

First Stage

Sixty years of Italian colonial rule in Eritrea, played a major role in changing the economic, social and cultural structures and forging a nation. But they did not do away with backward agricultural and animal husbandry methods or transform Eritrea into a developed industrial nation. (In fact, such a rapid transformation has never taken place, even in the developed countries) At the end of the Italian period, Eritrean society did not become one of laborers, service workers and modern farmers. Neither the Italian colonialism affected all sectors of the society equally. Hence, clan, tribal, regional and religious ties endured. This, along with the severe restriction of educational opportunities and the prescription of political liberties, precluded the emergence of an educated, politicized and experienced stratum capable of leading the political struggle. No wonder a united nationalist organization political activity commenced after Italy's defeat. The first political grouping, established in 1941 as "The Love of Nation Association", could not be taken as a serious movement, since it lacked clear political orientation, until it was later transformed into the Unionist Party. The movement was infiltrated by Haile Selassie's agents and several highland leaders motivated by religious considerations and personal conflicts and ambitions opposed their Moslem brothers within the organization. These leaders used the church which had ties with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as a political instrument, conducted sectarian agitation and threatened opponents with excommunication. Their actions constituted the first negative experience in the Eritrean people's struggle for self-determination. As a reaction, most of the Moslem leaders who had been denied a say and who had been threatened by the domination of the highlanders and the church-led conspiracy of some Christian leaders to collaborate with Ethiopia were forced to set up the "Moslem League". The appearance of these two parties split the national struggle along religious lines and created favorable grounds for Ethiopian ambitions.

The political line-up, however, was not strictly on a religious basis. Many Christian leaders allied themselves with the brothers in the Moslem League. On the other side, many Moslem chiefs and other Moslem leaders cast their allegiance with the "Unionists". Moreover, there were disputes based on land among various tribes and clans.

The Haile Selassie regime worked to widen the gulf it had itself created. With the complicity of the British Administration, it infiltrated armed bandits from Ethiopia who in coordination with Unionist agents sowed terrorism in Eritrea. Under its bidding, the church, who had been in the service of Ethiopian kings, forged its spiritual duties and became a center of political agitation.

Internal political developments of the Eritrean struggle for self-determination

Written by Yishak Yared

Political developments, however, did not turn to be favorable to Ethiopian interests. In the second half of the forties, all political parties aside from the Unionist Party, joined forces to form the Independent Bloc, which also attracted many members of the Unionist Part. By the end of the decade when UN delegations were visiting Eritrea to ascertain the wishes of the Eritrean people, up to 70% of the population were for independence. The rest were divided among those who wanted to compromise solution and those who favored unity with Ethiopia.

However, the true findings of the effort to ascertain the wishes of the Eritrean people were in the final analysis meaningless as the matter had already been decided by the US. Had the decision been deferred for another ten years as had been proposed by some wise leaders of the Independence Bloc, the outcome would have been different. Leaving aside the question of who decided Eritrea's fate, however, it can be said that in the years between 1941-52, the Eritrean people showed marked improvement in the level of their political organization and unity but not able to form a solid and mature national organization.