CHAPTER 6

The Ethiopia–Eritrea War

Leenco Lata

Introduction

The multiplicity of its proximate and distant historical causes, coupled with its diverse forms of manifestation, makes fitting the Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict into neat conventional categories a very challenging undertaking. Analyzing and adopting policies and measures that would achieve its resolution, however, demands a prior ability to fit the conflict into known categories. Conflicts are commonly believed to fit into either the interstate (international) or the intra-state (domestic) categories. The latter is further divided into intercommunal or interethnic and intra-communal or intra-ethnic. The main argument of this chapter is that the Ethiopia–Eritrea conflict defies attempts to fit it neatly into just one of these types. Intervention by the UN and its allied regional bodies hence will succeed in achieving sustainable peace between and within these two entities only to the extent that all the diverse forms of manifestation of the conflict are understood and addressed.

Picking the most pivotal cause from among the array of stipulated causes of the Eritrea–Ethiopia conflict proves just as challenging. Border dispute, economic issues, the divergence of the ideologies of the groups ruling the two entities, differing visions and nature of state types, the contrast between democracy in one state and authoritarianism in the other, are all offered as some of the causes. But which one (or ones) is decisive, the resolution of which would pave the way for addressing all others? Here again intervention will succeed to the extent that the ultimate underlying cause or causes is uncovered and addressed.
There is yet another source of complication. The people currently ruling both Ethiopia and Eritrea began their political careers by denouncing the Western powers as imperialists. The extent to which this ideological thinking continues to linger and to influence their behavior as state leaders cannot be definitively determined. There are indications of its survival at least among the rulers of Ethiopia. Furthermore, these leaders lack confidence in international organizations such as the UN and the OAU due to a number of historical reasons. These sentiments must be taken into account when trying to assess the long-range effectiveness of intervention by the UN and the OAU, as well as the United States and the EU.

A few general remarks about Ethiopia, Eritrea and the rulers of the two neighboring states is in order before proceeding any further. Ethiopia’s Soviet-style federal system (instituted in 1995) supposedly affords its more than 70 nations and nationalities (called ethnic groups by others) the right of self-government. The leaders of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), coming from the minority Tigrean nation (7 percent of Ethiopia’s population of close to 60 million), have been dominating the country since 1991 by controlling the surrogate fronts that they created for other groups. Nine officially recognized nationalities make up Eritrea’s population of 3.5–4 million. The leaders of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), renamed as the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice in 1994, dominate Eritrea’s highly centralized unitary government. The EPLF’s most powerful leaders belong to the Tigrinya-speaking Eritrean highlanders who, to outsiders, are indistinguishable from the neighboring Tigreans of northern Ethiopia.

The outbreak of hostilities between Eritrea and Ethiopia in May 1998, is almost unanimously described as bewildering. War between two of the world’s most impoverished countries was described as “incomprehensible” by a writer in *The Economist*. ¹ Another reporter stated, “absolutely no one imagined it could happen.”² Surprisingly these are the views of even the protagonists. Asked how the conflict came about, the Eritrean president, Isaias Afewerki, responded, “It is very difficult to easily find an answer.”³ His Ethiopian counterpart, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, said “I was surprised, shocked, puzzled” by the incident.⁴ In the view of the Kenyan foreign minister, Bonaya Godana, “the two countries have gotten into a situation which . . . none of them really wanted to get into.”⁵ Evidently, some force beyond the control of the two sides pushed them suddenly and inexplicably into a situation of war. Such an assessment becomes even more astonishing for two reasons. First, the officials now ruling the warring countries attained maturity adhering to a doctrine of Marxist historical materialism, according