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The Genesis of the Modern Eritrean Struggle (1942–1961)

NIKOLAOS BIZIOURAS

This article shows how the intra-ethnic, elite-level competition for leadership over the Eritrean ethnic mobilization drive interacted with the economic policies that the Amhara imposed on the Eritreans in the imperial era of the Ethiopian state to generate the potential for violent ethnic conflict. The Eritrean ethnic mobilization drive turned violent when economically dependent Eritreans prodded their ethnic group leaders into a series of bidding wars with each other that made peaceful accommodation with the Amhara leaders of Ethiopia infeasible. To illustrate this argument, this article presents the history of the incorporation of Eritrea into Ethiopia after Eritrea's decolonization, examines intra-Eritrean divisions and their relationship to the Ethiopian imperial centers, shows how the economic policies that the Ethiopians imposed upon Eritrea impacted the Eritrean ethnic mobilization drive, and then shows how economically dependent Eritreans incentivized rival Eritrean political leaders to engage in bidding wars with respect to the Ethiopian authorities.

KEYWORDS *Amhara, Eritrea, ethnic mobilization, fractionalization, imperial Ethiopia, secession*

INTRODUCTION

Existing arguments about the emergence of the Eritrean-Amhara ethnic conflict in imperial Ethiopia have stressed a variety of factors. Traditional

NIKOLAOS BIZIOURAS is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the United States Naval Academy. His current research focuses on the political economy of intra-state conflict and the security implications of fragile states. This article solely represents the author's views and does not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Naval Academy, the Department of the Navy, or the Department of Defense. This article is based on a paper that was recognized as the Best Paper–Africa at the 2012 Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA).

approaches have consistently highlighted the long-term ethnic heterogeneity of Ethiopia and its periodic crises in terms of interethnic relations. As such, the country's collapse into violent interethnic conflict and its reemergence as a coherent, multiethnic entity have assumed a nearly mythic status, and these events are used as powerful examples of the ability of ethnic heterogeneity to generate interethnic conflict.¹ More Eritrea-focused variants of the traditional argument have stressed the significantly high levels of ethno-linguistic and religious fractionalization both within and between Eritrea and Ethiopia.² For traditional interpretations, Eritrea's violent confrontation with Ethiopia represents the power of ascriptive identities to determine political action and engender conflict in the context of ethnic and religious heterogeneity.

Marxist approaches have stressed the intervening role of ethnicity as conditioning access to resources but without affecting the potential for intra-ethnic group resource allocation that continues to be determined along class lines. As such, the establishment of the modern Ethiopian state was the result of integration into a capitalist international economy driven by the imperial tendencies of the Amhara, the key intermediating ethnic group, which used violence and control over the Ethiopian state to benefit from such an institutional arrangement.³ In the Eritrean context, this meant that the expansion of the capitalist economy and its attendant exploitation happened along ethnic lines, thus increasing the potential for ethnic conflict. As such, Eritrean ethnicity, much like other subnational forms of ethnicity, was presumed to be a direct threat to the notion of a "Greater Ethiopia" that had been painstakingly embedded both within the country and across the region.⁴

¹Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xiv.

²As Haggai Erlich argues, "Eritrea was a problem that became a conflict, a conflict that became a local tragedy, and a local tragedy that became a pivotal issue in a regional crisis... The essential problem was a matter of identity"; Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1986), 1. Similarly, Richard Sherman defined the "Ethio-Eritrean conflict [as] a national liberation movement by an oppressed people rather than a simple attempt at secession by a hard-core dissident faction"; Sherman, "Center-Periphery Relations in Ethiopia," *Horn of Africa* 2, no. 2 (1979): xvii. For an analysis of the role that intra-Eritrean divisions played in the Eritrean mobilization drive, see Kjetil Tronvoll, "Borders of Violence—Boundaries of Identity: Demarcating the Eritrean Nation-State," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 6 (1999): 1054–55. For an accurate presentation of the projected and actual links that this conflict has had in terms of religious overtones, see Roy Pateman, "Eritrea, Ethiopia, and the Middle Eastern Powers: Image and Reality," *Northeast African Studies* 8, no. 2–3 (1986): 23–39.

³See Mesfin Araya, "The Eritrean Question: An Alternative Explanation," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 28, no. 1 (1990): 80; Teshale Tibebe, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia 1896–1974* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995), xxii; and Assafa Jalata, "Oromo Nationalism and Ethiopian Ethnocratic Politics," *Horn of Africa* 20, no. 1 (1997): 12–13.

⁴See Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 24–28.

Modernization approaches have stressed the instrumental role of ethnicity in enabling urban-based political entrepreneurs to foment collective action for resource allocation purposes.⁵ As in other cases of the modernizing, postcolonial African state, this approach contends that the urban-based, interethnic elite, split between the politically dominant ethnic group—in this case, the Amhara—and the competing ethnic group—in this case, the Eritreans—broke down because of insurmountable differences over sharing rules.

Institutionalist approaches have stressed the inherent disjuncture between a centralizing state and its peripheral regions.⁶ As such, the emergence of Eritrean nationalism and its subsequent radicalization into violent ethnic conflict and predatory secessionism were the results of the center's institutional inability to maintain its control over the peripheral regions.⁷ More Eritrea-focused variants of this institutionalist approach present the Eritrean ethnic mobilization as the emergence of an anticolonial liberation struggle in the context of the continued colonization and exploitation of the area by the Ethiopian state.⁸

There are many reasons to disagree with the aforementioned analytical approaches. Empirical findings demonstrate that although ethnic heterogeneity played an important role in the onset of violent ethnic conflict, it was not

⁵See John Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

⁶See Christopher Clapham, "Centralization and Local Response in Southern Ethiopia," *African Affairs* 74, no. 294 (1975): 73; and Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Challenge*, 130–32.

⁷See Sherman, "Center-Periphery Relations," 37; and Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 207.

⁸See Richard Lobban, "The Eritrean War: Issues and Implications," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 10, no. 2 (1976): 339; David Pool, "Eritrean Nationalism," in *Nationalism & Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa*, ed. I. M. Lewis (Los Angeles, CA: Evergreen Book Distribution, 1984), 45; Okbazghi Yohannes, "The Eritrean Question: A Colonial Case?" *Journal of Modern African Studies* 25, no. 4 (1987): 664–68; Edmond Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: From Empire to People's Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 150; Bereket Habteselassie, *Eritrea and the United Nations* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1989), 54; and Roy Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990), 8. Fessehatzion put it best when he argued that "the central issue of the struggle is the right of an African people to determine their own destiny, to develop institutions that reflect their goals and aspirations, and to remove all vestiges of oppression, exploitation and inequities. In short, what Eritreans want is not different from what Namibians and Zimbabweans want; or what Angolans and Mozambicans struggled for and won"; Tekie Fessehatzion, "The Eritrean Struggle for Independence and National Liberation," *Horn of Africa* 1, no. 2 (1978): 29. Taddia, taking a slightly different position, argues that the failure of decolonization after Italy withdrew was an important intervening variable in Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia; Irma Taddia, "Post-Twentieth-Century Eritrea," *Northeast African Studies* 5, no. 1 (1998): 7–29.

a sufficient cause for such conflict. Ascriptive identities did not lead to a smooth and effortless ethnic mobilization. Capitalist expansion may have increased national and interregional income inequality within Ethiopia, but it did not disadvantage Eritrea. If income inequality and economic marginalization and exploitation by the center were the dominant reasons for the outbreak of ethnic conflict, the southern, coffee-producing regions would have led the ethnic mobilization drive. If anything, Eritrea benefited from the increased integration of the Ethiopian economy into the international economy far more than other regions did. Interethnic, elite-level agreements between the Eritreans and the Amhara did not break down; at the very least, they became stronger over the course of the federation years and up through the beginning of the unification period, even incorporating sectarian differences. Finally, in response to arguments that stress Eritrea's exploitation by the central Ethiopian state, this claim can be rebutted by showing that Eritreans commenced an ethnic mobilization drive at a time when benefits and assistance from the center were increasing.

The argument of this article focuses on the causal relationship between the intra-ethnic elite-level competition for leadership over the Eritrean mobilization drive and the economic policies that the Amhara imposed on the Eritreans in the imperial era of the Ethiopian state. The Eritrean ethnic mobilization drive turned violent when elite-level, intra-ethnic Eritrean divisions combined with the income effects of the economic policies imposed upon the average Eritrean ethnic group members by the Ethiopian state. In response, economically dependent Eritreans prodded their ethnic group leaders in a series of bidding wars that made peaceful settlement with the Amhara leaders of Ethiopia infeasible. To illustrate this argument, this study will present the history of the incorporation of Eritrea into Ethiopia after Eritrea's decolonization, examine the intra-Eritrean divisions and their relationship to the Ethiopian imperial centers, show how the economic policies that the Ethiopians imposed upon Eritrea impacted the Eritrean ethnic mobilization drive, and finally show how economically dependent Eritreans incentivized rival Eritrean political leaders to engage in a bidding war with respect to the Ethiopian authorities.

There are three policy implications for the contemporary era that flow from this historical case study. First, it is particularly important to note that understanding the economic roots of violent intrastate ethnic conflict are essential for comprehending the drivers of such conflict at the micro level. Second, intra-ethnic fractionalization, especially at the elite level, is a necessary precondition for the escalation of ethnic group demands that increase the chances of violent ethnic conflict. Third, the formulation of institutional solutions is not a sufficient condition for the avoidance of violent ethnic conflict—a point that is particularly applicable to federal multiethnic states and particularly important to remember in an era of external nation-building.

THE BRITISH COLONIAL PERIOD AND ERITREANIZATION POLICIES

Starting on April 8, 1941, the British assumed control over Eritrea and established the British Military Authority (BMA) as the main administrative body. Uncertain about the duration of their presence, the British consciously followed a policy of indirect rule. Unlike the Italians, they actively sought to minimize their expenditures while increasing their proceeds from colonial rule. Accordingly, the BMA initially maintained all Italian-era personnel and administrative departments, with the exception of the police force, which it promptly abolished.⁹ However, over the period 1943–1944, the increased allocation of British administrative personnel to Eritrea allowed the British to assume exclusive decision-making responsibility even while relegating the Italian administrators to middle-level positions.¹⁰ Additionally, as in other British-administered dominions in Africa, they began a process of “Eritreanization.” While these policies allowed the British to maintain a low level of expenditure in Eritrea, they also enabled the emergence of Eritrean political entrepreneurs.

While initially placing Eritreans into low-level, manual labor positions, by 1944 the British had begun to allow Eritreans in the police forces and in middle-level positions as administrative assistants in charge of subprovincial districts and subdistricts.¹¹ Public sector employment in the military facilities of Asmara and the growing port area of Massawa provided Eritreans with plentiful employment opportunities that offered above-average wages, thus increasing their upward economic mobility.¹² Administratively, the British increased Eritrean participation in local government by establishing increasingly codified rules of participation and institutionalized practices of conflict adjudication in local branches of the Eritrean Advisory Council.¹³

Given this policy of “Eritreanization,” the BMA quickly realized the importance of increasing local human capital. Consequently, they expanded educational opportunities, more than doubling the number of functioning primary schools to fifty-nine, as well as constructing one middle school.¹⁴

⁹G. K. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition, 1941–1952* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 26. The Italian police force was replaced by a British-led, Eritrean rank-and-file police force.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 30.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 31.

¹²John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 61. While Eritreans were offered only low-level positions such as clerks, accountants, medical orderlies, telephone operators, and railway assistants, these positions allowed them to increase their incomes significantly.

¹³Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 32.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 34. The British left the choice of whether to teach in Tigrinya or Arabic up to the local community and used English-language instruction from the last year of primary school onwards.

Indeed, by the end of the British occupation in 1952, nearly 20,000 Eritreans had been schooled in the three primary languages of Tigrinya, Arabic, and English.¹⁵ By allowing the use of Tigrinya and Arabic in primary education, the British enabled the Eritreans to use their native language in order to gain access to secondary education. By standardizing instruction in English at the secondary level, they increased the human capital skills of the Eritreans by introducing them to the lingua franca of the Red Sea regional economy.¹⁶

However, the British started reducing the size of their state sector involvement as soon as it became apparent that the Second World War was ending. Consequently, the BMA greatly reduced budgetary expenditures by eliminating infrastructure construction projects and reducing the number of public sector jobs.¹⁷ Indeed, this reduction cut down available public sector employment between 1940 and 1948 by more than 50 percent, greatly affecting Eritrean employment levels.¹⁸

This constriction of the public sector affected urban-based Eritrean Christians the worst. With their linguistic proficiency in Italian rendered irrelevant under the British administration, their Italian-era pensions cancelled, and their work schedules and workloads significantly increased under the British, these low-level clerical employees, the vast majority of whom were Eritrean Christians, increasingly became politicized.¹⁹

The distributional changes of the British administration had similar consequences in the rural areas as well. The continued respect for the Italian-era property rights of Italian settlers only increased Eritrean Christian agitation, because the Italians had expropriated privately held property to claim those property rights; furthermore, these violations had occurred in the Christian-dominated highlands areas.²⁰ The importance of increasing land-based tax revenue was obvious: despite the limited rainfall and the lack of sufficient land for large-scale agricultural production, by 1946, the British had been able to engineer a massive increase in the area of land under cultivation and for grain production.²¹ The increased demands for tax collection on the basis of land ownership only exacerbated the situation by increasing

¹⁵Richard Leonard, "The Eritrean War: Issues and Implications," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 10, no. 2 (1982): 81.

¹⁶E. R. J. Hussey, "Eritrea Self-Governing," *African Affairs* 53, no. 213 (1954): 325. On the eve of the British departure in 1952, there were one hundred primary schools with 13,500 students, fourteen middle schools with 1,200 students, and two secondary schools with 167 students. More important, the Eritrean educational system enrolled a significant number of female students, which distinguished it not only from Ethiopia but from the rest of Africa.

¹⁷Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 44–45.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 48.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 54.

²¹*Ibid.*, 40. Between 1930 and 1946, the number of acres under cultivation had increased more than fivefold, from 141,000 to 640,000, and grain production had almost tripled, from 28,000 to 118,000 tons annually.

intra-Eritrean animosity in the rural areas, because land-owning Eritrean Christians were faced with a much higher tax bill than the pastoralist Eritrean Muslims.

ERITREANIZATION AND THE POLITICIZATION OF ETHNICITY

Throughout the Second World War, Eritrean ethnic mobilization developed slowly. By May 5, 1941, Christian and Muslim activists had joined to form the first Eritrean political association, the *Mabber Fikri Hager Eritrea* (MFHE).²² Composed of urban-based, low-level clerical employees of the colonial administration and led by young professionals such as Gebremeskul Woldu, Woldeab Woldemariam, and Ibrahim Sultan,²³ the MFHE became a voluntary association in which incipient ethnic political entrepreneurs could acquire the skills for mass political mobilization while building the alliances necessary for the formation of modern political parties. Between 1941 and 1944, the MFHE acted as an explicitly interethnic alliance of up-and-coming Eritrean political entrepreneurs united by their continued opposition to the presence of Italians in the BMA administration.²⁴ The organization also contained a strong representation of the traditional pre-colonial era land-owning and commerce-based elites; however, the urban-based, educated intellectuals raised in the colonial era quickly achieved command of the MFHE, and the tensions between the different types of Eritrean political entrepreneurs became increasingly clear. Despite their rural backgrounds and limited personal material resources, the MFHE leadership fell into the hands of those educated by the Italians and the British, as well as those whose upward mobility had been checked by colonialism's ethnic-based professional ceilings.²⁵ Yet the needs of conflict would change the political economy of Eritrea once again.

When uncertainty over the North African campaign necessitated the transfer of military production facilities out of the Middle East, Eritrea benefited from the Allies' need to place light industry in a safe location. This economic boom benefited capital asset-holders who were involved in light

²²*Mabber Fikri Hager Eritrea* translates as the "Association of Love for the Country of Eritrea." This organization served as a clandestine network for political activists, because the BMA prohibited the formation of political parties at the time.

²³All three political entrepreneurs had been previously employed by the Italian colonial administration. Gebremeskul Woldu, an Asmara Eritrean Christian, had served as the highest-ranking Eritrean civil servant in the staff of the Eritrea Commissariat, Ibrahim Sultan had been a low-level interpreter, and Woldeab Woldemariam had been employed within the school system.

²⁴Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 160. Woldu was a Catholic from the highlands; Woldemariam was a Tigrinya-born, Asmara-based Protestant Christian; and Sultan was a lowlands Muslim.

²⁵Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1989), 80; and Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 52.

industrial enterprise or engaged in trading activities, namely the urban-based Italians and the Muslim merchants on the coast.²⁶ Additionally, the under-taxed pastoralist Muslims of the lowlands were prospering from the increased prices of meat and dairy products, while Muslim merchants used their access to capital to discount payments to Eritrean Christian farmers months in advance of the harvest season.²⁷

However, by the end of the wartime period, Eritrean industry had shut down, unable to compete in the international economy. This development augured poorly for the Eritreans: by 1947, there was an acute need to preserve the jobs of nearly 24,000 Eritreans who worked in the manufacturing sector and nearly 3,500 who were employed in the mining sector.²⁸ Any attempts for credit-based expansion of these enterprises were stifled by the BMA's decision to prohibit all bank loans in excess of £1,000.²⁹ This intervention in local capital markets reduced the potential of Eritrean entrepreneurs to benefit from the reconstruction of the postwar economy by expanding their capital base. Additionally, Eritrea was not on its way to becoming a primary commodity exporter of any size. Throughout the period from 1930 to 1950, Eritrea managed to run up significant trade deficits, with net exports equal to only 50 percent of net imports.³⁰ Eritreans experienced disillusionment when their expectations for employment went unmet during the British colonial period. The expansion of public sector employment could have altered their income situation. However, the continued unwillingness of the BMA to replace Italian administrators with Eritreans only served to reduce the general Eritrean perception of the British as "liberators."³¹ Indeed, for many Eritreans, and especially for those working in the modern sectors of the economy, Britain's economic policies solidified their belief that their

²⁶Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 46. Not only did the Muslim merchants prosper through the rapid increase in prices for consumer goods, but their newfound wealth also allowed them to engage in credit financing, especially for Eritrean Christians. When these individuals defaulted on their mortgage payments and foreclosures followed, this only increased the potential for intra-Eritrean animosity along religious lines.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 70; and Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 30.

²⁸Leonard, "Eritrean War," 110. The approximately 8,500 Eritreans who were employed in the public sector did not perceive the employment situation in the same way.

²⁹Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 43.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 43. Yet, as an entrepôt, Eritrea was very successful, averaging almost as much as its annual level of imports and nearly twice its exports between 1947 and 1949.

³¹Richard Pankhurst, "The Legal Question of Racism in Eritrea during the British Military Administration: A Study of Colonial Attitudes and Responses, 1941–1945," *Northeast African Studies* 2, no. 2 (1995): 44–48. However, the BMA actively eliminated the vast majority of the race-based decrees that the Italian administration had bequeathed them, often over local European objections.

chances for individual economic upward mobility could only increase within a postcolonial Eritrea.³²

INTRA-ERITREAN BIDDING WARS AND MOBILIZATIONAL RESOURCES

Once the British indicated that their presence in Eritrea had a short time horizon, Eritrean politics assumed an increasingly competitive tone. Through the Eritrean Coptic Church, with its powerful network of 711 churches, Ethiopia began supporting Eritrean Christians in the MFHE.³³ This relationship was based on a mutually rewarding exchange of support for selective incentives: the Church would utilize its impressive network of churches to support the pro-Ethiopian and pro-unification Eritrean political entrepreneurs, while the imperial regime would restore the Church's lands to it upon unification.³⁴ Suddenly every village church was decorated with the Ethiopian flag, every religious festival and holiday was an opportunity for the diffusion of Ethiopian nationalism, and every sermon was a chance for the presentation of the Ethiopian unification goals.³⁵ In addition, Addis Ababa created the Society for the Unification of Ethiopia and Eritrea, which would later form the organizational basis for the establishment of the Unionist Party.³⁶ This

³²Taddia, "Post-Twentieth-Century Eritrea," 164–65; Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism*, 65; and Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 69, 161.

³³V. Stitz, "Distribution and Foundation of Churches in Ethiopia," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 13, no. 1 (1975): 12; Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 66.

³⁴S. F. Nadel, "Land Tenure on the Eritrean Plateau," *Africa* 16, no. 1 (1946): 21; Trevasakis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 59 (see note 9); Ambaye Zakarayay, *Land Tenure in Eritrea* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa Press, 1966), 20; and Leonard, "Eritrean War," 91. These lands, located in the Bahri regions of the highlands areas, were particularly profitable, because their nearly constant rainfall made them the most productive land areas of Eritrea. The Italians had expropriated them from the Church, and the British administration consistently refused to return them. Moreover, in the highlands areas, villages were inundated with priests—some of them having nearly thirty priests living within them. More important, village priests were exempted from agricultural labor, did not have to pay tribute, and were given the first choice of land plots during the periodic land redistributions.

³⁵As Abuna Marcos, the Christian bishop of Tigray and Eritrea, stated in the 1942 Epiphany Address, "A male child is brought into the Church forty days after it has been born and a female child is brought after eighty days. Names are then given to them. When the child cries, its mother gives it milk, and it stops crying as soon as she lifts it to her breasts. But you, my people, have you a name? Yes, you have a mother and you must come to know her as she already knows you"; quoted in Trevasakis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 60. While metaphorical, the allusion to Ethiopia's intimate relationship with Eritrea got the point across.

³⁶Trevasakis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 60; Araya, "Eritrean Question," 82; Marcus, *History of Ethiopia*, 158; and Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 38. This society was staffed by the highest-ranking Eritrean members of the Italian colonial administration, and its senior leadership was Christian, of either Catholic or evangelical background. Their rallying cry became "Mother Ethiopia or Death!".

support for unification was consistently and publicly proclaimed by the Ethiopian state.³⁷ Supported by the Asmara Advisory Council, a creation of the British administration, these incipient political entrepreneurs actively sought to mobilize Eritreans for union with Ethiopia.³⁸ Their initial members were the underemployed public sector Eritrean Christian employees in urban areas; the rural, highlands-based Eritrean Christian elites who had lost their Italian-era sinecures; and the highlands peasants who had been adversely affected by British and Italian land ownership policies.³⁹

In contrast to these Ethiopia-backed Eritrean political entrepreneurs, Eritrean political entrepreneurs who pushed aggressively for independence began a countermobilization. Led by Woldeab Woldemariam, editor of the popular *Eritrean Weekly News*, this faction of the Eritrean political mobilization movement attempted to counterbalance the Ethiopian influence by allying itself with the traditional lowlands Muslim elites in the Akele Guzai region.⁴⁰ The British supported the Akele Guzai elites and increased the resources allocated to them.⁴¹ This intersectarian, elite-level coalition enabled the urban-based, anti-unification Eritrean political entrepreneurs to build ties to the rural-based opposition. These two mobilization drives not only increased the anticolonial overtones of the larger Eritrean political mobilization drive but also established a greater potential for intra-Eritrean political competition.

³⁷In a memorandum sent by the Ethiopian state to the London Conference of Foreign Ministers, the state argued that “Ethiopians and Eritreans are incontestably one and the same people The history of Eritrea has been one with that of Ethiopia The race is the same, the language, except for dialectical differences, is the same. The culture and the habits are identical It is firmly claimed that with the forfeiture of Italian rule, Eritrea and Somaliland should revert to their mother country. To provide for such a return would be merely to recognize the realities of the existing historical and other ties which bind them integrally to Ethiopia”; quoted in Sally Healy, “The Changing Idiom of Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa,” in *Nationalism & Self Determination in the Horn of Africa*, ed. I. M. Lewis (Los Angeles, CA: Evergreen Book Distribution, 1984), 97–98.

³⁸In the late 1940s, slogans began to appear on the walls of Asmara that reflected distinctly pro-Ethiopian propaganda and exclusivist Eritrean Christian overtones. For example, one instructed Eritreans to “remember your Mother Ethiopia! Your Mother will not deny you and you, her sons, must not deny her. She will feed you. The Italians beat you and dishonored your women. The British starve you and fatten the foreigners. Have you seen how the Italians and Arabs grow rich while you go naked? Have you seen how the British protect them and despise you?”; quoted in Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 61.

³⁹Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 62.

⁴⁰Asnake Ali, “Addis Zemen and the Eritrean Issue: A Review of Articles, 1941–1947,” in *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies: Humanities and Human Resources: Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Harold G. Marcus (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995), 471. The *Eritrean Weekly News*, published in the Eritrean Christian Tigrinya language, established a column in 1944 with the sole goal of publishing anti-unionist positions.

⁴¹Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 62–63.

On September 25, 1946, the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Allied Powers decided that Italy should renounce all right and title to its former African colonies, and that if the Four Power Commission could not agree on the future of Eritrea, then the problem should be referred to the United Nations. This decision rendered the entire period from 1946 to 1950 one of acute uncertainty for Eritreans and Ethiopians alike, because of the highly volatile policy environment produced by the Four Powers. They oscillated between a variety of options: total and full independence, partition between Sudan and Ethiopia, and union. To complicate matters even more, the local British colonial administrators, who were relaying information to the metropolitan political centers, were also divided between partition and union on the one hand and partition and independence on the other.⁴²

Despite its increasingly weakened position as a result of the international conflict over the issue of union with Ethiopia, the MFHE made an attempt at reconciliation, led by Woldeab Woldemariam, who argued for the need to achieve a “conditional union” platform that would prevent Eritrea from being divided between Ethiopia and Sudan. However, the radical elements of the pro-Ethiopian side intervened and, under the leadership of Tedla Bairu, were successful in overthrowing the president of the MFHE and replacing him with Bairu.⁴³ Negotiations between Woldemariam and Bairu in November 1946 quickly disintegrated into a confrontation—one that not only would characterize Eritrean politics until the end of the 1950s but also indicated the acute differences within the various intra-Eritrean mobilization drives regarding the question of union with Ethiopia.

⁴²K. D. D. Henderson, *The Making of the Modern Sudan* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 335. For a discussion of the Foreign Office’s near-constant inability to decide upon the question of partition even before the Four Power Conference, see Tekie Fessehatzion, “The International Dimensions of the Eritrean Question,” *Horn of Africa* 6, no. 2 (1983): 7–10. Douglas Newbold, British Civil Secretary of the Sudan, argued that “it would be happier for them [the Muslim tribes of Western Eritrea] and no trouble for us [the Sudan government] to take these two or three districts into Sudan, and let the Christians and Tigrinya speaking districts be reunited to their kinfolk into Ethiopia”; see Stephen H. Longrigg, “The Future of Eritrea,” *African Affairs* 45, no. 180 (1946): 126. Stephen Longrigg, the head of the BMA in Eritrea, believed that the “Muslim tribal areas adjoining the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan should be included in that country. The central Christian Highlands with the port of Massawa and the Samhar and the Saho tribes should form part of a United Tigray state or province, which should be placed under the nominal sovereignty of the Emperor and administered in name by a European power for either a stated or an unstated term of years.” In his capacity as the Brigadier-General in charge of the BMA between 1942 and 1944, Longrigg argued that “the Danakil coast and Assab [should be handed] to the Emperor immediately . . . [and] the Muslim areas . . . should all take their place in the adjoining and congenial Anglo-Egyptian Sudan . . . and the Christian, Ethiopian-type, Tigrinya-speaking Plateau . . . should be placed, without much ado, under the Sovereignty of the Emperor.” For Longrigg, writing in 1945 on the question of the postwar status of Italian colonies in Africa, “there is, therefore, every case for partition of Eritrea”; Longrigg, “Future of Eritrea,” 126.

⁴³Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 69.

ERITREAN POLITICAL MOBILIZATION, SELECTIVE INCENTIVES, AND MOBILIZATIONAL RESOURCES

These unsuccessful negotiations led to the quick emergence of a variety of Eritrean political parties. By December 1946, the Muslim League (ML) had been established. Founded by Ibrahim Sultan, who had led the campaign to eradicate serfdom among the Muslim tribes between 1942 and 1944, the ML was strongly positioned for a political campaign that aimed at full independence. Simultaneously, Bairu founded the Unionist Party (UP). Strongly supported by the Coptic Church and financed by the Ethiopian state, the UP quickly established party branches in every major town and built a very effective party machinery.⁴⁴ By February 1947, the Liberal Progressive Party (LPP), led by Tessema Asberom and Woldemariam, was formed, followed in March 1947 by the LPP-Serai branch, which was led by Sebhatu Yohannes.⁴⁵ By September 1947, the New Eritrea Pro-Italian Party (NERIP), led by Omar Mohammed Baduri, had been formed. Once again, religion did not act as a monolithic ascriptive identity. Both the LPP and the NERIP were Christian-led parties that sought independence rather than union because of their opposition to the economic policies of the Ethiopian state. LPP supporters, as urban Christians in the professional sectors, preferred independence in order to safeguard their interests against Ethiopian competition.

The transfer of Eritrea to a new sovereign status began with Italy's decision to surrender any claims to it in September 1947 with the Italian Peace Treaty. While Italy committed itself to a policy of noninterference, this treaty allowed the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and the United States to dispose of the Italian colonies as they saw fit. The Four Powers in turn pledged to turn the matter over to the United Nations within one year if no consensual solution could be found. The Four Power Commission's visit

⁴⁴Led by Eritrean Christians who had been employed in the Italian colonial administration and were now unemployed because of the BMA's budget cuts, the UP welcomed the possibility of unification with Ethiopia as a way of taking over the allocation of state resources. See Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 69; John Markakis, "The Nationalist Revolution in Ethiopia," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 26, no. 1 (1988): 52; Tekeste Negash, "The Eritrean Unionist Party and Its Strategies of Irredentism, 1941–50," in *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Bahru Zwede, Richard Pankhurst, and Taddese Beyene (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1994), 300.

⁴⁵Dan Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1993), 55; Araya, "Eritrean Question," 83; and Negash, "Eritrean Unionist Party," 302. The LPP quickly became known as the "Eritrea for Eritreans" party and campaigned on a platform of ominous predictions about what that the "imperial Amhara government of Ethiopia" would unleash upon Eritrea. The LPP campaign was supported by the BMA because of the willingness of the former to accept a long-term Western power trusteeship rather than immediate independence.

to Eritrea (November 1947 to January 1948) concluded that there was significant opposition to the division of Eritrea between Sudan and Ethiopia, that there was limited interethnic consensus regarding an Eritrean national identity, and that the area's economic base could not sustain sovereign independence.⁴⁶ While in Eritrea, the Commission met with 3,336 delegates, each of whom presented radically different viewpoints, depending on their location and religious affiliation.⁴⁷ In September 1948, unable to achieve a consensus among its members and confronted with acute intra-Eritrean divisions, the Four Power Commission decided to accept the United Nations as the final arbiter on the issue.

In Eritrea, the nascent political parties moved quickly. On July 25, 1949, the Independence Bloc, led by Ibrahim Sultan of the ML and including all the major Eritrean parties except the UP, was formed. However, the continuing UN negotiations, the increasing levels of uncertainty over the final solution, and the near-constant state of negotiations without any type of closure in sight only increased the fluidity of the ethnic mobilization and collective action drives. Accordingly, by November 1949, the Independence Bloc had already been weakened by defections and increased factionalism: the ML split into the ML and the Independent Muslim League, led by Sheikh Ali Radai; the LPP divided into the LPP and the Liberal Unionist Party, led by Abraha Tessema and Seyoum Maascio; and the ML split again into the ML and the Muslim League of the Western Province (MLWP).⁴⁸ The incorporation of the NERIP into the Independence Bloc dealt the final blow to the anti-unification coalition. For the new crop of Eritrean political entrepreneurs, the interethnic alliance with the Italian-based NERIP party was a strong incentive for factional splits.⁴⁹ By February 1950, the Liberal Unionist Party, the MLWP, and the Independent Eritrea United to Ethiopia Party had left the coalition. Moreover, these splits only narrowed the opposition to the UP: Muslim political representation became increasingly divided along territorial lines, and with the creation of the LUP, the Christian opposition to the union was severely reduced.

⁴⁶Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 89; Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 63. The British and American delegates to the Four Power Commission reported a 55-45 split in favor of independence over union, while the French and Soviet delegates reported 52-48 split in favor of independence over union. The territorial breakdown of the vote was as expected: in the Christian dominated highlands areas, including Asmara, pro-union support exceeded 70 percent, while in the rest of Eritrea, anti-union support exceeded 70 percent.

⁴⁷See Araya, "Eritrean Question," 84. In the predominantly Christian highlands areas, 71.1 percent were pro-union, while the remainder was against it. In the predominantly Muslim lowlands areas, 12.9 percent supported union, while 87.1 percent were against it.

⁴⁸Lloyd Elligson, "The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950," *Journal of African History* 18, no. 2 (1977): 277-78.

⁴⁹Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 97-98.

INDEPENDENCE, FEDERATION, AND ERITREAN PARTY COMPETITION

When the Eritrean issue fell under the jurisdiction of the United Nations, the United States assumed a more important role. In the interim, low-level conflicts along tribal and religious lines occurred in the southern highlands and central lowlands.⁵⁰ The Independence Bloc, advocating for full and immediate independence, increased its mobilization drive. UP supporters, who had formed militias, aggressively pursued violent intimidation tactics aimed against the Italian and Eritrean supporters of the Independence Bloc.⁵¹ The United States, driven by Cold War motives as well as the need to reward Ethiopia's consistent support of Western initiatives in the area and elsewhere, supported the federal arrangement option in order to appease both sides and prevent outright unification and the possibility of violent secession.⁵² Hence, in 1950, the United Nations chose the federation option. Eritrea would become part of a federal system with Ethiopia while maintaining its own parliament, chief executive, and separate administrative structure in charge of regional security, taxation, and budgeting. The federal government would be in charge of defense, foreign affairs, finance, foreign trade relations, and interstate transport and communications. Eritrea's chief executive would be elected by the directly elected assembly, and the 1952 Constitution that was drawn up was significantly more modern than Ethiopia's 1931 one. Its political parties were organized, and each campaigned masterfully along well-articulated ideological platforms.

For Eritrea, this was hardly a welcome option. Given that its population was nearly equally divided between Muslims and Christians, the proposal for federation within a predominantly Christian imperial regime faced major detractors.⁵³ Additionally, even its Christian population, which was originally descended from the Tigray region of Ethiopia, expressed a high level of apprehension about the political dominance of the Amhara in Haile Selassie's Ethiopia. Nevertheless, this new form of political sovereignty was better than the former colonial or protectorate status.

The March 1952 elections were conducted by secret ballot in the urban areas, while in the rural areas, village assemblies elected delegates to regional electoral colleges, which then voted for representatives by secret ballot. The franchise was extended to all males over the age of twenty-one who were

⁵⁰Ibid., 91.

⁵¹Ibid., 96; and Taddia, "Post-Twentieth-Century Eritrea," 10. The Italian community in Eritrea actively supported the Independence Bloc.

⁵²Marcus, *History of Ethiopia*, 158–59.

⁵³A. Arthur Schiller, "Eritrea: Constitution and Federation with Ethiopia," *American Journal of Comparative Law* 2, no. 3 (1953): 379–80. The presentation of the federation proposal in Eritrea during 1951 led to considerable debate and significant levels of mass mobilization on both sides of the proposed federation question.

descendants of Eritrean ancestors and had established residency within their constituency for at least a year. More important, any Eritreans of ethnically mixed parentage or Italo-Eritreans were not allowed to vote. Eritrea was divided into 238 electoral wards that were combined to form sixty-eight constituencies.⁵⁴ Popular participation was high, approaching 88 percent in the urban areas and nearly 100 percent in the rural areas.⁵⁵ There was active interparty competition for popular support.

The federation question led to strikingly different positions among political parties. The UP advocated union with Ethiopia, constantly reminding voters of their experiences under Italian and British colonial rule. Moreover, the UP utilized the Coptic Church's network of churches not only to push its unification message but also to campaign effectively.⁵⁶ The LPP advocated Eritrean independence and strongly eschewed religious institutions, representing itself as the secular party of all Eritreans, regardless of religious affiliation. The ML argued for a ten-year British trusteeship period before independence while advocating the creation of strong institutional guarantees to prevent the domination of Eritrea by the Christian segment of the population.⁵⁷

While Eritrea appeared to be divided on the issue of unification, the electoral results did not demonstrate such divisions. The pro-Ethiopian, Christian-based, and Church-supported UP, along with the LUP, won thirty-two out of sixty-eight seats, with the Democratic Bloc (representing the ML) winning nineteen, the MLWP winning fifteen, and the rest of the seats divided among the NERIP, the Independent Muslim League, and an independent candidate.⁵⁸ Again, these electoral results followed religious and territorial lines. The UP won the vast majority of the highlands constituencies, while the Democratic Bloc won the Muslim vote in the coastal and Saho areas and a few victories in the western provinces and the Muslim areas of Asmara and Massawa. The MLWP dominated the western provinces but did not campaign anywhere else, illustrating the relative unimportance of ascriptive religious identities.⁵⁹ The MLWP decided to support the UP

⁵⁴Fessehazion, "International Dimensions," 16. These constituencies appeared to have been gerrymandered slightly so as to assure that pro-union Muslims were included in constituencies in which they could tip the balance.

⁵⁵Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 2000), 244.

⁵⁶Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 47. Throughout the period between 1946 and 1950, the Coptic Church used its weekly prayer meetings to ask for divine intervention in order to achieve the unification of Eritrea with Ethiopia. Moreover, it threatened its members with excommunication if they chose to support the LPP.

⁵⁷Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 56–57.

⁵⁸Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 74. The UP won thirty-one out of thirty-four seats representing areas where Christians were the majority, while the ML and the MLWP split the Muslim-majority seats.

⁵⁹Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony*, 120.

because of the acute competition among intra-Muslim political entrepreneurs and the selective incentives that the UP could credibly promise to them, especially in terms of public sector employment. The UP's leader, Bairu, became the new chief executive, and Ali Radai, the leader of the MLWP, became president of the new Eritrean Assembly. English, Arabic, and Tigrinya were made the official languages of the Assembly.⁶⁰

Between May and July 1952, the Eritrean Assembly passed a series of constitutional amendments that created the institutional parameters of the Eritrean state: a unicameral, four-year assembly; the granting of Eritrean citizenship to federal nationals in accordance with Eritrean laws; the denial of the Ethiopian imperial representative's right to comment on draft legislation; the establishment of Tigrinya and Arabic as the official languages; and the creation of an Eritrean flag. These amendments were unanimously ratified on July 12, 1952, and by September 15, 1952, the British armed forces had left Eritrea and Bairu was formally established as the chief executive of Eritrea.

THE POLITICIZATION OF ETHNICITY

In addition to the traditional land-owning Christian political leaders and rural-based Muslim tribal chiefs, postcolonial Eritrean political entrepreneurs were self-made men who had benefited from the colonial era's need for regional administrators. Confronted with a lack of means to accomplish their ends, they had utilized the existing religious and tribal differences in order to build up mobilizational resources and engage in collective action.⁶¹ After the first elections of 1952, they quickly embarked upon a series of policies that rewarded their supporters with selective incentives. Public sector employment, and especially its higher-level and better-paying positions, became a main incentive extended to individuals in exchange for support. All but 348 of the 2,217 foreign-held positions in the Eritrean administration were transferred to Eritreans, and Eritreans were appointed as provincial governors and departmental heads.⁶²

Subsequent to the federation with Ethiopia, the Constituent Assembly, despite having been elected solely for the purpose of approving the constitution, chose to extend its term for four years. The immediate economic policy changes that it implemented had significant consequences for individuals: taxes were increased on three different occasions, customs duties were raised, and Eritreans were forced to procure identity cards that cost the

⁶⁰Ali Radai's defection from the ML was rewarded with this position as president of the Assembly.

⁶¹As Markakis argues, "The urban and relatively modernized leadership partly responded and partly stimulated the political mobilization of religious and ethnic parochialism which has provoked continuous upheaval in this province during the past three decades"; Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy*, 365 (see note 5).

⁶²Henze, *Layers of Time*, 244.

equivalent of three days' of work.⁶³ In terms of property rights and agricultural policy, the 1953 Communal Land Tenancy Act codified the periodic redistribution of land at the local level, thus smoothing an otherwise unruly process that had generated a significant level of rural concern.⁶⁴ The Eritrean state maintained Eritrea's level of economic liberalization, neither decreasing nor increasing it.

The increasingly authoritarian decision-making style of Bairu led to increased calls for independence, even from the MLWP, by June 1953.⁶⁵ His unwillingness to share the spoils of executive power and his support for Ethiopia were increasingly being conflated by his rival political entrepreneurs. The January–February 1954 visit of Haile Selassie foreshadowed future developments in Ethiopian policy vis-à-vis Eritrea: Selassie selectively allocated resources to local leaders, while informing Eritreans of the need to acquire Amharic language skills.⁶⁶ By the summer of 1954, Eritrean politics had become a competition between Bairu on the one side and the rest of the Eritrean political entrepreneurs, including Woldemariam, Sultan, Keshi Dimetros, and Tessema on the other, regardless of their positions on the unification issue.⁶⁷

After the summer of 1954, the Ethiopian response to Eritrea was one of Amharization of the senior positions in the public sector. Amhara governors were immediately appointed and used their placement to appoint Amhara officials to all the key administrative posts. Freedom of the press, which had flourished under the British, was significantly curtailed, often through judicial and police intervention.⁶⁸ However, the Amhara administrators increased intra-Eritrean divisions by using Tigrinya-speaking, Christian Eritreans from the local population as their preferred advisors and staffers.⁶⁹ In turn, Eritrean Christians used federation with Ethiopia to gain public sector employment in other parts of the empire, but Eritrean Muslims, given their limited education, were not as adept.⁷⁰ Indeed, a significant number

⁶³Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 81.

⁶⁴For a history of communal land practices in Eritrea, see Nadel, *Land Tenure*, 6–10; and Zakarayay, *Land Tenure in Eritrea*, 5–15. The operative clause of this act stated that “the redistribution of communal land amongst the persons entitled shall henceforth be carried out at uniform intervals of 27 years commencing in respect of each *gebri* or share of land in the year next after the coming into force of this Act in which such land would, under the existing system applied to such land, have been redistributed”; quoted in Hussey, “Eritrea Self-Governing,” 323.

⁶⁵Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 85.

⁶⁶Alemseged Abbay, “Diversity and State-Building in Ethiopia,” *African Affairs* 103, no. 413 (2004): 595.

⁶⁷Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 98–99.

⁶⁸Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Challenge*, 217.

⁶⁹Henze, *Layers of Time*, 277.

⁷⁰Christopher Clapham, “Imperial Leadership in Ethiopia,” *African Affairs* 68, no. 271 (1969): 117. With the exception of the placement of one Eritrean Muslim from the western lowlands to the cabinet in 1962 and two Eritrean Muslims as vice-ministers, Muslim penetration of the resource-allocating levels of the Ethiopian state was limited.

of Christian Eritreans found employment within the Ethiopian public sector as officials and teachers. Confronted with these changes, Eritrean Muslims leveraged their niche as small-scale merchants to expand their trading networks in Ethiopia, often serving as the key trading intermediaries and distributors in a variety of Ethiopian provinces.⁷¹ In the early 1950s, the market economy of neither Eritrea nor Ethiopia had yet been ethnicized.

If anything, the Ethiopian state did not intervene in the Eritrean economy in an ethnically discriminatory manner. It increased Ethiopia's industrial base while providing it with much-needed access to international markets through the ports of Assab and Massawa.⁷² This critical need for Ethiopia only strengthened Eritrea's openness to the international economy. Between 1952 and 1962, Eritrea maintained its role as a primary exporter to the greater Red Sea area of agricultural products such as fresh fruit from the central highlands areas and livestock from the western lowland areas.⁷³ Additionally, the Ethiopian state upheld its long-standing policy of supporting European-owned, large-scale agricultural endeavors that were explicitly export-oriented.⁷⁴ The pro-industry economic policies of the Eritrean administration increased the number of proto-industrial and light manufacturing firms in Eritrea between 1946 and 1956.⁷⁵ Its industrial sector firms, specializing in textile, glassware, and consumer products such as tobacco, continued to remain a primary source of employment for urban Eritreans. Its manufacturing sector continued to be well financed, rising from an industrial capital base of ETH\$16.74 million in 1957 to ETH\$154 million in 1969.⁷⁶ Foreign direct investment, most of it from Italy, increased significantly during this

⁷¹Haggau Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea, 1962–1978: War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 11; Henze, *Layers of Time*, 275. Additionally, their English language-based education provided the Muslim merchant class with the skills to participate in the internationally oriented sectors of the Ethiopian economy—hence, their disproportionate representation in the tourism and foreign trade sectors.

⁷²Shiferaw Jammo, "An Overview of the Economy, 1941–1974," in *An Economic History of Ethiopia, Volume 1: The Imperial Era 1941–1974*, ed. Shiferaw Bekele (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995), 1. The Eritrean industrial base, which had been established to fill the Italian and British wartime needs for localized manufacturing production, constituted nearly one-third of total Ethiopian production, while the trade that passed through the Eritrean ports constituted nearly one-fourth of the total Ethiopian trade.

⁷³Abebe Zegeye, "Environmental Degradation, Population Movement and War," in *Ethiopia in Change: Peasantry, Nationalism and Democracy*, ed. Abebe Zegeye and Siegfried Pausewang (London: British Academic Press, 1994), 181.

⁷⁴Araya Tseaggai, "Independent Eritrea: Economically Viable?" *Horn of Africa* 6, no. 2 (1983): 41. By 1969, there were 564 agro-business enterprises of the aforementioned type, with concessions ranging from nine to ninety-nine years.

⁷⁵Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 123. By the end of 1956, there were 627 industrial firms in Eritrea, 300 more than had existed in 1946.

⁷⁶Negussay Ayele, "The Eritrean Problem Revisited," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 22 (1989): 149–50. In the rest of Ethiopia, the industrial capital base increased from ETH\$44 million to ETH\$189 million over the same time period.

time, focusing on the commercialized agriculture, consumer product manufacturing, and construction sectors and often solicited by Addis Ababa in the form of land grants and subsidies.⁷⁷ Additionally, resource-based mining surveys and concessions were expanded, and location-specific industrial endeavors, such as the coastal-area salt mines, were supported in their expansion.⁷⁸ Confronted with these options, the Eritreans, who were by and large not employed within the public sector, quickly turned to market-based occupational sectors, especially commerce.⁷⁹ The high level of economic liberalization, especially in the integration of the region into the international economy, prevented Eritreans from focusing on the domination of the state by the Amhara.

Under attack by rival political entrepreneurs, Bairu resigned in July 1955. The 1956 elections, which were held without organized political parties, led to the election of Asfaha Woldemichael, an Eritrean Christian political entrepreneur with strong pro-union leanings, as the new chief executive.⁸⁰ Upon his election, he staffed the Eritrean cabinet posts with UP leaders with particularly strong unification preferences and even a few Eritrean Muslims with similar preferences.⁸¹ This decision created fissures within the ML, leading to the increased domination of its internal organization by western lowlands Muslim political entrepreneurs. Woldemichael quickly pushed through the Assembly bills that sought to accelerate this union, proposing legislating in support of the transformation of the Eritrean government into an Eritrean administration; the adoption of the Ethiopian flag; and, more important, the introduction of a large number of Ethiopian administrators and teachers into Eritrea.⁸²

ERITREAN POLITICAL ENTREPRENEURS AND MOBILIZATIONAL RESOURCES

This policy change quickly affected the most mobile segment of the pool of ethnically aware and educated Eritreans open to mobilization, a group that included many teachers and civil servants of the Eritrean Ministry of Education who had been either demoted or passed over for promotion. These individuals quickly formed a powerful network of ethnic activists

⁷⁷Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, 118.

⁷⁸Tseggai, "Independent Eritrea," 90–91.

⁷⁹Tibebu, *Making of Modern Ethiopia*, 158.

⁸⁰Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 111; Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 89. Indeed, before his election as chief executive, Woldemichael had been the leader of the UP in Addis Ababa and had worked directly for Selassie. In 1952, he was appointed imperial vice-representative.

⁸¹Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 112.

⁸²Michael Johnson and Trish Johnson, "Eritrea: The National Question and the Logic of Protracted Struggle," *African Affairs* 80, no. 319 (1981): 186; Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 90.

who had both the skills and the incentive to begin mobilizing against the Ethiopian state and would come to play an important role in the subsequent Eritrean mobilization.⁸³ Additionally, the imposition of Amharic instruction and the use of Ethiopian teachers in the schools to help students achieve proficiency in Amharic only increased the distributional consequences of Addis Ababa's policy changes. Similarly, the centralized education authorities' decision to stop providing teachers for language instruction in Arabic further inflamed the Eritrean teachers' mobilization potential.⁸⁴ Under the British administration, Eritrea had maintained a bilingual educational system along religious lines: Arabic and Tigrinya were the languages of instruction at the elementary level for the Muslim and Christian communities, while English was the language of instruction at the secondary level. The shift to a policy of Amharic instruction increased the costs of education because Eritrean students were now forced to learn Amharic as well as English in order to achieve a secondary-level education.

While Ethiopia was actively involved in the 1956 Eritrean elections and the UP was aided in its campaign by the Eritrean police,⁸⁵ the election of Idris Mohammed Adem, an Eritrean Muslim from the western lowlands, as president of the Assembly led to increasingly confrontational Eritrean-Ethiopian relations. The ML leaders vehemently, frequently, and publicly criticized the Eritrean administration for its unwillingness to provide public sector employment opportunities to young, educated Eritrean Muslims.⁸⁶ The lack of reciprocity by the Ethiopian state in this regard prevented the situation from de-escalating: unlike their UP counterparts, the ML leaders could not demonstrate their ability to generate a sufficient amount of selective incentives from the state to their critical mass, the educated Eritrean Muslims. The constant tension between the strongly unionist chief executive and the pro-independence president of the Assembly led to Adem's resignation in the fall of 1957 and his move to Cairo by the end of the year.⁸⁷

Starting in April 1958, Eritrean Muslim political entrepreneurs began to be officially harassed, but the encroachment of the Ethiopian state in this respect did not arouse support from any of the other political entrepreneurs. Yet there were hints of an Eritrean ethnic mobilization. In November 1958, the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) was established in Port Sudan by five young Muslim exiles who had been members of the General Union of

⁸³Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 101.

⁸⁴Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy*, 157.

⁸⁵Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 116–17.

⁸⁶In a letter to Woldemichael in his capacity as chief executive, the ML leaders “vehemently requested the government to give consideration to all applications submitted by the Moslems' educated youth who want employment”; see Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 125.

⁸⁷Henze, *Layers of Time*, 274; Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Challenge*, 219. Adem joined Woldemariam and Sultan in Egypt.

Labor Syndicates.⁸⁸ Organized in a clandestine cell structure, the ELM was explicitly secular in its membership drive, aiming to mobilize both Muslim and Christian Eritreans.⁸⁹ Its organizational structure allowed it to rely upon a critical mass of supporters who were entrusted with the recruitment of additional members in a self-reinforcing cascade fashion.⁹⁰ It also committed itself to the incorporation of nontraditional members, targeting the urban working classes, small-scale merchants and traders, low-level administrators, teachers, and students.⁹¹ As such, the movement was appealing to those segments of the Eritrean population who had been left behind by Ethiopia's economic liberalization policies. Unlike many Marxist movements, this mobilization of the urban-based working classes did not take a redistributionist or class consciousness angle. As such, it quickly branched out to the urban-based Christian communities of Asmara and the Tigrinya-speaking highlands areas. It intentionally eschewed interethnic, elite-level alliances and was strongly opposed to the use of patronage mechanisms and the allocation of selective incentives to further its mobilization drive.⁹² This rejection, which stemmed partly from limited resources and partly from ideology, would prove detrimental to its mobilizational ability. The ELM's goal was Eritrean secession through a coup d'état, but the experienced Eritrean political entrepreneurs that it approached, such as Sultan, turned down its offers. Only Woldemariam, the former leader of the LPP, agreed to become the group's representative in Egypt.⁹³

This increased Eritrean mobilization was matched by increased Ethiopian interventionism. By November 1959, the Eritrean Assembly had abolished the Eritrean flag, and by May 1960, the seal of the Eritrean government had met the same fate and the name of the Eritrean government had been changed to "Eritrean Administration under Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia."⁹⁴ Furthermore, the judicial system was placed under centralized control and the decision-making power for the provision of educational and social services was transferred to Addis Ababa. The third and final

⁸⁸Mariam Haile, "The Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Politics in the Twentieth Century: Part II," *Northeast African Studies* 10, no.1 (1987): 14.

⁸⁹Despite being formed by four Eritrean Muslims, the ELM actively sought to include Eritrean Christians within its membership rosters because "Muslims and Christians are brothers, and unity makes Eritrea one nation"; quoted in Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, 106.

⁹⁰Bereket Habteselassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980), 61–62; Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 100. One of the outcomes of this emphasis on clandestine organization was that the Muslim cells in the lowland areas and the Christian cells in the highlands were not organizationally linked.

⁹¹Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 100.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, 107.

⁹⁴Marcus, *History of Ethiopia*, 172.

Eritrean elections, held in September 1960, led to the victory of the UP and the creation of an executive body that was solidly pro-Ethiopian.

ERITREAN ETHNIC MOBILIZATION, INTRA-ERITREAN BIDDING WARS, AND MOBILIZATIONAL RESOURCES

In September 1961, an exiled Adem founded the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which was from the beginning dedicated to the use of violence for gaining control over the state in Eritrea. Initially staffed by the expatriate Eritrean student community of Cairo,⁹⁵ the ELF's first Provisional Executive Committee was composed of Adem; Idris Glawdewos, a law graduate of the University of Cairo; and Osman Sabbe, a schoolmaster.⁹⁶ The emergence of this countermobilization drive forced the ELM to radicalize its operational strategies by launching an insurgency within the Eritrean territory. However, when the ELM attempted to compete with the ELF, it fell short because it lacked the ELF's mobilizational structure and the latter's use of selective incentives.⁹⁷ The September 1961 attack on an Ethiopian police post by Hamid Idris Awate's thirteen ELF fighters signaled the onset of a thirty-year ethnic conflict.⁹⁸ Eritreans from a variety of backgrounds formed the armed wings of the ELF for a variety of reasons: Italian army veterans and western lowlands bandits joined to continue pursuing their violence-based skills; unemployed urban Eritreans to solve their economic survival issues; tribal members because of intertribal competitive dynamics.⁹⁹ An October 1961 ELM assassination attempt on Dimetros failed and, during the Ethiopian state's suppression, broke up the ELM's urban-based cell structure. During

⁹⁵Marcus, *History of Ethiopia*, 109. The financial support that the Egyptian government provided to Muslim youth from East Africa, in conjunction with the elimination of Arabic as a language of instruction in post-1956 Eritrea led to the enrollment of nearly 300 Eritrean students in Cairo secondary schools and universities.

⁹⁶Shumet Sishagne, "The Genesis of the Differences in the Eritrean Secessionist Movement (1960–1970)," in *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Volume 2*, ed. Taddese Beyene (Addis Ababa: University of Addis Ababa, 1984), 461. Osman Sabbe joined the ELF because of his ejection from the Ethiopian-run Teachers' College, which effectively denied him the opportunity for upward mobility within the educational system.

⁹⁷Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 104.

⁹⁸Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion* (London: Hurst, 1975), 197; Pool, "Eritrean Nationalism," 184; and Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 149. The original nucleus of fighters centered on the ex-bandits of Idris Awate, who had been actively involved in law-breaking behavior along the Sudanese border throughout the 1940s. Being a Beni Amer allowed Adem to tap into the group's common tribal networks and enlist Awate's services. Even in this case, Awate's involvement was contingent on the ELF leader's promise of returning land confiscated from Awate by the British as a punishment for his banditry.

⁹⁹Sishagne, "Genesis of the Differences," 450.

1963–64, Mohamed Nawud, the local ELM leader, continued the armed insurgency in Eritrea, despite the objections of Woldemariam.¹⁰⁰

For the ELF, this separate Eritrean mobilization drive was unacceptable: in March 1965, the ELF informed the ELM that they had already formed a liberation movement and that the ELM had to join them. ELM's objection to this ultimatum led to a violent ambush by ELF forces along the Sudanese border in May 1965 that dealt a powerful blow against the ELM.¹⁰¹ Reeling from its losses, the ELM lost the remnants of its membership base in the spring of 1965. March 1965 student demonstrations in Asmara—which demanded a UN-administered referendum on the union issue, the expulsion of foreign military personnel (mainly American technical personnel at the Kagnew radar station and Israeli counterinsurgency advisers) from Eritrea, the release of political prisoners, and the reestablishment of Eritrean jurisdiction over local social and political institutions—were violently suppressed. The ELM's slow response to the suppression of the demonstrations paled in comparison to the ELF's armed attacks on Ethiopian soldiers in the western lowlands.

This difference in action weakened the appeal of the ELM and enhanced the ELF's credibility as an Eritrean ethnic mobilization movement. The ELF's consistently more militant approach, which privileged the use of violence from the start, was exemplary in demonstrating how an intra-ethnic counter-mobilization drive could spark a bidding war. To make matters worse for the ELM, in their competition for leadership over the Eritrean ethnic mobilization drive, the ELF was able to attract supporters through the allocation of selective incentives, allowing its members to appropriate resources for the maintenance of their forces in the areas that they controlled.

Last, but not least, the ELF showed how the use of mobilizational networks was instrumental in the development of this ethnic mobilization drive. Unlike the secular nationalism of the ELM, the ELF intentionally highlighted the discrimination that the Eritrean Christian elites were perceived as imposing against the Eritrean Muslims as a recruiting tool.¹⁰² As such, the Muslim lowlands tribes, and especially the Beni Amer, became the linchpin of the group's mobilization drive. Organizationally, the ELF did not have the structure of the ELM nor its commitment to planned action. It started operating under a centralized decision-making system that was based in Cairo and provided its members on the ground with tactical direction, financial resources, and logistical supplies.¹⁰³ In 1962, the Provisional Executive Committee was replaced by the Revolutionary Command, which included

¹⁰⁰Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 105.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Tesfatsion Medhanie, *Eritrea & Neighbors in the "New World Order": Geopolitics, Democracy, and Islamic Fundamentalism* (Munster: LIT, 1994), 28; Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 110.

¹⁰³Erlich, *Struggle over Eritrea*, 22.

the original three leaders and a twelve-member executive committee made up of other expatriate Eritreans in Sudan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. By 1965, the ELF had moved its decision-making center from Cairo to Khartoum and had replaced the Revolutionary Command with the Supreme Council. Organizationally, it divided Eritrea into five territory-based zones with an authority structure that heavily relied on established, local patronage networks.¹⁰⁴ Zone commanders were empowered to raise the necessary resources for their maintenance by taxing the local population.¹⁰⁵ As such, the ELF effectively transformed its centralized, top-down organizational structure into a decentralized organizational structure that was loosely coordinated with the center but operated under a strict hierarchy in each of the five zones. This heavy reliance upon existing mobilizational networks increased intra-ELF factionalism while allowing for an increased reliance upon a critical mass of activists and supporters, because it replicated pre-existing territorial, sectarian, and tribal differences within a context of a purportedly all-encompassing Eritrean mobilization drive.¹⁰⁶

POLITICIZED ETHNICITY AND THE ALLOCATION OF SELECTIVE INCENTIVES

Until the mid-1960s, the ELF was based on fewer than 1,000 fighters who were engaged in low-level insurgency that produced no significant effects upon the Ethiopian administration of Eritrea.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, until the mid-1960s, Asrate Kassa, the regional governor general, echoing the conventional wisdom of Addis Ababa, strongly believed that the Eritrean ethnic mobilization was the result of low levels of economic development and high levels of unemployment that could be addressed by state intervention and resource allocation.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, in June 1962, Haile Selassie visited Eritrea and proceeded to allocate selective incentives to both Eritrean political elites and citizens. Members of the Assembly and the traditional Muslim elites in the western lowlands received numerous land ownership titles; urban-based, educated Eritrean Christians were granted the assets of the British colonial authorities at very low prices; and the rural areas were excused from the

¹⁰⁴Markakis, *National and Class Conflict*, 113; Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle*, 111. By structuring their organization in such a way, the ELF leaders were copying the organizational methods of the Algerian movement, which had ended its insurgency successfully in 1962.

¹⁰⁵Sishagne, "Genesis of the Differences," 451.

¹⁰⁶Pool, "Eritrean Nationalism," 185.

¹⁰⁷Marcus, *History of Ethiopia*, 175.

¹⁰⁸Robert Hess, *Ethiopia: The Modernization of an Autocracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), 191.

payment of land tribute for two years.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, the Eritrean ethnic mobilization drives only grew in numbers, and their commitment to secession only intensified.¹¹⁰

This lack of positive response among the Eritreans to the Ethiopian overtures of aid, subsidies, and selective incentives indicated how much the content of the Ethiopian-controlled economic policies mattered. In the economic policy context of the mid-1960s, in which the Ethiopian state actively engaged in the ethnicization of the economy, control over state resources became the key issue. Whereas in the past, Amhara control over the state led to the rebellion of a small minority of Eritreans with a narrow socioeconomic profile, the projected Amhara control over both the state and the economy generated the potential for a significant increase in the level of Eritrean mobilization within a larger cross-section of the Eritrean economy and society.

CONCLUSION

Economic policies quickly assumed a predominant role in determining the onset of ethnic conflict. Eritreans did not decide to join the ethnic mobilization drives that Eritrean political entrepreneurs offered them because of a primordial hatred for Ethiopians or as a response to the transformation of the federation into incorporation. Nor did they join these ethnic mobilization drives because of their economic marginalization or lack of political contestation within the enlarged Ethiopian state. They joined them because the changes in economic policies made in Addis Ababa reflected the degree of ethnicization of the Eritrean economy under Ethiopian rule. When the Eritrean economy remained a competitive market-based economy in which individual merit determined income levels and the potential for upward economic mobility, Eritreans resisted the calls for ethnic mobilization. When the greater political power of the Amhara within imperial Ethiopia changed economic policies to benefit themselves at the expense of Eritreans, Eritrean political entrepreneurs could, and did, make credible claims to their potential supporters about the benefits of ethnic collective action. More important, when the segment of Eritrean society that relied on access to the state for their economic well-being—such as educated Eritreans in the civil service and the liberal professions—realized that their opportunities for upward economic mobility would come second to the needs of the Amhara, then collective action accelerated.

¹⁰⁹See Guido Bimbi, "The National Liberation Struggle and the Liberation Fronts," in *The Eritrean Case: Proceedings of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal of the International League for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples: Session on Eritrea, Milan, Italy, May 24–26, 1980* (Rome: Research and Information Centre, 1982), 177–78.

¹¹⁰Gilkes, *Dying Lion*, 197–98.

Although the changes in economic policies determined the individual Eritrean's calculus for joining the ethnic mobilization drive, preexisting mobilizational resources, remnants of the colonial era's political contestation, provided an ample and region-specific supply of opportunities for a viable ethnic mobilization drive. Eritrea was not the only Ethiopian region where there was an ethnic division of labor or where inhabitants competed with a politically dominant group for the allocation of resources. However, it was the only Ethiopian region that contained within it the mobilizational resources that were necessary for the implementation of an ethnic collective action drive: a dense social network of politically inclined, literate, educated activists who had engaged in a number of collective action drives; a variety of professional associations that represented their members' interests through public action; a series of established communication networks (newspapers, pamphlets, and cultural associations) that were very experienced in the diffusion of information and political agendas; and, last but not least, a whole series of well-organized political parties with a strong network of activist members and a territorial diffusion of branches. These mobilizational resources proved to be instrumental in enabling and sustaining the Eritrean ethnic mobilization. Unlike the Tigray rebellion in 1944, the 1964 Ogaden Somali rebellion, and the inaction of the southern provinces, the Eritrean political entrepreneurs could rely upon this wealth of mobilizational resources to further their attempts to generate ethnic collective action drives. When the Amhara imposed a new set of economic policies, it was this constellation of income effects and mobilizational resources that led to the onset of violent ethnic conflict in Eritrea by incentivizing individual Eritreans to join the ethnic movement.

These two specific conclusions point to three more policy-oriented implications for current policymakers. First, the crucial importance of an ethnic division of labor cannot be overemphasized, because it is the key variable that aspiring ethnic political entrepreneurs can use in their attempts to mobilize ethnic group members. In essence, the greater the overlap between ethnicity and economic well-being, the greater the chances that ethnicity will be used as the basis for political mobilization, especially during periods of economic transition. Second, the greater the role of the state in the allocation of economic resources, the greater the chance that different ethnic groups will compete, often using violence, for control of the state, because they will perceive the critical role that state employment can play in helping individuals avoid the vicissitudes of the market. Last, but not least, regardless of the level of individual grievances, there is a need for an organizational framework that can enable group-level mobilization. The more civil society organizations and resources an ethnic group has, the greater its capacity will be for mobilization when a need for such mobilization exists.