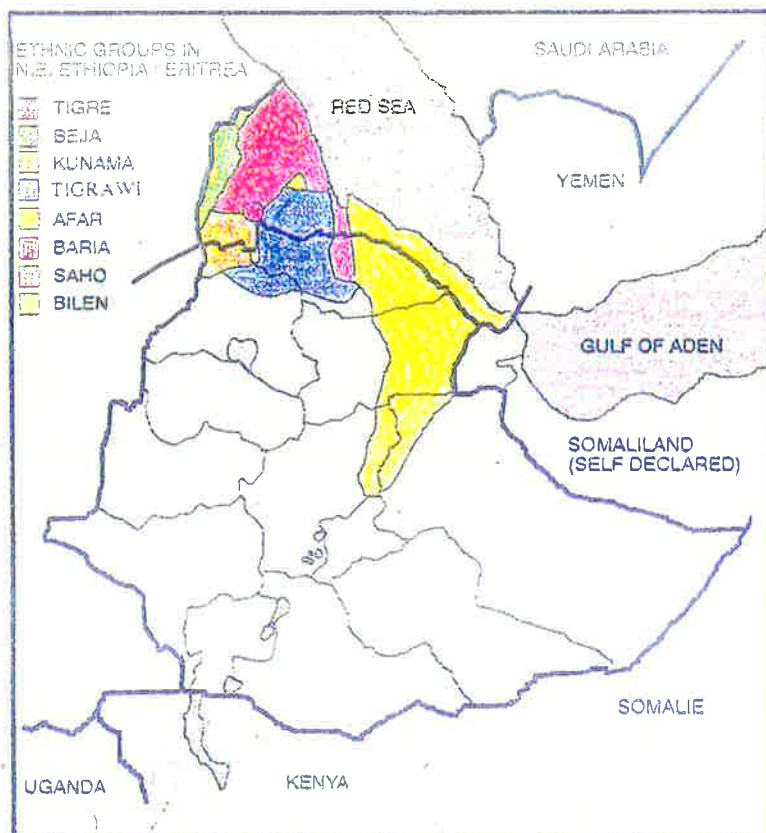


ERITREA'S INDEPENDENCE AND THE ETHNIC PROBLEM IN ETHIOPIA



Except for a minute minority, the consensus in Ethiopia is to accept Eritrea's independence. But almost everyone feels that serious problems remain unresolved and, until and unless they are solved through constructive dialogue between future democratic governments both in Ethiopia and Eritrea, they could lead to trouble between the two countries.

Although this may seem paradoxical, these problems arise both from Eritrea's «separation» and EPLF's unwillingness to accept the consequences of independence, especially in Eritrea's state to state relations with Ethiopia.

1. Problems arising from Eritrea's separation: Eritrea's separation was not a case of one country gaining its independence from another «foreign» power. EPLF's top leaders have now abandoned the claim that Eritrea was a colony of Ethiopia and that the Eritrean struggle was therefore a fight for independence from colonization by a «foreign» country. The latest view launched by hints from Issayas Afewerki himself and expounded by prominent pro-EPLF intellectuals is that Eritreans and Ethiopians share the same cultural heritage and are one and the same people. We shall not elaborate on the reasons and implications of this change of attitude. We shall limit ourselves to two of the immediate consequences of Eritrea's «separation» and to its impact on the ethnic problem in Ethiopia.

a) As the map clearly shows, Eritrea's independence was a case entailing separation and tearing apart of peoples, ethnic groups and in some cases even families. Out of the 8 ethnic groups in Eritrea, four live on both sides of the frontier - those are the Tigreans, Kunamas, Afars and

Sahos. For the first three, the majority of the ethnic group lives in Ethiopia proper. The Afars have clearly refused Eritrean independence and have even launched armed struggle against EPLF. This struggle has been contained by the combined military operations of the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments. A group of Tigreans calling itself «Tigray-Tigriny Ethiopia» has refused to recognize the frontier which divides the Tigreans and has vowed to fight for the «unity of the Tigrean people in Ethiopia and Eritrea».

b) Eritrea's separation has clearly modified the distribution of the population of Ethiopia in figures and in percentage. The most affected ethnic group is that of the Tigreans. It is generally assumed that out of the 4,200,000 Tigreans in Ethiopia in 1984, some 1,200,000 were living in Eritrea. The number of Eritreans living in other parts of Ethiopia at the time of the population census was estimated at more than 500,000. This means that, be they in independent Eritrea or in Ethiopia, some 1,700,000 Tigreans have now formally become «foreigners». And this has considerably reduced the number of Tigreans in Ethiopia. In a society that has grown «ethnic sensitive», TPLF had to «compensate» this loss by resorting to «Tigray-Tigriny nationalism» (nationalism which advocates the unity of all Tigreans). The policy consists for the

TPLF to encourage the hundreds of thousands of Tigreans from Eritrea not only to stay on but also to help in strengthening its hold on the country. This has further exacerbated the ethnic problem in Ethiopia and given birth to some sort of «Eritreans go home!» movement that can have serious consequences in the future.

2. Problems arising from the refusal of EPLF and TPLF to accept the consequences of Eritrean independence: The most visible aspect of this refusal to assume the consequences of Eritrean independence is that the number of Eritreans living in Ethiopia has increased since 1991. First because almost all Eritreans who are living in Ethiopia have chosen to stay where they are rather than move to their independent homeland. Secondly, more Eritreans have moved to Ethiopia. In addition to Eritrean military and security personnel now present in Ethiopia and tens of thousands of Eritrean women married to Ethiopians who were unceremoniously expelled from Eritrea in the wake of the EPLF takeover, we have former fighters now registered in Ethiopia's institutions of higher learning, businessmen, young people fleeing military service and even intellectuals who have moved either from Eritrea or abroad to take administrative posts in the state apparatus, corporations, banks and other economic concerns. Such massive presence of Eritreans in Ethiopia cannot be compared to that of Algerians or Nigerians in post-colonial France or the United Kingdom respectively. The problem here is that the alleged former colonized are now a conspicuously privileged ethnic group in the land of the former «colonizer».

In short, Eritreans, who have clearly fallen victim to what one Ethiopian intellectual called the «runaway teenagers' syndrome» continue to be part and parcel of the ethnic problem in Ethiopia.