

From Nakfa to Sawa



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Since 1994, right after independence, we Eritreans have been going to Sawa. Why? The center of gravity of Eritrea was shifted from Nakfa during the struggle to Sawa after independence. Why? Simply, to continue the already started nation-building process!

To make the future better than the present! What else? In order to ensure the security and stability of the nation. Ultimately, the list of possible answers comes thick and fast. Questions also continue to flow. Until when will we continue to go to Sawa? No definite answer, but maybe until the delivery of the future of Eritrea. Anyway, my objective was to indicate the changing shift of “centers” and the regularities of events and meanings attached to them.

During the dark nights of Ethiopian colonization, the EPLF was able to develop a vision that can see a liberated Eritrea that belongs to all, a nation united in its diversity, a people working together for the greater good of all. While normally everyone can see observable things that can be sensed by human naked eyes, it is rare for some people to see things that do not exist in the real world but in

their minds. We have a proverb that says, “mrAy mEman yu” meaning “seeing is believing” Generally, human beings are inclined to believe what they see with their own eyes. In addition to the “to see is to believe” reality, the EPLF came up with the idea of “to believe is to see.” According to this concept, one can see ideas which are non-existent in the material world but are ideas, thoughts, beliefs concocted in the mind. The picture of a liberated and sovereign Eritrea observed by the EPLF from the deepest parts of the Sahel in the midst of the struggle was aided by the optics of “to believe is to see.”



Nakfa was a symbol of resilience and perseverance. In the difficult times of our struggle, where seemingly everyone and everything stood against the tegadelti, Nakfa proved to be the reliable sanctuary of Eritrean fighters who dedicated their lives in search of freedom. Nakfa was the only place, which once liberated by the EPLF in 1976, the Ethiopian invading army could not capture again. The Ethiopian army frequently attempted to regain Nakfa saying, “Nakfa or death,” but ultimately to no avail. During the strategic withdrawal in 1978 after the massive Soviet military assistance to Ethiopia, the EPLF was forced to withdraw from the gates of Asmara to Nakfa. Thus, the Eritrean revolution shifted to Nakfa whose impenetrable mountains had been chosen as a rear base and the last line of defense. The creation of the Nakfa front, northeastern Sahel and Halhal, marked the end of the strategic withdrawal. When the fighters reached there they were determined to fight to death and not to surrender Nakfa. The EPLF’s personnel, logistic, armament, strategy, idea, and, above all, the hope and revolution of Eritrea were relied upon during the defense of Nakfa. Nakfa

saved the symbolic and material aspect of the Eritrean struggle for independence. As a tribute to its paramount importance during the struggle for independence, Eritrea named its currency Nakfa.

What happened after independence? We have witnessed many revolutionaries after independence; notably, many forgot their core and base and became mired in the city life. In Eritrea, the change, however, was only a horizontal movement. The center of gravity was changed from Nakfa in the northern tip of Eritrea to Sawa, the western tip of the country bordering Sudan. During the struggle for independence, Nakfa was the symbol of perseverance and determination and a point reference for the fighters. After independence, Sawa has become the symbol of readiness and defense and point of reference for the Warsay generation. The second Ethiopian war of aggression was started by the misconception that the Sahel/ Nakfa generation “Yikealo”, the unified, highly disciplined and battle hardened army was weakened. Another errant assumption was that the aggressors underestimated the power of the Sawa generation, “Warsay,” who successfully inherited the revolutionary Yikealo deeds. Although this was the reality, Sawa as an idea was developed as president Issayas Afewerki noted “[not] because we anticipated wars or other hostilities. On the contrary, it came as a continuation of the political process on the basis of which Eritrea was built throughout the armed struggle” (ECSS 2011).

Sawa produced militarily and academically competent young men and women responsible for development and protection of the country. To date, 30 rounds (or cohorts) of youth have enrolled and completed training and programs at Sawa. The graduation of trainees after the completion of their academic and military training is amongst the most celebrated and respected occasions. It is always attended by senior government and military officials (including the president), families and friends of the trainees, and invited guests from inside and abroad. Sawa has proven to be the heart and soul of Eritrea.

Today it has become common to see nations and societies across the world disintegrate, degenerate, and suffer from chaos and instability. Throughout the Horn of Africa, from Sudan to Somalia, and from Ethiopia to Kenya, as well as the neighboring Middle East, from Yemen to Syria, we see societies

disintegrating, suffering internal strife and sectarian violence, ultimately eliminating their national identities. In Eritrea, the national glue is strong, and Eritreans of all ages and groups come together. Men and women from six provinces and nine ethnic groups come to Sawa and spent one year learning, developing, and growing. The time that I spent in Sawa, both as a student and as an educator, was unique, transformative, and unforgettable. The friendship and acquaintances that I made in Sawa were free from the influence of time and space. The care of the enlightening trainers, the hard work of teachers, the companionship of my colleagues, and the efficient management of the place remain fresh in my memory.



The weather in Sawa was relatively hot and the trainees found out the reason why, jokingly suggesting that the sun was down from its position high in the sky to see the beautiful scene laid in the flat fields of Sawa. The beauty of Sawa emanates from the flat and clean area as well as from the youth of different ethnic groups. Mao was very much right to describe youth as a morning sun at eight or nine. The national anthem of Eritrea, roared by the students, reverberates in the sky of Sawa every morning and evening, while the bright faces of the trainees, full of hope and mettle, adds its own flourishes to the beauty of Sawa.

Sawa is misrepresented by outsiders as a military training camp where everyone is punished and sexual abuse is systematically employed. The Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, for example, presented non-existent and false facts about Sawa. They said “girls continue to be pulled out of school

and/or forced into a marriage arranged by their family in order for them to avoid the harsh conditions and the possibility of sexual abuse committed in the military training camp in Sawa” (A/HRC/32/CRP.1, 31). This was deliberately fabricated to defame the institution and obstruct the national path of Eritrea. To see the truth, one only has to look at the current statistics of women in Sawa, observe the falling rates of school dropouts, or ask the confident and free Eritrean girls about their own experiences.

President Issayas Afewerki once said, “When we first came up with the idea [Sawa], it was only as a continuation of our revolutionary experience and not as a new innovation” (ECSS 2011). The armed struggle served as a melting pot of Eritreans from all parts of the country. After independence, “The question that we faced then was: should the process stall or continue as a cultural, social and political process for nation building? It was from there that the idea of creating Sawa originated” (ECSS 2011).

Sawa is a place where we interact with our past, understand our present, and foresee and prepare for our future. It teaches skills, lessons, and innovation, as well as developing identity and a sense of nation – all of which are needed for the reconstruction and development of the country. In this sense, Sawa represents the perpetuation of the nation-building process that was initiated during the long, hard years of the liberation struggle. Whoever denies this fact has the right to do so, but on our part we will not let anyone walk through our mind with their dirty ideas. No one can attach negative emotions to something that we have already attached positive emotions. Sawa will continue to serve as the proverbial Mecca or Jerusalem for the adherents of Eritreanism, where every faithful person must visit at least once in his/ her life. To live on a day to day basis is insufficient for us. We need to transcend to the ultimate meaning, understanding, and explanation. We need hope and help to sense our future. In this sense, Sawa provides a telescope that allows us to see the unseen.

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