

## Half a century of Misery and with no end in sight



21 years ago on May 24, 1991, the EPLF with its well organized army of peasants, overrun one of the largest army in Africa, the Army of Ethiopia's Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam, and captured Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea. This was the culmination of a 30 year war of "independence" waged by the Eritrean people under the leadership of the EPLF and Isayas Afewerki the current head of the Asmara government.

Eritrea, a semi-arid strip of land bordering the Red Sea, Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti, is a new African nation in the Sahel region, which owes its birth to Italian colonialists in 1890. The Italians gave the nation its present day boundaries and its name Eritrea (*Primogenia*, "first daughter").

Historically, Eritrea was part and parcel of the Abyssinian Empire. Named by Emperor Zara Yacob (1399–1468) as the domain of the "*Bahre Negash*" and "*Midri Bahr*" until the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872 – 1889), when its name was changed to "*Mereb Melash*." It was administered as an integral part of Ethiopia by its own Prince known as the "*Bahrenegash*" or "King of the sea coast" who was a vassal of the Abyssinian King. Part of its coastal areas adjoining the Red sea, and part of the Western peripheries were occupied by the Ottoman Turks and Egypt at different times.

The Italians ruled Eritrea from 1890 to 1941. During the Second World War the British defeated the Italian army in Eritrea and administered it for a decade. In 1952 the UN General Assembly, called for Eritrea and Ethiopia to be linked through a loose federal structure under the sovereignty of the then Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930 -1974). In 1962 the Eritrean Assembly led by the Unionist Party (which had a majority in the house) dissolved the Federation formally and declared it a province of Ethiopia.

In response to that half a century ago Eritrea started an armed struggle led by Hamid Idris Awate, who was a local outlaw "shifita", engaged in cattle raiding and rustling. Awate was a criminal and is well remembered by his victims the Kunamas (indigenous people living in south Western Eritrea) for committing atrocious crimes against them and the indiscriminate killing of women and children including infants and burning and razing of Kunama villages. He was pardoned by the British Administration in Eritrea and given complete amnesty for his past crimes and allowed to return to his hometown, until upon request from the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) he turned his band of outlaws into the armed wing of the ELF.

The separatists began the guerilla movement in the western lowlands of Eritrea. Initially they were a bunch of mostly ragtag hit-and-run guerrilla rebel groups. The first guerillas were mostly ex Sudanese army members. By the mid 1960s some radicalized Eritrean students with communist ideologies from high schools and colleges in Ethiopia (including the current head of state) joined the independence movement. With no written program or vision the so called Eritrean Struggle for independence limped until 1970s.

By 1970 the movement, still with no vision other than the objective of “liberating Eritrea from Ethiopian colonialism”, split up and another faction - the EPLF (Eritrean People’s Liberation Front) was created. The two fronts, both fighting for the same aim, continued to cause mayhem, death, and destruction on the people and the land. The senseless violence and infighting between them which culminated in 1981 caused more death and destruction than the war for the so called independence.

Even though the fronts declared objective was to free the people from oppression and colonization from Ethiopia, the leaders were nonetheless pursuing a hidden agenda of carving a fiefdom for themselves at the cost of the Eritrean people. The Eritrean people were used as a tool to achieve their secret agenda. Eritreans were nothing more than cannon fodder.

During the protracted war, they used the people as shields in most of their campaigns with the intention of creating civilian casualties. The deliberate creation of collateral damage was employed as a routine tactic. Successive Ethiopian governments approach towards solving the problem in Eritrea did not help either. The heavy handed approach pushed many Eritreans toward nationalism. Many Eritrean youth who were escaping the red terror era of Mengistu also joined the fronts further inflating the number of the fighters. By the mid seventies the ELF and EPLF took advantage of the political unrest and turmoil in Ethiopia and overrun many towns and military garrisons. They pretty much captured most of the whole of Eritrea with the exception of the city of Asmara, the ports of Assab and Massawa and a couple of other smaller towns.

The Mengistu regime was able to reverse the gains made by the guerillas by 1978. Successive campaigns by the Ethiopian military decimated the ranks and files of the fronts. Facing extinction, the fronts, which so far have relied on voluntary recruits, began to forcibly round up new recruits particularly in the regions of “*Akeleguzay*” and “*Seraye*” whose participation in the war so far was negligible and had untapped manpower. Those who resisted the forcible recruitment were imprisoned. Their parents were imprisoned and whatever property the poor peasants had confiscated. Deserters were gunned down in front of their units. Whole districts “*woreda*” like the people of “*Kohayine*” in southern “*Seraye*” region were massacred and subjected to untold persecution. They were uprooted from their villages and their livestock and property confiscated. The other victims were the “*Kunamas*” whose villages were burned and their property taken away for their alleged support to Ethiopia. The “*Kunamas*” have been subjected to systematic and persistent persecution and have been totally decimated and whatever remains of them now live mostly in refugee camps in Ethiopia.

Many of the fighters who joined these fronts were innocent youngsters who wanted to bring about social change for the betterment of society. They believed the fronts stood for democratic change and wanted to participate. What they found after they joined was the opposite.

The fronts were undemocratic and extremely repressive. Dissent, the expression of differing views and opinions was not tolerated. Every aspect of the fighters; how each fighter acted, what they did, who they could talk to, and who they associate with was controlled. Many front members and soldiers who were suspected of having differing views were labeled as subversive elements and imprisoned, tortured and eliminated. Dissenters were labeled as *Menkae*, *Fallull*, *Yemin*, *Ethiopian spy* etc., and were summarily executed or made to disappear. The Security apparatus of the fronts inflicted extraordinary horror and terror on the fighters and cowed them to absolute submission.

The Eritrean struggle from inception was not a struggle for democracy, justice and lasting peace. The heinous and perpetual crime perpetuated by the fronts on the people in the 30 years of its journey and which has been continued with greater intensity since independence for the last 20 years, points to one and only one direction. This so called independence struggle was designed to create a fiefdom for the leaders of the fronts like Isayas by subjugating the Eritrean people.

Eritreans were helpless outsiders who were used as tools and cannon fodder towards achieving this end. This might look like a farfetched conspiracy theory, but believe it or not it is; and step by step we are witnessing its implementation. The authors of this agenda are none other than the non Eritrean settlers who moved into Eritrea at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to either religious persecution or political marginalization from other parts of Ethiopia and were motivated by hatred and resentment towards the Abyssinian Empire. When individuals are guided by hate they are extremely dangerous and would use any means at their disposal to achieve their goals. Their aim is not the betterment of society but rather the destruction of their enemies and a meaningless desire to triumph over their opponents.

The final chapter of their grand plan is being written in the form of grooming the son of Isayas as the next leader of Eritrea. A minor monarchy or rule by heredity is being installed. Eritreans have no say in this because they have been systematically decimated in preparation for this day.

The EPLF realizing that they will not in any way win the war alone began to foster and create alliance with other guerilla fronts in Ethiopia. The most notable alliance was with the TPLF (Tigrayan People's Liberation Front) which tipped the balance in the war. The strategic alliance between these two organizations was determinant in liquidating the ELF and also in triumphing over the vast army of Ethiopia.

After the elimination of the ELF from Eritrea, the EPLF had the field for its own. This is when Isayas Afeworki the current leader of the country began to build his power base. He had previously eliminated all those that criticized his leadership and asked for reform. All educated member of the front were put in the first line of war and sacrificed. New and existing members were screened either by ethnic origin or blind loyalty and moved up the scale of power. A secret party named the EPRP (not to be confused with the Ethiopian EPRP) took full control of the front with Isayas at its helm. Anyone who uttered any opposition or posed a threat simply disappeared.

Fate also played the biggest role in the final outcome of the war. The military support that Mengistu Hailemariam so far enjoyed from the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc began to dry. The unpopularity of Mengistu's rigidly socialist policies also created dissent within Ethiopia and its own army. The Ethiopian army for all purposes and intent stopped fighting. The TPLF (Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front) was also able to mobilize the people of Tigray and became a formidable force, and overrun all Ethiopian garrisons in Tigray. The final countdown to the demise of the Mengistu regime began in earnest. By 1991 the two fronts launched a brilliantly coordinated attack on all fronts both in Eritrea and the rest of Ethiopia and succeeded in overrunning the Ethiopian army and captured Asmara and Addis Ababa respectively.

The first phase of the destruction and domination of the Eritrean people, i.e. The Elimination of dissent and opposition to Isayas and “his future Eritrea” was implemented during the liberation war era. All organized and individual dissenters within EPLF were dubbed as regionalists, radical Marxists, leftist or rightists and were liquidated immediately. That was followed by the defeat and pushing out of the ELF from Eritrea.

Phase two of the destruction and domination of the Eritrean people was implemented after independence. A new Eritrea began to be shaped and molded by Isayas and his cliques. It consists of the destruction of all cultural, religious and traditional institutions and values of Eritrea society and converting the people into slaves and serfs.

EPLF destroyed the Awraja system of Administration and created new administrative zones. Eritrea was divided and reorganized into central, south, north etc. regions. They abandoned the age old Geez Calendar and introduced the Gregorian calendar and New Year began to be celebrated on January 1<sup>st</sup>. Religious leaders had to conform to EPLF directives or face closure. Traditional and religious leaders were replaced by EPLF cadres. Muslims were persecuted as radicals. Only sanctioned churches were allowed to operate and non sanctioned churches were closed. The Jehovah Witnesses were stripped of their citizenship and became stateless in their ancestral land. The president who does not tolerate anyone who considers their highest allegiance to God labeled all protestant churches as imperialist religions and closed them. The Orthodox Church was infiltrated and run directly by the directives of the state.

In 1995 the conversion of the Eritrean people to serfs started through the Warsay Yikealo development program. With the sole purpose of having inexhaustible free labor and illiterate citizens at its disposal the government introduced compulsory national service in 1995. Thus condemned to perpetual slavery hundreds of thousands of Eritreans were drafted never to be demobilized and began serving the government without pay or compensation. All the young men and women of Eritrea now became the serfs and slaves of Isayas.

All educational establishments were dismantled and Eritreans who had one of the highest literacy rates in Ethiopia were stripped of their right to education. The only University in Eritrea; the Asmara University, which was originally opened by the Comboni Sisters in 1958 was closed. Thus Eritreans were condemned to be a nation of backward illiterates, whose only purpose in life is to serve the President and his cliques as serfs. Eritrean youth was systematically made to leave the cities and towns and villages and relegated to military camps. Eritrea thus became one vast Military camp and its people became serfs and soldiers of Isayas.

Eritreans helpless and dismayed by the turn of events in their nation began to leave en masse. Hundreds of thousands of refugees left the country in search of safe haven. In a span of a decade Eritrea has become one of the highest refugees producing nation in the world. Thus the emptying of Eritrea from its bona fide citizens was put in full gear.

By holding family members of Eritreans as hostages the government through its enforcers and embassies put in place a coercive expatriate fund raising operation and consolidated its control over the Diaspora. It punishes family members in Eritrea of the Diaspora who fail to pay by detaining them, and denying them the right to do business by revoking licenses or confiscating farm land.

In 2012 phase three and the final stage of the destruction and domination of the Eritrean people has begun to be implemented. This stage has started to play out rather prematurely because of the unexpected deterioration of the health of the president. Isayas Afeworki is suffering from Cirrhosis of the Liver and appears that he is running out of time. Therefore, he has begun to groom his eldest son Abraham Isayas as a successor to his throne. Abraham who is 28-year-old is not only inexperienced to handle the running of the state, but he is also uneducated with only a high school education and hence unfit and ill prepared for the top job.

Moreover, there is the old guard from the liberation era, generals in the army and heads of the vast security machinery and the entire ruling clique whose loyalties are questionable once Isayas is out of the picture. It would be unpalatable for them to be governed by a young inexperienced man who was neither in the liberation struggle nor educated and competent enough to earn their respect. Therefore, Isayas has to ensure a smooth transition of power to his son, by eliminating possible obstacles after his death and surrounding his son Abraham with loyal yes men.

Thus the recently staged drama of his sudden disappearance and reappearance was designed to gauge and appraise the actions and reactions of both his enemies as well as those closest to him. He needed to determine which of his deputies would pose obstacle to his intention of installing Abraham as the next head of state. Eritrea in the near future would witness a big reshuffle. Most of the old guards would be removed from the political scene of Eritrea. Some might be retired and immobilized, some would be forced to leave the nation, yet some might die of dubious circumstances and yet some might even join their comrades in prison. There would be new appointments and promotions. This would be the final scenario of the destruction and domination of the Eritrean people.

Eritreans have no other option but to be spectators in the affairs of their own land. The nation is divided along all imaginable lines, religion, ethnicity, age, etc.etc., The opposition which is split into around 40 factions as at the last count is a pathetic and weak excuse for a political movement. It is powerless and crippled. The government in power which commands the forces of evil has all the state machinery and apparatus at its disposal and can do whatever it wants with minimal opposition, except the usual cry from ineffective cyber space politicians and some human rights organizations. The international community has no alternative but to accept the outcome for lack of a credible alternative.

This once proud and peace loving people are now reduced to stateless sojourners scattered around the globe in search of safe heaven. Those in the country are either languishing in the countless Eritrean prisons and dungeons or have become slaves and surfs in their own homeland. Countless are dying in the Sahara desert; their organs harvested and sold by Bedouin smugglers in the Sinai and drowning in the high seas of the Mediterranean. For half a century the history of this land has been a history of perpetual war, killing and wanton destruction. Its people had been subjected to endless suffering, exile, and displacement. The founding fathers of the armed struggle promised them Eden on earth after victory. But what they got was Sheol on Earth. Within a few years they witnessed their country change from a land of the living to a nation of misery celebrating death, courtesy of their so called "liberators" – the EPLF.

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