

## Eritrea General Facts

---

### Pre-Colonial Period

Eritrea, like every other African state, took its present form during the period of European colonialism. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, as elsewhere in Africa, the land was divided into chiefdoms and sheikdoms, often at war with each other.

In the sixteenth century, large areas of present-day Eritrea along the coastal zones came under the domination of the Turkish Empire (1557-1865). They were eventually supplanted by the Egyptians (1865-1884). In 1882, the Italians installed themselves at Asseb on the Eritrean coast, an occupation which expanded into the hinterland and ended in [complete](#) Italian control of Eritrea in 1890.

---

### Italian Colonial Period (1890-1941)

From the [start](#), Italy intended to use Eritrea as a settler colony. To this effect, it constructed a relatively advanced infrastructure network: roads, railways, ports, electricity, telephones and small factories. Large agricultural plantations were established in various parts of the country. All this led to the widespread displacement of the indigenous population and a disruption of the existing form of society.

It was the ambition of Italian fascism to use Eritrea as a base for extending their power over the whole of northeast Africa. In 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia and took control of the country.

In 1940, Italy joined forces with Nazi Germany but, in the following year after having occupied Eritrea for half a century, it lost to the Allied Forces in Africa led by the British. A British military administration was set up in Eritrea which was to last until 1952. Britain was also given jurisdiction over the other Italian colonies, Libya and Somalia.

---

### British Military Administration (1942-1952)

Eritrean aspirations for independence and British designs for the Horn of Africa clashed from the outset. Britain's immediate interest was the consolidation of their military gains and support for their war efforts in Europe and North Africa. They left Italian administrators in their old positions and expanded industrial establishments. They also forged a [close](#) alliance with the Ethiopian emperor, Haile Sellassie

The Eritrean people established their first anti-colonial patriotic association in 1941 and called it **Mahber Fikri Hager Eritrea** (Association for the Love of the Country of Eritrea). The association became an immediate target for the British and the Ethiopians. While the Ethiopians sent their agents to split the association on religious and ethnic lines, Britain started to propagate the colonial argument that "Eritrea was too poor to become an independent state." In order to prove its point, it dismantled hundreds of buildings and factories, and transferred machinery and other industrial goods including a floating dock in Massawa to its other colonies and semi-colonies. In collaboration with the Italians, the British proposed the partition of Eritrea (the Bevin-Sforza Plan) incorporating half of it with its colony Sudan and giving the other half to its ally Ethiopia. This plan was rejected by the United Nations and the people of Eritrea.

By 1949, there were nine Eritrean political organizations. Only one, the Unionist Party which was fully financed and supported by the Haile Sellassie regime, pushed for unity with Ethiopia. The rest, in one form or another, fought for the independence of Eritrea and eventually formed the Eritrean Independence Bloc with Ibrahim Sultan at the head

---

## Eritrea at the United Nations

At the end of the Second World War, the [future](#) of former Italian colonies (Eritrea, Libya, and Somalia) was discussed among the victorious Allied Powers (Britain, France, the United States, and the USSR). The Four Powers sent a commission of enquiry to Eritrea in 1947. The commission held meetings with representatives of the different Eritrean political parties from 12 November 1947 to 3 January 1948. After hearing the report of the Four Power Commission and unable to resolve their differences, the Four Powers decided to present the issue to the UN General Assembly.

The UN sent its own mission of enquiry (with Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan and South Africa as its members) to Eritrea in 1950. The mission, which stayed in Eritrea from 9 February to 9 April, failed to reach a common accord in presenting their findings to the General Assembly. Despite the fact that the majority of the Eritrean people clearly wanted complete independence. Documentary evidence, recently declassified under the US Freedom of Information Act, attests to this fact.

*"British administration estimated privately for British Embassy Addis that independence bloc commands 75 percent of Eritrea as of August 10."*

### Telegram message from US Embassy in Addis Ababa to the Secretary of State in the US, 19 August 1949.

The question was then discussed in the UN General Assembly, with the US and its [allies](#) pushing for the incorporation of Eritrea into Ethiopia, while the Soviet Union and its allies advocated independence.

*"The USSR has consistently supported the proposal that Eritrea should be granted independence and has continued to do so at the current session.*

*We base our argument on the fact that all people have a right to self-determination and national independence...The USSR delegation objects to the proposal for the federation of Eritrea with another State, as such a federation would disregard the right of the Eritrean people to self-determination by preventing the Eritreans from exercising that right. The delegation of the Soviet Union bases its position on the fact that such a decision is being imposed on the Eritrean people without its consent and, hence, in violation of the fundamental principle of the right of self-determination of people...The USSR delegation appeals to all the other delegations to vote in favour of Eritrean independence, which is the equitable solution to this problem..."*

### USSR delegation, UN General Assembly, 1950.

The deadlock was finally solved on 2 December 1950 by a federal solution" proposed by the US whose hegemony over the UN at that time was almost total. It was the product of a mutuality of interest between the American and Ethio. governments, not the expression of the interests and aspirations of the Eritrean people.

*"From the point of [view](#) of justice, the opinion of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interest of the US in the Red Sea Basin and world peace make it necessary that the country be linked with our ally Ethiopia."*

—John Foster Dulles, US Secretary of State.

*"From the standpoint of strategic and logistical considerations it would be of value to the US to have refineries, capable of supplying a substantial portion of our aviation needs, located close to a crude supply and also close to areas where naval task forces would be operating and where air fields would be located, yet far enough removed to be reasonably safe from effective enemy bombing.*

*With respect to the Middle East refineries located in Italian Somaliland and Eritrea would meet the foregoing conditions provided prospective development of adequate crude supply for these refineries also reasonably safe from enemy bombing, is realized. Therefore, as a long-range provision of potential military value, it is believed that concessions or rights should be sought for US interests to construct and operate refineries in Italian Somaliland and Eritrea. These rights should include necessary transportation and port concessions, together with air and naval base rights and communication facilities.*

*It would appear that demands by our probable enemies for concessions of like nature would be invited if efforts were made by the US to include the matter of concessions to us in prospective United Nations agreements for the disposition of former Italian colonies. It would, however, be satisfactory from the military viewpoint, if the matter could be handled by separate agreement with friendly nations desiring control of Italian Somaliland and Eritrea."*

**Letter from James Farrestal, US Secretary of Defense, to Dean Acheson, US Secretary of State, 11 December 1948.**

As the facts show, the federal resolution, 390A(v), was a violation of basic human rights of the Eritrean people and an unworkable formula from every point of view.

#### **Legally:**

In accordance with the principles and substance of the UN Charter on self-determination, the UN should never have been the body that determined the future of the Eritrean people by federating Eritrea with Ethiopia. Only the people of Eritrea had that right. It would also be recalled that neither the Four Power Commission nor the UN Commission of Enquiry carried out plebiscites or referendums to ascertain the wishes of the Eritrean people.

#### **Constitutionally**

A federal government must be separate from and above its constituent parts. On 2 December 1950 the UN determined that "Eritrea should constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown." It was constitutionally incorrect for the Ethiopian government to be given the powers of the federal government.

#### **Economically and Socially:**

It was inevitable that major conflicts would arise when a smaller, relatively developed, more democratic and advanced state like Eritrea was incorporated into an archaic, feudal, and extremely backward state like Ethiopia headed by an absolute monarch, Emperor Haile Selassie.

#### **In Terms of Peace and Security**

Peace and security are founded on the universal respect for and observance of the very principle of self-determination. In a farsighted speech to the UN General Assembly, Ibrahim Sultan, the leader of the Eritrean Independence Bloc, stressed the fact that denial of this basic human right would bring instability and war to the region.

*"The Eritrean people's cause is a just cause of the independence of people who refuse and reject any form of annexation, dismemberment or a return to the hated colonialism no matter what type it would be, whatever form it takes, or from which direction it comes. This indisputable right to independence*

*to which our country is attached can not be ignored without creating a new area of strife in East Africa, since the Eritrean people will never accept Ethiopian domination."*

### **Ibrahim Sultan.**

Ibrahim Sultan's predictions were to prove only too accurate. Instability and war reigned in the Horn of Africa for 30 years. However, the federal solution was never intended to bring peace and security in the region. It was principally designed to camouflage other overriding interests: the US intention to build a major communications base at Asmara from which to monitor the African, Asian and Middle Eastern regions, and Ethiopia's desire to have access to the sea.

With Ethio-American conspiracy against the Eritrean people successful, Haile Sellassie signed the Eritrean-Ethiopian federation act on 11 September 1952 and Eritrea was formally federated with Ethiopia on 15 September.

---

### **Federation (1952-1962)**

Right from the outset, the provisions of the federation were violated by the Ethiopian emperor. This was to be the pattern throughout the following decade: The emperor appointed his son-in-law as his representative in Eritrea where, in reality, he acted as an administrator.

- Violations of the power of the Eritrean Parliament became a daily occurrence. Political parties, with the exception of the Unionist Party, and the General Union of Eritrean Labor Syndicates were banned.
- Newspapers were closed down and the freedoms of speech and assembly drastically curtailed.
- Eritrea's share of the customs duties were expropriated and numerous factories were closed down and moved to Ethiopia.
- Delegates sent to the emperor's court to protest the violations were either told by the emperor that "there are no internal nor external affairs" or not received at all.
- Prominent Eritrean leaders had their lives threatened. Seven attempts were made on the life of Woldeab Woldemariam, Vice-Secretary General of the Independence Bloc, during the period between 1947-1953, one of which seriously injured him.
- In July 1955, the emperor ordered Tedla Bairu, the Eritrean Chief Executive, and Ali Musa Radai, President of the Eritrean Assembly, to resign. In August, he replaced them with his own representatives, Asfeha Woldemichael and Idris Mohammed Adem.
- In 1956, a major student demonstration protesting all forms of human rights violations was brutally suppressed.
- In 1957, all books in Tigrinya and Arabic, the official Eritrean languages guaranteed by the federal act, were burned. Amharic, the emperor's language, was substituted in the administration and in the schools.
- In November 1958, the Eritrean flag was lowered and the Ethiopian flag hoisted.
- Massive demonstrations and a general strike called by the underground Eritrean Labor Union Federation protesting the violations and coercion took place in all major Eritrean cities. The demonstrations and strike, supported by students, were suppressed by force with 88 killed and 450 wounded. Thousands

were jailed. In 1959, the name Eritrean Government was changed to "Eritrean Administration" and Ethiopian law was imposed.

- In 1960, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education took full control of Eritrean schools.

Though it denied the Eritrean people the exercise of their right to self-determination, the constitutional provisions of the Eritrean federation which were spelt out in UN resolution 390A(v) were guaranteed by the General Assembly. There were specific statements made by the UN Commissioner to Eritrea, Anzo Matenzo, dealing with eventual violation.

*"With regard to the application of the General Assembly's resolution after the entry into force of the Federal Act and the Eritrean constitution have come into force the mission entrusted to the General Assembly under the peace treaty with Italy will have been fulfilled and that the future of Eritrea must be regarded as settled, but it does not follow that the United Nations would no longer have any right to deal with the question. The UN Resolution of Eritrea would remain an international instrument and if violated, the General Assembly could be seized of the matter."*

#### **Report of the Special Political Commission of the General Assembly, A/2188, 11 December 1952.**

Despite the above clause and the fact that Eritreans sent repeated protest missions to the United Nations, the latter body kept an obstinate silence on the issue a position that it maintained to the day of liberation, May 24, 1991.

In the end, having exhausted all possible legal recourse to obtain their right to self-determination, the Eritrean people decided on 1 September 1961 to take up armed struggle under the leadership of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Just over one year later, with the federal constitution systematically and gradually dismantled, the long feared annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia took place on 14 November 1962.

This was taken from **"Eritrea: General Facts, 1989."**

---

The information in this website is accurate as of the time it was posted. However, things are changing rapidly in Eritrea and some of it may prove out of date. The Eritrean Embassies have various other information materials available. If you are interested, please contact them for a publication list.