Eritrea 1960–94

Executive Summary

Eritrea is a country in the Horn of Africa bordered by Sudan in the north and west, Ethiopia in the south, Djibouti in the southeast, and the Red Sea in the east. The country's east has an extensive coastline (approximately 1,000 kilometers) on the Red Sea, directly across from Saudi Arabia and Yemen. A series of colonial occupations mark Eritrea's history. Situated in the Horn of Africa, Eritrea's strategic position along the Red Sea has made it a focal point for various powers throughout history.

The modern history of Eritrea began with the arrival of the Italians in the late nineteenth century.[1] Before Italian colonization, Eritrea was influenced by the Ottoman Empire, particularly along its coastal regions, and the Ethiopian Empire in the highlands. Italy, seeking to expand its colonial empire, established its presence in the region in the 1880s, initially securing the port of Massawa. Despite its defeat at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, a historic event in which Ethiopian forces decisively repelled the Italians, Italy nonetheless solidified its hold on Eritrea with the acquiescence of Emperor Menilek II of Ethiopia.[2]

The onset of World War II marked a turning point for Eritrea. In 1941, British forces defeated the Italians in East Africa, placing Eritrea under the British Military Administration.[3] The British Military Administration period also saw the rise of Eritrean political consciousness. The British allowed the formation of political parties, labor unions, and other social organizations, which provided a platform for Eritreans to express their aspirations and grievances.

In the postwar period, Eritrea's fate became contentious, influenced by Cold War geopolitics. In 1952, a UN resolution federated Eritrea with Ethiopia, reflecting the strategic interests of the United States and other powers seeking to counter Soviet influence. The federation granted Eritrea limited autonomy, but tensions arose, especially among lowland Muslim Eritreans who favored independence, while some highlanders supported closer ties with Ethiopia. In 1962, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie dissolved the federation, annexing Eritrea as a province, nullifying its autonomy, and sparking widespread opposition. Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea ignited the armed struggle for independence.[4] The Eritrean Liberation Front, established in 1960, began a guerrilla war against Ethiopian rule. Initially, the Eritrean Liberation Front drew its support primarily from the Muslim lowlands but gradually expanded its appeal.[5] By the early 1970s, the Eritrean Liberation Front had gained significant traction despite facing brutal repression from Ethiopian forces. From 1970 to 1974, Eritrea's fight for independence saw increased militancy and internal factionalism, set against the backdrop of political upheaval in Ethiopia. The emergence of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front as a key player in the liberation struggle and the fall of Selassie on September 12, 1974, were pivotal developments during this period.[6] These events shaped the trajectory of Eritrea's protracted battle for self-determination, which persisted for two more decades.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. **Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?**

   No. In the early postwar years, Ethiopia was a state with significant internal divisions. More than 80 ethnic groups are distributed over nine regions (without counting Eritrea), and they are divided by religion into Christians, Muslims, and pagans. While there were efforts to promote a centralized national identity, the ethnic, regional, and political diversity, coupled with active insurgencies and widespread discontent, indicated that Ethiopia was struggling with national cohesion. The country had elements of a national identity, particularly among certain groups, but deep-seated divisions and conflicts undermined the overarching sense of unity. The population of Eritrea in 1990 was 2.15 million, dropping to 1.92 million by 1992 because of the conflict. The population of Ethiopia in 1990 was approximately 48 million, increasing to 49 million by 1992.

2. **Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?**

   No. Given the widespread ethnic, regional, and socioeconomic disparities, coupled with political repression and active insurgencies, it is unlikely that 85 percent of the Ethiopian population saw the government as legitimate. The legitimacy of Selassie's regime was heavily contested, particularly among the Eritreans, the Oromos, the Somalis, and other marginalized groups. While some segments of the population—particularly the urban elite and the Orthodox Christian community in the highlands—might have viewed the government more favorably, legitimacy was a significant issue facing the Ethiopian government in the early 1970s. In 1974, Selassie was overthrown, and a Marxist military regime led by the Derg, headed by Mengistu Haile Mariam, took power.[7] This period witnessed severe repression, prolonged civil war, and an escalation of the conflict with the Eritrean liberation movements.

3. **Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?**

   Yes. The Ethiopian Army maintained control over most urban areas in Eritrea and some mountainous regions with a Christian majority through economic programs and political appointments. The secret police carried out arrests and assassinations to intimidate Eritreans. In 1971, the emperor declared martial law in Eritrea and deployed additional forces to suppress the rebellious movements, creating an atmosphere of fear and terror. The internal conflict between the Eritrean Liberation Front and Eritrean People's Liberation Front during this time significantly impacted the failure of independence movements. It weakened the military efforts against the Ethiopian army, which maintained control of most strategic Eritrean lands and the largest cities, including Asmara, the capital. The liberation movements were confined to the mountains and rural areas. In 1990, the people of the Eritrean region made up less than 5 percent of the overall population of Ethiopia.

4. **Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?**

   Yes. The existence of external sanctuaries, particularly in Sudan, was of military significance for Eritrean insurgents during the war of liberation. These sanctuaries provided critical logistical, materiel, and political support, enabling the insurgents to sustain their operations against the Ethiopian government. The ability to retreat, regroup, and receive external aid from these sanctuaries played a pivotal role in the protracted nature of the Eritrean

independence struggle. The borders with Djibouti were more stable due to the economic and security agreements concluded with Ethiopia.

5. **Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?**

    Yes. The Ethiopian army, known as the Imperial Ethiopian Armed Forces, was a relatively well-equipped and well-trained force. The Imperial Ethiopian Armed Forces comprised the army, air force, and navy. The army was the largest and most significant branch. The military was relatively large compared to other African nations, with a force that included infantry, mechanized units, and a small but growing air force. It receives support from Western countries, especially the United States.[8]

Outcome

Initially, even with the lack of government legitimacy and national identity, the Ethiopian government retained ownership of the Eritrean region in early rounds of independence fighting (1972–74 and 1980–81) because of the strength of its regular army and police, its regional and international alliances, and its population control over most of its territory. By 1991, however, the Eritrean rebels succeeded in capturing the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa and forcing Mengistu to take asylum in Zimbabwe. Eritrea ultimately achieving independence in a referendum in April 1993 by an almost unanimous vote. This conflict supports the Five Factors Model.

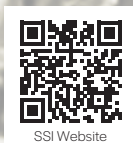| ERITREA 1960–94	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	NO
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Endnotes

1.   John Markakis and Geoffrey Charles Last, "History of Eritrea," *Britannica* (website), published May 25, 2023, last modified April 11, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Eritrea.

2.   Editors of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "5 Fascinating Battles of the African Colonial Era," *Britannica* (website), accessed June 14, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/list/5-fascinating-battles-of-the-african-colonial-era.

3.   "Our History," Embassy of the State of Eritrea (website), n.d., accessed September 6, 2024, https://us.embassyeritrea.org/our-history/.

4.   "Explore All Countries: Eritrea, Africa," in *The World Factbook*, CIA (website), accessed August 8, 2024, last updated August 27, 2024, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/eritrea.

5.   M. W. Tedla, "The Eritrean Liberation Front: Social and Political Factors Shaping Its Emergence, Development and Demise, 1960–1981" (thesis, University of Leiden), 12.

6.   David Pool, "Revolutionary Crisis and Revolutionary Vanguard: The Emergence of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front," *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 19 (September-December 1980): 33–47, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3998121.

7.   Temesgen Gebeyehu, "The Genesis and Evolution of the Ethiopian Revolution and the Derg: A Note on Publications by Participant in Events," *History in Africa* 37 (2010): 321–27, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40864628.

8.   As cited in Marina Ottaway and David Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution* (Africana Pub., 1978), 45.

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