

## **He Didn't Do It for Them**

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Michela Wrong, *I Didn't Do It for You: How the World Betrayed a Small African Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

When I first encountered Eritrea in 1976, I was deeply impressed with the movement heading up the former Italian colony's 30-year war for independence from Ethiopia. During those years, most foreign visitors to Eritrea were.

With no consistent outside support, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) mobilized the population—half Christian, half Muslim, from nine ethnic groups—into a highly motivated, well-disciplined military force that was able to bring successive US- and Soviet-backed Ethiopian governments to their knees, and eventually declare formal independence in 1993. Eritrea generated similar admiration from a new set of visitors in the 1990s, when its leaders picked up the battered society and, still with little help, made striking progress in alleviating mass poverty while dismantling deep-rooted patterns of social exclusion, particularly those that are gender-based, in a largely crime- and corruption-free environment.

In her compelling narrative of Eritrea's rise to prominence as part of a post-Cold War "African Renaissance" and its subsequent fall from grace, Michela Wrong dubs these visitors the "True Believers."

Today, however, Eritrea is a nation in a perpetual state of emergency, under siege by its own leaders, with thousands of its citizens in prison for their politics, none of them charged with a crime or given a day in court to defend themselves. The rest of the population is denied the most basic rights of speech, assembly, press and religious practice, as a constitution ratified eight years ago has yet to go into effect and young people called up for short-term military duty seven years ago remain in uniform or on assignment in civilian jobs at national service pay today. Meanwhile, the continuing confrontation with Ethiopia not only dominates the political discourse to the point where all dissent is branded as treason, it also provides cover for further militarizing the new state from top to bottom. The party in power—the only one legally permitted to operate—is not even accountable to its own leadership structures or membership. In short, says Wrong in *I Didn't Do It for You: How the World Betrayed a Small African Nation*, Eritrea has become "the stalest, most predictable of African clichés."

Explanations for this state of affairs take the movement's former admirers back to the liberation struggle and force us to reevaluate the very successes we once so loudly (and uncritically) praised. What was it about those years and those practices that led to the current juncture?

Says Wrong, who counted herself as one of the country's fans:

Somewhere along the line, it wasn't yet clear where, the True Believers must have missed the point. They had failed to register important clues, drawn naïve conclusions, misinterpreted key events. The qualities we had all so admired obviously came with a sinister reverse side.

She quite correctly points to the repeated slights of the international community and the EPLF's isolation and asceticism through the war years as important factors in the country's post-independence plight. But there is more to the story, much of it buried

within the movement itself and still kept hidden by its leaders and their shrinking circle of loyalists.

Eritrea flourished under the Italians in the 1930s, Wrong tells us, with its capital of Asmara blossoming into “the most modern city in Africa.” But this was hardly a golden age for Eritreans, who were ruled by “the most racist regime” on the continent. The colony was then, as the country would be later, a paradoxical blend of development and despotism in equal—and extreme—measure. Wrong’s vividly sketched accounts of this contradictory experience provide the liveliest reading in the book, much as did her tales of Belgian and Congolese brutality and betrayal in her riveting earlier work, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu’s Congo* (2001).

But it is from the behavior of Eritrea’s ostensible liberators that this book takes its title. Wrong tells of a British officer who dismissed a ululating Eritrean woman after the 1941 victory over the Italians: “I didn’t do it for you, nigger.” This sneering remark aptly sums up the way Eritrea has been treated since then—by the British, US officials, the Soviets, the United Nations and just about everyone else who had a say in the former colony’s political status. No wonder Eritreans do not take kindly to others lecturing them about rights.

In seeking to make sense of the EPLF’s singleness of purpose throughout years of betrayal and setbacks, Wrong turns to the front’s 1978 retreat to the Sahel mountains. There, in the face of vastly superior Ethiopian (and Soviet) firepower, the Eritreans drew a line at the frontline town of Nakfa that Ethiopia was never able to cross. That stand became the symbol of Eritrean steadfastness; indeed, the independent Eritreans later named their currency the nakfa. As Wrong sees it, this experience shaped the EPLF’s Spartan warrior culture and its “rigidly puritanical lifestyle,” out of which sprang both its military prowess and its intolerance for difference. “Insulated from Africa’s contemporary reality, it was easy for the Eritreans to make the mistake of assuming they knew all the answers,” she writes.

All this is true. But it is not enough to explain the subsequent turn to authoritarianism, for the EPLF is not the only nationalist organization to have developed in harsh conditions. Fortunately for social scientists, if not for Eritreans, this has long been a divided movement, with contending organizations that arose out of the same culture, experienced the same or similar field conditions, coped with the same international betrayals and yet behaved quite differently. The Eritrean Liberation Front arose in the early 1960s and spawned many offspring—including the EPLF itself—and there are several newer Islamist trends and recent splinters. Eritrea is thus a laboratory for testing hypotheses about the trajectory of nationalist movements.

Looking at the outcomes, one finds that the difference is in the leadership, not the environment. This is true of both the individuals involved and the form of organization through which they led, as well as the political influences upon the leadership. Considering these categories brings us to current Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki, the “People’s Party” and Mao’s China.

The EPLF’s political culture has long been predicated upon secrecy and the exercise of absolute power, often by violent means. This culture—one might even say cult—of secrecy has made social-science analysis extremely difficult. Nevertheless, no narrative of the nation’s descent into dictatorship is complete without attention to the clandestine party that ran the liberation movement from its inception, for its shadow looms large over the contemporary political arena.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the EPLF was led by the secret Eritrean People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), chaired by Isaias and strongly influenced by Maoist political currents. Founded in 1971, the EPRP defined the EPLF from its earliest

days. It ran a cadre school that trained organizers who convened thrice-weekly political education sessions for all EPLF members. It met in secret to draft the EPLF's program prior to its congresses and to select slates for leadership prior to elections. Its central committee doubled as the EPLF's political bureau, positioning the party to run the front on a day-to-day basis. Party members who broke the rules were punished mercilessly and then suddenly rehabilitated, as was the practice in China, where Isaias received military and political training at the height of the Cultural Revolution in 1968-1969.

One can point to a number of incidents during the independence war that reflect Isaias's own penchant for unaccountable power and the use of force to resolve differences—notably the suppression of two dissident groups within the EPLF in the 1970s (a leftist trend known as *menqa* and a rightist one termed *yamin*) and the troubled relations with the rival ELF. But no incident outdoes the “three privileges campaign” of the 1980s in prefiguring his move to consolidate a dictatorship in 2001. This campaign was a moral crusade in which Isaias appealed to second-tier cadres to heap shame on their leaders for drinking, womanizing and using their positions to secure material advantage. After thus weakening his political rivals, he elevated three generals to the party and front leaderships, fundamentally altering the balance of power in favor of army loyalists. Today, these three men, each responsible for command of what are termed “operational theaters” in Eritrea, are among the most powerful people in the country and are Isaias's likely successors.

Prior to the EPLF's third congress in 1994, when it changed its name to the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), Isaias convinced many veterans to step aside from the leadership in order to bring what he called “new blood” into the political movement. Afterward, however, he rarely used the front's newly elected bodies to decide issues. Instead, its 19-member executive committee spent most of its time discussing how to implement policies determined elsewhere. In this respect, the newly christened PFDJ mimicked the EPLF's operational forms during the liberation struggle, but with a single difference. From this point forward, there was no pretense of collective leadership—one man and his personally selected advisers made all the decisions.

The same was true of the state. Though the new government had the appearance of a separation of powers—an executive office with a cabinet of ministers, an interim parliament (pending the first national elections) and a nominally independent judiciary—it was an illusion. The cabinet did not provide a forum for debate or decision-making. It, too, served mainly as a clearinghouse for determining how policies hammered out elsewhere would be put into practice. Even the military remained under the president's personal control, as Isaias leapfrogged his own defense ministry to exercise direct command through four field commanders, including those generals he brought with him from the EPRP.

Throughout the 1990s, Isaias expanded and strengthened the President's Office with specialized departments on economic and political policy that duplicated (and effectively outranked) similar ministries. He staffed these departments with loyal individuals who reported to no one but him. Ministerial portfolios were frequently shuffled to keep rivals from developing power bases of their own. High-ranking officers and government officials who questioned the president's judgement found themselves removed from their posts, kept on salary but not permitted to work, and then abruptly brought back into the fold when they were perceived to be rehabilitated.

Up to 2001, however, the president's authority and judgment was contested within the PFDJ by those of the movement's founders who remained, and measures to draw a widening circle of the general population into the country's political life encouraged many to hope for a more open future. The two-year mobilization for a 1993

referendum on Eritrea's political status brought thousands of people into the political process. A three-year constitution-making process produced a foundation for the exercise of basic civil and human rights. This process fed the hope of some—myself included—that Eritrea was on the road, however rocky, toward the elaboration of a legal framework in which such rights could at least be contested. During this period, many of the refugees from the long years of fighting began to return.

Up against the sense of democratic possibilities was a conviction at the center of power that the people could not be trusted to rule themselves, especially in this unsettled regional environment where enemies and spies might manipulate them against their interests. What was needed, those close to Isaias argued, was “guided democracy” in which an enlightened few would make the key decisions about Eritrea's future and involve the general population only after the fact.

These two lines coexisted and contended within the EPLF/PFDJ through the post-independence years, but they collided head on when war broke out with Ethiopia in 1998, during which conflict the hardliners engineered what amounted to an internal *coup d'état*. In doing so, they set back Eritrea's political development by at least another decade and so undermined the nation's unity, morale and strength of purpose that they put Eritrea at greater risk of defeat than ever before.

On September 18 and 19, 2001, Isaias loyalists arrested 11 of 15 top government officials and former liberation movement leaders—known as the Group of 15—who had signed a petition charging the president with illegally suppressing debate and calling for implementation of the constitution and democratization of the political arena. Next, the government shut down the private press and arrested its leading editors and reporters.

In the years since, there have been numerous, less publicized arrests—elders who sought to mediate on behalf of the detainees, more journalists, mid-level officials, merchants, businessmen, young people resisting conscription, and church leaders and parishioners associated with minority Christian denominations, among others. (There had also been unpublicized arrests even before 1991, notably of ELF sympathizers and other organizations banned under PFDJ rule.) Some detainees were held for short periods and discharged. Others—like the Group of 15 and the journalists and many ELF cadres—have been held indefinitely with no charges leveled and no visitors allowed.

The only non-religious, membership-based organizations permitted to operate in Eritrea today are those under the party's direct control—the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers, the National Union of Eritrean Women and the National Union of Youth and Students. But the trade unions are not permitted to organize any segment of the work force without state and party permission; nor are strikes permitted under any circumstances. Three trade union leaders were arrested in 2005 to preempt planned strikes. The women's and youth organizations are service providers and do not engage in policy advocacy or protest either. The PFDJ sets their priorities and preselects their leadership slates, which are then confirmed at periodic organizational congresses, much as was the case with the EPRP and the EPLF during the liberation war.

Meanwhile, no group larger than seven is permitted to meet without government permission, and no public protest is tolerated. All public remonstrations since independence—by armed liberation fighters in May 1993, by disabled veterans in 1994, by University of Asmara students in 2001 and by conscripts in 2004—have been forcibly put down, with their leaders detained without trial for lengthy periods. New prisons have sprung up in and around the major cities, as well as in remote locations, and there are reports of new “ghost houses” in Asmara as the government has begun to arrest the parents of AWOL conscripts.

Throughout these years, the economy has been dominated by the state and the PFDJ, which share ownership of the major financial and commercial institutions, utilities, services, communications facilities and transport companies. In fact, the PFDJ owns or controls enterprises in banking, trade, construction, shipping, metalworks, auto repair, road surfacing and well drilling, among others. It also holds controlling stakes in joint ventures with foreign investors for other large-scale undertakings, such as mining. For all this, there is no fiscal transparency of any kind for party operations. Nor, for that matter, is there transparency in the financial affairs of the state. Nevertheless, it is more and more obvious that the country is surviving on little more than shrinking remittances from the diaspora and politically motivated charity from other states, including, oddly enough, the US, which sees in Eritrea a partner in the global war on terrorism (and, irony of ironies, a charter member of the “coalition of the willing” to bring democracy to Iraq).

With an executive-dominated government running a one-party state that prohibits independent media, quashes non-party NGOs and detains without trial or recourse to appeal anyone who dissents, there are no guaranteed rights for the citizens of Eritrea, only privileges to be granted or withdrawn at the will or whim of one man—Isaias Afewerki. In short, Eritrea has become a classic African dictatorship.

“If Eritrea today so often comes across as dangerously impervious to criticism and bafflingly quick to anger, she is largely that way because her colonial masters and superpowers made her so,” says Wrong. “Nakfa’s most dangerous legacy was not the EPLF’s indomitable self-belief, its profound distrust of outsiders or its iron self-control, but the impossibly high expectations raised in a generation of Eritreans,” she adds, correctly identifying central aspects of the front’s political culture but misattributing their source. In doing so, Wrong rationalizes the rise of the “big man” as a product of circumstances and, intentionally or not, lets Isaias off the hook.

Eritrea’s experience with the outside world certainly fostered a politics with attitude, but it did not create those politics out of whole cloth. The liberation movement’s leaders bear a large share of the responsibility for inculcating, from the outset, an ideology of extreme nationalism with a strongly paternalistic bent that set the stage for dictatorship later. The Nakfa experience, during which the fighters were cut off from the outside world for years on end, was only the milieu in which these values and beliefs ripened. It was the party that first embedded the values in its members and then cultivated them as a means of both group motivation and political control—both much in evidence in the mid-1970s when I first encountered the movement. Their success at this project helped turn the EPLF from an impressive military-political movement into a frighteningly self-referential cult.

And the dance continues.

The Isaias regime’s response to the international community’s failure to enforce the boundary commission decision has been to spurn diplomacy, trumpet Eritrea’s righteousness, lambaste everyone else for their lack of principle, and brandish the threat of renewed war. Late last year, Eritrea restricted UN flights along the tense frontier and expelled Western members of the peacekeeping force. Early this year, Asmara mounted a major mobilization and rounded up hundreds of Eritreans serving with the UN on the grounds they were avoiding their obligatory military service.

But the American response was equally bull-headed and self-defeating. Shunning a multilateral initiative aimed at moving Ethiopia to once and for all accept the terms of the border settlement, the Bush administration dispatched a delegation headed by Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer, who insisted on touring the border itself, as if some as yet undiscovered secret lay there that would enable her to

leverage a fresh compromise. The Eritreans refused to let the junket land in Asmara and the cycle of threats and recriminations only intensified.