

The United States, which emerged as the strongest capitalist nation after the Second World War, began to play a major role in the handling of international problems. It was the US which played a decisive role in the disposition of Italian colonies in the Horn. On the other hand, Britain whose army was the main force in defeating the Italians in the Horn of Africa and which colonized Eritrea for a decade, played a subservient role. The decade of British colonization in Eritrea was a period of crises in all sector of the economy, as the British were more intent on destroying what was built by the Italians than in developing it. The British also left the racist Italian colonial administrative system intact. But they introduced changes in two areas. The first, in the field of education, scrapped the Italian policy restricting Eritreans to four years of schooling and provided Eritreans with opportunities for higher levels of education, thus raising the cultural level of the society. With their second major reform, the British introduced legislation protecting political rights and permitting political activity. Political parties and trade unions were soon established. This coupled with discussions of the question of self-determination-which came to prominence at that time-gave new breath to Eritrean political life.

Although this was a positive development, British motives were by no means altruistic. Aside from the fact that the backward social structure and the low political level of Eritrean political organizations prevented the Eritrean people from fully benefiting from their new rights, the British-who were serving US strategic interests-deliberately whipping up religious and tribal divisions and clashes and promoted the banditry of non Eritreans-all in the name of political liberties. It was in this decade of turmoil, which followed 60 dark years of Italian colonial rule, that the Eritrean people were faced with the challenge of deciding their own destiny.

And did the Eritrean people decide their fate? Was federation a compromise solution based on the wishes of the Eritrean people? Despite the much-touted and written about political clamor of those years, the splitting of parties along religious lines, meetings of the United Nations and the arrival in Eritrea of a UN commission, the Eritrean people were not given the opportunity to exercise their rights to self-determination. The political commotion had merely been a show.

It was the US that plunged the Eritrean people-who had already suffered for 70 years from colonial rule-into another form of subjugation by denying their right to self-determination and depriving them of their political and human rights. Although these facts have been generally known, recently declassified State Department documents have corroborated that the US decided right after the Second World War that Eritrea should not become independent. And not without cause. Intent on ascertaining its global dominance, gaining control of the strategic Red Sea route and exploiting oil and other resources in the Middle East, the US sought to gain a foot-hold in an area that could easily link it with its bases in the Indian Ocean and the Far East. Soon after the World War, the US began to set up naval, air and communications facilities in

From the end of the World War to the federation period

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Eritrea. To protect these interests, the US initially came up with a plan of retaining control of the coastal areas and the highlands, while ceding the western lowlands, which it deemed of no strategic importance, to the Sudan which was then a British colony. Later, when it realized that the Eritrean people were opposed to the partition of their country and the British were not enthusiastic about the plan, the US decided to preserve the colonial status of united Eritrea under the guardianship of its ally, Haile Selassie. Though the matter had been so decided, the UN federal Resolution was passed-after ten years of procrastination-to lend it international legitimacy. This decision did not satisfy the wishes and aspirations of the Eritrean people and became the cause for their struggle for self-determination.

How did Eritrean nationalism develop from 1941-52, the decade of British colonial rule? Taking into account the fact that there had been no organized Eritrean political activity during the Italian colonial period, that the outcome of the Second World War was totally unexpected by the Italians, that the Eritrean people's movement for self-determination had to start from scratch after Italy's defeat, that despite growing nationalism, political activity was marred by manifestations of the old socioeconomic formation, that Ethiopian bandits with the active collusion of the British were active in the country, that ten years was too short a span of time, the Eritrean people did not succeed in establishing a unified organization to lead their struggle for independence. Nevertheless, Eritrean nationalism emerged stronger from those ten years.