

Sawa and National Service

Over the last 25 years



In Eritrea national service is viewed as a rite of passage to adulthood and a training ground for building good citizens and national unity.

National service provides the practical and experiential education that cannot be found in formal classrooms. It gives the youth knowledge and skills that are vital for the security, prosperity and tranquility of the country and its people. Eritrean national service reshapes the life of the Eritrean society in fundamental ways and accomplishes much-needed national tasks of defense, development and security. It instills the basic Eritrean values upon the young generation.

The national service of Eritrea is the biggest national institution and national practice that brings together hundreds of thousands of Eritrean youth in service to meet the country's critical needs in social, economic, cultural and political sectors. Service to the country and community has a long tradition and strong foundation, with ktet, wefera and maetot being part and parcel of the common Eritrean socio-cultural practices. In addition to the well-known national service, there are also supportive programs and interventions like summer campaign of secondary school students. Every summer, students give community service that focus on environmental protection. This summer campaign run by the Ministry of Education has two broad goals: one is to give service to the country and the

other is to bring about positive effects on the young students in areas that include civic engagement, volunteerism and life skills.

One year after the formal declaration of independence the government of Eritrea launched a compulsory national service for all young men and women of Eritrea. Since then Eritrean youth have been going to Sawa, the training camp, to undertake their duty. Sawa has become a center of training of Eritrea. The national service has now been running for a quarter of a century enabling young Eritreans to continue the nation building efforts, to make the future better and secure and to prepare for any eventualities. During the struggle for independence Nakfa was the symbol of perseverance and determination and a point of reference for the freedom fighters. After independence Sawa has become the symbol of readiness, training and defense and point of reference for the Warsay generation. Sawa produced militarily and academically competent young men and women responsible for the development and protection of the country. So far 32 rounds of young Eritrean have been trained at Sawa. Sawa proves to be the heart of Eritrea that supplied the national veins and arteries with instant and powerful blood of trained youth.



As president Isaias Afwerki once said, the rationale behind the establishment of Sawa was “[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). Today many nations and societies across the world are degenerating. In Eritrea the national glue is so strong that Eritreans of all ages and groups are serving, working, learning and living together in unity and harmony. Sawa and national service have cemented the national unity of Eritreans that started in Sahil.

Sawa and national service make military and community service equally-shared responsibilities across all segments of the Eritrean society. This equality in service, besides averting external threats, creates a cohesive national identity.

Sawa is a place where we interact with our past, understand our present and foresee our future. Eritrean Youth are inhaling the rich history of the revolutionary generation and smelling the cheerful future in Sawa. It teaches the art of patriotism and nationalism, innovation and modernization that are equally needed for the reconstruction of the country. In this sense, Sawa represents the perpetuation of the nation building process that was initiated during the hard years of liberation struggle. Sawa will continue to serve as a cradle of Eritrean nationalism that every Eritrean must visit at least once in his/her life. Sawa teaches Eritrean youth to abandon thinking on a day-to-day and at an individual level. It gives hope and help to understand the present and to sense the future.

Sawa and national service serve as social glue that is critical to the Eritrean society’s survival and continuity in the unstable region. In Eritrea the rights enjoyed by citizens are accompanied by duties and responsibilities typically exemplified by the completion of the national service. The freedom fighters that fought for independence are national heroes and Warsay, the generation that participates in the development and defense of the country, are equally national heroes.

National service in Eritrea is perhaps unique and noble experience of success in Africa. The objective of the service is based on an ideology of the reconstruction of the country, strengthening of the economy and development of an Eritrean identity. In 1994, military training was introduced in the national service, and both women and men between 18 and 40 years are required to give service.

National service is a way of strengthening the civic ideals of public service and community spirit through voluntary participation. The notion of the youth providing some form of service is becoming part of Eritrean youth. The need to give to others, the need to feel that “I have done something for the country” has become the motivation for every Eritrean youth to participate in national service. Eritrea is now proceeding to voluntary youth participation in national issues. Sawa and national service have become effective routes towards voluntary involvement and strengthened the bond between the youth and the community. Sawa and national service teach love and service for Eritrea, responsibility and duty and the importance of giving priority to community and national interest above personal interest.

Sawa and national service played a great role at forming a disciplined society with self-confidence and faithfulness towards the nation. Sawa has produced thousands of trained men and women always prepared to face any challenges that would face Eritrea. Now it has become clear to everyone that Sawa has played significant role in physical fitness, character building and nationalism of Eritrean youth. Sawa and national service teach skills and instill values. The teaching at Sawa is guided by a pro-social approach that engages and integrates the youth with Eritrea’s past and future. The Eritrean youth are now willing to contribute in a far greater level than ever made in the past.

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