

# Our Children Fighters Came with a Big Snake: Eritrea's Dark Journey Since 1991

A historical reflection centered on the December 1994 crackdown

When Eritrean fighters entered Asmara in May 1991, joy filled the streets. Independence had finally been won after decades of sacrifice. The people called the fighters their children — they were sons and daughters of every village and family. But amid the celebration, a sober/መጠነኛ saying emerged among ordinary Eritreans.

« እቶም ናትና ደቅቂ ተዋጋኢቲ እዮም ምጹኣት ምስ ሐደ ዓቢይ ገብበል መንነኩም »

*I nostri figli combattenti sono venuti con un serpente grande fra di loro.*

*“Our children fighters came with a big snake.”*

This proverb has proven prophetic. The “snake” was the hidden authoritarianism of the EPLF leadership, which slowly revealed itself over the years. What began as hope for freedom became a story of repression, disappearances, and lost generations.

## 1991–1993: Liberation and Independence

In 1991 the EPLF toppled the Ethiopian regime. By 1993, a referendum confirmed Eritrea's independence with near-unanimous support. The people believed a new era of justice and democracy was beginning.

But even then, signs of the snake were present. The EPLF's culture of secrecy and absolute control carried over into peacetime. No opposition parties were allowed. The new ruling party — the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) — promised democracy in name, but functioned as a one-party state.

**MOHAMMED MARANET** – Teacher and judge. Abducted by the Isaias regime on July 17, 1991, just seven weeks after Eritrea's liberation day. He was the first Eritrean prisoner of conscience after independence. Born on the banks of the Anseba river, north of Keren, Maranet was a teacher at Keren Ma'had Islamic school (1970–1985) and then served as a qadi (judge) in Keren, Ghindae, and Agordat. He had a long history of political activism with the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), having been imprisoned multiple times during the 1960s and 1970s for his work. His family has been left in the dark about his fate for nearly 30 years, never knowing if he is alive or dead.

**MOHAMMED ALI HASAN** – Teacher abducted by Eritrean security agents on April 14, 1992, in Keren. Still unaccounted for. Disappeared in 1992.

## December 1994: The Black Month

Only three years after independence, Eritreans witnessed the first wide bite of the snake. In December 1994, a coordinated crackdown spread across the country.

### Selected cases

**Mohammed Saeed Abdella** — shop owner (Sahel Grocery, Nakfa Avenue, Asmara).

Abducted 5 Dec 1994, Asmara. Disappeared.

**Mohammed Nur Abrar** — businessman. Abducted 5 Dec 1994, Asmara (around 4:30 p.m.). Disappeared.

**Mohammed Tahir Idris** — teacher (Amal School; Teachers Training Institute, Asmara). Abducted in 1994 while walking to work. Disappeared.

**Mohammed Tahir Mender** — teacher. Arrested 24 Dec 1994, Keren. Disappeared.

**Mohammed Hamid Dweida** — teacher; elected chairman of Senhit Province Assembly. Arrested 24 Dec 1994, Keren. Disappeared.

**Mohammed-Saleh Mahoud** — judge, regional court of Barka (Gash-Barka). Arrested Sep 1995, Agordat. Disappeared.

They were taken by security agents, never charged, never seen again. Families were left in permanent anguish, with no answers. At the same time, Jehovah's Witnesses were stripped of their citizenship and rights. December 1994 was a turning point: the new state revealed it would not tolerate independent voices, whether religious, professional, or civic.

## 1997: The Constitution Betrayed

In 1997 Eritrea ratified a new constitution. On paper, it guaranteed democracy, rule of law, and human rights. But President Isaias Afwerki refused to implement it, claiming "the time was not right." The promise of democracy was abandoned.

**MOHAMMED ALHASAN IBRAHIM** – Secretary of the Mufti of Eritrea. Arrested in Asmara in 1997. A year later, his brother Mahmoud Hasan, who worked in the town administration of Hagat, was also arrested. Both disappeared in 1997.

## 2001: The G-15 and the Media Silenced

By 2001, even senior liberation leaders began demanding reform and constitutional rule. Known as the G-15, they wrote open letters to Isaias. His response was swift: 11 of them were arrested and disappeared, along with independent journalists. All private media was shut down.

## 2002–2005: Religious Persecution

Next came the tightening grip on faith. Evangelical Christians were jailed in shipping containers. Jehovah's Witnesses remained without rights. Muslim scholars and teachers continued to disappear. The regime sought total control over both politics and religion.

**YOSIEF BERHANE** – Imprisoned by the regime of Isaias Afwerki since 2005.

Former freedom fighter for Eritrean independence. Arrested a few months after his wedding with no charges filed. His family remains unaware of his whereabouts or condition.

**የሴኔ በርካሽ** — ሕብቡስ ብ እቲ ረጊመ/ regime ናይ ኢሳያስ አፈወርቂ ካብ እቲ 2005. አክስ ተዋጋኢ ምእንቲ እታ ኢንዲፕንደንዝ ናይ እታ አሪትራ. እሱር/ኣርረስታቶ ሒደት አዋርሕ ድሕሪ እቲ ናቱ ቃልኪዳን ብዘይ ገለ ክስሲ. እታ ስድራ/ፋሚልያ አይትፈልጥን ገና አበይ ይርከብ ወይ እታ ናቱ ትሕድርቲ/ናብራ.

## Indefinite National Service: A Strangled Generation

By the 2000s, Eritrea had introduced indefinite national service. What began as an 18-month program became open-ended forced labor. An entire generation of young Eritreans found themselves trapped in camps or fleeing across borders. Hundreds of thousands went into exile.

## Today: The Snake Fully Grown

Three decades after independence, Eritrea is one of the most repressive states in the world. The disappearances of December 1994 remain unresolved. The constitution is still frozen. Political prisoners remain in secret jails. Families still wait for news of loved ones who vanished decades ago.

## Conclusion: The Wisdom of the People

The proverb was more than a saying — it was a prophecy. The people sensed from the start that the victory carried a hidden danger. Step by step, history has confirmed their fears: the snake of authoritarianism grew larger with each year, tightening its hold on the country. Remembering December 1994 — the Black Month — is essential. It was the moment the snake first revealed its fangs. To honor the disappeared, their names and stories must be kept alive, and the truth of Eritrea's dark journey must be told.

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