

Eritrea: The Dream and the Dictatorship

By Martin Plaut, January 2021

How Eritrea became the country it is:

Eritrea is a small country (by African standards) on the Red Sea. It has been the gateway to Ethiopia down the centuries – its shores trampled upon by Greek, Egyptian, Turkish, British and Italian soldiers. When the Ethiopian rulers were powerful, they controlled Eritrea, when they were not it was under local rulers.

In the 1880's the Italians became the most recent nation to establish a presence in the country; a presence that they gradually expanded. It was from here that Italy attempted to attack Ethiopia in 1871, only to be resoundingly defeated at the battle of Adwa. Mussolini used Eritrea as a base to launch a renewed attempt to conquer Ethiopia in 1935, this time using Eritrean conscripts (*askaris*) as well as Italian troops. In 1941 the British captured Eritrea as part of its Middle East offensive in World War 2, and went on to free the rest of Ethiopia.

Left with Eritrea as a military conquest, the British were not sure what to do. Finally, they consulted the UN which federated Eritrea with Ethiopia, but granted Eritrea considerable freedoms. That was in 1950. In 1962 the Emperor Haile Selassie ended Eritrea's federal status, including it as a province of the empire.

Eritreans – who had begun fighting for their freedoms a year earlier – were furious. For the next 30 years they engaged in a fierce war of independence. Originally led by the Eritrean Liberation Front, it was later (after a brutal internal conflict) led by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. The EPLF – more radical than the ELF – was under Isaias Afwerki. Unlike most of the ELF leadership, he was Christian by background, even though the EPLF insisted it was supported by Muslims as well as Christians. In 1991 the EPLF finally took the capital, Asmara, to huge celebrations. The EPLF had defeated the Ethiopians by engaging in an alliance with Tigrayans of the TPLF. Indeed, Eritrean troops actually participated in the final attack on Addis Ababa, helping put the Tigrayans in power.

Sadly, relations with the TPLF soon soured. Previous differences over strategy, tactics and ideology gradually eroded trust. In 1998 minor border skirmishes led to a full-scale war between Ethiopian and Eritrea. Some 100,000 died in battles that at times resembled the warfare of World War One – with mass attacks on entrenched positions.

In 2000 peace was signed in Algeria. An international boundary commission was meant to resolve the border issue. Although it reported, designating the border, Ethiopia refused to accept the outcome. A cold peace ensued. There was 'no-war, no-peace' between the two nations. All along the 1,000 kilometre border Eritreans faced Ethiopians at a distance of a few hundred meters. To provide the troops for this standoff President Isaias insisted that all young Eritreans should be involved in indefinite 'national service.' The youth of the country

was trapped in the military, with no escape. Many fled to Sudan or Ethiopia, rather than live their lives in a foxhole on a desert mountainside.

In 2018 the Tigrayans lost control of Ethiopia, which they had ruled via a system of 'ethnic federalism.' This meant that each of Ethiopia's main ethnic groups were encouraged to establish their own parties and exercise considerable autonomy. Behind the scenes these ethnic parties were effectively controlled by TPLF party members. By 2018 this system collapsed. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (an Oromo – Ethiopia's largest ethnic minority) came to power.

President Isaias saw his chance, and cemented a deal with Abiy. This allowed for a new vision of the Horn of Africa in which Ethiopia and Eritrea were in lockstep – at the expense of the Tigrayans. The current conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea (on the one side) and Tigray (on the other) is an outcome of this understanding. How it plays out is impossible to predict, but so far it appears to be dragging both Abiy and Isaias into a military quagmire. Could this be their 'Vietnam'?

The Eritrean dictatorship

How did a movement – the EPLF – which fought for 30 years to liberate Eritrea, become among the most repressive political organisations in the world? The EPLF (now renamed the PFDJ) is the brainchild of Isaias Afwerki. He is a shrewd, skilful and highly manipulative personality. He is also someone who brooks no opposition, of any kind.

For the EPLF to win against the Ethiopian state took a titanic struggle and absolute discipline. Isaias, who was sent to be trained in Mao's China during the cultural revolution, learned how to control the movement. When he returned from his training and broke with the ELF – the original liberation movement – he organised a party within the party. The inner party, known unofficially as the 'People's Party', formed an elite that took all the real decisions. The EPLF was just a rubber-stamp.

A second system was put in place (which still exists) called zero 3 and zero 9. One was a system of scrutiny and reporting, which went down to the smallest village and extended family. The other spread rumours against people the party disapproved of. Once a dissident was discovered, their reputation ruined, they were then ruthlessly punished. This might have been justified when Eritreans were facing Ethiopia – with ten times its population, and a military armed first by the USA and then the Soviet Union. But it has since been retained and reinforced. The system of spying and spreading malicious rumours continues to this day – both inside Eritrea and in the diaspora across the world.

Today Eritrea is probably the most dictatorial regime in Africa. It's approximately 3.5 million people have little, if any, of the most basic freedoms (No-one is sure of the population; there's been no census since independence.)

Eritrea has no:

- Constitution

- Functioning legislature
- Free media
- Independent judiciary
- Opposition parties
- Freedom of speech
- Freedom of movement
- Freedom of religious belief.

Eritrea has never held an election and there is no prospect of any being held.

In reality Isaias and his tiny elite of political associates and senior officers run the state as they see fit. There are no limits on what they can, or will do.