



# ERITREA

**From Victim to a Key Player in the  
Geopolitics of the Horn**



Presented on the Multi-Disciplinary Dialogue  
on "Justice, Development and the Geopolitics of the Horn"  
4th – 6th September 2024  
Asmara, Eritrea

**The State of Eritrea  
Ministry of Justice**



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Eritrea: From Victim to a Key Player in the Geopolitics of the Horn

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## ACRONYMS

BMA	British Military Administration
CPC	Country of Particular Concern
CRS	Common Reporting Standard
EEBC	Eritrean Ethiopian Boundary Commission
ELA	Eritrean Liberation Army
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ERREC	Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission
FLN	Algerian National Liberation Front
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IGADD	Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development
MLWE	Muslim League of Western Eritrea



NDP	National Democratic Program
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLMs	National Liberation Movements
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OETA	Occupied Enemy Territory Administration
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PGE	Provisional Government of Eritrea
TGE	Transitional Government of Ethiopia
TPLF	Tigray People Liberation Front
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UP	Unionist Party
US	United States
WWII	Second World War

# INTRODUCTION

The countries of the Horn of Africa are creations of geopolitical manoeuvring of colonial powers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This fact might be unpalatable for some to swallow but swallow we must. The people of the region have paid dearly for the misadventures of their leaders, intent on realizing fantasies of grandeur fabricated from myths of mist existing only in the imagination of pseudo-historians. If we are to break free from the cycle of war, poverty and backwardness that has plagued our region, we must, as much as possible, face head-on the reality of our history, without shying from the skeletons in the cupboard and building on the noble achievements of our forebears. Only then can we redeem history and leverage it to jointly build a bright future for all.

When the Italians named their newly acquired real-estate in the Horn, Eritrea, the native inhabitants of that land were not consulted nor were they aware that their history has just taken, for better or worse, a new direction. When the Italian masters drafted the natives into the imperial army and forced them to fight their wars, the shared suffering created a germ of a new identity. When the Italian masters recruited the natives to provide back-breaking labour for the construction of their roads, railways, palaces, cathedrals and monuments, the shared suffering aroused a new sense of togetherness. When the natives were uprooted and congregated into shanty towns, and forced to work as house maids, factory hands, and

government clerks for pittance, through their collective suffering they were reborn as Eritreans, while their blood and sweat created Eritrea.

When the Italians were defeated and forced out of Eritrea during the Second World War, Eritreans naively expected, at last, they were going to be masters of their fate, masters of Eritrea. Alas, it was not meant to be. The geopolitics of great power rivalry of the Cold War gave them a rude awakening and a bitter but very important lesson: nobody gives you your freedom, you take it, you take it by force if necessary. Thus began one of the longest wars for liberation. When Eritreans raised-up arms and began fighting for their independence they quickly realized that defeating the enemy was not enough, the demons within must also be vanquished. This two-fronted struggle, allowed Eritrean not only to gain their freedom but also to strengthen the bond of nationhood through the camaraderie of shared sacrifice.

The Eritrean war for liberation was one of the bloodies in the history of the region, and the two brotherly people of Eritrea and Ethiopia paid for the folly of others with their best and brightest and decades of lost opportunities. When Eritrea won its independence, there was hope that it was going to be a new dawn for the peoples of the region, an opportunity to learn from history and restart afresh. Unfortunately, there were people still stuck in old mentality and intent on swimming against the current on the river of history. And like their peers in history their preferred method of operation was to align themselves as retainers of great powers rather than serve the interest of their people by genuinely working to bringing about collective peace, justice and prosperity for the people of the region.

The second war between Eritrea and Ethiopia was even more bloody and costly, but in the heavy price it demanded it reaffirmed the need for paradigm shift in the way states think about their security and development. The solution to their problems is found within the region

and not without; and progress and greatness comes from working together to bring peace, justice and prosperity for the entire region and not from taking the easy way out and handing over our problems, along with our destiny, to others.



# PART ONE: STATE FORMATION AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF COLONIALISM IN THE HORN

## I. THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

The Scramble for Africa, a historical phenomenon that had a profound impact on the geopolitical landscape of the African continent, was a complex interplay of various factors, from the establishment of European trading posts in Western Africa to the opening of the Suez Canal and the need for permanent colonial presence.<sup>1</sup>

### **Causes for the Scramble for Africa**

Historians classify the period from 1880 to about 1919, ‘an era of pacification’.<sup>2</sup> During this period, Africa was partitioned, conquered and occupied effectively by the then industrialized European nations.<sup>3</sup> The immediate cause for this was the competition among Great Britain, France and Germany which also in turn led to the Berlin Conference

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<sup>1</sup> Musisi S. and Kinyanda E., ‘Long-Term Impact of War, Civil War, and Persecution in Civilian Populations – Conflict and Post-Traumatic Stress in African Communities’, 11 *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.00020>.

<sup>2</sup> A. Adu Boahen, ‘Africa and the Colonial Challenge’, in A. Adu Boahen (ed), *Africa under Colonial Domination 1880-1935*, (California: University of California Press, 1985) vol. 7, 1-18 at 17.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

(1884-85); and culminated in the partition of the continent on paper.<sup>4</sup> The later years of the 'era of pacification' are characterized by the deployment of troops to effect the partition on the ground, and the effective occupation of the conquered areas by the introduction of various administrative measures and infrastructures for the exploitation of the resources of the colonies.<sup>5</sup>

The Scramble for Africa was a complex and multifaceted historical phenomenon. The establishment of European trading posts in Western Africa, the opening of the Suez Canal, and the need for permanent colonial presence in Africa were among the key factors that contributed to this geopolitical shift.<sup>6</sup>

The presence of European trading posts in Western Africa, such as those established by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, laid the foundation for the Scramble for Africa. These trading posts were primarily concerned with the extraction of natural resources and the establishment of commercial networks, which ultimately led to the desire for more permanent colonial control over the region.<sup>7</sup> The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 was another significant factor that contributed to the Scramble for Africa.<sup>8</sup> The canal provided a direct maritime route between Europe and Asia, making the Red Sea a crucial strategic pathway for the dominant European powers of the time.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the need for permanent colonial presence in Africa was driven by a variety of factors,

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<sup>4</sup> Ewan Sutherland, 'The Scramble for Africa' (Paper presented for the 35<sup>th</sup> Telecommunications Policy Research Conference, George Mason University, Arlington 28-30 September 2000, available at <http://www.3wan.net/>.

<sup>5</sup> See A. Adu Boahen, above n2.

<sup>6</sup> Michael and Trish Johnson, 'Eritrea: The National Question and the Logic of Protracted Struggle', 80 (319) *African Affairs* 181 (1981), at 183.

<sup>7</sup> See Michael and Trish, above n6.

<sup>8</sup> A.A. Abdussalam and F.S. Abusedra, 'The Colonial Economy: North Africa: Libya, Egypt and the Sudan' in A. Abdu Boahen (ed), *General History of Africa: Africa under Colonial Domination 1880-1935* (California: University of California Press, 1985) vol. 7, 440-457 at 449.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

including the desire for political and economic dominance, the expansion of European spheres of influence, and the perceived need to ‘civilize’ the African continent.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Geopolitical Impact of the Scramble for Africa**

The Scramble for Africa had a profound impact on the geopolitical landscape of the continent. The arbitrary division of the African continent by European powers, with little regard for the existing social, economic, and political structures, led to the creation of artificial borders and the disruption of traditional power dynamics. This, in turn, contributed to the emergence of various geopolitical tensions and conflicts, as the newly established colonial states vied for control over resources and strategic locations.

The Scramble for Africa also had a significant impact on the economic and technological development of the continent. The European colonial powers exploited the natural resources and agricultural potential of their respective colonies, at the expense of the local populations. This extraction of resources, coupled with the development of infrastructure (such as railways and ports) to facilitate trade and transportation, had far-reaching consequences for the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape of Africa.

### **The Case of Eritrean as an Italian Colony**

Eritrea is another product of the Scramble for Africa and the power dynamics that existed between the European colonial powers towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Eritrea was established as an Italian colony in 1890, largely as a result of the tensions between France and Britain. The geopolitical competition between these two powers, along with the heavy famine of 1888-1892,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



continuous plunder by war lords from Tigray, the religious mission of the Catholic Church, and the influence of the Rubatino Shipping Company, all contributed to the Italian colonization of Eritrea.<sup>11</sup>

The Italian colonization of Eritrea had a significant impact on the country's political, economic, and technological development. Italy actively pursued its geopolitical, military, and economic interests in the region by settling Italians in Eritrea, developing its infrastructure, exploiting its natural resources and agricultural land, and establishing and expanding port cities to dominate the Red Sea trade routes.

These actions by Italy greatly affected the geopolitical, geoeconomic, and technological landscape of Eritrea. The Italian colonial strategy of using the Askari, a military force composed of Eritrean soldiers, was a key aspect of their geopolitical and geostrategic control in the region. The Italian colonization of Eritrea transformed the country into a strategic hub for their colonial ambitions in the Horn of Africa, with far-reaching consequences for the region's geopolitical development.

## **II. ITALIAN COLONISATION IN ERITREA**

### **History and Motivations of Italian Colonisation**

The Horn of Africa experienced significant changes at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The fall of the Mahdists, the emergence of the Ethiopian Empire, and the expansion of European powers into the region were among the major developments of that time.<sup>12</sup> These changes were shaped by a series of wars that had a profound impact on Eritrea and its population. From the Battle of Gundet in 1875 between Emperor Yohannes and the

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<sup>11</sup> Shawn O. Utsey et.al., 'Assessing the Psychological Consequences of Internalized Colonialism on the Psychological Well-Being of Young Adults in Ghana', 41(3) Journal of Black Psychology 195 (2014), at 198.

<sup>12</sup> Zemhret Yohannes መኸተ አገጻር ኢጣልያዊ መካከለኛ አብ ኤርትራ. (*Resistance against Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*) (Asmara, Eritrea: Hidri Publishers, 2010).

Egyptians, to the Battle of Adwa in 1896 between the Italians and Menelik, Eritrea and its people were severely affected.<sup>13</sup> As a result of these conflicts, coupled with natural calamities like prolonged lack of rainfall; spread of the rinderpest virus, which devastated the cattle population the Eritrean people endured a heavy famine from 1888 to 1892.<sup>14</sup> This not only led to the disruption of Eritrea's social and economic life, but also created a conducive environment for Italian expansionism in the region. Furthermore, the Italian colonization of Eritrea was driven by a broader geopolitical and ideological agenda, which sought to challenge the dominance of other European powers, such as France and Britain, in the region.<sup>15</sup>

This can be traced back to the 1861 political unification of Italy that happened through territorial annexations led to the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy.<sup>16</sup> However, the unified Italian state faced domestic issues like poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, which drove many Italians to emigrate. Italy, aware of its political weakness, sought support from Great Britain for its colonial ambitions.<sup>17</sup>

In 1869, the Italian missionary Giuseppe Sapeto purchased a small territory in Assab on the Red Sea coast, acting on behalf of the Italian government, which was initially reluctant to claim the territory openly due to concerns over European rivalries.<sup>18</sup> Over the next decade, Italy gradually consolidated its control over Assab and the surrounding region, eventually establishing the colony of Eritrea in 1890. This colonial venture was driven by Italy's desire to establish a permanent presence in the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Morten J, Strangio D and Weisdorf J.L. 'A Case of Its Own? A Review of Italy's Colonisation of Eritrea, 1890-1941', 50 (1) *The Journal of European Economic History* 99 (2021).

<sup>16</sup> Bartolini G. (ed.), *A History of International Law in Italy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Bocresion Haile, *The Collusion on Eritrea*, (2000).

strategically important Horn of Africa and control the Red Sea trade routes. As a result, the small territory of Assab (about 630 km<sup>2</sup>, inhabited by 1,253 people) officially became the first Italian colony.<sup>19</sup> In a speech before the Chamber of Deputies Mancini pointed out that Assab was a territory belonging to Italy in the political sense, although it did not constitute an integral part of the State and was subject to a special regime, as appropriate for a colony.<sup>20</sup> In 1884, the Italian ambassador in London informed Mancini that Britain's Foreign Secretary had asked if Italy was willing to occupy the port of Massawa on the Red Sea.<sup>21</sup> Italy accepted, and in 1885, Italian forces occupied Massawa without resistance from the Egyptian garrison.<sup>22</sup> This marked the beginning of Italy's colonization of the region, which was formally established as the colony of Eritrea in 1890.

The relationship between Italy and Ethiopia, however, soon deteriorated. Italy sought more favourable boundaries than those agreed in the Treaty of Wuchale, and it pursued a divide and conquer policy against Emperor Menelik.<sup>23</sup> Italy also claimed the treaty established an Italian protectorate over Ethiopia, which Menelik later discovered. Negotiations failed, leading to the Battle of Adwa in 1896, where the Italian army was defeated. As a result, Italy recognized Ethiopia as a sovereign and independent state, and the Treaty of Wuchale was terminated.<sup>24</sup>

### **Italian Colonisation Objectives, Policies and Strategies in Eritrea**

The Italian colonization of Eritrea was characterized by a range of policies and strategies aimed at consolidating their control over the territory and its population. The Italian colonization of Eritrea was driven by three

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<sup>19</sup> See Strangio et.al., above n 15.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Redie Bereketab, 'Eritrea: The making of a nation 1890-1991' (Doctoral dissertation submitted to the Upsaliensis University, Upsala, on file with the author).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

primary objectives. Firstly, Italy sought to settle its 'surplus' population in Eritrea, which was deemed climatically suitable for European settlers and possessed fertile valleys and irrigable plains.<sup>25</sup> To this end, the Italian colonial government systematically expropriated most of the fertile land from native Eritrean farmers and instituted a new land tenure system, placing nearly half of the country's land under government control. This was facilitated by a series of decrees that designated certain areas, such as coastal regions, forests, and lowlands, as 'public land' (*Terre Dominiali*).<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, the Italian colonial regime aimed to acquire cheap sources of raw materials for its expanding industrial sector and to establish an expanded market for its finished products without competition from other European economies.<sup>27</sup> To achieve this, the colonial administration set up light industries in Eritrea that did not contribute significantly to the country's economic growth but served as 'links' for the smooth transfer of Italian goods into the Eritrean and East African markets. The colonial government also invested heavily in infrastructure projects, such as roads, railways, and seaports, to facilitate the movement of goods and resources.<sup>28</sup>

Thirdly, Italy sought to use Eritrea as a springboard for further colonial expansion in the Horn of Africa, primarily targeting Ethiopia, Somalia, and Yemen. This ambition was fuelled by Italy's desire to 'revive' the Roman Empire through fresh conquests and a sense of being 'belittled' by other European powers for not having a significant colonial presence. The rise of Benito Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy further accelerated these

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<sup>25</sup> See Bocresion, above n18.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Tate H.R., 'The Italian Colonial Empire' 40 (159) *Journal of the Royal African Society* 146 (1941).

<sup>28</sup> See Bartolini G., above n 16.

expansionist aspirations, leading to the incorporation of Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia into the Italian East Africa Empire in 1936.<sup>29</sup>

As a result, all the policies and development projects initiated by the Italian colonial government were centred on those three primary objectives. The Italian administration launched its first major development projects in Eritrea starting from the late 1880s. For instance, the construction of the Eritrean railway network commenced in 1887, with the first line connecting the port city of Massawa to the inland town of Saati, located 27 kilometres from the coast, completed in 1888. This railway line was later extended to reach the capital city of Asmara in 1911.<sup>30</sup> In addition to the railway, the Italians built an extensive infrastructure of ports, roads, telecommunications, factories, administrative centres, and police stations across the colony, which helped unify Eritrea under a centralized colonial government.<sup>31</sup> Many historians and specialists have traced the development of a distinct Eritrean national consciousness to this period, as the large-scale recruitment of Eritreans as askaris (colonial soldiers) in the Italian army reinforced a sense of shared identity among the population. These Eritrean askaris participated in the two Italo-Ethiopian wars as well as the war against the Ottoman Empire in Libya.<sup>32</sup> However, the Italian colonial administration also implemented policies aimed at limiting the development of an Eritrean elite. In 1932, the Fascist government expelled Protestant missionaries, who had been the primary providers of education beyond the fourth grade for Eritreans.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the colonial authorities restricted the access of all Eritreans,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Tsegai A. The economic viability of an independent Eritrea. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln; 1981.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Hess R.L., 'Italy and Africa: Colonial ambitions in the First World War', 4 (1) The Journal of African History 105 (1963).

<sup>33</sup> Lass-Westphal, Ingeborg. "Protestant Missions During and After the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1937." *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10, no. 1 (1972): 89-101.zh

including those of mixed racial background, to schools, jobs, and social services in the urban areas.<sup>34</sup>

### **Economic Exploitation of Eritrea under the Italian Colonisation**

The Italian colonization of Eritrea was also characterized by the systematic economic exploitation of the territory and its population. The colonial administration's primary objective was to transform Eritrea into a source of raw materials and a captive market for Italian finished products, rather than developing a self-sustaining economy.<sup>35</sup> To achieve this, the Italian colonial government implemented a range of policies that disrupted the traditional economic and social structures in Eritrea. For instance, the colonial authorities confiscated large tracts of land from native Eritrean farmers and allocated them to Italian settlers, effectively depriving the local population of their means of livelihood.

The colonial administration also imposed heavy taxes on the Eritrean population, with the revenues used to finance infrastructure projects that primarily benefited the Italian settlers and the colonial administration, rather than the local population.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the colonial government established a system of forced labour, which obligated Eritreans to provide labour with little pay for the construction of roads, railways, and other infrastructure projects.<sup>37</sup> The Italians also heavily exploited natural resources like gold, zinc, copper...etc. and used Eritrea as a source of raw materials and agricultural produce for the Italian mainland. Additionally, the colonial administration implemented a strict system of control over the Eritrean economy, including the imposition of tariffs, monopolies, and restrictions on trade and commerce.<sup>38</sup> The economic exploitation of

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<sup>34</sup> Pretelli M., 'Education in the Italian Colonies during the Interwar Period', 16 (3) *Modern Italy* 275 (2011).

<sup>35</sup> See Tsegai, above n 30.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Eritrea under Italian colonization had a significant impact on the country's social and political development.

### **Social and Cultural Impact of Italian Colonisation**

Economic Transformation and Class Structure is one of the impacts of Italian colonisation in Eritrea. Italian colonialism brought significant economic changes to Eritrea. The establishment of a capitalist system and the exploitation of local resources were central to this transformation.<sup>39</sup> However, the impact on the working class and the development of a well-established capitalist economy was limited. Eritrea did not witness economic growth or improved education in its citizens.<sup>40</sup> This is because Italian capital investment primarily focused on import/export trade rather than productive activities within the colony. Hence it did little for the locals in Eritrea.

Moreover, the Italian colonisation significantly influenced the social and cultural fabric of Eritrea, as the colonial authorities implemented policies aimed at transforming the local population according to Italian norms and values.<sup>41</sup> The colonial administration sought to impose Italian language, religion, and cultural practices on the Eritrean people, often through coercive measures. This led to the gradual erosion of traditional Eritrean customs and the emergence of a hybrid culture that combined Italian and local elements.<sup>42</sup> The social stratification within Eritrean society also shifted, with the colonial elite and Italian settlers occupying positions of power and privilege, while the local population faced increased marginalization and exploitation.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Tekeste Negash, *Italian colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941: Policies, praxis and impact*, (1990).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

However, the little education and industrialisation added with the conscription of locals as askaris to fight Italian wars led to national consciousness. The unfortunate deed of the colonial government to limit education for Eritreans viewing it as a potential threat to colonialism itself started to fail slowly. The role of intellectual elitism in shaping national consciousness was high and education eventually was seen as a vehicle for fostering national identity.

### **Italian Colonization and Eritrean Identity Formation**

The Italian colonization of Eritrea had a profound impact on the formation of Eritrean identity. The influx of Italian settlers, language, and cultural practices significantly influenced the social and cultural fabric of Eritrean society. The colonial administration's efforts to assimilate Eritreans into the Italian colonial system resulted in the emergence of a hybrid cultural identity, blending elements of Italian and local Eritrean traditions.<sup>44</sup>

The colonial period also saw the consolidation of Eritrea's diverse ethnic and religious groups into a more cohesive national identity. The Italian colonial administration's language policies significantly impacted Eritrean identity and nationalism.<sup>45</sup> By instituting the Italian language as the primary medium of instruction in Eritrean schools, the colonial authorities aimed to facilitate communication and assimilation.<sup>46</sup> However, this linguistic shift had the unintended consequence of undermining the widely spoken local languages, which were deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of Eritrean society. This linguistic imposition contributed to a complex interplay between Eritrean and Italian cultural influences, as Eritreans

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<sup>44</sup> Barrera G. Patrilinearity, race, and identity: the upbringing of Italo-Eritreans during Italian colonialism. *Italian colonialism*. 2005:97-108.

<sup>45</sup> Chelati Dirar U., 'Colonialism and the Construction of National Identities: The Case of Eritrea', 1 (2) *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 256 (2007).

<sup>46</sup> See Pretelli, above n 33.



grappled with the tension between their native traditions and the imposed colonial norms.

Furthermore, the colonial authorities established a Western-style education system in Eritrea. While this exposure to new knowledge and skills benefited the Eritrean population, it also served to reinforce the colonial power structures and create a class of educated elites.<sup>47</sup> These elites often found themselves caught in a precarious position, torn between their Eritrean heritage and the aspirations of the colonial administration.<sup>48</sup> Paradoxically, this education system also played a crucial role in the rise of Eritrean nationalism.<sup>49</sup> As Eritrean youth became more educated, they developed a deeper awareness of their country's history, culture, and the injustices of colonial rule. This intellectual awakening fuelled a growing desire for self-determination and independence.<sup>50</sup>

The conscription of Eritreans into the Italian colonial army, known as askaris, further shaped Eritrean identity and nationalism. This experience exposed Eritrean soldiers to a wider world and diverse cultures, fostering a sense of unity as they shared common hardships and sacrifices. The participation of Eritreans in Second World War (hereinafter referred as WWII), fighting alongside Italian forces, created a paradoxical situation. While serving in the Italian army, many Eritreans became disillusioned with colonial rule and developed a stronger sense of Eritrean nationalism. Their experiences on the battlefield contributed to a growing desire for independence and self-determination, with some Eritrean soldiers eventually joining resistance movements against the colonial regime.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See Tekeste, above n 38.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Mohammad AS. Competing identities and the emergence of Eritrean nationalism between 1941 and 1952. In *African Dynamics in a Multipolar World: 5th European Conference on African Studies—Conference Proceedings 2014* (pp. 1376-1408). Centro de Estudos Internacionais do Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL).

The military training and experience gained by these Eritrean soldiers proved invaluable in the subsequent struggle for liberation. While Italian colonization had a profound impact on Eritrean society, it also played a paradoxical role in the formation of Eritrean identity. Education and conscription, initially intended to serve colonial interests, ultimately contributed to the rise of Eritrean nationalism and the eventual struggle for independence.

### **Assessing the Long-Term Effects of Italian Colonisation on Eritrean Geopolitical Development**

The legacy of Italian colonisation in Eritrea has had a significant and lasting impact on the geopolitical dynamics of the Horn of Africa. The arbitrary demarcation of Eritrea's borders, the creation of a hybrid Eritrean-Italian cultural identity, and the abrupt decision taken on the fate of Eritrea after WWII have all contributed to the complex and volatile geopolitical landscape in the region. While Italy's colonial presence in Eritrea was relatively short-lived, its consequences have reverberated for decades. The impact of Italian colonialism on Eritrean identity and the subsequent struggle for independence has shaped the country's trajectory and its relationship with its neighbours. As Eritrea continues to navigate the challenges posed by its colonial past and the ongoing regional tensions, it will be crucial for policymakers and scholars to gain a deeper understanding of the historical roots of these issues. Only by acknowledging and addressing the legacies of colonialism can the countries of the Horn of Africa work towards lasting stability and cooperation.



# **PART TWO: ERITREAN NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE COLD WAR**

## **I. HOW THE BRITISH BETRAYED ERITREA**

Despite wartime promises that had raised hopes for liberation from foreign domination, the British placed Eritrea, along with Ethiopia and Somalia, under the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (hereinafter referred as OETA). This administration was led by Sir Philip Mitchell, a South African-born British colonial official with extensive experience in Africa, and operated from Nairobi, Kenya. It soon became evident that freedom for Eritrea was not part of the British agenda in East Africa. The British had no intention of honouring their initial pledge.<sup>1</sup> To the dismay of the Eritrean people, the strategic goals pursued in the war did not consider their wishes or interests. Instead of liberation, the British aimed to dismember Eritrea, divide its people, and erase its national identity.<sup>2</sup>

With its surrender, Italy lost its colonies in the Horn of Africa. In a stroke, the sun set forever on Mussolini's crumbling new Roman Empire. British occupation was formalized as part of the spoils of war. However, it

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<sup>1</sup> Vestal, Theodore M, *Consequence of the British Occupation of Ethiopia during World War II, Rediscovering the British Empire* Barry Ward (eds.), Melbourne, FL Krieger, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

retained the ‘fascists in high office’; maintained the ‘fascist colon bar intact’; and sanctioned the continued display of the sign, ‘Vietato per Nativi’ (Prohibited for Natives), over the front doors of cafés, cinemas, restaurants, and hotels.<sup>3</sup> It also retained the racial system of separate hospital beds for Eritreans and Europeans. It “divided Eritrea’s populace by ethnicity, religion, region, language and locality, in order to divide and rule; and committed grave injustices against the Eritrean people. To the inhabitants of Eritrea, the change in regime brought little apparent change in the system of government.”<sup>4</sup>

Placing Eritrea under military occupation displayed a cynical betrayal of trust, initiating the first in a long series of international betrayals of Eritrea and its people that were to follow suit in the future. Stephen Longrigg, Chief Military Administrator, admitted that much in his first annual report on the OETA of Eritrea when he stated that the British inability or unwillingness to keep their promise was a cause of complaints by the ‘natives,’ in a sniping reference to the Eritreans, stating; “*We had unfortunately made promises or half-promises before the occupation which we have been unable (or not always willing) to implement, thereby giving the natives some grounds for complaints (emphasis added).*”<sup>5</sup>

The maintenance of de facto Italian domination, with the reviled fascists holding high office and wielding real power under the British Military Administration (hereinafter referred as BMA), incensed many Eritreans. Adding insult to injury, the fascists carried out brutal acts of retribution with vengeance against Eritreans for ‘disloyalty’ during the war. Abusive and vindictive Italian behaviour aggravated public discontent and lent new impetus to Eritrean aspirations for self-government. The retention of

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Trevaskis, G.K.N., *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition: 1941-1952*, Oxford University Press, London, 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Italian jurisdiction, courts, and judges (until 1950) as well as Italian officials, carabinieri, and Sudanese soldiers in the police and security services under the BMA caused great popular indignation and palpable tension that led to several violent incidents between May 1941 and August 1946.<sup>6</sup> These actions not only failed to meet the Eritrean aspirations for freedom but also exacerbated tensions and discontent among the population. The legacy of these betrayals had a lasting impact on the Eritrean struggle for independence and shaped the political landscape of the region for years to come.

## **II. THE BRITISH ATTEMPT TO MAKE ERITREA A NON-VIABLE INDEPENDENT STATE AND PARTITION IT**

During the 1940s, the global balance of power was shifting dramatically. The Axis Powers were on the losing side of the war. Within the Allied camp, the British Empire's influence was waning, while the United States was emerging as the new world power. In Eritrea's neighbourhood across the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia and North Yemen were independent, but South Yemen was still under British control. On the African side, Djibouti was under French rule, Sudan was effectively a British colony, and Ethiopia had just been freed from Italian occupation and placed under British oversight.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid; For example: In August 1941, scuffles broke out between Sudanese soldiers and Eritrean civilians in Massawa, causing the death of 15 persons on both sides. Similar clashes occurred in the port city on 8 and 20 January 1943, involving Eritrean police officers and civilians, Italian officers, and Sudanese soldiers and workers, resulting in 21 people dead and 20 wounded. Most of the casualties were unarmed Eritrean civilians. The worst incident occurred in downtown Asmara on 28 August 1946. Some Sudanese soldiers got involved in an argument with a group of Eritreans. A Sudanese soldier died in the ensuing brawl. When the news reached their barracks on the outskirts of the capital, 70-armed Sudanese soldiers arrived on the scene and, in reprisal, started a shooting spree that targeted Christian Eritreans and lasted for two hours. In all, 46 civilians and 3 Sudanese soldiers died, while 70 civilians and 13 soldiers sustained injuries.

The British government wasn't satisfied with just occupying Eritrea; they had plans to divide it.<sup>7</sup> In a step that revealed marked contrast between word and deed, they devised a scheme that would essentially erase Eritrea as a political entity.<sup>8</sup> The plan aimed to split Eritrea between Ethiopia and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, mostly along sectarian and regional lines. The idea was to divide Eritrea into three parts: the predominantly Muslim Western Lowlands, Northern Highlands, and northern Coastal Plains would go to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan; the predominantly Christian Central Plateau, the mostly Muslim Central Coastal Plains, and the port of Massawa would join a Tigray state or province under European administration; and Denkel and the port of Assab would be ceded to Ethiopia. An initial variant of the plan even suggested keeping British control over Asmara and Massawa, connected by a corridor to Sudan.

This partition plan was first conceived in 1942 and adopted on May 18, 1943. It was the brainchild of the British Committee on Ethiopia, chaired by Lord Moyne, and included key figures like Colonel Stephen Longrigg, Mr. Robert G. Howe, and General William Platt. The plan underwent several modifications but retained its core objective of dismembering Eritrea until it became official British policy in April 1946. The British presented it for resolution during the third session of the United Nations General Assembly (hereinafter referred as UNGA) in May 1949, arguing that Eritrea was ethnically divided and economically non-viable, and thus should be dismembered along its natural lines of cleavage. It was tabled as: *“Ethnically disunited and economically non-viable, there is no good reason for preserving it (Eritrea) as an administrative unit under any form of administration, whether under Individual Trusteeship or restored Italian rule. The right solution*

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<sup>7</sup> Trevaski, G.K.N 1960.

<sup>8</sup> Longrigg, Stephen H., Half Yearly Report by the Military Administrator on the Occupied Enemy Territory of Eritrea 1942, preface.

would seem to be to dismember it along its natural lines of cleavage (emphasis added).”<sup>9</sup>

WWII in Europe officially ended on May 8, 1945. The leaders of the three victorious powers—Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, and Harry Truman—met in Potsdam, Germany, from July 17 to August 2, 1945. They agreed to establish a council of foreign ministers from the three countries plus France and China to conclude a peace treaty with Italy and decide the future of its former colonies. The Council of Ministers held its first meeting in London from September 11 to October 2, 1945, and its second meeting in Paris from April 25 to May 16, 1946. The British formally proposed the plan to partition Eritrea at the Paris meeting. Negotiations over the colonial question and competing national ambitions over the former Italian possessions dragged on. The peace treaty with Italy was finally reached on February 10, 1947, and came into effect on September 15, 1947. The treaty required Italy to renounce its former colonies, which were to be disposed of by the Four Powers within a year. If they couldn’t agree, the matter would be referred to the UNGA.

As the council couldn’t reach an agreement, they sent a Commission of Inquiry to the territories to understand the wishes of the local population and report on the political, economic, and social conditions. The Commission visited Eritrea from November 12, 1947, to January 3, 1948, and found a sharp difference of opinion between the British and Americans on one side, and the Russians and French on the other. The Four Powers eventually abandoned the effort to reach an agreement and referred the matter to the United Nations (hereinafter referred as UN) on September 15, 1948.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Memorandum to the British Cabinet, 18 April 1946, p 14, British National Archives (BNA).

<sup>10</sup> Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea, General Assembly, Official Records: 5<sup>th</sup> session, Supplement no.8 (A/1285), 1950. (Four-point commission)



The peace treaty transformed Italy from an enemy into a co-belligerent, giving it a voice in the disposal of its former colonies. Initially, Italy opposed the British plan to partition Eritrea and advocated for its immediate independence. However, Italy eventually agreed to support the partition plan in exchange for British backing of its proposal to gain trusteeships in Somalia and Tripolitania. This agreement between the British and Italian foreign ministers, Ernest Bevin and Carlo Sforza, led to the Bevin-Sforza Plan, which was co-sponsored during the fourth session of the UNGA on May 10, 1949.

### **The Bevin-Sforza Plan**

The Bevin-Sforza Plan proposed a composite resolution on the disposal of the former Italian colonies. It proposed to grant independence to Somalia after a period of ten years of Italian trusteeship; to grant independence to Libya after a period of ten years of trusteeship, with the three provinces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan placed under Italian, British, and French trusteeships, respectively; and to partition Eritrea between Ethiopia and the Sudan. The First Committee adopted the resolution, jointly sponsored by Britain and Italy. In considering the draft composite resolution on 17 May 1949, the UNGA voted first on the proposal for each territory and then on the resolution as a whole. The separate rounds of voting resolved the disposal of Eritrea and the two Libyan provinces of Cyrenaica and Fezzan but left the fates of Somalia and the third Libyan province of Tripolitania pending. Under the circumstances, the UNGA decided to disregard the outcome of the separate balloting and reconsider the resolution on the disposal of the former Italian colonies as a whole. Accordingly, it reconsidered the Bevin-Sforza Plan as a package and rejected it, with 37 votes against, 14 in favour, and 7 abstentions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> UN General Assembly, 17 May 1949. [Http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/3/ares3.htm](http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/3/ares3.htm).

The defeat of the Bevin-Sforza plan spared Eritrea dismemberment. Crucial as it was for the retention of Eritrea's territorial unity, however, the rejection of the Bevin-Sforza plan per se advanced neither the country's prospects for immediate decolonization nor its people's legitimate aspirations for independence. It merely postponed the issue of the disposal of Eritrea and kept its fate uncertain.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Plunder of Eritrea by the British**

On January 5, 1943, the British Government, along with 16 other UN governments and the French Committee, signed a formal declaration to combat and defeat Axis plundering of occupied Europe. They reserved all rights to declare invalid any transfers or dealings with property, rights, and interests in Nazi-occupied territories. However, the same British Government allowed the plunder of British-occupied Eritrea, applying different standards for behaviour in Nazi-occupied Europe and British-occupied Eritrea.<sup>13</sup>

The BMA orchestrated the wholesale pillage and destruction of Eritrea's industries, productive assets, and vital properties. This operation, described as "a disgrace to British civilization," saw the British systematically plundering, dismantling, and destroying millions of dollars'

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<sup>12</sup> This was agreed by the British Cabinet under Prime Minister Clement Attlee on 6 September 1950, BNA; A UN Commission, comprising delegates from Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan, and South Africa, was subsequently set up to review the question of Eritrea and propose a solution for the future of the country. The delegates of Guatemala and Pakistan presented a joint report and proposed a ten-year UN trusteeship followed by independence, in line with the wishes of the 'great majority of the population.' The delegates of Norway, Burma, and South Africa presented a combined report and two different proposals. The Norwegian delegate proposed union with Ethiopia, except for the Western Province, which would remain under British administration and eventually allowed to decide between union with Ethiopia or the Sudan. The delegates of Burma and South Africa proposed that Eritrea 'be a self-governing unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown,' a compromise between independence and union with Ethiopia. In the final analysis, the failure of the UN Commission to present a joint report and a single proposal on the future of Eritrea placed the matter in the hands of the Big Powers, whose divergent geopolitical interests obstructed consensus on the way forward.

<sup>13</sup> Inter-Allied Declaration Against Acts of Dispossession Committed in Territories under Enemy Occupation or Control, PP 443-444.

worth of Eritrean assets<sup>14</sup>. They dismantled and sold industrial installations, equipment, cranes, docks, buildings, warehouses, stores, bridges, factories, machinery, ships, and facilities in cities like Asmara, Massawa, Dekemhare, Gurae, Mai Habar, Assab, and Zula. What the Italians had built in Eritrea for colonial grandeur, the British looted and ruined for colonial spoils.<sup>15</sup>

Notable items of loot included the Asmara-Massawa Cableway, mobile docks in Massawa, 16 large ships, and stocks worth \$20 million taken from stores in several cities and sold abroad.<sup>16</sup> The BMA sold a mobile dock to Pakistan for £500,000 and most of the other assets to countries like India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen, as well as to Italian and Arab traders in the Middle East.<sup>17</sup> Eritrea could arguably establish a reliable estimate of the total value of the pillage and reserve all rights to declare invalid the transfers and dealings with all the properties under the British Government for the present value of the assets lost to plunder and demolition, executed under the auspices of the British Military Administration.<sup>18</sup>

The British were well aware of Eritrea's economic prospects. The Asmara Industrial Exhibition of 1943 showcased Eritrea's potential as a supplier of industrial goods for the large Middle East market. Eritrea's exports grew by about 240 percent within the next two years, from £494,000 in 1943 to £1,678,000 in 1945.<sup>19</sup> Instead of enhancing this potential, the British

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<sup>14</sup> Pakhust, Sylvia, 'Eritrea on the Eve', Woodward Green, 1952, P13, 15-16

<sup>15</sup> Alemseged Tesfai, Aynfelale, 2001, P. 138-139.

<sup>16</sup> E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *Eritrea on the Eve* (Woodward Green, UK: New Times and Ethiopia News Books, 1952) at 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, at 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

requisitioned essential plant and equipment and prevented economic development to further their hopes of partition the country.<sup>20</sup>

At the time, cotton production was the most valuable agricultural asset, and earlier prospecting had established the presence of substantial mineral deposits in Eritrea. The British purposely paralyzed the agricultural, agro-industrial, and mining sectors, while restricting the prospecting of gold, which could have revitalized the economy. They also subverted efforts to exploit other mineral resources and discarded cotton production to engender economic depression. Making matters worse, the British imposed heavy and severe income, property, and municipality taxes, disregarding the population's low- and diminishing-income levels and ability to pay. They also made Eritreans pay school and hospital fees and special annual contributions to help run the colonial administration.<sup>21</sup>

The result of this general plunder, destruction of industrial and transport assets, and heavy taxation was the transfer of wealth from Eritrea to Great Britain. This, along with the engineered economic depression, led to an abrupt decline and regression of Eritrea's thriving and relatively developed modern economic sector, whose foundations had been laid by the Italians. The immediate impact of the British pillage and paralysis of the Eritrean economy was mass unemployment, impoverishment, and social discord.

Besides profiteering from the spoils of war, plunder served as an integral part of the overall strategy to destabilize Eritrea. This contrived decline provided fresh evidence of the economic unfeasibility of independence. These machinations aimed to support the logic behind the partition plan. An Eritrea that was economically unviable, politically unstable, and socially discordant would be an unlikely candidate for independent

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

statehood and an easy target for dismemberment in the malleable tribunal of international diplomacy.

The British cited the engineered economic distress, political discord, and social volatility as arguments of Eritrean weakness, presenting them as evidence of the economic and political unviability of Eritrean independence. Ironically, this happened during the twilight of the British Empire and after Ethiopia's liberation from Italian occupation, when the wind of change for national independence was in the air. These schemes influenced the shape and orientation of Eritrean political organization and artificially deepened its social divides. They might also have created a misguided constituency for the union project with Ethiopia but ultimately, they failed to garner support for the partition plan to split Eritrea.

### **III. THE BUDDING ERITREAN NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND HOW THE BRITISH AND ETHIOPIA TRIED TO THWART INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENTS**

It is in the nature of a colonial system to seek to systematically destroy the “national culture” and promote a culture of ‘regionalism’ and ‘separatism’ in contest with the culture of unity of the colonized people, in the service of colonial domination. Under this premise, the British drew up the plan to divide Eritrea based on ethnic, regional, and religious factors. The scheme was designed to foster ‘separateness’, prompting the budding national movement to resort to region/religion as a mobilizing principle, and induce the formation of political parties along regional, religious, and linguistic lines.

Having concocted the plan, the BMA schemed to define the terms of reference and drive the internal debate on the future of Eritrea in a manner designed to foster ethnic, regional, and religious schisms within the

nationalist movement and to prepare the ground for the partition of the country. In October 1943, the chief British military administrator announced that Eritreans would henceforth be allowed to discuss the political affairs of their country and express opinions on its future in an organized way, spurring intense jockeying and a flurry of activities for the formation of political parties.

In August 1944, Brigadier Longrigg authored an article under the guise of an Eritrean Tigrinya-speaking Christian highlander and had it translated and published in the BMA-run Tigrinya weekly, *Semunawi Gazetta*.<sup>22</sup> The article depicted Eritrea as intricately divided between two main regions, peoples, and cultures: the highlands inhabited by Tigrinya-speaking Christians and the lowlands inhabited by mostly Tigre or Arabic-speaking Muslims. Disguising the British design with the garb of Eritrean desires, the article opined that the lowlanders wished to unite with the Sudan with whom they share educational, commercial, and religious affinity. It also opined that the highlanders wished to unite and establish one country with the Tigrayans in northern Ethiopia with whom they share ethnic, religious, cultural, historical, educational, and traditional affinity and a common Axumite heritage. The article aimed to prepare the groundwork for the execution of the British plan to partition Eritrea. It sought to direct national debate, and split the Eritrean body politic, along regional, religious, and linguistic lines; and drive a wedge between Highlander and Lowlander, Christian and Muslim, and Tigrinya and Tigre/Arabic speaker. It set the stage for the formation of political parties based on sub-national affiliation; and encourage the use of sectarian considerations as the underlying mobilizing principle of political organization in order to

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<sup>22</sup> Alemseghed Tesfai, *አይገራለሉ (Let's not put asunder to ourselves)*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Asmara, Eritrea: Hidri publishers, 2007).

undermine national unity, divide the country, and facilitate the realization of the partition plan.<sup>23</sup>

The advocacy of a greater Tigray state and cession of western Eritrea to the Sudan was designed to sow national discord and division along sectarian lines. It targeted the unity of the Eritrean people and the territorial integrity of Eritrea. Partition would reverse the historical process of colonial state formation, undo the dynamics of the making of Eritrea, and erase Eritrean national identity. Hence, the Italians accused the British of pursuing a deliberate policy of divide and rule (*divide et impera*) in encouraging the Unionists in the Plateau and the Moslem League in the Lowlands; introducing Arabic and Tigrinya into the school system; impoverishing the territory; and promoting communal strife in the service of the partition plan.<sup>24</sup>

The British authorities connived to widen social divisions, incite religious friction, antagonize inter-communal relations, and poison the political climate. They undertook measures harmful to national unity and communal harmony while allowing the disruption of public order and security by failing, for instance, to prevent violence by Moslem Sudanese soldiers that targeted Christian civilians. In the same vein, reluctance to confront Ethiopian-backed armed political banditry that conducted an overt campaign of assassinations, intimidation, and threats against prominent leaders and supporters of the Independence Bloc fuelled insecurity, vitiated peaceful political contest, and stoked social tension. The uncanny mix of fostering sectarian politics and failing to prevent partisan violence aimed to stir popular indignation, incite religious animosities, and undermine the unity of the nationalist movement.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

A nascent nationalist movement that demanded independence for a united Eritrea, intact within its colonial treaty borders, emerged in opposition to these manoeuvres. It articulated the popular aversion to the partition plan and hostility to the union project. The burgeoning Eritrean nationalist movement challenged British imperial interests and Ethiopian expansionist designs. Opposition to the partition plan, in particular, galvanized Eritrean public opinion in defence of a common destiny, reinforced popular awareness of a shared national identity, and catalysed the nationalist resistance movement.

#### **IV. THE DENIAL OF INDEPENDENCE TO ERITREA BY THE US, THE UNGA RESOLUTION 390A(V) AND THE FAKE FEDERATION**

After a decade of intense struggle during British colonial rule and amidst a climate filled with imperialist intrigues, the issue of Eritreans' right to self-determination was presented to the UN. A commission was established to investigate this matter. However, the Eritrean people faced significant limitations in expressing their desires for self-governance, both within Eritrea and at the UN. This restriction stemmed from the predetermined stance of United States (hereinafter referred as US) imperialism, which emerged as the primary imperial force post-WWII, along with its allies, who had already determined that Eritrea's quest for independence would not be granted, dictating the fate of the Eritrean people.<sup>25</sup>

The enduring factors that influenced superpower interests in Eritrea were multifaceted. Eritrea's strategic position on the Red Sea, serving as a crucial link between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, presented a key attraction due to its proximity to the oil-rich Middle East.

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<sup>25</sup> Dan Connell, *Against all odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution*, The Red Sea Press Inc. 1993, 22.



Additionally, the capital Asmara's unique advantage as a surveillance platform for monitoring both adversaries and allies added to its significance. The geopolitical and diplomatic importance of Ethiopia within Africa further heightened the region's appeal.

During the peak of WWII, the US, which soon supplanted the United Kingdom (hereinafter referred as UK) as the leading global power, took over Radio Marina in Asmara in 1942 to serve as a wartime communications hub. In 1953, it further established Kagnew Station, a key military and intelligence communications base. The strategic location and altitude of Asmara, aligned longitudinally with Moscow, provided the US military base with a unique advantage to monitor Kremlin communications. Consequently, Eritrea became a pivotal component in the post-war US defence strategy against potential Soviet expansion in the Middle East and the southern Mediterranean.

The inception of Kagnew Station marked the beginning of American involvement in Eritrean affairs, setting the stage for long-term US engagement in the region with significant destabilizing effects. Amidst the evolving rivalry between major powers concerning the fate of Italy's former colonies, the US's desire to maintain this vital base led to a policy decision a decade later. This decision prioritized US strategic interests over Eritrea's legitimate right to self-determination and the region's long-term stability, within the context of the Cold War.

John F. Dulles, the then US Secretary of State and the Representative to the Fifth Session of the UNGA, encapsulated this stance in his statement: *“From the point of view of justice, the opinion of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the United States in the Red*

*Sea Basin and world peace make it necessary that the country [Eritrea] be linked with our ally Ethiopia (emphasis added)."*<sup>26</sup>

U.S. imperialism, leveraging neo-colonial tactics to advance its interests in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, identified the Haile Selassie regime as a compliant ally and moved to subjugate the Eritrean people under the feudal rule of Haile Selassie.<sup>27</sup> The US coerced Eritrea into a pseudo-federation with Ethiopia, subsequently securing a 25-year mutual defence pact in 1953, excluding Eritrea from the decision-making process.<sup>28</sup> This agreement allowed the US to establish the significant Kagnew Station military base in Eritrea.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Ethiopia, in its expansionist pursuits, welcomed Israel to exploit Eritrean territories and waters, permitting Israel to set up naval and intelligence bases on islands like Haleb and Fatma near the Bab el Mandeb Strait to monitor Middle Eastern affairs.<sup>30</sup>

Following the collapse of its attempt to absorb a portion of Eritrea into the Sudanese colony, The British also adopted a stance akin to that of the US. British authorities exploited the political crisis and economic distress of their making to fabricate misleading reports suggesting that an independent Eritrea would lack economic viability and political stability.<sup>31</sup> Aligned with imperialist goals, Haile Selassie's regime then audaciously demanded control over Eritrea, asserting Eritrea's historical union with Greater Ethiopia over millennia and emphasizing Ethiopia's critical need of access to sea for its survival as justifications for Eritrea's annexation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Dulles, John Foster, United States Representative to the Fifth General Assembly of the UN

<sup>27</sup> Okbazghi Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*, The University of Florida Press., 1991, 93.

<sup>28</sup> James Firebrace & Stuart Holland MP, *Never Kneel Down; Drought, Development and Liberation in Eritrea*, The Red Sea Press Inc. 1985, 22

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>31</sup> Eritrean People's Liberation Front, *Political Report & National Democratic Programme adopted in 1987*, Hdri Publishers, 2007, 13.

<sup>32</sup> See James & Stuart, above n 3, 25.

During that era, the prevalence of US imperialism and reactionary forces globally was starkly evident within the UN. In 1952, disregarding the legitimate appeals of member states, notably socialist nations, the UN mandated that Eritrea should form a federal union with Ethiopia under the imperial rule of Haile Selassie.<sup>33</sup> Following seventy years of colonial oppression, imperialist and colonial schemes subjected the Eritrean people to another decade of foreign domination.

Despite a confidential British report indicating that approximately 75% of Eritreans favoured independence, the US sponsored UN Resolution 390A(V) (1950), which proposed Eritrea's federation with Ethiopia.<sup>34</sup> This denial of Eritrea's right to self-determination planted the seeds for the thirty-year Ethio-Eritrean war (1961-1991). Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea, facilitated by US complicity and UN acquiescence, triggered one of the longest and most brutal wars of national liberation in modern African history.

The US's decision to deny Eritrea its independence and support its federation with Ethiopia was driven by strategic interests, including the need to maintain Kagnaw Station, control the Red Sea, and secure oil supplies from the Arabian Peninsula. These priorities overshadowed the legitimate aspirations of the Eritrean people for self-determination, leading to decades of conflict and instability in the region. Despite this setback, the Eritrean people remained resolute in their quest for national autonomy, which served to sharpen their awareness, identify their adversaries, and bolster their resolve and organizational capabilities.

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<sup>33</sup> Redie Bereketeab, *The Making of a Nation 1890-1991*, Uppsala University, 2000, 11.

<sup>34</sup> US department of State, Incoming Telegram Control 8528, No. 171, 19 August 1949.

### **The ‘Fake’ Federation and its Dissolution**

In 1950, the UN passed a resolution that provided for the federation of Eritrea as an autonomous unit with Ethiopia, under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown. This decision was made without considering the interests, participation, and consent of the Eritrean people, contradicting the fundamental principle of the right of colonized and dependent peoples to self-government. Despite upholding the unity and territorial integrity of Eritrea, the federal resolution essentially denied the Eritrean people’s legitimate right to self-determination, serving merely as a prelude to imperial Ethiopian domination.

The authors of UN Resolution 390A(V) appear to have deliberately planned the absence of credible institutional constraints or enforceable safeguards. The federation stripped Eritrea of national sovereignty and the prerogative to develop a capacity for self-defence, without providing internal or external checks against any infringement on its autonomy. Ethiopia exploited this structural weakness to constantly intervene in Eritrea’s internal affairs, despite such interference directly contravening the letter and spirit of the UN federal resolution.<sup>35</sup>

The international community was ostensibly relying on the ‘good will of the Emperor’ to keep his pledge to safeguard the integrity of the Federal Act and the Eritrean constitution. The arrangement offered Ethiopia the prospect to democratize its political system, modernize its economy, and make the association work. However, Ethiopia chose to forfeit the opportunity to build a viable federal association, decided to abandon any pretences to observe Eritrean autonomy, and opted to drag Eritrea down rather than lift itself up.

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<sup>35</sup> UN Resolution 390 (A), 1950.

Ethiopia openly flouted the guarantees to let Eritrea freely manage its internal affairs. For instance, when members of the Eritrean Assembly protested Ethiopian encroachment on Eritrean domestic jurisdiction, they were bluntly told that *'there are no internal or external affairs as far as the office of His Imperial Majesty's representative is concerned, as there shall be none in the future. The affairs of Eritrea concern Ethiopia as a whole and the Emperor (emphasis added).'*'<sup>36</sup>

This blatant lack of imperial restraint allowed Ethiopia's hegemonic ambitions to play out and unravel the federation. It was not enough that Ethiopia gained sovereignty over Eritrea, access to the sea, and control of Eritrea's finances, ports, foreign affairs, and international trade. Eritrea had to be totally swallowed and all traces of its special status completely erased as a matter of urgency. Barely three years into the federation, Ethiopia forced the resignation of Eritrea's elected Chief Executive for standing up against its transgressions of the Federal Act, and appointed a pliable Eritrean official of its choice in his place. Once it imposed a docile 'Chief Executive' eager to do its bidding, Ethiopia accelerated the demise of the federation.

Ethiopia's disregard of repeated petitions and protests and heavy-handed interference disaffected and alienated most Eritreans. While using the Unionist Party (hereinafter referred as UP) as the main instrument of intervention in the internal affairs of Eritrea to corrode Eritrean autonomy, Ethiopia disposed of, marginalized, betrayed, and alienated even its most loyal erstwhile collaborators in the UP and the Muslim League of Western Eritrea (hereinafter referred as MLWE), and turned them into staunch federalists who resisted its encroachment and defended Eritrea's prerogatives. Increasingly, Ethiopia's betrayal cornered its former unionist

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<sup>36</sup> Address of the Emperor's representative in Eritrea to the Eritrean Assembly, 22 March 1955, quoted in Eritrean Liberation Front, *Eritrea: The National Democratic Revolution versus Ethiopian Expansionism*, (Beirut: ELF Foreign Information Centre, 1979), p. 24.

allies into open opposition, driving many to join the ranks of the emerging independence movement.

Elsewhere in Africa, the process of decolonization was facilitated by the use of the principle of self-determination as a powerful instrument in waging and legitimizing national resistance to European colonialism, and attaining self-rule. However, the UN federal resolution served merely as a smokescreen for the substitution of a new form of African colonial rule for the old form of European colonial system in contravention of the principle of self-determination. Through the agency of the UN, Eritrea became a sacrificial lamb on the altar of federation in the interest of US strategic interests in the region. Deprived of the prerogative to establish its own foreign relations and made dependent for, among other things, its finances and defence on Ethiopia, Eritrea finally became the victim of brazen military occupation. The UN imposition of the Ethio-Eritrean federation and acquiescence in its abrogation, therefore, violated the principle of self-determination and sowed the seeds of conflict between the two neighbours. Ethiopia's strategy proved counterproductive, as its actions inflamed Eritrean public opinion, incited popular indignation, and galvanized support for the armed struggle for liberation.



# **PART THREE – THE ERITREAN REVOLUTION AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE ‘REBELS’**

## **I. THE DISMANTLING OF THE FEDERATION AND START OF ARMED STRUGGLE**

The period of federation witnessed an escalation in political strife, with heightened activism notably from workers, students, and patriotic factions.<sup>1</sup> Haile Selassie’s feudal administration, threatened by the mounting Eritrean resistance, violated fundamental rights outlined in the Eritrean Constitution, including freedom of speech, press, assembly, and movement.<sup>2</sup> Deploying military forces to suppress the burgeoning national struggle, the regime’s oppressive measures only solidified the Eritrean people’s determination, prompting clandestine organization and an upsurge in revolutionary actions.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1950s, prior to armed opposition, Eritreans vehemently protested frequent violations of the federation terms, yet their pleas fell on deaf ears. Facing Ethiopian breaches of the UN-mandated Federal Act, Eritrean

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence; Domination, Resistance & Nationalism 1941-1993*, African Studies series 82, 88-94.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



leaders engaged in diplomatic efforts. They presented themselves before the UN, submitted written statements, and appealed to the Ethiopian government. In November 1957, Weldeab Weldemariam and Omar Qadi, representing different views on Eritrea's future, pleaded the UN to halt Ethiopia's encroachments on Eritrean autonomy, cautioning that continued diplomatic impasse could inexorably lead to conflict due to the rising discontent among Eritreans.<sup>4</sup> In response to the modest appeals of Eritreans for the Federation's preservation, Emperor Haile Selassie adopted a more rigid stance. In 1957, students staged massive protests against the encroaching violations, culminating in a general strike in Asmara and Massawa on March 10, 1958.<sup>5</sup> The Addis Ababa government responded ruthlessly, with troops firing upon demonstrators, resulting in over five hundred casualties, underscoring to Eritrean nationalists that peaceful protest was no longer a viable avenue.<sup>6</sup>

The Ethiopian regime resorted to increasingly violent methods to suppress escalating political unrest in Eritrea. It subjugated the Eritrean police force and incited terrorist factions to sow chaos and intimidate opposition figures throughout the nation. In a brazen display of power, the Ethiopian regime removed the Eritrean flag in 1958, replacing the title 'Eritrean government' with 'Eritrean Administration' despite vehement opposition from the Eritrean people.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the Eritrean identity was systematically dismantled, with the Eritrean parliament manipulated as a compliant instrument in this subversion. Parliamentarians who resisted

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<sup>4</sup> Awet T. Weldemichael, *African Diplomacy of Liberation. The Case of Eritrea's Search for an "African India"*, *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 212 | 2013, Online since 16 December 2015, connection on 10 December 2020; DOI <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafrcaines.17542>, (accessed July 30th, 2024.) 871.

<sup>5</sup> See Dan Connell, above n 1, 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See Ruth Iyob, above n 9, 89.

the orchestrated dissolution of governmental structures faced intimidation and coercion, often resulting in their forced exile.<sup>8</sup>

Unsatisfied with its prevailing political dominance in Eritrea, the Ethiopian regime shifted its focus towards the decimation of the Eritrean economy. Persisting in its autocratic tactics, the regime systematically dismantled industries, compelling industrialists and entrepreneurs to relocate their ventures to Ethiopia.<sup>9</sup> A mass exodus of workers ensued, migrating to Ethiopia and neighbouring nations in pursuit of sustenance.<sup>10</sup> One consequence of the systematic flouting of the Federal Act and the Eritrean Constitution was the diversion of legitimate Eritrean revenues into the coffers of the Ethiopian government, precipitating the financial collapse of the Eritrean government.<sup>11</sup> Struggling to endure, the Eritrean authorities imposed exorbitant taxes, further stoking the flames of widespread public discontent.<sup>12</sup>

Following the crackdown, exiles based in Sudan formed the Eritrean Liberation Movement (hereinafter ELM) in the late 1950s.<sup>13</sup> Referred to as Mahber Shewate (the group of seven) within Eritrea for its clandestine cells, the ELM garnered broad support and engaged in visible agitation and propaganda efforts, albeit lacking an armed faction.<sup>14</sup> In July 1960, Eritrean students together with various nationalists, including Idris Mohammed Adem, the former president of the Eritrean Assembly, took initiative to establish the foundation of an armed movement, leading to the formation of the Eritrean Liberation Front (hereinafter ELF).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Dan Connell, above n 1, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Over time, the irreconcilable conflict between Eritreans' call for independence and Haile Selassie's expansionist ambitions intensified. Eventually, disregarding justice and the people's rights, and leveraging a coerced vote in the Eritrean Assembly as a pretext, Haile Selassie unilaterally revoked the UN's federal resolution, proclaiming Eritrea as an Ethiopian province.<sup>16</sup> This action was unauthorized, as neither the Ethiopian emperor nor the Eritrean parliament had the right to dissolve the federation; only the UNGA possessed that authority, the very organization that had established the federation in the first place.<sup>17</sup> The Eritrean people and its leadership promptly protested the egregious breaches of the Federal Act. They anticipated that the UN, as the creator of the federal framework and its custodian, would step in to halt the one-sided cancellation and ensure the proper enforcement of the federation.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, Eritrean representatives and numerous communications were dispatched to apprise the international community of the injustices perpetrated by the Ethiopian administration regarding the federation and Eritrea's governance.<sup>19</sup> Despite these expectations placed on the UN and international community, they ultimately proved to be unfounded illusions. Backed by premeditated support from US imperialism, which held significant global influence, Haile Selassie's aggression against Eritrea encountered minimal international resistance. Consequently, Eritrea, through the machination of the US, found itself as a colony of Ethiopia.

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<sup>16</sup> Basil Davidson, Lionel Cliffe and Bereket Habteslassie, *Behind the War in Eritrea*, Spokesman publishers, 1980, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Eritrean Liberation Front, *Eritrea: The national democratic revolution versus Ethiopian Expansionism*, Foreign information centre 1979, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Tekie Fessehazion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation 1952-1962*, Eritreans for peace and democracy publication committee 1990, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Woldeab Woldemariam, *A short history of Eritrea*, Oslo, Norway 1987, 29.

On September 1, 1961, Idris Hamid Awate initiated the armed struggle by attacking a remote police outpost in western Eritrea.<sup>20</sup> The ELF's mission was clear and resolute: the attainment of full national independence.<sup>21</sup> Following a decade of federal subjugation and a cumulative eighty years of colonial oppression, with twenty years dedicated to organized political resistance, the Eritrean people found it to be a necessary evil to resort to violence. This decision was rooted in the conviction that only armed force could counter the violent repression of the oppressors, a response born out of the world's indifference to their peaceful efforts—demonstrations, strikes, appeals to the UN, and more—as they became targets of Ethiopian aggression and brutality. As the armed resistance of the Eritrean people gained momentum, the Haile Selassie regime, backed by imperialist forces, unleashed severe atrocities on the Eritrean people.<sup>22</sup>

## **II. THE ARDUOUS AND LONG ROAD TOWARDS UNITY**

By 1965, the membership of the ELF had significantly grown in both numbers and diversity. The Supreme Council, operating from its distant headquarters in Cairo, took the decision to enhance its control over the movement by restructuring the Eritrean Liberation Army (hereinafter ELA) into four distinct territorial zones based on factors such as ethnicity, religion, and place of origin.<sup>23</sup> The blueprint for the plan drew inspiration

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<sup>20</sup> See Dan Connell, above n 1, at 58.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Eritrean People's Liberation Front, *Memorandum*, Hoover institution 1978, 8-9. To explain Ethiopian atrocities, it states:

In a period of fourteen years (1961-1974), the Haile Selassie regime, with unprecedented savagery and in inhuman manner slaughtered, assassinated and burned thousands of Eritrean children, women and elderly, imprisoned and tortured thousands of Eritrean patriots, burned hundreds of villages and looted the people's property, turned hundreds of thousands into refugees, ruined the economic life of the country, suppressed the cultures and languages of the people and became the primary cause of the spread of poverty and disease in the country.

<sup>23</sup> See Ruth Iyob, above n 9, 111.

from the successful Algerian National Liberation Front (hereinafter FLN), which achieved victory after an eight-year guerrilla campaign culminating in 1962.<sup>24</sup> The FLN's military structure was divided into six territorial zones (wilayas), each functioning as an independent military and administrative entity overseen by a designated zone commander.<sup>25</sup> In emulation of this model, the ELF initially set up four similar zones and added a fifth zone after some time.<sup>26</sup>

The strategy aimed to create zone armies primarily comprised of locals, tasked with liberating their own regions to incentivize wider participation in the armed struggle.<sup>27</sup> To prevent dominance by fighters from a single region, the leadership capped the number of recruits from any one region at 30% while mandating that the commander must hail from the region.<sup>28</sup> Reviews were planned every six months to ensure effectiveness.<sup>29</sup>

The zones, initially structured on ethnic and regional lines to garner support, instead devolved into arenas of conflict and exploitation. Rather than collaborating, the various territorial zones within the ELF began competing with one another, actively working to undermine rival factions, thus neglecting the purported national cause they claimed to champion.<sup>30</sup> The commanders who presided over these zones leveraged their positions to extract resources from the people, imposing fines, extorting protection money, and exploiting the vulnerabilities of already impoverished communities.<sup>31</sup> This reality starkly contrasted with the idealistic notion

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<sup>24</sup> See Redie Bereketeab, above n 8, 188.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Gaim Kibreab, *Critical reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence*, The Red Sea Press Inc., 2008, 153.

<sup>27</sup> See Eritrean Liberation Front, above n 23, 33.

<sup>28</sup> See Ruth Iyob, above n 9, 111.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

that aligning zones with ethnicity and religion would foster greater solidarity and support among the population.<sup>32</sup>

The intensity of intergroup rivalries reached such heights that the overarching goal of achieving independence was either overshadowed or chiefly disregarded.<sup>33</sup> These discordant conditions created an environment ripe for the erosion of both bonding and bridging social capital, the very fabric that could have united and connected disparate factions within the movement.<sup>34</sup> In 1966, the ELF faced a profound internal crisis characterized by relentless conflicts and tensions manifesting as distrust, suspicion, coercion, corruption, and the stifling of individual liberties. This tumultuous environment not only fractured the organization but also significantly weakened its overall cohesion.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the initial efforts of the Rectification Movement and the subsequent unity achieved among the zone armies, challenges persisted. A Conference held in 1969, which united all five zones, was a significant milestone but also sowed the seeds for a more profound split within the movement.<sup>36</sup> The conference's outcomes, though modest and reformist, failed to satisfy all factions, leading to further discord and divisions.

The struggle for unity within the Eritrean liberation movement was complicated by the divergence in political understanding between elder leaders abroad and the younger generation of fighters gaining influence on the ground.<sup>37</sup> The push for reform, particularly the abolition of the zonal structure of the ELF, was a central point of contention.<sup>38</sup> The reform efforts aimed to reorganize leadership, enhance efficiency, and increase

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>34</sup> Peter A.K., *Politics and Liberation: The Eritrean Struggle 1961-86*, University of Aarhus 1987, 58.

<sup>35</sup> See Redie Bereketeab, above n 8, 189.

<sup>36</sup> See Gaim Kibreab, above n 39, 160.

<sup>37</sup> See Ruth Iyob, above n 9, 114.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

popular participation in the liberation struggle.<sup>39</sup> The internal conflicts and reform movements within the ELF during the 1960s and 1970s reflected broader challenges faced by the Eritrean independence movement. The lack of a clear political program, efficient leadership, and strong organizational structure hampered progress. Despite these obstacles, Eritrean youth continued to join the armed struggle, highlighting the resilience and determination of the Eritrean people to achieve independence.<sup>40</sup>

By the onset of 1970, a considerable number of dissidents successfully evaded the persecution instigated by the ELF leadership and sought refuge in the Danakil coastal region.<sup>41</sup> In July 1970, they established the 'People's Liberation Forces 1'.<sup>42</sup> Concurrently, another faction of dissidents formed the 'People's Liberation Forces 2' in the eastern escarpment.<sup>43</sup> By February 1972, these groups, along with a third faction, reached an agreement to merge gradually and coalesce into a singular entity. This consolidation was realized by late 1973, leading to the formation of the Eritrean People's Liberation Forces, later renamed the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (hereinafter EPLF) during their inaugural Congress in 1977.<sup>44</sup>

The EPLF's emphasis on the necessity of a social revolution alongside armed conflict, coupled with its adept recruitment strategies, posed a challenge to the ELF.<sup>45</sup> Subsequently, the ELF adjusted its own political agenda, though these alterations primarily remained rhetorical.<sup>46</sup> It was the EPLF that began implementing tangible initiatives for the societal

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> See Peter A.K, above n 46, 63-64.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> See Basil, Lionel & Bereket, above n 24, 139.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

transformation of Eritrea.<sup>47</sup> By the late 1970s, the EPLF had emerged as the predominant force in Eritrea. In 1981, following confrontations between the two factions, the EPLF ousted ELF fighters from their stronghold in Barka province, forcing them into Sudan.<sup>48</sup>

### **III. ETHIOPIA: A TROJAN HORSE IN THE GRAND GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY**

The overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie and the rise of a military junta (Derg) in Ethiopia in 1974 marked a significant turning point in the country's history. The downfall of Haile Selassie's regime, which was perceived as a guardian of imperialism, occurred against a backdrop of complex international and regional circumstances. The demise of Haile Selassie's rule can be attributed to various factors. The Ethiopian people, long subjected to chauvinism, national oppression, and severe deprivation under the feudal regime, rose up in a bitter struggle for their rights.<sup>49</sup> The population, plagued by poverty, disease, and illiteracy, had endured years of exploitation and marginalization.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the Eritrean masses' fight for national independence and social emancipation further contributed to the regime's downfall.<sup>51</sup> The uprising against Haile Selassie was fuelled by the desire to end economic exploitation by feudal lords, bureaucratic capitalists, and imperialist powers.<sup>52</sup> The workers, peasants, and other oppressed groups sought to establish a new political order that would safeguard their social and political rights. Despite the presence of progressive groups and democratic movements in Ethiopia, there was a

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<sup>47</sup> To know more about the social transformation undertaken by the EPLF, see *Political Report & National Democratic Programme*, above n 6.

<sup>48</sup> See Dan Connell, above n 1, 208.

<sup>49</sup> See EPLF's memorandum, above n 30, 13.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



lack of a unifying political organization capable of mobilizing the masses effectively.<sup>53</sup>

The absence of a cohesive political leadership to channel the spontaneous popular uprising meant that the Ethiopian masses through the progressive forces failed to seize political power.<sup>54</sup> Following a period of power struggles between the military and civil progressives, control ultimately fell into the hands of the army. The Derg, assumed power, ushering in a new era in Ethiopian governance characterized by authoritarian rule and radical socio-political transformations.<sup>55</sup> The transition from Haile Selassie's monarchy to the military-led Derg regime reflected the complex interplay of domestic grievances, regional dynamics, and global influences. The Derg's rule did bring about profound changes in Ethiopian society, with far-reaching implications for the country's future trajectory.<sup>56</sup>

From 1946 to 1975, US military aid to Ethiopia amounted to \$286.1 million in grants and loans, comprising a significant portion of Washington's annual military assistance to Africa.<sup>57</sup> By the mid-1970s, however, the strategic importance of Addis Ababa had waned as other African nations, like Kenya, Ivory Coast, and Nigeria, emerged as more attractive investment destinations with modern infrastructures.<sup>58</sup> Southern Africa's mineral resources and strategic significance also drew increased attention from Washington, especially following the Portuguese empire's collapse and the rise of Marxist-leaning governments in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Haggai Erlich, *The struggle over Eritrea 1962-1978: War and Revolution in the horn of Africa*, Hoover press publication 1983, 43-54.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> See James & Stuart, above n 3, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

The diminishing significance of Kagnew Station and the advent of alternative communication technologies led to the phased closure of the Asmara communications complex as the US-Ethiopia treaty approached its expiration in 1978.<sup>60</sup> Subsequently, President Carter's shift towards a human rights-focused foreign policy inadvertently paved the way for increased Soviet involvement in Ethiopia, as the Soviets supplied arms, military training, and political support to counter the Eritrean insurgency.<sup>61</sup>

In the final year of the US-Ethiopia alliance, the Ethiopian regime sought enhanced military aid from Washington to combat Eritrean forces.<sup>62</sup> Faced with post-Vietnam war constraints and economic challenges, the US limited military assistance to Africa, although arms sales remained an option.<sup>63</sup> In 1975, amidst Ethiopia's recovery from a severe famine, the ruling Derg significantly increased its military purchases from the US, reflecting a shift in foreign policy dynamics and regional alliances.

The Soviet Union initially backed Eritrean self-determination during the early stages of the Cold War but shifted its support to Ethiopia after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974.<sup>64</sup> It bolstered Ethiopia's military endeavours while actively suppressing Eritrean nationalists, with allied countries like South Yemen and Libya aiding Ethiopia in quashing the Eritrean independence movement.<sup>65</sup>

In 1977, the United States and the Soviet Union swiftly switched positions in the region, leaving the Eritrean movement to confront a new Soviet-backed Ethiopian regime with limited external backing.<sup>66</sup> Initial Eritrea's

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> See James & Stuart, above n 3, 48.

<sup>65</sup> See Awet T., above n 12, 882.

<sup>66</sup> See Basil, Lionel & Bereket, above n 24, 56.

diplomatic efforts extended to garnering support from smaller nations and leftist ideologies. Cuba, in particular, played a significant role in introducing the Eritrean cause to non-African Third World countries and facilitating Eritrean participation in international forums.<sup>67</sup> Despite early successes, internal divisions and changing allegiances hindered sustained Cuban support.<sup>68</sup>

As Eritrea found itself excluded from superpower alliances, it diverged from the typical Cold War dynamic where rival powers backed opposing factions. Lacking substantial diplomatic backing to challenge Ethiopia's position on the global stage, Eritrean resistance relied heavily on armed struggle to assert its independence.<sup>69</sup> The interplay between war and diplomacy remained central to Eritrea's quest for autonomy, with armed resistance driving its locally-focused diplomatic initiatives. The Eritreans' effectiveness in navigating this shifting social and political landscape stemmed from their remarkable capacity and willingness to adapt their ideology, politics, and strategies to evolving circumstances. Despite facing a series of natural and man-made calamities, the EPLF innovatively articulated a compelling vision for a better future and provided tangible examples of progress to a weary population.<sup>70</sup> This dynamic approach kept the revolution alive when many other regions in the developing world were descending into authoritarianism, sectarian violence, and persistent poverty.

From the latter part of 1976 onwards, the liberation of villages and towns progressed at an unprecedented rate in Eritrea. By the conclusion of 1977, over 90 percent of Eritrea had fallen under the control of the National Liberation Movements (hereinafter NLMs).<sup>71</sup> This advancement ushered

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> See Dan Connell, above n 1, 209.

<sup>71</sup> See Redie Bereketieb, above n 8, 198.

in a new era and challenge for the NLMs: the task of governing towns, leading to close interactions between urban civilians and fighters.<sup>72</sup> This interaction underscored the pressing need to establish law and order using a system comprising Eritrean individuals, replacing the oppressive Ethiopian state apparatus. Consequently, civilian administration was instituted. The sight of the revered flag adorning every street corner, once just a distant hope, became a common occurrence, marking a significant moment for many Eritreans witnessing their flag for the first time.<sup>73</sup>

The eradication of fears and insecurities, the lifting of night curfews, and the cessation of arbitrary arrests or executions for minor infractions such as expressing nationalist sentiments, possessing certain materials, or arousing suspicion among Ethiopian soldiers, disappeared for the majority of Eritreans.<sup>74</sup> One crucial method employed to cultivate a national identity was through the glorification and commemoration of victories via music, poems, and songs.<sup>75</sup> Many popular tunes from that period reflected the ongoing changes, particularly the liberation of towns, echoing sentiments like “Eritrea, Eritrea, towns became our camps.”<sup>76</sup> In the pursuit of nurturing national identity and reinforcing nationhood, symbolic actions were implemented by the liberation fronts. These symbolic gestures included renaming public spaces such as streets and public buildings after martyrs, historical battles, and significant battlegrounds, all to be revered and honoured by the people.<sup>77</sup> Central to the collective identity of the imagined community, akin to the significance of the ‘Unknown Soldier’ tomb, was the Martyrs Square (*Meda Siwu'at*), established at the heart of every liberated town.<sup>78</sup> The emotional impact of

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 199.

<sup>76</sup> See Dan Connell, above n 1, 145.

<sup>77</sup> See Redie Bereketeab, above n 8, 199.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

these initiatives on Eritrean society was profound, sparking intense national sentiment and engagement in various liberation movement projects without any financial incentive.<sup>79</sup>

While the liberation movement savoured victories at the time, there were strong indications that the Ethiopian regime, with substantial support from the Soviet Union and its allies, would attempt to recapture the towns. Unity within the revolution was deemed critical to defend both the organizations and the liberated areas.<sup>80</sup> However, before unity could be achieved, the anticipated Ethiopian assault materialized. Within a brief period, the Derg army was able to reclaim the towns.<sup>81</sup>

The failure to achieve unity within the NLMs undoubtedly contributed to the strategic military retreat, though it may not have been the deciding factor.<sup>82</sup> Even with a united liberation movement, it was uncertain whether they could have withstood the formidable Ethiopian forces supported by the Soviet Bloc.<sup>83</sup> The recapture of most towns marked a significant hindrance for the liberation struggle. Nevertheless, the national sentiment, emotional impact, and lasting memories instilled during the NLMs administration in those towns, albeit brief, left a lasting impression.<sup>84</sup>

#### **IV. SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION, THE SECOND FACE OF THE REVOLUTION**

During that tumultuous period of armed struggle, the EPLF demonstrated exceptional organizational skills and discipline. Reforms in the land system were initiated by its members in collaboration with community

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> See Ruth Iyob, above n 9, 119-120.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> See Redie Bereketeab, above n 8, 200.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

leaders.<sup>85</sup> Educational centres were established, and public forums were held to effectively communicate the EPLF's objectives.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, their medical teams established numerous clinics and deployed mobile units to remote regions lacking healthcare services.<sup>87</sup> Embracing a policy of self-sufficiency, the EPLF ensured the delivery of essential supplies to the people in liberated areas.<sup>88</sup> By rallying the local residents in these newly liberated territories, the EPLF bolstered its influence, skilfully repurposing much of the Ethiopian government's military arsenal and transforming its guerrilla forces into a conventional army.<sup>89</sup>

The unity of Eritreans, regardless of their background, were emphasized. This was deemed crucial to prevent the divisions that plagued many other nations, and to reconcile differences for a future united independent Eritrea. The EPLF was acutely aware of this necessity and invested significant efforts in fostering mutual respect among the diverse ethnic groups.<sup>90</sup>

Among the various economic reforms instituted by the EPLF, land redistribution emerged as the most pivotal.<sup>91</sup> Land, being central to economic prosperity, had sparked discontent in numerous regions due to unjust distribution or lack of access.<sup>92</sup> The relationship between the liberation struggle and these social issues grew increasingly significant. In the mid-1970s, the EPLF initiated an initial land reform in the highland areas under its influence.<sup>93</sup> This reform was rooted in the traditional '*Diesa*'

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<sup>85</sup> See Dan Connell, above n 1, 188.

<sup>86</sup> See James & Stuart, above n 3, 33.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-116.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>92</sup> Lionel Cliffe & Basil Davidson, *The long struggle of Eritrea for independence and constructive peace*, The Red Sea Printing Press Inc. 1988, 100-101.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

system, which had been dormant for decades in some regions.<sup>94</sup> Noteworthy modifications were introduced: women were granted land ownership rights for the first time, absentee villagers could retain land only under strict conditions, and usurious interest rates on loans to impoverished peasants were prohibited. Certain lands were designated for collective farming by the village, with the yields utilized to fund local services such as constructing clinics or schools, compensating teachers and healthcare workers, or acquiring equipment for workshops producing agricultural tools.

The EPLF stressed the need for women's emancipation and their complete involvement in social production and the political sphere was fundamental to the revolution's success. Women's rights were prominently featured in the nine points outlined in the National Democratic Program (hereinafter referred to as NDP).<sup>95</sup> With time, the participation of women in the revolution became increasingly visible, with women eventually constituting 30% of the EPLF and over 15% of the combatants.<sup>96</sup> The percentages grew with each new batch of recruits joining the EPLF. The role of women became visible with them actively serving as organizers, educators, administrators, as well as mechanics, electricians, electronic engineers, watchmakers, tailors, healthcare providers, and village health workers.<sup>97</sup>

The EPLF revolution also focused on social services such as healthcare. The establishment of hospitals and clinics was crucial for providing medical care to the population, including fighters who were injured in battle. By prioritizing healthcare services, the EPLF demonstrated its commitment to the well-being of the people it aimed to liberate.<sup>98</sup> The

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> See James & Stuart, above n 3, 38.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> See Lionel & Basil, above n 100, 112.

EPLF instigated radical changes in the healthcare infrastructure by aligning it with the broader objective of restructuring society in favor of the most marginalized.<sup>99</sup> This commitment aimed to reach the segments most neglected by Eritrea's colonial health services: the remote communities, nomads, and women.<sup>100</sup> The EPLF established an extensive healthcare system, facing four primary challenges: a predominantly illiterate populace with limited healthcare professionals, the necessity to engage the population in healthcare delivery, the issues arising from the ongoing conflict, resource scarcity, and the geographical isolation of EPLF-controlled areas.<sup>101</sup>

A significant impediment to the development of the EPLF's healthcare services was the constrained budget within which its Health Department operated. Importing drugs or equipment incurred substantial costs due to transportation expenses.<sup>102</sup> Consequently, the Health Department initiated the production of its medical supplies, starting with intravenous fluids, which were costly to transport due to their weight and bulk.

According to the NDP, literacy was deemed a fundamental right. The EPLF believed that achieving progressive social change necessitated a literate and educated population.<sup>103</sup> However, the education system inherited from the colonial era was tailored to cultivate a small educated elite who utilized education for personal advancement and held manual labor in disdain.<sup>104</sup> Eritreans who attended school faced setbacks when Amharic was imposed as the medium of instruction.<sup>105</sup> In designing education programs, the EPLF had to devise methods to offer mass

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<sup>99</sup> See James & Stuart, above n 3, 103.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>103</sup> See Eritrean People's Liberation Front, above n 6, 61.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*



education, promote the idea that education should benefit the collective good, and elevate the status of manual labor.<sup>106</sup>

Another key area the EPLF revolution focused on was public administration.<sup>107</sup> The EPLF established a system of governance within the territories it controlled, setting up administrative structures that provided essential services to the population.<sup>108</sup> This included creating local councils, dispute settlement mechanisms, and other institutions that helped in maintaining order and providing basic services to the people.<sup>109</sup>

Moreover, the EPLF revolution also delved into economic activities such as setting up workshops and factories.<sup>110</sup> By establishing these economic enterprises, the EPLF aimed to not only support its military efforts but also to lay the groundwork of a self-sufficient economy for the future independent Eritrea. These workshops and factories produced goods that were needed by the population and the fighters, contributing to the economic sustainability of the movement.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, the EPLF engaged in transportation and construction projects to improve infrastructure in the liberated areas, facilitating movement and communication among the population and supporting economic development.<sup>112</sup>

The overhaul of the EPLF during its second Congress was a pivotal moment that laid the foundation for a new and confident state in the Horn of Africa. This Congress, held in 1987, marked a significant shift in the organization's structure and ideology. The EPLF leadership recognized the need to adapt to the changing circumstances and to prepare for the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> See Lionel & Basil, above n 100, 118.

<sup>108</sup> See James & Stuart, above n 3, 42-44.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 74-78.

transition from a liberation movement to a government.<sup>113</sup> The Congress led to the adoption of new policies and strategies that aimed to not only secure military victories but also to govern effectively and provide for the needs of the population.<sup>114</sup>

The second Congress of the EPLF also emphasized the importance of inclusivity and democracy within the organization.<sup>115</sup> By promoting internal democracy and participation, the EPLF leadership sought to build a more cohesive and united front that could effectively govern a future independent Eritrea. The Congress laid the groundwork for a more organized and structured leadership that could guide the country through the challenges of state and nation-building.<sup>116</sup>

## **V. ACHIEVING THE ULTIMATE GOAL - SELF-DETERMINATION AND INDEPENDENCE**

After three decades of armed conflict, huge civilian casualties, and the loss of 65,000 EPLF fighters, the struggle against Ethiopian dominance culminated in an Eritrean military and political triumph in 1991.<sup>117</sup> The EPLF's victory and the complete liberation of Eritrea significantly shifted the political and military dynamics in the Horn of Africa. The enduring call for Eritrean self-determination received official recognition from the new Transitional Government of Ethiopia (hereinafter referred as TGE) as the primary foundation for mutual coexistence between the Eritreans and their Ethiopian counterparts.<sup>118</sup>

Upon announcing the establishment of a provisional government and the intent to conduct a referendum in Eritrea within two years, the EPLF

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<sup>113</sup> Eritrean People's Liberation Front, *National Democratic Program*, 1987, 23-36.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> See Ruth Iyob, above n 9, 136.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

promptly and effectively replaced the Ethiopian officials who had controlled key civil service sectors.<sup>119</sup> All EPLF members volunteered their services without remuneration until an independence plebiscite determined the nation's fate.<sup>120</sup> EPLF teams diligently restored damaged roads, constructed new ones, set up schools and clinics in previously neglected regions, mobilized rural communities for agricultural seasons, initiated reforestation projects in eroded areas, revamped educational curricula, and engaged in journalism for the newly launched newspaper.<sup>121</sup> The ethos of self-sufficiency that had guided the liberation movement during the wartime era empowered Eritrean nationalists to shape post-war reconstruction priorities without external dependencies.

The journey towards Eritrea's self-determination and independence traversed initial phases of conflict between pro-independence and anti-independence factions, characterized by colonial and imperial influences, political turmoil, and fragmentation. This was succeeded by a more sophisticated and unified national struggle, the establishment of a national organization, periods of discord and subsequent rectification movements aimed at solidifying national unity. The evolution culminated in the formation of a broad and decisive Eritrean people's liberation front, leading to the ultimate realization of self-determination and independence. Throughout this progression, the Eritrean national identity was reinforced through shared experiences of hardship and resistance against all odds.

With the dismantling of Ethiopian hegemony over Eritrea, the antagonistic relations of the past three decades came to a close. Internationally and regionally, the Eritrean people's demand for self-determination ceased to be an isolated concern viewed as a potential threat, becoming one of several cases underscoring the necessity for revising

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

international and regional norms governing conflict resolution in the post-WWII era. The demise of the 'Ethiopian dominance' mentality marked the onset of a fresh era characterized by interdependence and collaboration between the two nations. National resources and citizen efforts were finally liberated from the imperatives of conflict, redirecting focus towards self-determination and popular engagement in shaping a national identity.

## **VI. RELATIONS WITH OTHER LIBERATION MOVEMENTS**

Recognizing the intrinsic connection between the aspirations for peace, justice and prosperity of the peoples of the region, the EPLF, while spearheading the Eritrean national struggle, actively engaged with Ethiopian movements such as the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (hereinafter referred as TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Front (hereinafter referred as OLF) to establish a democratic alternative to the oppressive Derg regime.<sup>122</sup> This collaboration was not rooted in a simplistic 'enemy of my enemy is my friend' ethos but rather in a steadfast belief that Eritrea's complete independence and the rise of a progressive, people-supported government in Ethiopia were intertwined objectives. Consequently, the front supported and collaborated with groups striving towards these aims while critiquing and opposing factions that hindered progress.<sup>123</sup>

Emphasizing unity and equality among Ethiopia's diverse nationalities, the EPLF advocated for leadership that could foster Ethiopian cohesion without subjugating any group.<sup>124</sup> It underscored the necessity of

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<sup>122</sup> See Awet T., above n 12, 884-885.

<sup>123</sup> Adulis, *The Eplf and its relations with democratic movements in Ethiopia*, Vol. no.11 1985 review of African Political economy, found at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4005589> (accessed July 30th, 2024.) 85.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

preventing divisions based on ethnicity and ensuring a united Ethiopian people.<sup>125</sup>

The EPLF expressed its candid opinions on the fundamental issues and imperatives of the Ethiopian revolution for democracy and justice, recognizing the close interdependence of Eritrean and Ethiopian destinies.<sup>126</sup> It believed that cooperation with the Ethiopian people's struggle was paramount for the advancement of the Eritrean revolution, second only to the agency of the Eritrean people.<sup>127</sup> Conversely, it viewed the Eritrean people's struggle as a critical external impetus for the Ethiopian revolution.<sup>128</sup> The front diligently cultivated and strengthened ties with democratic Ethiopian organizations, seeking to fortify the solidarity between the two peoples.<sup>129</sup>

Prioritizing the establishment of a robust alliance between the Eritrean and Ethiopian revolutions, the EPLF remained committed to this overarching objective. Simultaneously, it called for similar dedication from Ethiopia's democratic movements.<sup>130</sup>

## **VII. REALIZATION OF THE ERITREAN PEOPLE'S QUEST FOR SELF-DETERMINATION**

Referendum, as a peaceful solution to the Eritrean question was first proposed by the EPLF in 1980, but the Derg regime, under Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam, rejected these calls for peace.<sup>131</sup> This was a

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> The EPLF's referendum proposal aimed for a just, democratic, and nonviolent path towards determining the future of the Eritrean people. Transitioning from a military approach to a legally sanctioned political resolution, the EPLF's proposal was met with resistance from the Derg, which opted for violence over dialogue. For more on this See Roy Pateman, *Eritrea; Even the stones are burning*, Red Sea Printing Press Inc. 1990, 144. See also Ruth Iyob, above n 9, 124.

continuation of various initiatives taken by Eritreans to fulfil their right to self-determination. Ethiopia thwarted the EPLF's referendum initiative by resorting to military force and diplomatic manoeuvring.

After five decades of political and armed struggle aimed at securing independence, the resolution of this issue was ultimately laid in the hands of the Eritrean people through a referendum. In addition to the valiant efforts made on the battlefield, the referendum stood out as one of the significant historical accolades bestowed upon the people of Eritrea by the EPLF.<sup>132</sup> Despite the EPLF's triumphant advance in 1991, its leadership chose to defer the declaration of independence until the referendum could take place.<sup>133</sup> In many similar scenarios where liberation struggles occurred, independence declarations and pleas for acknowledgment typically followed the conclusive victory on the battlefield. Yet in Eritrea, the assertion of sovereignty and the pursuit of international recognition hinged on a democratic and lawful resolution.<sup>134</sup> This illustrates the EPLF's commitment to legality and its avoidance of a sole reliance on military might. Upon the liberation of Eritrea in May 1991, instead of hastily declaring independence, the decision was made to establish a provisional government and plan for a referendum within a two-year timeframe. The Provisional Government of Eritrea (hereinafter referred as PGE) instituted a referendum commission through Proclamation No. 22/1992, which was issued on April 7, 1992.<sup>135</sup>

The Eritrean referendum held on April 23-25, 1993, marked a pivotal moment in modern Eritrean history. Eager Eritreans formed orderly

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<sup>132</sup> *Eritrean Referendum: Reinforcement of the Bullet by Ballot*, article written on Shabait.com

<sup>133</sup> People's Front for Democracy & Justice (PFDJ), *History of Eritrea from ancient times up to independence*, Textbook 2012, 213.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> In the preamble of the proclamation, it states, 'The Eritrean people had to win a long and bitter war of liberation to assert their right of self-determination and the people and PGE have freely decided to delay for two years the expression of this right to self-determination.....'. For more on this See Provisional government of Eritrea, *Eritrean Referendum Proclamation N. 22, Gazette of Eritrean Laws 1992.*

queues, carrying registration cards, at the 1,010 polling stations amidst an atmosphere charged with jubilant anticipation.<sup>136</sup> Cities, towns, and villages were adorned with numerous green, red, and blue EPLF flags, with posters encouraging citizens to participate in the voting process adorning walls, shops, and fences.<sup>137</sup>

From an organizational standpoint, the event was meticulously organized, showcasing the efficiency, practicality, and widespread legitimacy of the PGE/EPLF.<sup>138</sup> Registration of all eligible voters was completed by mid-December, followed by civic education on voting procedures conducted in local languages across all regions from December to April.<sup>139</sup> Despite the people's lack of prior voting experience, the efforts of the Referendum Commission in educating the public proved to be effective.

The overwhelming 99.8% vote for independence, announced on April 27, 1993, unequivocally reflected the aspiration and unity of the Eritrean population.<sup>140</sup> The validation of Eritrean referendum by the UN, the OAU, and the international community further solidified this outcome. On April 27, 1993, the UN Special Commissioner, Samir Sanbar, formally declared the referendum to have been conducted freely and fairly.<sup>141</sup> The Eritrean referendum is often cited as probably the most affirmative referendum in the history of democracy, in terms of both the yes-percentage (99.8%) and the turnout of registered voters.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> George W. Sheperd, *Free Eritrea: linchpin for stability and peace on the horn*, Africa Today journal Vol. 40 N.2 1993, 2.

<sup>137</sup> See Ruth Iyob, above n 9, 139.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> See PFDJ, above n 132, 213-214.

<sup>141</sup> Kjeti Tronvoll, *The Eritrean Referendum: Peasant Voices*, Eritrean Studies Review 1993, 25.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 1.

## **PART FOUR: INDEPENDENT ERITREA AND THE ‘END OF HISTORY’**

### **I. CHANGING THE RULE OF THE GAME IN THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE REGION**

If there is one truth this paper has unequivocally shown, it is the fact that the Eritrean people have been time and again excluded from determining their fate. Once they defeated and kicked out the Ethiopian army from Eritrea they could have gone ahead and declared independence without asking for blessing from anybody. In fact, for many Eritreans it was incomprehensible to undertake a referendum after all the suffering and the sacrifice and the government had to work hard to explain to them on the necessity of referendum.<sup>1</sup> The referendum was not just about legalizing the independence of Eritrea, it was also about bringing about a new chapter in the history of the region and laying the foundation for sustainable peace for the people of the region.

After overthrowing the Derg regime, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) led by the TPLF organized a conference to charter Ethiopia’s transition to democracy. The conference adopted a Transitional Charter for Ethiopia wherein it recognized the

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<sup>1</sup> Kjeti Tronvoll, ‘The Eritrean referendum: Peasant Voices’, *Eritrean Studies Review* V1No.1(1996), p 24



right of the Eritrean People to self-determination through a referendum.<sup>2</sup> In accordance with the Charter, the TGE led by the EPRDF made a request to the UN in November of 1992 that the referendum on independence for Eritrea be held.<sup>3</sup> The referendum was observed and declared free and fair by representatives of the UN, the OAU, the League of Arab States, the Non-Aligned Movement and thirty-two countries including Ethiopia.<sup>4</sup> What is more, the Government of Eritrea also decided not to pursue any claim it might had under international law for the atrocities committed by the Ethiopians against the people of Eritrea. The Ethiopian army used to take reprisal action against those villages it claimed to have supported the rebels.<sup>5</sup> Ona, Besikdra and Wekidiba are few examples out of many. In Ona, more than 800 civilians including pregnant women, children and elderly were killed by indiscriminate firing by Ethiopian soldiers on the morning of the 1<sup>st</sup> of December, 1970, while a day earlier, the Ethiopian army opened fire at the village mosque in Besikdra and killed 120 people who were hiding in what they thought to be a sacred place.<sup>6</sup> In Wekidiba close to 100 people who were sheltering in a Church were killed.<sup>7</sup> Wekidiba was attacked twice within one year.<sup>8</sup>

To further strengthen the peace and to lay the foundation for future integration between the two countries, the Eritrean and the Ethiopian

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<sup>2</sup> Tekie Fessehazion, 'The Eritrean Referendum of 1993', *Eritrean Studies Review* Vol. 1, No.1(1996), p 169

<sup>3</sup> George W. Shepherd, 'Free Eritrea: Linchpin for Stability and Peace on the Horn', *Africa Today*, Vol. 40, No. 2, *The Horn of Africa: Reconstructing Political Order* (2nd Qtr., 1993), p. 83

<sup>4</sup> Tekie Fessehazion, 'The Eritrean Referendum of 1993', *Eritrean Studies Review* Vol. 1, No.1(1996), p 173

<sup>5</sup> Mary Dines, *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace*, Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson (ed), 1988

<sup>6</sup> Simon Weldemichael, 'Ona massacre', <https://shabait.com/2020/12/05/ona-massacre/> (visited on the 17th of July, 2024)

<sup>7</sup> Habtu Ghebre-ab, 'Massacre at Wekidiba: The Tragic story of a Village in Eritrea', Red Sea Press, 2013

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

governments signed the Friendship and Cooperation Agreement in July 1993. The key components of the agreement were:

- (a) Preservation of the free flow of goods, capital and people that existed before Eritrea gained its independence;
- (b) Ethiopia's continued free access to Eritrea's ports;
- (c) Cooperation in monetary policies and continued use of the *Ethiopian currency Birr* by both countries until Eritrea issues its own currency;
- (d) Harmonization of customs policy; and
- (e) Cooperation and consultation in foreign policy (*emphasis added*).<sup>9</sup>

This arrangement of common currency, open trade and open frontiers was accommodated with a policy of toleration of mingled populations along the border areas, and above all, the sense that problems would be resolved, when they arose.<sup>10</sup>

In order to come up with regional solution for regional problems, the Eritrean government teamed up with the Ethiopian government to address the conflicts in Somalia, Sudan and the Great Lakes.<sup>11</sup> Given its strategic importance to the peace and security of the Horn, it was natural that Eritrea undertook in the early nineties, a humble diplomatic initiative to bring to an end the bloody civil war in Somalia, which at that time had already claimed over 30,000 casualties.<sup>12</sup> To institutionalize this initiative for regional peace and security, Eritrea together with the countries in the region established in 1996 the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (hereinafter referred as IGAD) to replace the

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<sup>9</sup> Kidane Mengisteab, 'Some Latent Factors in the Ethio-Eritrean Conflict', *Eritrean Studies Review* Vol. 3, No.2(1999), p 96

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Iyob, 'The Ethiopian–Eritrean Conflict: Diasporic vs. Hegemonic States in the Horn of Africa, 1991-2000', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Dec., 2000), p 676

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p 659

<sup>12</sup> Okbazghi Yohannes, 'Eritrea: A Country in Transition', *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 57, *The Politics of Reconstruction: South Africa, Mozambique & the Horn* (Jul., 1993), pp. 24

Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (hereinafter referred as IGADD) which was founded in 1986. The mission of IGAD is to assist and complement the efforts of the member States to achieve, through increased cooperation: food security and environmental protection, peace and security, and economic cooperation and integration in the region.<sup>13</sup>

## II. CHANGING THE RULE OF THE GAME IN INTERNATIONAL AID

In 1994, when the EPLF reconstituted itself into the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (hereinafter referred as PFDJ) it issued the National Charter for Eritrea<sup>14</sup> with the objective, among others, of articulating the basic principles that are to guide the developmental policies of the country. The Charter provides six basic principles, one of which is self-reliance. Within the economic realm self-reliance is defined as the need to develop and rely on internal capacities.<sup>15</sup> The Charter goes on to explain that the Eritrean revolution succeeded because of self-reliance.

*We succeeded because we planned according to our own experience and conditions, without copying anybody else's political model, foreign policies and military strategies. We dealt with problems we faced in our daily lives and our programs (by ourselves), not expecting solutions from outside experts. In matters of ... economic development, we must chart our own programs which work for our own condition (emphasis added).*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> 'IGAD - Intergovernmental Authority on Development', <https://archive.uneca.org/oria/pages/igad-intergovernmental-authority-development>, (visited on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, 2024)

<sup>14</sup> PFDJ National Charter, adopted at the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Congress of the EPLF/PFDJ, 1994, Translation by Milena Bereket

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

As has been shown in previous chapters, the emphasis on self-reliance might have found its natural out-let in the Eritrean revolution but its hold goes much deeper into the psyche of the Eritrean people. There is a traditional saying in Eritrea, ‘those who need from others, end up wearing-out like a piece of cloth.’ This preoccupation with self-reliance of the Eritrean Government stems from three interrelated factors: the need for equality, independence and sustainability. In one of the papers he wrote, President Isaias stated, “symmetry should be the linchpin of this relationship. Donor-recipient relationship based on prescription and dictation of unsuitable antidotes will not do. Our independence of decision should not be encroached upon by conditionality of aid. This is a fundamental question of dignity which cannot be compromised by temporary necessity.”<sup>17</sup> The experience of African countries is full of glaring examples where foreign aid exacerbated the problem of socio-economic underdevelopment and political dependence with associated problems of corruption and nepotism.<sup>18</sup> Given this lesson it was only natural that Eritrea would attempt to avoid aid dependence, and to set the donor-recipient relationship (the government prefers the term ‘partnership in development’) on its terms and emphasize national ‘ownership’ of development projects.<sup>19</sup> *[Eritrea] is strongly disinclined to accept aid packages simply because they include much needed capital; if programs are supportive of Eritrea’s priorities and designed in partnership, the government will both endorse*

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<sup>17</sup> Isaias Afewerki, ‘Achieving Global Human Security: Eritrea’s View’, a paper presented at the biennial on International Development Conference, Washington, DC, 1995. Reprinted in the Eritrea Profile, the 31st of January, 1995

<sup>18</sup> Nuhad Jamal, ‘Development Aid: Eritrea’s Practice as an Alternative Model’, Prepared for the Eritrean Studies Association (ESA) International Conference “Independent Eritrea: Lessons and Prospects”, Asmara, 2001

<sup>19</sup> Göte Hansson, ‘Building New States: Lessons from Eritrea’, Discussion Paper No. 2001/66, World Institute for development Economics Research, p 5

*and support them; if they are not, it will, as it has time and time again, choose to go it alone, often at high cost (emphasis added).*<sup>20</sup>

There are those who argue that the donor-recipient relationship will never be a true partnership and that “aid in any form would always benefit the core countries and frustrate Third World countries’ endeavour to liberate themselves politically and economically.”<sup>21</sup> But this is a bleak assessment of reality. Aid can foster partnership between the donor and recipient countries; promote the political and economic independence of poor countries and ensure the sustainability of the developmental endeavour if it is aimed at developing and strengthening of the internal capacity of the underdeveloped countries while at the same time utilizing that internal capacity to articulate and implement its programs. The National Charter for Eritrea explains what this ‘internal capacity’ is in Eritrea: ‘the secret for our victory in the struggle is found in the dedicated fighter.... It was this selfless individual who made it all possible, beating all odds.... In building an economy too, the most decisive factor is human resources, not natural or capital resources, nor foreign aid or investment.’<sup>22</sup> ‘Eritrea possess a highly motivated, industrious and disciplined people who have not only a strong aspiration for development but are also aware of what it takes to develop and have the necessary commitment to bring it about.’<sup>23</sup> ‘We have to work, develop our skills and stand side-by-side with the rest of the world.’<sup>24</sup>

In February 1997, the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission (hereinafter referred as ERREC) issued a policy document titled ‘Role,

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<sup>20</sup> USAID/Eritrea, The Investment Partnership between The United States Agency for International Development and the State of Eritrea, October 1997, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ghelawdewos Araya, ‘Eritrea: A Political Economy of Transition’, A paper presented at Economic Policy Conference on Eritrea, Organized by the University of Asmara, 1991

<sup>22</sup> PFDJ, National Charter, adopted at the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Congress of the EPLF/PFDJ, 1994, Translation by Milena Bereket

<sup>23</sup> Macro-policy, The Government of the State of Eritrea, 1994

<sup>24</sup> Isaias Afewerki, President of the State of Eritrea, Public question and answer session, 1998

Scope and Modalities of Operation of International NGOs in Eritrea' which specifically limits the programs of aid institutions in Eritrea to the education and health sectors.<sup>25</sup> What is more, the responsibility for the development of sector policies and strategies, as well as programme implementation was exclusively reserved for the line ministries.<sup>26</sup> According to the UN Human Development Index Report of 2005, between 1993-2003, '30% of the total of almost US\$1.9 billion went to Emergency Assistance and Reconstruction (CRS [Common Reporting Standard] code group 700); 12.4% to Government and Civil Society (Incl. Land Mine Clearance & Demobilization)[The previous two aid items were due to the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia]; 10.5% to Commodity Aid and General Programme Assistance (CRS code group 500); 8.3% went to Education, 7.3% to Agriculture and 6.4% to Health.'<sup>27</sup> Empirical assessment of the success of this policy outlook is beyond the scope of this paper, however, Eritrea's achievement in the Millenium Development Goals can give us a good indication.<sup>28</sup>

### **III. SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY: RENEWED US HOSTILITY AGAINST THE ERITREAN PEOPLE**

There is one point that need to be made clear here, the US government hostility is directed against the Eritrean People not just its government. If this was not so, how can one explain the US position on the Eritrean independence question in the 1940s. At that time there was no such thing

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<sup>25</sup> Nuhad Jamal, 'Development Aid: Eritrea's Practice as an Alternative Model', Prepared for the Eritrean Studies Association (ESA) International Conference "Independent Eritrea: Lessons and Prospects", Asmara, 2001

<sup>26</sup> Teferi Michael et-al, *Managing Aid Exit and Transformation Eritrea Country Case Study*, 2008, p 31, <https://library.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/managing-aid-exit-and-transformation-eritrea-coun.pdf>, , (visited on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, 2024)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, et al, 'Africa MDGs Report 2015 - Lessons Learned', <https://www.undp.org/ghana/publications/africa-mdgs-report-2015-lessons-learned>, (visited on the 26th of July, 2024)

as an Eritrean government. It seems the US was worried that if given their independence, the Eritrean people would not be amenable to US interest in the region. “Who is tiny Eritrea to defy US wishes?”<sup>29</sup> This possibility has now become a certainty because of continuous US hostility against the Eritrean people.<sup>30</sup>

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the US was desperately trying to come with some justifications to prevent the independence of Eritrea even during the final push for the capture of Asmara. There are some anecdotal evidences that the US offered the EPLF leadership of Ethiopia if they didn’t go ahead with their plan for referendum.<sup>31</sup> In any case, as the independence of Eritrea was a done deal, the US had no choice but to accept it.<sup>32</sup> During the early years of independence, there was alignment between the foreign policy objectives of the two countries.<sup>33</sup> The US has just suffered a humiliating debacle in the ‘Black Hawk Down’ incident in Somalia and was happy to let the regional actors handle the problem and was promoting regional solutions for regional problems, although there were some subtle differences in their prescriptions. The same also with the problem in Sudan. Sudan under Beshir-Turabi was intending on exporting political Islam to the region, which made Eritrea nervous given its preoccupation for internal cohesion and unity.<sup>34</sup> The US on its side was beginning to worry about the aftermath of its success in Afghanistan. The

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<sup>29</sup> Redie Bereketeab, ‘The Eritrea-Ethiopia Conflict and the Algiers Agreement: Eritrea’s Road to Isolation’, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280010587\\_The\\_Eritrea-Ethiopia\\_Conflict\\_and\\_the\\_Algers\\_Agreement\\_Eritreas\\_March\\_Down\\_the\\_Road\\_to\\_Isolation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280010587_The_Eritrea-Ethiopia_Conflict_and_the_Algers_Agreement_Eritreas_March_Down_the_Road_to_Isolation), (visited on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, 2024) p 122

<sup>30</sup> Michela Wrong, ‘I Didn’t Do It for You: How the World Betrayed a Small African Nation’, London and New York Fourth Estate, 2005

<sup>31</sup> Leenco Lata, ‘The Ethiopia-Eritrea War’, *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 30, No. 97, *The Horn of Conflict* (2003), p 379

<sup>32</sup> Terrence Lyons, ‘Post-Cold War U.S. Policy toward Africa: Hints from the Horn’, *The Brookings Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1992, p33

<sup>33</sup> Saleh A.A. Younis, ‘The Eritrean-Ethiopian Conflict or How Ethioiphilia Blinded Susan Rice’, *Eritrean Studies Review*, Vol. 3 No. 2, 1999, pp168

<sup>34</sup> George W. Shepherd, ‘Free Eritrea: Linchpin for Stability and Peace on the Horn’, *Africa Today*, Vol. 40, No. 2, *The Horn of Africa: Reconstructing Political Order*, 1993, p 88

Great Lakes is another region where Eritrea and the US worked together to stabilize a dangerous situation.<sup>35</sup> The government of Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire was about to implode and engulf the region in flames.

The problem started when Ethiopia and Eritrea went into war in 1998. The possible causes for the war have been extensively discussed elsewhere and are beyond the scope of this paper. The US as an ally of both countries was ideally situated to mediate and resolve the conflict. For some reason, probably a relapse to its innate hostility towards the people of Eritrea, chose to side with Ethiopia and thereby botched the US-Rwanda Peace Plan.<sup>36</sup> Washington then spent the next six months trying to coerce Eritrea into accepting a flawed proposal, while Ethiopia used the truce to mobilize hundreds of thousands of troops and assemble a staggering arsenal of Cold War arms for a second round of fighting.<sup>37</sup> When the war ended after the death of tenth of thousands of combatants,<sup>38</sup> the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians and the destruction of billions of dollars of property the countries signed the Algiers Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2000 wherein they agreed to refer their border dispute to a final and binding international arbitration.<sup>39</sup> When the arbitrators gave their decision and awarded the town of Badime, the ‘flash-point’ for the war, to Eritrea, Ethiopia reneged on its agreement and refused to abide by the

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<sup>35</sup> Dan Connell, *Against All Odds: The Second Siege of Eritrea*, *Eritrean Studies Review*, Vol. 3 No. 2, 1999, pp 191-192

<sup>36</sup> Redie Bereketeab, ‘The Eritrea-Ethiopia Conflict and the Algiers Agreement: Eritrea’s Road to Isolation’, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280010587\\_The\\_Eritrea-Ethiopia\\_Conflict\\_and\\_the\\_Algers\\_Agreement\\_Eritreas\\_March\\_Down\\_the\\_Road\\_to\\_Isolation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280010587_The_Eritrea-Ethiopia_Conflict_and_the_Algers_Agreement_Eritreas_March_Down_the_Road_to_Isolation), p 99 (visited on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, 2024)

<sup>37</sup> Amanuel Biedemariam, *The History of the US in Eritrea: From Franklin D. Roosevelt to Barak Obama and How Donald Trump Changed the Course of History*, lulu.com, 2020, p 167

<sup>38</sup> Redie Bereketeab, ‘The Eritrea-Ethiopia Conflict and the Algiers Agreement: Eritrea’s Road to Isolation’, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280010587\\_The\\_Eritrea-Ethiopia\\_Conflict\\_and\\_the\\_Algers\\_Agreement\\_Eritreas\\_March\\_Down\\_the\\_Road\\_to\\_Isolation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280010587_The_Eritrea-Ethiopia_Conflict_and_the_Algers_Agreement_Eritreas_March_Down_the_Road_to_Isolation), p 110 (visited on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, 2024).

<sup>39</sup> Press Statement, US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/23rd-anniversary-of-the-algiers-agreement-between-the-governments-of-ethiopia-and-eritrea/>, (visited on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, 2024)



award of the arbitrators.<sup>40</sup> The US, as a guarantor of the peace agreement, instead of pressuring Ethiopia to accept the award, entertained and assisted it to evade its international obligations by engaging in such gimmicks (Ethiopia accepts the award in principle but would like to negotiate on the modalities for the actual demarcation; the demarcation might divide houses, families and communities...) to frustrate the demarcation of the border.<sup>41</sup> John Bolton the former US Ambassador to the UN put it succinctly in his book, 'For reasons I never understood, however, Frazer [former US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs] reversed course, and asked in early February to reopen the 2002 EEBC [Eritrean Ethiopian Boundary Commission] decision, which she had concluded was wrong, and award a major piece of disputed territory to Ethiopia.'<sup>42</sup> Soon after, Western governments would start disseminating demonizing propaganda about how Eritrea is one of the worst violators of human rights, calling it a destabilizing force and/or terrorist supporter – all sorts of lies to set the foundation for punishing Eritrea.

#### **IV. A BAD EXAMPLE OF A GOOD EXAMPLE**

The National service program was one of the first national institutions to be targeted by this defamatory propaganda. Given the pivotal role of the members of the national service in safeguarding Eritrean sovereignty and territorial integrity in the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrea war, this was not surprising. The National Service Program can be considered as the crystallization of the bitter lessons Eritreans learned during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is reflected in the stated objectives of the program.

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<sup>40</sup> Siphamadla Zondi and Emmanuel Rejouis, 'The Ethiopian-Eritrean Border Conflict and the Role of the International Community', *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 6 No.2, 2006, P 77

<sup>41</sup> John Bolton, 'Surrender is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations and abroad, Threshold Editions, 2007, p

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

According to Article 5 of Proclamation No. 82/1995 the objectives of the National Service Program are:

- a) To establish a strong defense force with a solid popular base that can guarantee the sovereignty and independence Eritrea;
- b) To preserve and bequeath to the next generations the legacy of courage, perseverance and bravery the Eritrean people have shown in the 30 years armed struggle;
- c) To cultivate a new generation characterized by hard work, discipline, and participation and readiness to build the nation;
- d) To strengthen and develop the national economy by utilizing our human resources in an organized and skilled manner, which is our main reservoir of national wealth;
- e) To provide the participants of the program with military training and continuous exercise in order to acquire and develop specialized skills and physical fitness; and
- f) By cultivating unity in nationalism, to fight subnational sentiments and enhance cohesion among our people.<sup>43</sup>

In spite of these worthy objectives, or more likely because of them, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (hereinafter referred as UNHCR) designated national service evaders/deserters as being particularly at risk and deserving special protection under the international asylum system.<sup>44</sup> This created an artificial pull factor for many Eritreans (and many Ethiopians claiming to be Eritreans) to migrate to Europe in the hands of vicious human traffickers crossing the harsh Saharan desert

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<sup>43</sup> Proclamation No. 82/1995, National Service Proclamation

<sup>44</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Eritrea, April 2009, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/countryspos/unhcr/2009/en/66801> (accessed 23 July 2024) pp 12-20

and the Mediterranean Sea in barely floating boats.<sup>45</sup> The plight of those migrants is well documented and doesn't need to be enumerated here. Now that the receiving European states are feeling the negative impact of this misguided policy many of them are doing a U-turn. To take just one example, in March 2015 the UK Home Office issued new country guidance on Eritrea. This reversed the position of the previous guidelines, and claimed that national service was no longer indefinite, no longer equivalent to 'forced labour' and therefore did not amount to persecution or degrading or inhuman treatment (the basis on which someone would be granted refugee status or other forms of protection in the UK).<sup>46</sup>

Another issue that has been weaponized to attack Eritrea is the issue of religious prosecution. In accordance with its domestic laws the US through its president reviews the status of religious freedom in every country in the world and designate each country the government of which has engaged in or tolerated "particularly severe violations of religious freedom" as a Country of Particular Concern (hereinafter referred as CPC). Burma, People's Republic of China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are the latest CPC.<sup>47</sup> When one looks at the list, one cannot but wonder how US government's concern for international religious freedom is so much aligned with its geopolitical interest. With regard to Eritrea, the US claims:

Eritrea continues to have one of the worst religious freedom records in Africa .... No new religious institutions were officially

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<sup>45</sup> Fausto Biloslavo, The Scam of Fake Eritrean Refugees who are actually Ethiopians, <https://tesfanews.com/scam-false-eritrean-refugees-actually-ethiopians/> (accessed 23 July 2024)

<sup>46</sup> The Guardian, 'Home Office Eritrea guidance softened to reduce asylum seeker numbers', <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jan/22/home-office-eritrean-guidance-softened-to-reduce-asylum-seeker-numbers>, (accessed 23 July 2024)

<sup>47</sup> Office of International religious Freedom, 'Countries of Particular Concern, Special Watch List Countries, Entities of Particular Concern', <https://www.state.gov/countries-of-particular-concern-special-watch-list-countries-entities-of-particular-concern/>, (visited on the 20th of July, 2024)

registered, and thus only four religious communities remain legally permitted to operate: the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, a Lutheran-affiliated denomination.<sup>48</sup>

The history of religious coexistence in Eritrea is centuries old. Christianity arrived in the region in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and Islam during the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. Through mutual respect and understanding, Eritreans have managed to preserve their diverse religious traditions while maintaining a peaceful and harmonious coexistence. Except for one instance, quickly and ingeniously resolved by elders/leaders of both faiths (discussed above in part two), there has never been religious strife in Eritrea. This is difficult to square with the statement '*the worst religious freedom records in Africa (emphasis added)*'. However, as has been amply demonstrated in this paper, Eritrea has had first hand lesson on how so-called concern for religious freedom can have ulterior motive of dividing and weakening a nation. That is why in the National Charter for Eritrea, National unity is declared as the paramount guideline, to which all work and policies will be aligned, thus rejecting 'all divisive attitudes and activities, ... [and] places national interest above everything else.'<sup>49</sup> After all, a house divided against itself cannot stand.

The third major front of attack was to allege that Eritrea was a supporter of terrorism and a force of instability in the region. On December 23, 2009, the United Nations Security Council (hereinafter referred as UNSC) passed a resolution (Resolution 1907) imposing sanctions on Eritrea and calling for a weapons embargo, a freezing of assets, and a travel ban on civilian and military leaders. The reasons for the sanctions were Eritrea's

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<sup>48</sup> United States Commission for International Religious Freedom, <https://www.uscirf.gov/countries/eritrea>, (visited on the 20th of July, 2024)

<sup>49</sup> PFDJ, National Charter, adopted at the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Congress of the EPLF/PFDJ, 1994

alleged support to armed groups undermining peace and reconciliation in Somalia and its failure to heed calls by the UNSC to withdraw its forces from its borders with Djibouti.<sup>50</sup> The statement continues on to state:

The Council reiterates its demand that Eritrea withdraw its forces to the position of the status quo ante in the area where its conflict with Djibouti had occurred, acknowledge its border dispute and cooperate fully with the Secretary-General's good offices. It further demands that the country cease all efforts to destabilize or overthrow, directly or indirectly, the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia.<sup>51</sup>

These sanctions were lifted by UNSC resolution 2444 in 2018 'amid growing rapprochement with Ethiopia' few months after the signing of a peace agreement between the two countries.<sup>52</sup> There is no better proof as to the hypocrisy of the system than this.

In 2005 Eritrea issued a law to regulate the activities of Non-Governmental Organizations (hereinafter referred as NGO).<sup>53</sup> This proclamation, among others, limited NGO activities to relief and rehabilitation;<sup>54</sup> work through concerned governmental entity;<sup>55</sup> limit overhead costs to less than 10% of the overall budget;<sup>56</sup> and submit annual audited financial report to the Government.<sup>57</sup> Immediately, western media outlets began attacking Eritrea: "As one of the world's poorest nations...

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<sup>50</sup> United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1907, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1709>, (visited on the 24th of July, 2024)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> UN News, 'Eritrea sanctions lifted amid growing rapprochement with Ethiopia: Security Council', <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/eritrea-sanctions-lifted-amid-growing-rapprochement-ethiopia-security-council>, (visited on the 24th of July, 2024)

<sup>53</sup> Proclamation No. 145/2005, A Proclamation to Determine the Administration of Non-Governmental Organizations

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, Article 7(1).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, Article 6(2).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, Article 6(5).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, Article 6(4).

Eritrea can scarcely afford to say no;”<sup>58</sup> “Eritrea’s people pay the price for their government’s pride.”<sup>59</sup> In the leaked notes of a diplomatic cable of a meeting then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held with Ronald McMullen – the then-Ambassador to Eritrea in June 2009, exposed by WikiLeaks, she describes Eritrea as a “bad good example” of governance.<sup>60</sup>

## V. THE ROAD AHEAD

It seems the age of a unipolar world is on its way out. The time when the US was the undisputed champ is coming to an end. History, after all is not dead. The US is finding it harder and harder to boss around everyone, big and small. The way African states voted in the UNGA with regard to the Ukraine war is a good indication of this. There were six UNGA resolutions on the war.

	ES-11/1	ES-11/2	ES-11/3	ES-11/4	ES-11/5	ES-11/6	Total
<b>YES</b>	28	27	10	30	15	30	<b>140</b>
<b>NO</b>	1	1	9	0	5	2	<b>18</b>
<b>ABSTAIN</b>	17	20	24	19	27	15	<b>122</b>
<b>NO VOTE</b>	8	6	11	5	7	7	<b>44</b>

This table shows how African countries voted in each resolution.<sup>61</sup> This would have been unthinkable a decade ago. Another example is when the UNGA overwhelmingly adopted a resolution declaring that Palestinians qualify for full membership at the UN, the US was one of the few countries

<sup>58</sup> Los Angeles Times, ‘Eritrea aspires to be self-reliant, rejecting foreign aid’, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-eritrea2oct02-story.html>, (visited on the 20th of July, 2024).

<sup>59</sup> The Economist, ‘A myth of self-reliance’, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2006/04/27/a-myth-of-self-reliance>, (visited on the 20th of July, 2024).

<sup>60</sup> Lambert Ebitu, ‘Eritrea paying the price for daring Africa to become self-reliant’, African Interest, [https://africaninterest.org/eritrea-paying-the-price-for-daring-africa-to-become-self-reliant/#google\\_vignette](https://africaninterest.org/eritrea-paying-the-price-for-daring-africa-to-become-self-reliant/#google_vignette), (visited on the 20th of July, 2024)

<sup>61</sup> Elias Götz, et al, ‘How African states voted on Russia’s war in Ukraine at the United Nations – and what it means for the West’, <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/how-african-states-voted-on-russias-war-in-ukraine-the-united-nations-and-what-it-means>, (visited on the 24th of July, 2024)

that opposed it.<sup>62</sup> What it was telling is that the US has to defend its opposition.<sup>63</sup> This does not mean that the US has lost its primacy. The US is still the number one country economically, it has the biggest army and is leading in scientific and technological innovations. What it means is that other countries are catching up quickly. What is more important than this, however, is the structural problems that the US is facing, in particular, huge national debt and polarized domestic politics.

The decline of the US as a sole superpower has the advantage of limiting its excesses in foreign policy and opening up space for other countries. It, however, has risks too. First of all, history teaches us no superpower gives up its supremacy graciously. The US is no different and the intensifying rivalry with China is an indication of this. What is different now is the fact that scientific and technological advancement, especially in weaponry, have made the game a high stakes poker where the fate of humanity hangs at the balance. Secondly, emerging powers, both actual and fanciful, rush to fill up the space left by the declining superpower. The intense regional rivalry over the control of the Red Sea and its immediate environs with its concomitant negative impact for the people of the region (Sudan, Somali, Yemen) is a good example of this. If we take the case of Sudan as an example, although the core problem is a failure of successive governments in the state and nation building process, the interference of upcoming regional powers in support of one or the other of the antagonists in the conflict is causing unbearable suffering on the Sudanese people and could lead to the disintegration of the country with repercussions for the entire

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<sup>62</sup> United Nations, 'At Emergency Special Session, General Assembly Overwhelmingly Backs Membership of Palestine to United Nations, Urges Security Council Support Bid', <https://press.un.org/en/2024/ga12599.doc.htm>, (visited on the 24th of July, 2024)

<sup>63</sup> The New York Times, 'The U.N. General Assembly adopts a resolution in support of Palestinian statehood', <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/05/10/world/israel-gaza-war-hamas-rafah>, (visited on the 24th of July, 2024)

region. What is worrying is that Sudan is not the only country facing similar fate.

What is even more optimistic than the demise of the unipolar system is the growing consciousness and solidarity developing among the downtrodden of the world. Economic woes, environmental catastrophes and unending wars and associated suffering, death and destruction have awakened the slumbering masses. It is becoming glaringly clear that if we are to avoid catastrophe of global proportion things must change. This is even more pronounced in the global south where neo-colonial exploitation have exacerbated the problems many folds. This does not mean that a positive outcome is inevitable. The gains made by far-right parties in the last European election is a manifestation of the blind lashing out of the wretched of Europe. Europeans, especially the youth, have lost hope that the established traditional elites can address the daily struggles they are facing. However, instead of politically educating, organizing and mobilizing themselves to take charge of their fate and bring about the required change by themselves they are taking the easy way out by putting their faith in far-right parties peddling dangerously false solutions.

The National Charter for Eritrea states ‘unless peace, justice and prosperity prevail in Eritrea, the independence we won with heavy sacrifices will be meaningless.’<sup>64</sup> If we expand the logic of this statement a little bit further, Eritrea cannot secure peace, justice and prosperity for its people unless there is peace, justice and prosperity in the whole region. The countries of this region are destined by geography to swim together or sink together. Thus, they have no alternative but to work together. Working together will require learning from historical mistakes, forgoing

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<sup>64</sup> PFDJ, National Charter, adopted at the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Congress of the EPLF/PFDJ, 1994



untenable hegemonic ambitions and above all exorcising oneself of comprador mentality.

The time is now for the countries of this region to get their act together, seize the moment and take advantage of the opportunities created by the geopolitical reconfiguration taking place in the region and the world at large while purposefully and carefully navigating around the hidden pitfalls. The people cannot afford to lose this historic opportunity.

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