

Book Reviews

The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism 1941-1993, Ruth Iyob, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1995), ISBN: 0-521-47327-6, 198pp inc index, Price: £30, US\$49,95 (h/b).

Ruth Iyob's account of the 1941 to 1993 struggle for independence in Eritrea charts a new path of analysis in our assessment of the country's nationalist movements, programmes and capabilities of the parties contending for power. This is a very important intervention in the academic discourse of Eritrea which has generally been dominated by two perspectives.

The first one posited that the Eritrean conflict was a secessionist insurgency or sectarian nationalism directed against the historic unity of greater Ethiopia. The most prominent scholarly representation of this approach is seen in Donald N Levines's work, "Greater Ethiopia" which basically noted the existence of an organic unity of the peoples of Ethiopia by ascribing to modern Ethiopia, "*...the image of a vast ecological area and historical arena in which kindred peoples have shared many traditions and interacted with one another for millennia.*" Ruth Iyob argues that the use of selective facts – ethnic, linguistic, and historical affinities – blended with the legendary exotica to produce the doctrine of "Greater Ethiopia," obscured as much as it revealed. This thesis influenced many scholars to acknowledge grievances of Eritreans, but left no room for redressing or significant reconfiguration of the status quo.

The second body of thought examined the structure and function of the Ethiopian state and its exercise of colonial domination over occupied territories. This school identified the Eritrean resistance to Ethiopian rule as essentially an anti-colonial movement. The late A Babu suggested that the conflict was deliberately portrayed as a war of secession in order to camouflage Ethiopia's expansionist policies and the justification of those policies within the OAU. Scholars like Edmond Keller, Lionel Cliffe and Roy Pateman shared the same opinions.

Ruth Iyob's work identifies a third body of scholarship that focused on the development of nationalism, the revolutionary achievements and transformation of Eritrean society, and most importantly, the nature and dynamics of the post-colonial African regional order. Its most prominent scholars – Richard Leonard, John Markakis, Nzongola Ntalaja and Michael Chege – exposed the elements of conflict which epitomised the rise of the dissident nationalism in contemporary African society as a revolution: thus portraying the Eritrean Peoples's Liberation Front (EPLF) as a guerrilla organisation and its emergence as an effective popular liberation movement.

Ruth Iyob adds her voice to these scholars by effectively analysing the process which gave rise to Ethiopia's traditional position of prominence in the Horn, especially, the role of major international actors who helped the state to develop a well-trained army, an impressive arsenal, and crucial diplomatic leverage in the international community. In this regard, Ruth Iyob's work gives us major insights into the issue of regional hegemony, notably, the fact that it is a logical outgrowth of the consolidation and codification of regional and international norms and values. This is a very important point to note as it demonstrates how the formation of the United Nations and later the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), formalised a consensus around overriding principles of non-aggression, sovereignty, and security of nation-states, and the right of peoples to choose their destiny.

Ruth Iyob's work outlines different phases of struggle and notes that organised Eritrean response to Ethiopian hegemony began in the late 1950s. The main task of the nationalists involved reconciling political parties in the 1940s and late 1950s, constructing a national identity and finally, mobilising the nationalist forces against Ethiopian hegemony. The politics of protest permeated a wide constituency and popularised the nationalist struggle through a creative mobilisation of social and economic grievances against Ethiopian violations of federal guarantees.

The struggle for Eritrean independence has been characterised differently and it is important to note that Ruth Iyob's account will not satisfy everybody as it is commonly agreed that no scholarship is value free. For our review, Iyob's account appears relatively balanced especially when we consider the questions that she set out to answer. What really happened to cause a people to fight so tenaciously for three decades? Why did it take the Eritreans so long to realise their dream of a nation of their own?

Efforts to answer these questions makes this account bring out vividly the ugly and harsh realities of state rivalry, greed and the corruption power. For those who are not acquainted with the conflict and how it was resolved, it is very instructive to initiate one into this discourse by focusing on the Eritrean David against the Ethiopian Goliath. However, as noted by Iyob, in this modern version of the classic confrontation between a small territory and its giant neighbour, it appeared, until the very end, that God favoured Goliath and not David.

The book is compulsory reading for all people who are engaged in the activities of Africa, notably, the multiple challenges of economic, social, and political reconstruction. To the Eritreans themselves, the challenge the concluding remarks in the book posit are encompassed in the question: *how can pluralism be maintained?* This is a very important question because Africa has very few if any, successful pluralist polities which maintain self-conscious social groups in tolerant accommodation to each other.

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