



**ICG’s Conjectures on Eritrea:  
Realistic and Probable or Wishful and Imaginary?  
*Eritrean Center for Strategic Studies, ECSS***

On 28 March last month, the ICG released a report entitled: “Eritrea: Scenarios for Future Transition”. Unfortunately, as we illustrate below<sup>1</sup>, ICG’s primary sources are mostly the same circle of personalities and entities that harbor a hostile agenda against Eritrea while its basic presumptions are predicated on a superfluous predilection to project a calamitous trend of imminent “doom and gloom”. As it happened, these skewed approaches have rendered its scenario analysis extremely flawed, and, rather wishful and imaginary.

Political forecasting is not, admittedly, an exact science; it is a messy business indeed. Still, it’s critical usefulness cannot be glossed over. The architectures of conflict prevention and management depend on perceptive and sufficiently reliable early warning systems for a timely prognosis of fault lines and trends in order to avoid or mitigate crisis conditions. But this task requires, in the first place, the existence of a potential crisis-situation as well as objective, neutral and dispassionate appraisal of political realities and trends on the basis of full and

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<sup>1</sup> In both the current report and its predecessor, the ICG makes repeated reference to individuals and entities that espouse hostile attitudes towards Eritrea, being at the same time ardent champions of regime change. The list includes Bereket Habteselassie, Berouk Mesfin (a senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies who finds it difficult to divorce from the version of the Ethiopian government when writing on Eritrea) Dan Connell, Gaim Kibreab, Kjetel Tronvor, Leonard Vincent (author of *Les Erytheens* and cofounder of a Paris-based anti-Eritrean radio station), Martin Plaut, Tekeste Negash who is opposed to Eritrean independence, and Yosief Ghebrehiwet a permanent contributor of anti-regime articles in the *Gedab News*, a website devoted to Eritrean division and referred to repeatedly in ICG reports. Other entities of similar category referred to in the ICG reports are the TPLF website [aigaform.com](http://aigaform.com), Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders.

accurate information. The ICG report is found wanting on all these critical parameters.

The ICG's current report is a follow-up of its last report on Eritrea released on 21 September 2010 with the title "ERITREA: A SIEGE STATE". It was claimed then that the report was compiled in ten years of thorough field research that the think tank conducted inside and outside Eritrea<sup>2</sup> ICG experts visited Eritrea for extensive interviews with senior government officials and canvassed the opinion of various internal sources of their choice. But even then, there was a lingering impression among most knowledgeable observers of the Eritrean reality that the ICG was more inclined in corroborating a certain pre-conceived narrative rather than honestly and fairly depicting a balanced and nuanced picture.

This time around, the gloves are off and the ICG appears to have discarded all pretensions of objectivity and neutrality. The ICG claims that it was denied entry to Eritrea although this remains contested by officials in Eritrea's Foreign Ministry.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the case, and although the ECSS understands that the ICG did maintain some perfunctory communication with the Eritrean Mission to the UN<sup>5</sup>, the current report is conspicuous for its failure to cite official and neutral and credible sources for countervailing opinion and/or the validation of the facts and events that are described with authority.

Furthermore, and as we highlight below, the welter of information that the ICG cobbled together essentially emanate from rumors and innuendos<sup>6</sup> that are attributed to undisclosed sources. This is rationalized by considerations of confidentiality.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, it casts deeper doubt on the validity of its postulates and conjectures since these "confidential interlocutors" that provided the baseline data may well be affiliated to fringe groups that espouse certain political agendas. A cursory analysis of the 156 footnotes attached to the report illustrates that 71 % fall in that category. This is unduly large. And, as we intimated above, the remaining references are virtually recycled data provided by the usual, Eritrea-bashing, hostile elements and groups. These glaring shortcomings of data collection and validation can only dent the reputation of the ICG besides carving

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<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group, *Eritrea the Siege State* Africa Report No.136 31 September 2010 p.1

<sup>3</sup> ECSS interview with Dr. Fessehazion Petros, Foreign Office, Asmara,

<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group, *Eritrea: Scenarios for Future Transition* African report No.200 28March 2013, p.2, see *fn.* 6.

out a gaping puncture on the reliability, coherence and probability of the “scenarios of transition” that it envisages.

For purposes of illustration, we cite below some of the outlandish rumors that the ICG blindly replicates in its report without questioning their validity.

- Isaias’s disappearance from public view for several weeks in April 2012 amid rumours of his illness and death made evident the lack of a succession plan;<sup>5</sup>
- During the latter half of 2012, more rumors circulated about disagreements inside the regime on the direction of the country, as well as Isaias’s leadership;<sup>6</sup>
- In November 2012 there were rumors of a round of arrests and “freezing” of senior military leaders including the defense minister, Sebhat Ephrem;<sup>7</sup>
- There are rumors the skeptics have asked the President to step aside and support a smooth, internal transition, so as to avoid the country’s collapse....<sup>8</sup>
- The military ...appears to have maintained a certain degree of autonomy, such that it has reportedly (sic) questioned Isaias’s capacity to retain control and asked him to consider a transition at various points in the recent past;<sup>9</sup>
- The posters created for the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of liberation... portray Isaias in the image of Jesus Christ, the shepherd of the people, leading elders of both low and highlands;<sup>10</sup>
- Isaias has been grooming his son for succession;<sup>11</sup>
- The incident of 21 January 2013 is described as an event that was “not unprecedented” but as “the most recent in a number of unreported events”.<sup>12</sup> The report further states “the government reportedly

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.7

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.8

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, see *fn.41*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.16

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.10

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, see *fn. 62*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.22

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p.6

negotiated with the soldiers, and in the end, the Ministry's employees were released".<sup>13</sup>

All these assertions are at variance with the true facts and represent gullible regurgitation of wild stories that normally thrive in the grape vine. In a nutshell, the litany of rumor-inspired, unsubstantiated, facts; the blunders of methodological omission and commission, are too many for ICG's prognosis and "scenarios of transition" to be taken seriously. After all, if the diagnosis of a presumed illness is wrong in the first place, the prescribed antidote will not only be useless but it may turn out to be toxic.

We now revert to examine in some detail the ICG's substantive conjectures.

### *1. Aggravated Ethnic and Religious fault lines*

The ICG report paints a curiously explosive picture in regard to potential ethnic and religious conflicts and strife in Eritrea. To drive the point home, it opines: "Eritrean diversity, especially the Christian-Muslim divide",<sup>14</sup> may usher in social upheavals. The ICG waxes alarmist particularly in other sections of the report when it warns: "existing ethnic and religious divisions may come into play in a confrontation between military factions...leading to a disastrous civil war",<sup>15</sup> (emphasis ours).

This sudden, doomsday, prognosis is not only utterly wrong, but it contradicts the ICG's own report as spelled out in its previous report, which was the result, by its own admissions, of ten years meticulous research in Eritrea. This is what the ICG had to say on the same subject in its September 2010 report:

Despite occasional conflict (sic) and the marked diversity, Eritrea has by and large avoided the kind of serious interethnic and religious strife associated with the region. Economic lifestyles, cultures, faiths and ethnicities have mostly coexisted peacefully. Church and mosque have stood side by side, occasional clashes notwithstanding.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p.4

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, see fn. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p.24

<sup>16</sup> ICG, Report No.136, p.17

National cohesiveness and identity in Eritrea is, indeed, robust by all accounts; transcending parochial sentiments and allegiances to exclusive ethnic and/or religious sectarianism. Whatever it's other problems, the Eritrean polity has been blessed with ethnic and religious harmony that has further been reinforced in the past twenty two years of independence. The periodic communal/tribal infightings that erupt in virtually all the neighbouring countries and, the deep sentiments of religious/ethnic marginalization that characterize diverse communities in our region are literally inexistent in Eritrea. These have come about as a result of history, the long years of armed struggle as well as judicious government policies anchored on equality of rights and opportunities for all its constituent parts. The ICG's new narrative of a volatile, worrisome, trend towards "ethnic/religious civil war" is thus a malevolent chimera that exists only in the minds of Eritrea's detractors.

## 2. *Forceful nation building*

The ICG describes, in a rather deprecating manner, Eritrea's normative trajectory of nation building as a failed, "forceful process".<sup>17</sup>

This statement provokes a host of questions both in terms of abstract political theory as well as underlying motive. In the ICG's inexplicable view, nation building in the Eritrean case is found to be "forceful" because the "PFDJ has been seeking to further entrench the notion of a single national identity as defined during the struggle"<sup>18</sup>? In the first place, Eritrean national identity was not forged or invented during the 30 years of liberation war. Present-day Eritrea was shaped by European colonialism as is the case in the rest of Africa. And in any case, the post-liberation political process could not have occurred on an artificial and centrifugal setting of polarizing a cohesive national society along ethnic and religious identities if that is what the ICG is alluding to. The politics of ethnic institutionalization pursued by some countries in the region and that have been enshrined in their Constitutions is certainly not a positive example that must be emulated by Eritrea. These political precepts are not only dangerous and a recipe for perpetual strife but they are not also warranted by the Eritrean reality. In as far as ethnic/religious harmony during the armed liberation struggle is concerned;

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<sup>17</sup> ICG Report 200 see Executive Summary.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12

Eritrea's positive experience had attracted almost universal accolades from all historians and political pundits associated with those times.<sup>19</sup> ICG's concerns for that period are thus difficult to comprehend.

### 3. *Peace with Ethiopia*

The ICG's position on this cardinal issue is difficult to decipher. The imperative for Ethiopia to abide by its treaty obligations and to respect international law; the enhancement of regional peace and security that this would entail is not examined from its legal and political perspectives and is curiously absent from its lengthy discourse. It is totally ignored in the Executive Summary where the ICG suggests various "recommendations" purportedly to address all the critical problems that require urgent solution.

In the sections where it broaches the subject, its point of departure is a presumptive acknowledgement that there are no indications "for unprecedented opening or softening of the previous policy"<sup>20</sup> on the part of Ethiopia. The ICG then concludes, even if not in so many words, that the compromise must emanate from Eritrea. What follows next is simply absurd. The ICG quotes an anonymous "Eritrean analyst" to state:

"... In the event of a regime change, the Generals cannot last long without making peace with Ethiopia... Eritreans would propose negotiations on the status of Badme; a decision the population would not contest...there is no way for the Eritrean nation to survive as it is, if it does not make peace with Ethiopia. It will, simply, collapse."<sup>21</sup>

The ICG then proceeds to outline steps that a "transitional government" could be expected to take ... to open negotiations with Ethiopia in the eventuality/scenario of a *Peaceful Transition to Multiparty Democracy*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Reference to witnesses made by several close observers which among others included: Basil Davidson and Dan Connell.

<sup>20</sup> ICG Report No.200, p.24.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, see *fn*.140.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p.26

This analysis is too crass and simplistic to merit serious exposition. Obviously, the ICG has no clue and is out of sync with mainstream Eritrean political opinion. Even the inconsequential Eritrean armed groups that Ethiopia supports for subversive reasons would not contemplate making concessions on Badme or any other sovereign Eritrean territories. Apparently, the ICG also suffers from an acute lapse of institutional memory. Because this is what it had to say in its previous report:

The international community, in particular donors and the Security Council, repeatedly failed to pressure Ethiopia to comply. Eritrea's sense of outrage heightened, notwithstanding that the Claims Commission ruled that it violated international law during its military operation in may 1998, in effect, had started the war.<sup>23</sup>

The key point is that the Eritreans felt Ethiopia was once again being appeased by an international community that was tacitly or explicitly hostile to Eritrea. The already deep-rooted sense of isolation and betrayal was reinforced.<sup>24</sup>

The international community erred seriously in 2002 in not putting greater pressure on Ethiopia to fully implement the Boundary Commission's findings.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. *The Vulnerabilities of the Eritrean State:*

Perhaps because of its sources or for reasons better known to it, the ICG's overarching intention seems to prove not only the "extreme vulnerability of the Eritrean Government" but even the "non-viability of the nation itself". The "inevitable collapse of the State and the threat this poses to regional security", as well as the "weakness and fragmentation of the opposition... and the difficulty of reconciling the political cultures of PFDJ members and Diaspora leaders" are invoked for greater dramatization.

And, to cap it all, the ICG quotes again, an anonymous but "long time observer of the Eritrean reality", who states:

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.21

<sup>24</sup> ibid

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.25

“Is the system reformable from within...even after Isaias’ removal? ...Is Isaias’s absence from the Eritrean political system the answer to all the problems of the nation? Ultimately will Eritrea ever be viable as a nation?”<sup>26</sup>

With all these hyperbole in the background, the ICG considers “six scenarios of transition” which are all permutations of, and predicated on, the sequel after the “prior removal of the President”, by whatever means. Indeed, in almost all the sections that follow, the ICG emphatically envisions and calls for “the President’s exit”, which it describes as “if not the sole one”, but “still as the absolute *sine qua non* for transition”. Isaias’s exit ... “is about surely a precondition for anything much to change”,<sup>27</sup> we are reminded time and again!

What is pushing the ICG to dwell on and forecast cataclysmic developments in Eritrea in the times ahead? Surely, this cannot be a logical extrapolation from the isolated incident that transpired on January 21<sup>st</sup> early this year. As we emphasized in the first part of this article, ICG’s almost singular reliance on hostile sources may partially explain this muddled output. But one would have expected the ICG to consult more objective diplomatic and other sources as well as published materials. Although we do not subscribe to the underlying concept and analytic methods employed, the annual Index of Failed States,<sup>28</sup> for instance, ranks Eritrea in the upper middle rung, i.e. less prone to potential turmoil than Ethiopia and other countries in the region. ICG’s obsession with its conjecture is thus difficult to comprehend.

The other intriguing element in the whole report is the obvious disconnect between the recommendations in the Executive Summary and the rest of the report including the “six transition scenarios”. In the Executive Summary, the recommendations have two parts: the first option dwells on proposals for coordinated action by regional and international players in order to “promote talks with President Isaias Afwerki and the current leadership with a view to avert chaos and further displacement of populations”.<sup>29</sup> The second option focuses on residual measures that must be taken by the “US, EU and countries with special relations

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, see *fn.*118

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p.21

<sup>28</sup> Failed States Index , 2010,2011,2012

<sup>29</sup> ICG Report No. 200; see *Executive Summary*.

with Eritrea” in the event of “transition”.<sup>30</sup> But, as explained above, the entire report then swerves into a different discourse anchored on the agenda of imminent, inevitable and necessary “regime change”. One is led to believe that the two parts of the article were written by two groups of researchers with disparate views and conclusions. And these were not reconciled when the end product was published. The report thus fails even to meet minimum editorial standards.

##### 5. *External intervention*

The ICG does not conceal its overriding aim of establishing a case for external intervention. The scenarios it envisages for such an eventuality are however puzzling. This is what it has to say in its scenario of *External Mediation or Domination*.<sup>31</sup>

Dragged for various reasons, Addis Ababa and Khartoum could play at their intervention in two ways: either a political agreement on how to establish peace (perhaps through IGAD) and setting a closely mentored government or by splitting the country in effect into zones of influence as has happened in south-central Somalia. Alternatively, should a regional agreement over Eritrea not be reached, they could offer direct or material support to competing Eritrean factions in order to satisfy their national and regional security interests.<sup>32</sup>

In the last scenario of *Regime Change with Ethiopian intervention*, the ICG envisages a positive role being played by the new post-Meles leadership in which the latter offers a transitional leadership in Asmara a fresh diplomatic start, reopening economic ties and providing support for a non-partisan, inclusive, political initiative.<sup>33</sup>

We have never come across such a brazen and horrid apology or advocacy of colonialism under the guise of academic research work. In the first place, what would be the contents of a “fresh diplomatic start” by Ethiopia and what are the

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p.27

dividends to Eritrea? If the ICG is privy to any “concessions” that Ethiopia is prepared make to respect the border rulings of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Border Commission in the event of a “transition”, it does not spell them out in the report. And in any case, the ICG had categorically asserted in previous sections of the same report that there will not be any “new opening on the border problem on the part of the new Ethiopian government” thus throwing the gauntlet to Eritrea for any progress on that front. So what is this fresh diplomatic start? The re-opening of economic ties is another riddle that begs more nuanced answers. Although mutual benefits that may accrue from bilateral trade may not be discounted, the asymmetric advantages to Eritrea are not clear particularly as the report does not at all discuss economic issues and development strategies and policies in Eritrea, Ethiopia or the region as a whole. Ethiopia’s potential support for a “non-partisan, inclusive, political initiative” only underscores the authors’ utter ignorance of the political dynamics in the region. In the first place, Ethiopia – the old regime as well as its successor – is enmeshed in the political quagmire of ethnic and highly partisan politics in its own country. In Eritrea, Ethiopia’s futile policy of regime change has been pursued in the last ten years by mainly propping up what it calls the “Kunama and Afar Liberation Fronts”. And, in a report where incoherent and mutually contradictory conclusions appear in successive paragraphs, the ICG also states:

Any Ethiopian intervention would likely have a security rather than a democratic agenda. Hawkish responses are conceivable; Ethiopia could seal the border or seize the opportunity to support one faction in Asmara. It might even take advantage of instability to achieve one of the longstanding goals of hard-liners, control of the port of Assab in order to end the country’s land-locked status.<sup>34</sup>

The positive role that the ICG assigns to other regional actors similarly provokes more questions than answers. The ICG professes to be keenly aware of grave fault lines that obtain in the region’s countries in its multiple publications. It has written extensively on the dangers posed by the precarious leadership transition in Ethiopia (though without dwelling on the challenges this poses, as well as the internal dynamics of instability in the country). It has also written, in its recent reports, on

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p.27

what it has termed as the “embattled situation of the ruling National Congress Party in Sudan”, as well as the “electoral unrest in Djibouti”.<sup>35</sup> Yet despite its gloomy predictions on the potential consequences of these fault lines, it argues for entrusting Eritrea’s troubled neighboring States with the responsibility of “managing change in Eritrea”. This haphazard and ill-advised advice is indeed confusing and difficult to fathom. The ICG advocates, on the one hand, for an “urgent need for transition in Eritrea to ensure its stability” and for the “benefit of the entire region”.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, it envisages this change to come about through the intervention of Eritrea’s neighbors when each of them is embroiled in perhaps deeper political quagmire.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the ICG did not set out to appraise the reality in Eritrea in good faith. It must have started its research work from a pre-conceived conclusion. The end result is not really a professional and objective work of situation analysis but a catalogue of biases and suggestive conjectures.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid p.28

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.