

# The Great Illusion: Isaias Afewerki's Fear of Ethiopia

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*(Writer's Note: This will be the last instalment of my commentary on ESAT's interview with Isaias Afwerki. I acknowledge the public service that ESAT has provided in posting the video clips of the interview. I would like to thank the many readers who have given me their feedback, both favourable and critical. I would also like to thank the websites that posted my commentary. Thank you.)*

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In [Part VI](#), I have shown the logical inconsistencies of the fiction "Ethiopian colonialism". In this part, I will outline the motivations behind the coinage of the term, the purposes for which it has been used, and the problems it poses for allying with Isaias and the EPLF.

Along with the EPLF's long-term goals discussed earlier, its view of "Ethiopian colonialism" defines, shapes, and determines the EPLF's activities, tactical calculations, and strategic objectives in Ethiopia. A fabrication of the EPLF, a figment of his imagination, the term also feeds Isaias' fear of Ethiopia.

## An Appeal to the Pride of the Eritrean People

The EPLF used the term as an invaluable propaganda tool for mobilizing Eritreans. If other African countries could struggle successfully against European colonialism, if they could be masters of their own destiny, why shouldn't Eritreans fight for their independence from "Ethiopian colonialism"? The term stirred the pride of the Eritrean people to struggle for independence; it called them to arms. And Eritreans, spurred by Mengistu's brutalities, responded in large numbers.

## A Plea to African Countries

The EPLF also invoked the term to generate sympathy, recognition, and support from African states, most of whom had become independent after the dissolution of the federation in 1962, but despite the EPLF's efforts to convert them to its cause, the newly independent African countries, with the exception of the Arab states, rejected "Ethiopian colonialism". They understood the fiction. Additionally, they knew that Ethiopia had played a significant historical, diplomatic, and military role in the struggle against European colonialism.

## In Defence of Eritrea's Borders

The EPLF relied on the term to defend Eritrea's borders. Since the former colonies kept their borders intact when they became independent, Eritrea too should keep its borders unchanged, the EPLF reasoned. Hence Isaias' pronouncement about the "*sanctity of colonial borders*"

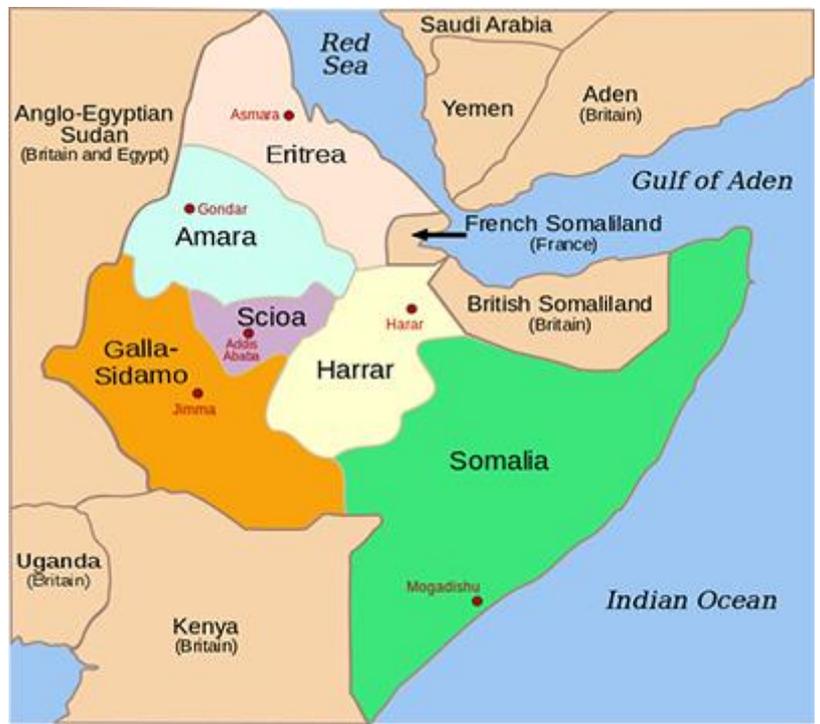
But, if the sanctity-of-colonial-borders is the only legitimate argument for Eritrea's independence,

it derives from a weak premise. When Italy occupied Ethiopia between 1936 and 1941, it created a larger colonial administrative unit called **Italian East Africa**. If colonial borders are sacred, then one can logically argue that the borders of **Italian East Africa** should be sacrosanct as well, which would have created a much larger Greater Ethiopia, as the map below shows.

### Application of Isaias' Formula and "Ethiopian Colonialism"

In practical terms, Isaias sought legitimacy in the term for applying his tactical formula of "*awareness, organization, and action*" to separate Eritrea from Ethiopia and to destabilize Ethiopia. The term elevated the various aspects of ethnic fundamentalist ideology discussed earlier to a more acceptable level of anti-colonial discourse.

In the interview, although he says that he tells Eritreans not to generalize, the term gave the EPLF the licence, if it needed any, to make all sorts of false generalizations. The enemy was the "Ethiopian colonial state" and the "colonialists" were the Amharas. The EPLF transformed the "evil white man" into the "evil Amharas".



The struggle against colonialism made no distinction between the colonial country and its government; they were the same enemy. The Algerian anti-colonial fight was not a dispute with Charles De Gaulle's government; it was a struggle against French colonialism.

Similarly, according to the EPLF, it did not quarrel with the Haile Selassie and Derg governments; it fought, battled, and defeated "Ethiopian colonialism". For the EPLF, Eritrea's enemy was never a particular government in Ethiopia; it was the entire Ethiopian state.

### Isaias' Vow to Destroy Ethiopia for 100 years

When asked about his vow to destroy Ethiopia for 100 years (or is it 1000 years?), he skated around the question, but the threat flows directly from the premise of "Ethiopian colonialism". The framing of the injustices committed against the Eritrean people as "colonial oppression" automatically defines the Ethiopian state as the enemy that he must destroy, and destroyed forever if possible.

### The Source of Isaias Afwerki's Fear

Isaias' perception of the situation in Eritrea under the two previous governments as "colonial

subjugation” nurtures his fear, even paranoia, that the “Ethiopian colonial state” may reconquer Eritrea one day, as he hinted in the interview, “*In this part of the world, we have learnt our lesson the hard way*”.

These days, Isaias is a fearful man. To paraphrase Franklin D. Roosevelt, the only thing that preoccupies him is fear; fear of his comrades in the EPLF, fear of the Eritrean people, and above all fear of Ethiopia. The talk in the media about Ethiopia becoming “*the next China, the awakening giant, the potential hegemon in Africa*” must give him many sleepless nights. To allay his fears, real or imagined, he must enfeeble the Ethiopian state by all means, principally by arming separatist groups and Al Shabab. (I realize that the TPLF-controlled government is conducting a proxy war against the EPLF, but the motivation is different).

### [Partial Destruction of the Ethiopian State by the EPLF and the TPLF](#)

The fear of the “Ethiopian colonial state” explains why, between 1991 and 1997—the glorious years of the EPLF-TPLF alliance— Isaias and Meles jointly destroyed key institutions of the Ethiopian state, specifically the defence apparatus, thereby abolishing the professional military force (replacing it with a private army that is only loyal to the TPLF), including the Ethiopian Air Force, one of the oldest, strongest, and well-trained air force in Africa. Today, Ethiopia has virtually no air force to defend its territory. Yes, the “Ethiopian colonial state” must be destroyed.

### [Isaias Afwerki’s Support for the EPRDF’s Constitution](#)

Isaias tells the interviewers that he opposed the constitution, particularly article 39. Asked if Meles showed him the draft constitution, he responded, “... *we did our utmost until the last minute when we became victims of the narrow distortions of the Woyanes...*”

Contrary to what he says, if the EPLF’s strategic objective demands a weak and divided Ethiopia, as discussed earlier, and if the Ethiopian state is the enemy that poses an existential threat to Eritrea, it follows logically that Isaias and the EPLF would support any legal mechanism that would weaken Ethiopia. A perusal of the constitution reveals this fact; the constitution loyally reflects Isaias’ formula for destabilizing Ethiopia. The dismantling of Ethiopia that started militarily must continue constitutionally.

### [The Genesis of Article 39: Article 2 of the 1991 Charter](#)

In reality, article 39 refines article 2 of the 1991 transition charter, a charter in effect co-authored by the OLF, EPLF, and TPLF. Under the rubric of “democratic rights”, [article 2 of the charter](#) states that:

The right of nations, nationalities and peoples to self-determination is affirmed. To this end, each nation, nationality and people is guaranteed.... *To exercise its right to self-determination or independence, when the concerned nation/nationality and people is convinced that the above rights are denied, abridged or abrogated.*

Sarah Vaughan reports “According to the OLF sources, the EPLF was also heavily involved in the process which resulted in the draft document, and the three organizations spent some time, hammering out the details” (p.35).

She further quotes Lencho Letta, the former Deputy Secretary General of the OLF, as saying ([here](#)), “...the three distinct groups – the EPLF, TPLF, and the OLF worked very hard to put together a covenant” (p. 35).

Her report about the critical role that the EPLF played in drafting the charter is supported by testimonials from individuals who attended the July 1991 conference, for example, Petros Beyene, Mekonnen Bishaw, and AssefaChebo. Article 39 simply “improved” what the EPLF co-authored earlier.

More importantly, people familiar with the issue indicate that the EPLF’s constitutional experts were instrumental in drafting the constitution ([here](#)). Isaias’ claim of opposing the constitution, especially Article 39, is entirely unpersuasive, to put it lightly.

A constitution is nothing but a document that reflects the opinions, views, and values of the people who are in power at the time of its writing. Between 1994 and 1995, when the constitution was drafted and adopted in Ethiopia, for all intents and purposes, the EPLF and the TPLF, Isaias and Meles, ruled Ethiopia jointly. As a result, the constitution bears their joint signatures all over it.

### [Should Ethiopian Opposition Groups Ally with Isaias and the EPLF?](#)

The foregoing analysis leads to an inescapable practical question: should political groups fighting for democracy and national unity in Ethiopia against the TPLF-controlled government ally with Isaias and the EPLF? The answer is self-evident. Isaias and the EPLF will always treat them as potential enemies that would oppose the EPLF’s strategic objectives in Ethiopia and, more ominously, that could revive the “Ethiopian colonial state”. They will not survive Isaias’ fears, let alone bring democracy to Ethiopia. The belief that Isaias and the EPLF are allies of the struggle for democracy and national unity in Ethiopia is an illusion, a great illusion.

Allying with Isaias and the EPLF, the self-identified enemies of the Ethiopian state, is committing a serious mistake, for the second time; this time the damage to Ethiopia could be incalculable. Some have argued that one should ally tactically even with the devil when fighting the regime in Ethiopia, but the problem is, as the saying goes, “*The Devil always looks after his own*”. The issue cannot be clearer.

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