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The Politics of Eritrea

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Historical Roots of Eritrean Politics
- **Chapter 2** The Road to Independence: Struggles and Sacrifice
- **Chapter 3** Nation-Building and Political Transition (1991-1994)
- **Chapter 4** The Formation and Ideology of the PFDJ
- **Chapter 5** President Isaias Afwerki: Leadership and Legacy
- **Chapter 6** The 1997 Constitution: Promise and Stagnation
- **Chapter 7** The Structure of Government: Executive, Legislature, Judiciary
- **Chapter 8** The National Assembly: Powers, Dormancy, and Decline
- **Chapter 9** The Judiciary and Rule of Law
- **Chapter 10** The Military's Role in Politics and Society
- **Chapter 11** Political Parties and the Single-Party System
- **Chapter 12** Elections: History, Suspension, and Prospects
- **Chapter 13** National Service: Policy, Implementation, and Impact
- **Chapter 14** The Economy, State Control, and Political Power
- **Chapter 15** Civil Society and the Space for Dissent
- **Chapter 16** The Media Landscape: State Control and Information Flow
- **Chapter 17** Human Rights and Civil Liberties
- **Chapter 18** Religion and the State: Policy and Persecution
- **Chapter 19** Political Prisoners, Arbitrary Detention, and Enforced Disappearances
- **Chapter 20** Diaspora Politics and Political Opposition Abroad
- **Chapter 21** International Relations and Foreign Policy
- **Chapter 22** The Eritrea-Ethiopia Conflict and Its Political Legacy
- **Chapter 23** The Role of Women and Youth in Politics
- **Chapter 24** Future Prospects: Reform, Resistance, and Stasis
- **Chapter 25** Towards a Democratic and Rights-Respecting System

Introduction

Eritrea's political history is a chronicle of resilience, shaped by decades of struggle, conflict, and a relentless quest for independence. Situated in the Horn of Africa, this nation emerged from a protracted war against Ethiopian rule to establish its sovereignty in 1993. Since then, Eritrea's political landscape has been defined by the enduring dominance of one party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), and its long-serving leader, President Isaias Afwerki. The country's unique journey and its resulting political system present a compelling subject for examination—one that this book seeks to explore in depth.

At the heart of Eritrea's story lies its transformative liberation movement. The sacrifice of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which evolved into the PFDJ, forms the bedrock of the nation's political culture—a legacy imbued with nationalism and a vision for self-reliance. However, the principles that galvanized the independence movement have been transformed over time. Instead of establishing a pluralistic democracy, Eritrea adopted a centralized, authoritarian model where the ruling party consolidated its power and curtailed basic freedoms.

This centralization of authority has profoundly influenced all aspects of Eritrean governance. The state is structured as a unitary presidential republic, dominated by the executive branch and president. While a constitution was drafted and ratified in the 1990s, its implementation has been delayed indefinitely, leaving the promise of democratic representation unfulfilled. The National Assembly, once imagined as the highest legislative authority, has been dormant for two decades, with legislative and executive powers being exercised almost exclusively by the president and his close circle.

The nature of Eritrea's government has led to a series of profound and ongoing challenges in human rights and civil liberties. Freedom of expression, assembly, association, and religion are tightly restricted. The press operates under strict state control, dissent is suppressed, and national service obligations extend indefinitely, affecting much of the country's working-age population. Though local elections have been held in a tightly managed format, no national elections have occurred since independence, and political opposition is effectively outlawed or forced to operate from abroad.

These dynamics have rippled outward, shaping the experience of Eritreans at home and within the global diaspora. Political activism often takes place in exile, and many citizens are drawn into complex relationships with the state—whether through loyalty, coercion, or resistance. Eritrea's government has also sought to exert influence

beyond its borders, monitoring and sometimes repressing diaspora dissidents and their families.

In "The Politics of Eritrea: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Eritrea," we will examine the country's political evolution, structures, and actors; the complex interplay between governance and society; and the lived realities of Eritreans under the current regime. By drawing upon history, analysis, and contemporary developments, this book aims to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of Eritrean politics and the critical issues that will shape its future.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Roots of Eritrean Politics

To understand the unique political system that exists in Eritrea today, we must first delve into its rich and complex history. For centuries, the land that is now Eritrea was a crossroads of cultures, empires, and trade routes, its strategic location on the Red Sea making it a coveted territory. This long history of external influence and control has indelibly shaped the Eritrean identity and its political development.

The region has a history stretching back millennia, with evidence of ancient civilizations and trading centers. The Kingdom of Aksum, a powerful trading empire, emerged in the first century AD, encompassing parts of modern-day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. This early period saw the introduction of Christianity, and later Islam, adding layers of religious and cultural diversity to the region. For centuries, various local rulers and external powers vied for control, drawn by the strategic importance of the Red Sea coast.

The late 19th century marked a pivotal moment with the arrival of European colonial powers. Italy, a relative latecomer to the "Scramble for Africa," began to establish a presence in the region in 1869, initially through the purchase of land in Assab by a shipping company. This toehold gradually expanded, and Italian troops landed in Massawa and other coastal locations in 1885. By 1889, Italy's control over the coastal areas was recognized by the Ethiopian Empire, and on January 1, 1890, the colony of Eritrea was officially established. The name "Eritrea" itself is derived from the Greek word for "red," a nod to the Red Sea.

Italian colonial rule, which lasted until 1941, had a significant impact on Eritrea. The Italians invested in infrastructure, building roads, railways, and modernizing towns like Asmara, which was envisioned as a "little Rome." However, this modernization was primarily aimed at serving Italian interests and facilitating their colonial ambitions, particularly the invasion of Ethiopia in the 1930s. Eritreans were subjected to discriminatory policies and faced various forms of resistance to Italian rule.

During World War II, British forces defeated the Italians in Eritrea in 1941, marking another transition in the region's history. Eritrea was placed under British military administration, a temporary arrangement while the Allied powers decided its future. The British administration adopted a "caretaker" policy, and there were proposals to partition Eritrea along religious lines between Sudan and Ethiopia.

Following the war, the question of Eritrea's fate was debated internationally. Ethiopia,

under Emperor Haile Selassie, pressed for the annexation of Eritrea, citing historical ties and the need for access to the sea. The United States, seeking a naval base in Massawa, also supported Ethiopia's claim. In 1950, the United Nations passed a resolution to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, a decision that aimed to balance Ethiopian aspirations with Eritrean desires for self-governance, though it sidestepped the issue of full independence.

The federation came into effect in 1952, granting Eritrea a degree of autonomy with its own constitution and elected government. However, this arrangement proved to be short-lived. Emperor Haile Selassie's government progressively undermined Eritrea's autonomy, curtailing its freedoms and effectively governing it as a police state. Eritrean political parties were banned, and the free press and right to assembly were suppressed.

Growing dissatisfaction with Ethiopian rule led to the emergence of an independence movement. The Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) was formed in 1958, seeking to end Ethiopian control. However, it was the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), founded in 1960 by Eritrean exiles, that launched the armed struggle for independence on September 1, 1961. This marked the beginning of a long and arduous war.

The ELF initially drew support primarily from the Muslim lowlands but gradually expanded its appeal to encompass various ethnic and religious groups. However, internal divisions and ideological rifts emerged within the ELF, leading to the formation of a new faction, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), in 1970. This split would lead to internal conflicts within the Eritrean independence movement.

In 1962, Emperor Haile Selassie unilaterally dissolved the Eritrean parliament and formally annexed Eritrea as Ethiopia's fourteenth province. This act further fueled the armed resistance and solidified the determination of Eritreans to achieve full independence. The war for independence, which pitted the Eritrean liberation fronts against successive Ethiopian regimes, would continue for three decades, marked by intense fighting and significant human cost.

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