

Eritrea Overview

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Environment

Eritrea is divided between a mountainous central plateau, where the capital Asmara is situated, and the lowlands in the north, west and along the Red Sea Coast. The highland mass narrows and falls abruptly into desert on its eastern and south-western sides. In the east, the depression is known as the coastal lowland, a northward extension of the Rift Valley. The Eritrean Plateau joins the Ethiopian highlands and is similar in vegetation, climate and rainfall. Eritrea also borders [Sudan](#) in the north-west and [Djibouti](#) in the south-east.

Peoples

Main languages: Tigrinya, Afar, Beni Amer, Tigre (Tegre), Saho, Arabic

Main religions: Eritrean Orthodox Christianity (official), Sunni Islam (official), Roman Catholicism (official), Evangelical Church of Eritrea (official), Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical Christianity

Minority groups include Tigre 16%, Afar 3.3%, Saho 3.7%, Beni Amer (Bedawi) 3.1%, Bilen 1.4%, Kunama 2.2 % and Nara 1.6%.

[Note: All population data is taken from Ethnologue, with varying ages of the data for different minority groups: Tigre from 1997; [Afar](#), Saho, Bedawi, [Kunama and Nara](#) from 2001; and Bilen from 1995.]

The inhabitants of the Eritrean Plateau are very close to their Ethiopian neighbours in Tigray in language, traditions, social structure and culture. Most belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox religion and their language Tigrinya is descended from Ge'ez (ancient Ethiopic), as is Amharic. The lowland Eritreans are largely Muslim, speaking local languages such as Danakil and Saho as well as Arabic. Peoples of the far west originally descended from northern Sudan.

To the north and west of the Eritrean Plateau the land gradually diminishes into the broken hill region, known as the Rora. In this hot and arid region, Tigre (Tegre) peoples, who represent one-third of the country's population, are dominant. Culturally and ethnically, they are related to the Beja of Sudan. Claiming Arab origin, their language, Tigre, is Semitic. Mostly Muslim, their primary occupation is cattle herding. Most are nomadic, however, some have settled by rivers such as the Barka and on state cotton plantations.

Tigre is used to describe the people who speak Tigre and the language itself. It shared origins with Tigrinya but is now very different. Its use is declining under the impact of Tigrinya in Eritrea. Tigre are made up of three groups, Habab, Ad Teklei and Ad Temaryam. They are all nomadic herdspeople except for Ad Teklei who have settled in Keren. Other Tigre-speakers live between Mensa and Bilen (Bogos) on the Dahlak Islands and among the Beni Amer. Tigre means 'serf'. They were originally Muslim vassals of the Christian Bet Asgede. During the nineteenth century the Muslim rulers adopted the language of their subjects as well as their religion but kept them serfs.

Sandwiched between Afar and Tigre are Saho nomads and semi-nomads. Mostly Muslim, they have imported many social and cultural values from the plateau. Saho speak local languages but have also used Arabic in commercial dealings and have long been exposed to foreign influence in the form of trade with expanding empires. Much of the land taken for resettlement of the 500,000 refugees in Sudan is likely to be that used by these nomads.

The western lowlands are strikingly similar to western Sudan. The northern part of the plains is hot and arid, with no vegetation, except along river banks. The southern part, known as the Gash-Setit Basin, supports a dense equatorial vegetation, rich soils and monsoon rains. The northern lowlands are inhabited by the Beni Amer branch of the Tegre tribes, who, like their cousins in the Rora, are related to the Beja of Sudan. They are Muslim and nomadic pastoralists.

There are three nomadic, two semi-nomadic and four semi-sedentary groups using the grazing land of the area between the Setit and Gash for all or part of the year, especially during the dry season. Between 2-3,000 nomads, mostly Beni Amer from Northern Eritrea, bring 40-80,000 cattle annually into the area. Other cattle are brought by local elders and semi-sedentary groups, and wealthy farmers hire Beni Amer to look after them. It has become increasingly difficult for Beni Amer to find grazing because the area is now farmed and used by other herders. Prior to the introduction of mechanized farming, only Beni Amer and Sudanese pastoralists used the grazing land of the area between the Setit and Gash. From the 1950s, however, many new groups and their herds started to appear as their own traditional grazing lands disappeared.

Both a region and an ethnic group, Bilen inhabit the most northerly district of Tigray, Bogos, divided from the rest of that province by the Mereb River. The mostly agricultural people comprise two main tribes of about 15,000 each: Bet Teqwe and Gebre Terqe. They became Christians but adopted clothing in colours worn by Muslims as a form of defence and so not to be easily recognized. The Gebre Terqe were slower to become Islamicized because of efforts of Roman Catholic and Swedish evangelical missionaries. About a quarter of the Bilen population is Roman Catholic today. In earlier times Bilen were prey to slave and cattle raiders from Egyptian Sudan. Keren, their capital, was occupied by the Egyptians in 1872. The return of Bogos was guaranteed by the Adwa Treaty in 1884 but the Italians annexed it and retained control until after the Second World War.

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History

The unification of Eritrea and the demarcation of its present boundaries were achieved only in 1890 by the Italians. Until then, the highlands had been part of the Christian province of Tigray and the lowlands had been penetrated successively by Turks, Egyptians and Mahdi forces from Sudan. In 1893 the colonial authorities began a policy of expropriation of land, sparking anti-colonial peasant uprisings.

As the cities underwent rapid growth, Eritreans of diverse social and ethnic backgrounds were drawn to

urban centres in search of work. By the end of the colonial period Eritreans - especially Muslims, who had gained most from the expansion of health, education and other modern services - had begun to see their territory as distinct from Ethiopia. However, given the diversity of groups, it took more than half a century of collective oppression under colonial rule to produce a unified nationalist tradition.

British military occupation

In 1941 Eritrea came under British military occupation. In the post-war period it was ravaged by unemployment and inflation. Christian highlanders suffered most; those who migrated to cities for jobs found none, while those who stayed in the plateau watched as land was taken arbitrarily from them. Urban and rural Muslims were only mildly affected by the new regime. Indeed those in towns prospered to become the creditors of the Christian highlanders, creating disparities in their political evolution.

One response saw the creation of a Christian separatist movement which aimed for the restoration of the ancient Tigray province, with its ancient capital Aksum. Muslim landlords from the northern highlands, to where Muslim nationalism can be traced, joined the unionist cause in search of allies to restore privileges. In 1942 the serfs rose against the landlords and refused to pay their annual tributes. Their demands were championed by merchant groups in Keren and Agordat which traced ties to the various serf clans. This group led by Ibrahim Sultan Ali formed the Muslim League of Eritrea in 1946 and opposed union with Ethiopia.

The Unionist Party, supported largely by Christians, was the dominant party in the plateau and its urban centres. The Muslim League, concentrated in the lowlands and the northern highlands, sought to create an independent Eritrea stressing the need to defend Muslim rights. A 1948 referendum was polarized along these lines.

End of World War 2 and Ethiopian Confederation

At the end of World War II in 1945, Eritrea had become a protectorate of the United Nations and in 1950 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for Eritrean autonomy and legislative, executive and judicial authority over its own domestic affairs with all other matters falling under federal, Ethiopian jurisdiction. In September 1952, after a two-year interim period, Eritrea became a semi-autonomous self-governing territory in confederation with Ethiopia.

Eritrea was to have its own government, parliament, prime minister, national flag, police force and two official languages, Arabic and Tigrinya. The British had allowed political parties, a free press and trade unions. This stood in contrast to Ethiopia, where there were neither political parties nor institutionalized representation of popular interests.

Rebellion against Ethiopian rule

Between 1952 and 1962 Addis Ababa gradually encroached on Eritrean rights, suspending the constitution, imposing Amharic as the language of government, education and business, outlawing political parties, packing the assembly with pliant supporters of the central government and finally incorporating Eritrea into its empire as a province like any other. Open rebellion by Muslim separatists broke out in western Eritrea in 1961. The systematic corrosion of Eritrean autonomy added fuel to the separatist movement. Eritrean politicians insisted that Eritrea presented a colonial not a secessionist problem. The demand for independence was on the grounds that Eritrea was a colony of Italy, transferred to British administration and illegally annexed by Ethiopia. The nationalist movement, however, exhibited the disunity of Eritrean people who had more in common with their neighbours than

with each other.

Ethnic/Religious component of rebel movements

The religious and ethnic diversity of Eritrea led some of the nationalist forces to identify with the Arab and Muslim world. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), formed in 1960, drew its leadership from the Tigre-and Arabic-speaking Muslim clans of the coastal plain and its cities. Its main external source of support was the Ba'athist Syrian regime.

During the 1960s Ethiopian military repression and enforced Amharization radicalized much of the politically aware Tigrinya-speaking youth. Having failed to obtain easy access to the ELF, some of them established the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1969. The immediate cause of the split was the ELF's portrayal of the Eritrean struggle in Islamic terms in order to secure assistance from the Arab world, thus effectively ostracizing the Christian populations of the highlands. The EPLF attempted to break down national divisions and include both Muslims and Christians by opting for a secular and Marxist-Leninist ideology, the resonance of which was enhanced through American backing for Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. It began attracting the support of young Christians from urban centres and successfully challenged the older organization in a conflict which lasted from 1969 to 1974.

The Derg

For a time after the revolution in Ethiopia in 1974 that ended the Selassie regime, it seemed that the military government might be prepared to make concessions on Eritrean issues. The new Prime Minister (not a member of the Dergue, the ruling military council headed by Mengistu Haile Mariam), General Aman Andom, was an Eritrean and favoured regional autonomy for Eritrea within the Ethiopian state. Just when the Ethiopian government was politically in a most favourable position to resolve the conflict, the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) launched a military offensive in February 1975.

The brutality and indiscriminate anti-Eritrean terror campaigns in urban areas of Ethiopia and Eritrea threw tens of thousands of Eritrean youth into the folds of the two fronts. In 1981, the EPLF, supported by its Tigrayan ally, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), drove the ELF out of Eritrea, with many members fleeing to refugee camps along the Sudanese border, where for years they would be harassed and killed on both sides of the Sudan-Ethiopia frontier. The EPLF and TPLF allies subsequently fell out over a range of issues, some political and some tactical. Although they patched up their relationship, this split left a residue of bitterness that, to this day, has continued to inhibit good relations between their leaders.

The fall of Addis Ababa & Independence

In 1989 a shift occurred in the power balance due to the EPLF's defeat of the Dergue army at Afabet, the TPLF's capture of Mekelle, low morale of a largely conscript and increasingly teenage Ethiopian army, and an abortive military coup. These factors coincided with the end of the Cold War, and in 1991 the end of Soviet arms shipments to the Mengistu regime. Within two years the EPLF took control of Eritrea and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) entered Addis Ababa one day after Asmara fell to the EPLF. Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe in May 1991.

The EPLF formed a provisional administration and because of difficulties in securing international recognition, vowed to hold a referendum on Eritrea's future within two years. Although Eritrea had fought militarily for its independence, recognition was bolstered by a referendum in April 1993 that was

approved by 99.8 per cent of the electorate, and which received UN and international support. The Republic of Eritrea was declared on May 1993. EPLF leader Isaias Afewerki became president, chairman of the National Assembly, and chief executive of the Council of State.

Ethiopian/Eritrean Border War

Isaias quickly fell out with erstwhile TPLF ally Meles Zenawi, who had assumed power in Ethiopia. Clashing personalities sharpened disputes over Ethiopian access to Eritrean ports, the price of Eritrean refined oil to the Ethiopian market and Ethiopia's refusal to conduct trade in Eritrea's new currency. Meles faced significant resentment within Ethiopia over the loss of Eritrea - a sentiment that he tapped to distract ethnically diverse Ethiopia from disgruntlement with his rule that was rooted in Tigrean power.

Border tensions developed in late 1997, and in May 1998, Eritrean and Ethiopian border patrols clashed in the desert, at the disputed town of Badme. To the surprise of many in the international community, the conflict rapidly escalated into mutual bombing campaigns and trench warfare. Ethiopia expelled 77,000 Eritreans from its territory, and the fighting displaced hundreds of thousands more at various points during the conflict. By the time the conflict ended in 2000 with the Algiers Agreement, at least 19,000 (and perhaps twice as many) Eritrean soldiers had been killed. The agreement led to the deployment of UN peacekeepers and establishment of a border demarcation commission.

The commission ruled in 2003 that Badme lies in Eritrea, but Ethiopia has failed to accept that ruling. The standoff has continued, and Eritrea has grown frustrated with UN peacekeepers who are unable to implement the arbitration decision. Isaias and his Ethiopian counterpart, Meles, remain ensconced in power despite, or perhaps because of their desert border dispute that has cost tens of thousands of lives.

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Governance

In 1994 Isaias changed the name of the EPLF to the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in order to draw a distinction between the state and the party. He was tentatively steering Eritrea toward a multi-party system, albeit with restrictions on religious-and ethnically-based organizations. Initially provincial administrations were set up encouraging people to identify with their own regions and Afar, Kunama and Saho peoples indicated strong support for this. However, in hindsight the government thought this likely to escalate ethnic tensions, and in 1995 the government reduced the number of provinces in a bid to bolster national cohesion. The PFDJ government launched two years of 'consultations' on a new constitution, but these consisted of little more than disseminating information about decisions that had already been made by the government. Nonetheless, the constitution had wide political support, with the main political opposition coming from exiled political parties, who felt they had not been consulted. When it was released in 1997, the new constitution was thus little more than a PFDJ document, and despite its embrace of multi-party democracy and a catalogue of human rights guarantees, the government did not pursue its implementation.

As tensions mounted between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998, opposition voices to the slide towards war were severely repressed. Eritrea had little independent media when hostilities erupted in May 1998. For a government wary of ethnic divisions, the war provided further pretext for delays in fulfilling the constitutional provisions for multi-party democracy. The war ended in December 2000 with losses of territory and an immense human toll. In May 2001, 15 senior PFDJ members publicly criticized Isaias and called on him to implement the multi-party and human rights provisions of the 1997 constitution.

Isaias responded with a severe crackdown in September 2001, ordering the arrests of eleven of his senior critics (three were abroad, and one retracted his support for the statement), hundreds of other oppositionists, and 18 journalists. He also ordered the closure of all independent media outlets. The following year, his National Assembly made the formal decision to delay indefinitely the introduction of a multi-party system.

The unresolved border dispute has allowed Isaias to extend what amounts to a military dictatorship indefinitely. All youth are mobilised for military conscription that can last for many years. Tens of thousands spend their youth manning the trenches along the border with Ethiopia. At the same time the diaspora are forced to contribute taxes to the Eritrean government if they want to support their families. Many young Eritreans have fled the country, with around 800 a month crossing into Sudan. War and authoritarianism have proved a devastating combination for the Eritrean economy. The United Nations estimates that Eritrea has produced only 30 per cent of its cereal requirements in the past decade. Food shortages are worsened by draconian restrictions placed by the government on international aid organizations.

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Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

The persecution of religious minorities in Eritrea remains a major concern. In its annual International Religious Freedom report 2007, the US State Department said the Eritrean government's record on religious freedom had deteriorated even further. There are reportedly 1,900 prisoners held for their religious beliefs in this small African nation.

The government recognizes four religions as practiced through state-approved institutions: Eritrean Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, and Islam. It has brutally suppressed Jehovah's Witnesses as well as members of evangelical and Pentecostal churches, and occasionally even persecuted Muslims accused of supporting Islamist opposition groups.

Religious persecution in Eritrea has its roots in the Albanian brand of Marxism to which Isaias adhered for a time during the EPLF rebellion against Ethiopia, and his regime's abiding distrust of potential alternate power centres. A 1995 decree banned all religious groups from involvement in political activity or receiving foreign funds. In May 2002 the government extended the focus of its crackdown on unofficial religions to evangelical churches. They were ordered to close their places of worship pending registrations that have routinely languished or been denied. Adherents have been arrested and tortured until agreeing to abandon their faith.

In September 2007, the BBC interviewed an Eritrean evangelical Christian who described the torture techniques which had been used on him - including being tied in a position known as 'the Helicopter' for 136 hours. Another victim reported that he was held for 12 months, forced to do manual labour, and on one occasion "suspended by his arms from a tree in the form of a crucifixion." The 'Open Doors' Christian charity reported that at least four Christians had died in 2007, following severe ill-treatment at the hands of the authorities.

Jehovah's Witnesses have particularly suffered because they refused participation in the 1993 referendum on Eritrean independence, and refuse mandatory military service. Through a decree in 1994, Isaias stripped all Jehovah's Witnesses of basic rights. They were denied schooling, healthcare, identity cards, birth certificates, marriage certificates and travel documents, were kicked out of public sector jobs, and their places of worship were closed. Those refusing military service have been jailed - in some

cases up to twelve years - and sometimes tortured. Even followers of the officially recognised religions have not been immune from harassment and ill-treatment. The deposed Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, has been under house arrest for over two years.

In a rare success, the prominent gospel singer Helen Berhane was released in November 2006, after an international campaign led by Amnesty International. She had been held for two and a half years - most of it in a metal shipping container, which served as a cell.

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