liberation one can speak of an entity that could command nationwide loyalty, the discussion is restricted here to the historical period encompassing the EPLF-led war of insurgency, the achievement of juridical statehood, and the process of state consolidation resulting of late in state securitisation under a rebel-turned-politician controlled government.[1]

The reminder of this paper is structured as follows: In the next section the EPLF and its modalities of rebel governance are discussed. This is followed by a discussion of the way in which those have been transported into the governance structures of the new state. It is shown that the dynamics behind the creation of the Eritrean state have led to a tight-knit entity characterised by a high degree of loyalty and the propensity of large segments of Eritrea's transnational population to associate with state activities. The subsequent section outlines how over time and partly based on military defeat in renewed warfare, disengagement and the exit option have become prominent in particular among segments of the young generation. This in turn has resulted in measures of securitisation to enforce loyalty. The final section – partly based on fieldwork among Eritrean refugees in Tel Aviv – shows how the ruling party has devised effective measures to make the exit option a pillar of power consolidation. The paper concludes that state consolidation in Eritrea can thus far be analysed as a shift from fostering voice via politics of mobilisation to controlling exit and voice in ways that keep citizens tied to the state project.

2. Rebel governance: the EPLF and the 'quasi'-state

To fully comprehend the emergence of the EPLF and its ability to sustain a long and costly war with few internal material resources but widely supported by financial contributions from the Eritrean transnational community, a particularity of the Eritrean case has to be pointed out: Unlike the majority of former colonial territories on the African continent where an 'antecedent state wittingly [forced] its inhabitants into a contrived nationhood' (Zelinsky, 1988, p. 7), Eritrea had to 'demonstrate its status as a nation before it could be granted its own state' (Hoyle, 1998, p. 384; see also Taddia, 1998). Being a nation is regarded here – following Anderson's (1991) dictum of the imagined community – as a form of 'social consciousness, and the nation is only born when enough people (...) believe in its existence' (Zelinsky, 1988, p. 6). It was in this process of 'designing' the Eritrean nation that the EPLF has been extremely successful. In offering a specific interpretation of Eritrean history partly based on 'inventing' pre-existing traditions

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[1] As in any case of political change dynamics can be traced back to more ancient historical trajectories. Concerning Eritrea, different parts of the country were ruled by different outside powers, including Abyssinian, Ottoman and Egyptian rulers. It was the establishment of Italian colonial administration (1890–1941) that brought Eritrea as a unified entity into existence. From 1941 until 1952, as a consequence of Italy's defeat in WWII, Eritrea came under British Military Administration. In 1952 it was federated with Ethiopia. Ethiopia dissolved that federation unilaterally in 1962 and annexed Eritrea as its fourteenth province. While armed opposition to Ethiopian rule started as early as 1961, this was initially confined to certain geographical settings and population groups and more divisive than unifying before the emergence of the EPLF from 1973 onwards and its formal establishment in 1977 (see Clapham, 2000; Gebremedhin, 1989; Connell and Killion, 2011; Levine, 1974; Longrigg, 1960; Markakis, 1987; Pool, 2001; Trevaskis, 1960).