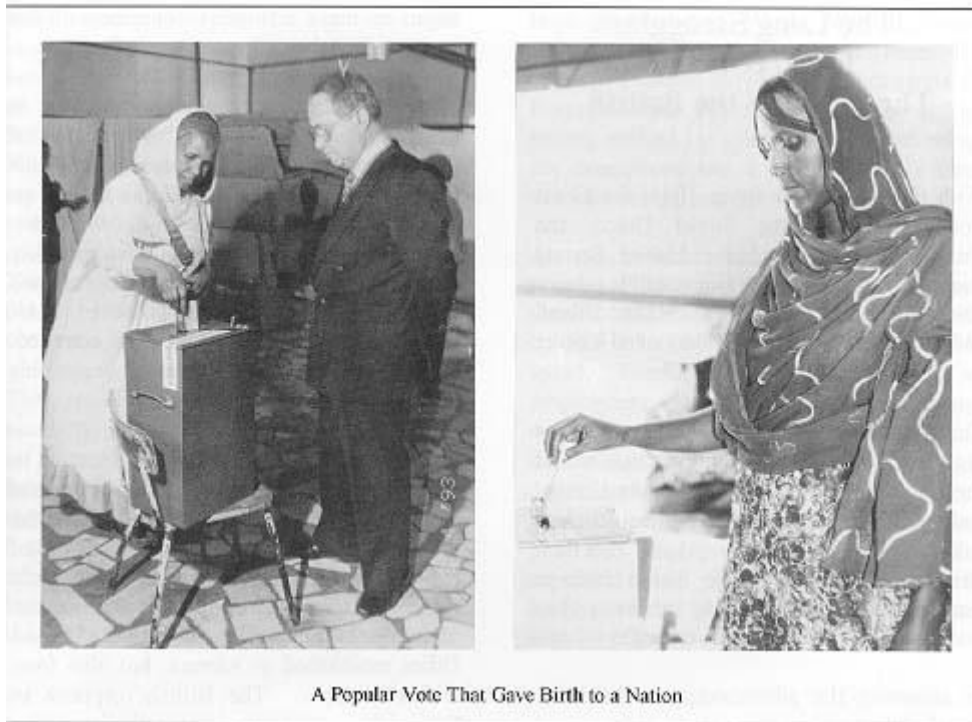


Eritrean Referendum: Reinforcement of the Bullet by Ballot



After 50 years of political and armed struggle, the loss of countless civilian lives, awful damage on natural and physical property, depopulation and miserable migration, the struggle against Ethiopian domination terminated with Eritrean military, political and legal victory. On April 23-25, 1993 Eritreans inside and outside began to vote in a referendum for independence with festive excitement. Although Eritrea had de facto independence and established a provisional government of its own in May 1991, the referendum represents the final legitimization of the 50 years of struggle for independence. According to the official returns, 99.8% of Eritrean voters responded “yes” to the question: “Do you want Eritrea to be a free, independent country?” On April 27, 1993 Eritrea formally became an independent nation. At the event President Issaias Afewerki said “Eritrea is a sovereign country as of today.” Referendum commissioner Dr. Amare Tekle announced the results and said “This is the proudest moment”. On the event Dr. Amare

briefed the overall turnout was 98.52%, 99.805% of Eritreans voting for independence and 0.165% against. “The Eritrean referendum is 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 (98.5%)” said Kjeti Tronvoll, a researcher and UN-observer during the referendum in Eritrea. Tim Wise, director of Grassroots International and a non-governmental observer of Eritrean referendum, said that “Men and women lined the streets surrounding the polling stations; Women cried and embraced the ballot box. Some ululated in the traditional celebratory manner... If I hadn’t seen the process with my own eyes, such a result would have been hard to believe. All smiled widely.”

Referendum gave a rebirth of Eritrea as a new nation to join the international community. It’s also regarded a matrimony of Eritrea linked with international community on the bases of sovereignty and dignity. After a U.N.-monitored referendum, the Provisional Government of Eritrea announced Eritrea’s formal independence, relegating to history four decades of unimagined barbarity of Ethiopian colonizers that turned the land of ancient civilization into Africa’s bloodiest battleground. UN, scuttled greatly by the victory of Eritreans, was compelled to witness the truth after half century of silence. One UN Press Release said that the 1993 referendum of Eritrea, which marked the end of one of Africa’s longest wars and brought about a peaceful transition, was a significant achievement for the United Nations.

Richard Dowden, who attended the referendum, referring to the diplomatic guests who had come to observe the referendum said that “there is a feeling of guilt about Eritrea in the corridors of the world’s foreign ministries. Eritrea is like an abandoned child who has returned a self-made man. This is all true. The war for Eritrea is the 20th century’s longest and least reported. Its result is this century’s version of David and Goliath”

Referendum was a simple but decisive choice for or against independence. This is a great responsibility which will affect the lives of Eritreans for generations to come. When Kjeti Tronvoll asked an elderly villager about how he looked at the referendum, he responded “We are waiting for the referendum the way a child is looking forward to getting sweets in reward for a job well done” (Tronvoll, 47). The only question asked and the only answer expected of the electorate was whether you do or do not wish to see Eritrea independent. On the occasion of the announcement of the results President Issaias Afewerki said “This is not a political competition, rather it’s about becoming a nation or not. It has come to be satisfactory and efficacious historical conclusion of Eritrean choice.”

After 50 years of political and armed struggle for independence, the issue finally rested with the verdict of the people in a referendum. Besides the brave contribution played on the field, referendum was among the great historical rewards of Eritrean people given by the EPLF. Although the EPLF marched to victory in 1991, its leadership decided to delay the declaration of independence until a referendum was held. In many other places where liberation struggle, was conducted, the declaration of independence and calls for recognition was made after the final battle of victory. In Eritrea, however, sovereignty and membership in the international community was predicted on a democratic and legal conclusion. This shows EPLF’s legality and its non-intoxication with military power. When the EPLF liberated Eritrea in May 1991, instead of rushing to declare independence it opted to form a provisional government and intended to hold referendum in Eritrea within two years. PGE established a referendum commission by proclamation no.22/1992 issued on April 7, 1992.

Historically, referendum was first proposed by the EPLF in 1980 as a way of settling the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia. However the repeated calls for peace were rejected by the military regime of the time (Derg) led by Colonel Mengistu hailemariam. When all avenues

for peaceful resolution of the conflict got blocked, Eritreans were forced to continue a bitter war to determine their destiny. The call for peaceful resolution of the Eritrean case through democratic and fair referendum was foiled by Ethiopia as it resorted to military solution and diplomatic intrigues. The 1980 referendum proposal of the EPLF was a fair, democratic and peaceful means to self-determination of the Eritrean people. The EPLF's call for referendum in the 1980 "was a shift from a military to a juridically sanctioned political solution" (Ruth 1995, 124). However the Derg who knew very well the desire of the people for independence had refused to agree. Fearful of the proposed ballot they resorted to the bullet.

The provisional government of Eritrea was determined to make the referendum of Eritrea one of the most observable and witnessed. UN, OAU, governments, numerous regional organizations, NGOs, prominent intellectuals, dignitaries, and international broadcast corporations were invited to participate as observers. In addition to that 547 observers and 137 members of international news broadcast received invitation from referendum commission of Eritrea (referendum '93, 49). Organizationally, the occasion was a carefully planned event which demonstrated the EPLF's efficiency, pragmatism and high degree of popular legitimacy (Ruth, 1995, 140). General Secretary of UN appointed Mr. Samir Sanbar as representative of the United Nations. The African union sent a delegation of 18 men headed by Senegalese ambassador to Ethiopia. Eritrean referendum was finally legitimized by UN commissioner Samir Sanbar, who declared the referendum to be free and fair. Eritrean people's festive excitement and warm reception to the UN and OAU envoys surprised diplomats. Eritreans demonstrated their wisdom to forget and give amnesty for past errors. Papa Louis, head of the OAU observer mission, said that "the observer team was particularly impressed with the high degree of enthusiasm, discipline and maturity exhibited by the Eritrean electorate and people in view of the warm reception they extended to

the OAU team in spite of previous misconceptions and misunderstanding.”

Eritrean referendum was unique in many respects. Unlike other developing countries there was no difference in the degree of participation between central and peripheral population. The participation of the people in Asmara, the capital, and the remotest village in the border were equal and the results were also the same across the country.

Eritrean referendum has not only answered the possible future of the country as an independent sovereign entity among the family of nations. It also validated the question of the Eritrean people in the past. Referendum was a historical decision that witnessed the determination of Eritrean people for independence through bullet and ballot. EPLF had a firm belief in the revolution by the people, to the people and for the people. The referendum was, therefore, made to include the people in decisions that determine the fate of the country.

Finally, Eritreans scored spectacular and unique victory in the armed struggle through the bullet and in the referendum through the ballot. The secret behind these victories was conscious and enthusiastic participation of the people. Such an achievement has few equals in the history and is a testimony of the political maturity of the people of Eritrea and its leadership. We have already achieved our national independence and sovereignty. Although we concluded an important chapter of liberation, we are also beginning a new chapter of emancipation from all social, economic and political ills. The task of building a peaceful and prosperous country is more difficult, which requires the participation of the entire population. As we voted “yes” in the referendum, on this historical juncture Eritreans inside and outside of the country have to renew our pledge to vote “yes” to bear a heavy responsibility to serve the society.

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