

The Spark that Ignited the Blazing Flames of Independence



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Certain days stand out as particularly important on the Eritrean calendar. 24 May, celebrating Eritrea's hard-earned independence, of course, is one. 20 June, reserved to remember the monumental sacrifices of those who fell to win and defend the country's independence and sovereignty, is definitely another. 8 March and 1 May, which are set aside to observe the huge contributions and importance of women and workers, respectively, are also special days for Eritreans.

Joining these distinguished days is 1 September, locally referred to as Bahti Meskerem, which represents the anniversary of the beginning of Eritrea's long and bitter armed struggle for independence. The occasion, a national holiday filled with deep patriotism and utmost pride, offers an important opportunity to reflect upon and remember the immense sacrifices and brave, heroic exploits of so many who fought to turn into reality what to many for so long seemed an impossibility: the defeat of Africa's largest, best-equipped army and the achievement of independence.

On 1 September 1961, now 62 years ago, the Eritrean independence movement transitioned from street demonstrations, non-violence, and peaceful protest, to active, armed resistance. Years before, on 20 September 1949, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) decided to send a second commission of

inquiry into Eritrea to explore a potential “solution [to] the problem of Eritrea.” In the delegation’s subsequent report about their visit to the country, Sir Zafrulla, the Pakistani representative, presciently observed, “An independent Eritrea would obviously be better able to contribute to the maintenance of peace (and security) than an Eritrea federated with Ethiopia against the true wishes of the people. To deny the people of Eritrea their elementary right to independence would be to sow the seeds of discord and create a threat in that sensitive area of the Middle East.”



After a lengthy international process seeking to develop a solution to the Eritrea question, on 2 December 1950, United Nations Resolution 390 (V), was passed by the UNGA. Resolution 390(V), which was backed and sponsored by the United States, extinguished Eritreans’ hopes for independence, federating Eritrea with Ethiopia as “an autonomous unit ... under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown.” Seemingly echoing Sir Zafrulla’s prophetic statement, G.K.N. Trevaskis, a former British official in Eritrea, ended his book, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, by warning Ethiopia that it would be in its (and Eritrea’s) interest for the federal arrangement to survive in accordance with Resolution 390 (V). Yet he acknowledged: “[For Ethiopia], the temptation to subject Eritrea firmly under her own control will always be great. Should she try to do so, she will risk Eritrean discontent and eventual revolt, which, with foreign sympathy and support, might well disrupt both Eritrea and Ethiopia herself.”

Although the Eritrean people’s inviolable and inalienable right to self-determination was denied, contrary to principles recognized by the United Nations, and unlike the other Italian colonies that received independence at the

end of World War II, Eritreans were nevertheless relieved that the country was not dismembered. The terms of the international resolution stipulating that Eritrea was to be an autonomous unit meant that Eritrea was to possess legislative, executive, and judicial powers in the field of domestic affairs, while the jurisdiction of Ethiopia was to extend to defense, foreign affairs, and international trade.

However, Ethiopia, an absolute monarchy ruled by Emperor Haile Selassie, viewed the federal structure with disdain and contempt. Almost immediately, the Emperor began to violate the terms of the federal arrangement; just nineteen days after the federal arrangement was officially ratified and came into force, the imperial regime committed its first violation, through Proclamation 130. The Emperor's views of the arrangement calling for Eritrea's autonomy were made unmistakably clear in a speech delivered to the Eritrean Assembly on 22 March 1955: "There are no internal or external affairs as far as the office of his Imperial Majesty's representative is concerned, and there will be none in the future. The affairs of Eritrea concern Ethiopia as a whole and the Emperor."

The Assembly quickly descended into little more than a rubber stamp for imperial demands and it rapidly lost any credibility among Eritreans. Eventually, the entire Eritrean constitution would be replaced, while the Eritrean flag was replaced by that of Ethiopia. Eritreans were also banned from using indigenous languages in education as well as all official functions, with Amharic, the dominant language of Ethiopia, being made the official language. Furthermore, Eritreans were forced to dissolve their political parties and trade unions, and whole industries were relocated from Asmara to Addis Ababa. The economic basis of autonomy was also eroded, as Eritrea's highly lucrative shares of customs and excise were expropriated by the Ethiopian government, while foreign investors were pressured to invest in Ethiopia rather than Eritrea. Furthermore, tax funds from Eritrea were used for imperial rather than local interests.

Eritreans were also subjected to state repression, severe violence, and persecution, while all forms of civil disobedience, opposition, dissent, and resistance, which had largely been peaceful and involved broad segments of the

Eritrean population, were forcefully crushed. On 10 March 1958, the trade unions launched a general strike in Asmara and other major centers, lasting for four days. In response, Ethiopian troops fired on unarmed protestors killing and wounding many. Assassination attempts against nationalists also became common and routine, forcing some of the most prominent targets, such as Woldeab Woldemariam, Ibrahim Sultan, and Idris Mohammed Adem, into exile. From abroad they continued their opposition to Ethiopia's expansionism and helped establish resistance groups.



It is worth noting that Eritrea had been guaranteed a review of its case by the United Nations if Ethiopia violated the international resolution. Despite the guarantee, and even though many Eritrean political leaders and activists, on numerous occasions, appealed and petitioned to the United Nations in protest of Ethiopia's steady dismantling of the federal arrangement, the United Nations and the international community remained silent and failed to muster a response. Finally, in November 1962, the imperial regime dissolved the Eritrean parliament under force of arms and annexed Eritrea, proclaiming it as the empire's fourteenth province. Again, the United Nations and the international community voiced no objections and failed to act in response to this flagrant breach of international law.

It was within this historical context that on 1 September 1961, harbanya (patriot) Hamid Idris Awate, a daring soldier regarded as a renegade by the Italians, British, and Ethiopians, and a small band of fighters, armed with only a handful of old rifles, fired the first shots of the armed struggle in the Gash Barka region of Eritrea. Awate was a talented marksman who had earlier served as a soldier in

the colonial army. There his military bravery and skills earned him the respect of his superiors and a variety of medals. A few months following Awate's launch of the armed struggle, Abdu Mohamed Fayed became its first martyr when he was killed at Adal, near Sawa. (Abdu Mohamed Fayed's grave is now located in Sawa, while Hamid Idris Awate himself passed away about 10 months after the beginning of the armed struggle due to illness.

For the peace-loving Eritrean people, the launch of the armed revolution was "the expression of the indignation of a people whose rights [were] flagrantly and ruthlessly suppressed." From those first shots fired by Awate and subsequent hit-and-run skirmishes, Eritrea's independence struggle grew into a wide-scale war of liberation encompassing the entire population – much like a small spark that ignites a blazing wildfire engulfing everything before it.

During the decades-long independence struggle, Eritrea received no substantive international economic, political, or military support, and it was confronted by one of the continent's largest and best-equipped militaries. Throughout the duration of the protracted conflict, Ethiopia was heavily backed by the Cold War superpowers, the US and USSR (sometimes simultaneously), as well as many other countries, including, among others, Israel, East Germany, Cuba, and Yemen. Eventually, in 1991, after one of the longest national wars for liberation in modern African history and following tens of thousands of deaths, numerous more injuries, and much devastation and destruction, Eritrea finally won its independence.

August 30, 2023