

**Third World Colonialism and Strategies of Liberation**  
*Eritrea and East Timor Compared*

By analyzing Ethiopia's rule over Eritrea and Indonesia's rule over East Timor, *Third World Colonialism and Strategies of Liberation* compares the colonialism of powerful Third World countries on their small, less-powerful neighbors. Through a comparative study of Eritrean and East Timorese grand strategies of liberation, this book documents the inner workings of the nationalist movements and traces the sources of government types in these countries. In doing so, Awet Tewelde Weldemichael challenges existing notions of grand strategy as a unique prerogative of the West and opposes established understanding of colonialism as an exclusively Western project on the non-Western world. In addition to showing how Eritrea and East Timor developed sophisticated military and nonmilitary strategies, Weldemichael emphasizes that the insurgents avoided terrorist methods when their colonizers indiscriminately bombed their countries, tortured and executed civilians, held them hostage, starved them deliberately, and continuously threatened them with harsher measures.

Awet Tewelde Weldemichael is an assistant professor in the history department at the University of Kentucky. He is also Fernand Braudel Fellow at the French Humanities Foundation, University of Paris Diderot. He taught at the University of Asmara in Eritrea and has worked as a political affairs officer for the UN peacekeeping mission in East Timor.

# Third World Colonialism and Strategies of Liberation

*Eritrea and East Timor Compared*

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*University of Kentucky*



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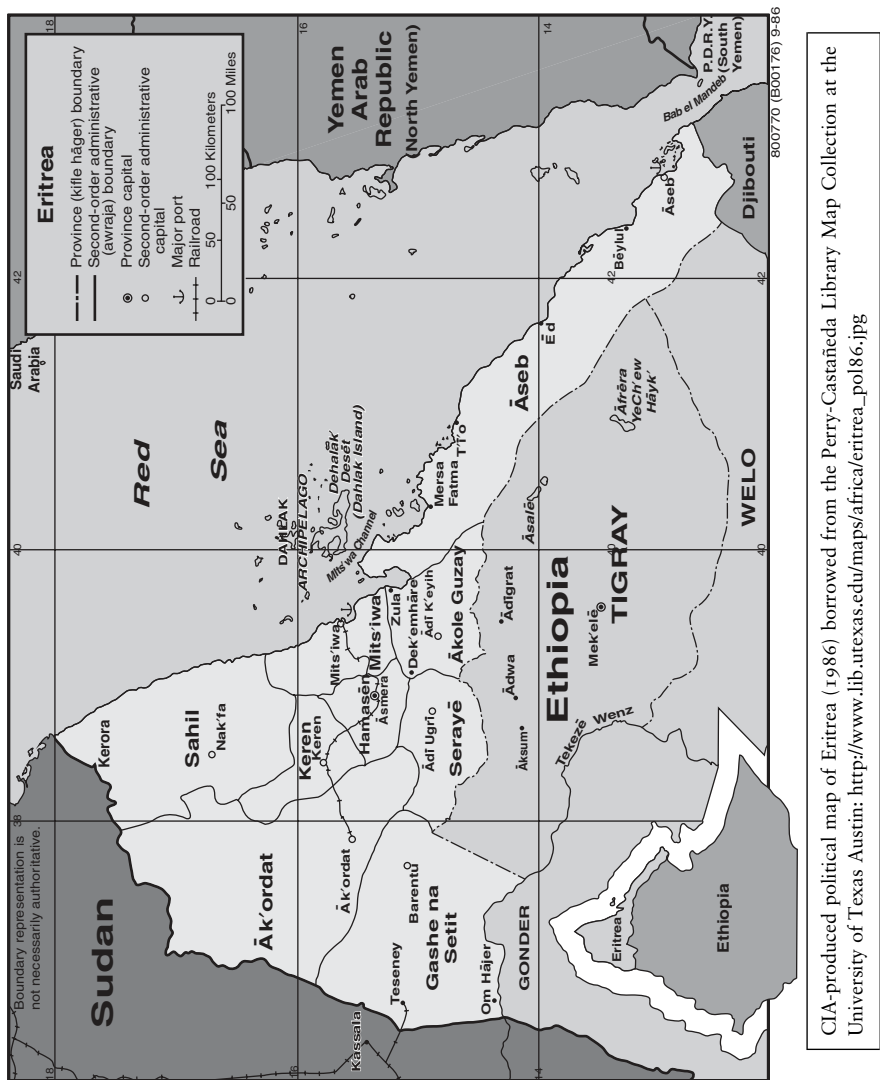
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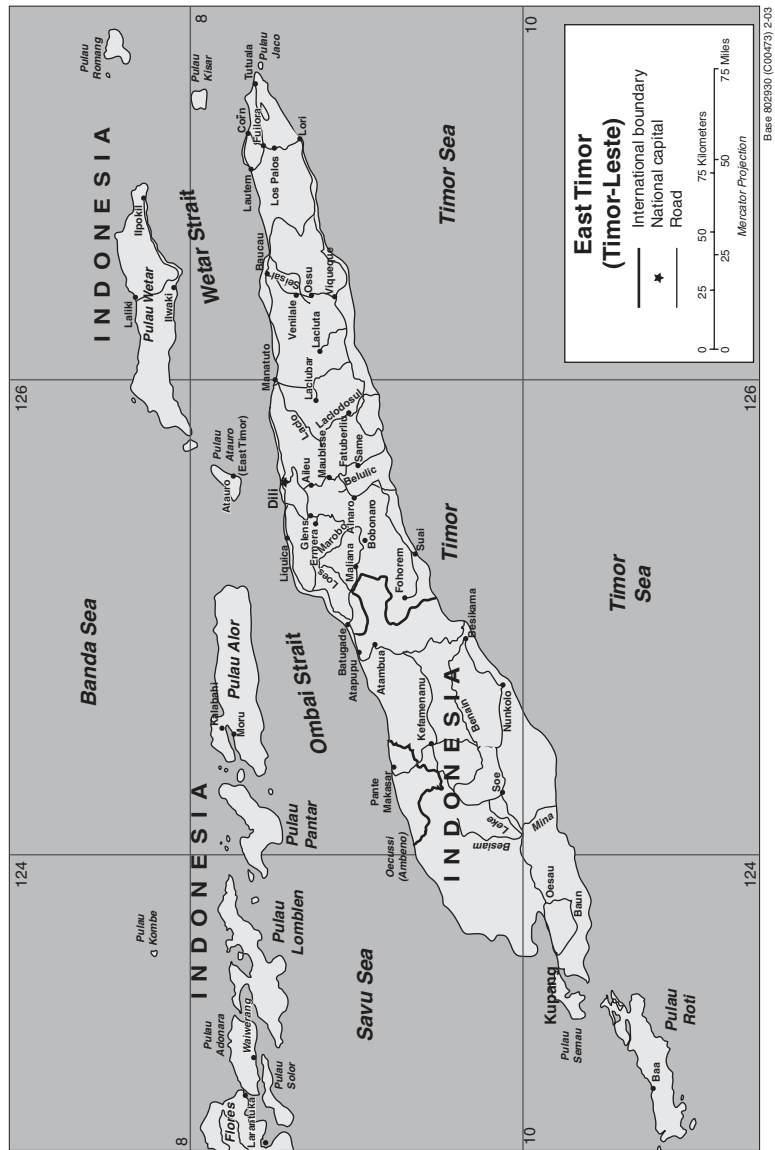
*I bow in front of you, I kiss your hands, kiss your knees, your feet,  
 too; exemplars of moral rectitude; most humorous providers of  
 unequalled teachings in life, my parents. You cannot directly read  
 this because you spent the better part of your lives making sure that  
 my siblings and I can read and write books. This is my first,  
 I promise.*

## ገጽ-በረከት

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>page</i> xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>I</b>
Imperialism by Adjacency and Colonialism	4
Grand Strategy and the Global South	9
State Terrorism and the Restraint of Nonstate Opponents	12
Colonial Nationalism Reified	16
Imperial Roots and Colonial Origins of the Recolonizers and the Recolonized	18
Conclusion	35
<b>1 Swaggering Empires and Defiant “New Provinces”</b>	<b>38</b>
The Cold War Curse	39
Domestic Conditions Surrounding the Outbreak of Open Resistance	56
Early Phases of Eritrean and East Timorese Resistance	68
Conclusion	75
<b>2 Bittersweet Replicas of Foreign Experiences and Reform</b>	<b>78</b>
Root Causes for Eritrean Reform and East Timorese Reorientation	79
From Haphazard to Strategic: Faulty Eritrean Initiative	79
Elusive Reform of ELF Zonal Command and Bifurcation of the Eritrean Movement	85
Ineffectual Experiment of the East Timorese Resistance	93
Inception and End of Guerrilla Support Bases	97
Conclusion	110
<b>3 Toward Reorganization and Reorientation: Eritrean Fragmentation and East Timorese Near Defeat</b>	<b>112</b>
Decisive Structural Factors	114
Ethiopian and Indonesian Counterinsurgencies	116

	“We Need Eritrea for Its Land, Not Its People”	117
	Indonesian Elite Consensus Falls Short of Victory	125
	The Backlash of Genocidal Invasion and Occupation	126
	Surviving and Moving Beyond the Challenges: Eritrean Splinter Groups Coalesce into a Maoist Movement	136
	Surviving and Moving Beyond the Challenges: East Timorese Resistance from the Jaws of Defeat	144
	Conclusion	149
4	<b>Victims of Their Own Success: The Revitalized Nationalist Movements and Their Challenges</b>	151
	Rivalry and Balance of Power among Eritrean Nationalists	152
	The ELF’s Strategic Oblivion and Lethal Internecine Squabbles	152
	The Onset of Internal Cohesion and Self-Reliance	155
	Ethiopian Realignment that Shifted the Balance of Power	161
	Developments in East Timor and Within the Resistance Movement	166
	The Catholic Church in East Timor Protests	166
	The Indonesians Hone Their Intelligence About the Insurgency	173
	Seeking International Recognition	175
	Conclusion	181
5	<b>Eritrean and East Timorese Diplomacy of Liberation</b>	183
	Liberation Diplomacy in Eritrea and East Timor	185
	Eritreans’ Search for an African India	187
	East Timor’s Three-Pronged Resistance	195
	Conclusion	216
6	<b>To Asmara Through Addis Ababa and Dili Via Jakarta</b>	218
	The Democratic Alternative in Addis Ababa	220
	The Empire’s Domestic Abuses and Its Dissenters	221
	Indonesianizing the East Timor Conflict	230
	Keeping East Timor in the Spotlight	241
	Doomed Counterinsurgencies	246
	Ethiopia and Indonesia Consume Their Own Propaganda	248
7	<b>Winning Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies in a Changing Global Order</b>	252
	The Debilitation of Ethiopia’s Capacities	254
	Faltering Indonesian Resolve	257
	Dynamic Insurgencies and Their Victories: The Eritrean Endgame	261
	Dynamic Insurgencies and Their Victories: East Timorese Irreversible Gains amid Adversity	267
	Waves of Arrests and Succession of New Leaders	268
	Referendum at Long Last	277
	“Liberation Came to East Timor Like a Whirlwind”	280
	Conclusion	284

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Eritrea and East Timor Compared  
Awet Tewelde Weldemichael  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

<i>Contents</i>	xi
<b>8 The Promise and Quandary of “Infusing Fresh Blood” and “Inaugurating New Politics”</b>	287
EPLF’s Ominous Monopoly of Organized Politics in Eritrea	288
Toxic Infighting Within the 1960s Generation	291
The Onset of Fractured Democracy in East Timor	296
Resurrecting the Politics of 1975 under UNTAET	297
Conclusion	310
<b>Conclusion</b>	313
<i>Bibliography</i>	317
<i>Index</i>	337

## Foreword

During our long struggle for independence, we sought and found examples in other independence movements that had been fighting similar wars against European and regional colonialism. We particularly took some lessons from African wars and drew inspiration from the Eritrean independence movement. Not surprisingly, Eritrean leaders kept well-informed about the dire predicament of the East Timorese people. Our knowledge about one another's struggle offered the basis for our mutual empathy, solidarity and collaboration.

At the height of our diplomatic campaigns, I worked closely with the Eritrean representative at the United Nations General Assembly, Bereket Habte Selassie, and I particularly remember the numerous occasions that him and I had been barred from or thrown out of international fora because Ethiopian and Indonesian representatives lodged complaints against us as terrorist.

The attendant hardship of occupation and domination that Timor-Leste and Eritrea endured in the hands of Indonesia and Ethiopia, respectively, are neither unique nor have East Timorese and Eritrean successes brought an end to that phenomenon aptly described in this book as secondary colonialism. Powerful countries have forcefully subjugated their weaker neighbors to brutal domination and are likely to continue doing so in pursuit of their geostrategic and resource needs. Through an analysis of our experiences parallel to that of Eritreans, Dr. Awet Weldemichael has done an excellent job in exposing the nature of such domination and the dynamics of resistance against it.

I first met Professor Weldemichael at the height of the brief conflict that afflicted independent Timor-Leste in 2006 – he was one of the very few foreigners who chose to stick it out when most of the expatriate community evacuated. As a young researcher then, and, later, as a political affairs officer for the United Nations peacekeeping mission, Awet developed intimate knowledge of Timor-Leste's historical and contemporary political nuances

all of which he richly represents throughout the pages of this book in comparison and contrast to Eritrea's, his native country.

Through a close examination of unprecedented detail and rigor, he captures the personal and collective drive of the East Timorese and Eritrean fighters, reconstructs the unique and complex processes of the two independence movements, and explains the current political realities in post-war Timor-Leste and Eritrea. In the process he offers important theoretical and practical insights with unique intellectual courage and boldness. He demonstrates how Third World countries – some of them former colonies themselves – have become colonial powers, hence secondary colonialism. He irrefutably projects colonial subjects as crafters of complex and successful grand strategies. And he proves how state terrorism was perpetrated against us when we – out of moral principle – avoided the temptation of expediently resorting to terrorism.

Rarely has any one succeeded to bring out so much detail and nuance of a single independence movement much less of two previously underestimated and subsequently neglected struggles in Timor-Leste and Eritrea. Awet has presented a lucid, brilliant and accessible comparative analysis that is indispensable for scholars, policy makers and aid organizations. This is a book that every politician, diplomat, development worker, academic and student should read not only on Timor-Leste and Eritrea but also on local resistance to regional domination, modern state formation and nation building at the age of globalization.

José Ramos-Horta  
Dili, 25 September 2012

The former president of East Timor (between 2007 and 2012); and the co-Laureate of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize.

## Acknowledgments

The seed of this book was sown in 2001, a year that witnessed major political turmoil within the ranks of Eritrea's liberation leaders. In September, the President ordered the arrest of a dozen ministers, generals, and other highly placed civil servants in one fell swoop. The government simultaneously suspended the mushrooming private press. A sudden shadow and polarization descended across the Eritrean political landscape. As I started to grapple with the dizzying speed of Eritrean politics, I stumbled across the story of the equally arduous and inspiring East Timorese quest for liberation whose outcome seemed to defy the trite adage that "revolutions devour their children." I set out to comparatively examine the two.

I hypothesized that the contrasting outcomes of the seemingly similar struggles were attributable to the grand strategies that the nationalist movements adopted. My hypothesis nearly faltered during my fieldwork in East Timor in 2006 when the country descended into chaos. At the expiration of a deadline to reverse an earlier summary dismissal of a third of East Timor's army, young supporters of the sacked soldiers ran amok across the capital. In a constitutionally questionable move, the president demanded the resignation of the ministers of interior and defense, and ultimately of the prime minister as well. As East Timor teetered on the edge of the precipice, the Eritrean clean sweep seemed to be a better alternative.

Timely international intervention averted the brief conflict in independent East Timor from degenerating into irreversible tragedy, and the revolution from devouring its own children. This action stands in stark contrast to Eritrea's parallel experience with members of the international community, where the most powerful members of the United Nations Security Council are actively hostile toward the Eritrean government. In more ways than not, that situation is an attribute of the legacy of the two independence movements' grand strategies with which this book is concerned.

During the first phase of the project as a doctoral thesis, I had the unmatched mentoring of Drs. Edmond Keller, William Worger, Christopher

Ehret, Anthony Reid, Geoffrey Robinson, and Edward “Ned” Alpers, to whom I owe a heavy debt of gratitude. I am particularly indebted to Geoff and Ned, who believed in the feasibility of an idea that many wrote off out of hand and unfailingly supported me from start to finish. I thank the University of California Pacific Rim Research Program, UCLA’s International Institute, and the Globalization Research Center–Africa for their generous research grants that made my fieldwork possible.

Contemporary history is incomplete by its very nature and this incomplete account of Eritrean and East Timorese contemporary histories took an exceptionally long time to complete because the allure of gaining new historical knowledge directly from its makers proved unrelenting, often to the detriment of writing it. I was humbled and privileged to sit at the bedside of the ailing Mohammed Omar Abdellah “Abu Tyara” and across the table from Dr. Taha Mohammed-Nur, Romedan Mohammed-Nur, and many others in Eritrea. It was an equal privilege for Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, President José Ramos-Horta, President Mário Soares, President Jorge Sampaio, Governor Mário Carrascalão, as well as many diplomats, politicians, and academics to make themselves available to me. Perhaps the most transformative moments of the entire exercise were my interviews with the Eritrean and East Timorese men and women who, at a young age, stood up to defend their people and rectify the wrongs they had suffered. Their respective peoples must be indebted to all of them – and to their fallen compatriots – for their exceptional sacrifices. I cannot thank them enough for opening their hearts and homes to me and sharing their experiences.

I have been extremely fortunate to have the support of numerous officials and private citizens who have generously granted me access to their personal and institutional resources. I am forever indebted to Zemhret Yohannes, Alemseged Tesfai, and Azeb Tewelde for their tireless mentoring, confidence, and unfailing support for me. I thank the young archivists at Eritrea’s Research and Documentation Center (RDC) in Asmara, who were valuable in extending hands-on assistance during my research. My thanks also goes to the directors of and archivists at the Arquivo e Museo Resistência in Dili, the Fundação Mário Soares and Arquivo Mário Soares in Lisbon, the Centro de Informação e Documentação Amílcar Cabral also in Lisbon, and Fentahun Tiruneh at the Library of Congress.

In East Timor, my research would not have gone far enough without the constant support of my friend Laurentina “Mica” Barreto Soares. She was generous with her direct knowledge (as a former active member of the clandestine student movement in Indonesia – RENETIL) of many of the important turning points of the resistance movement and of the Timorese personalities. She also helped me in interpreting all of the interviews conducted in Tetum. I am grateful to Mindo Rajagukguk, Lurdes Bessa, Jaquiline Siapono, Fernando de Araújo “Lasama,” Cris Carrascalão, Zacarias Albano da Costa, David Diaz Ximenes, Gregorio Saldanha, and Joaquim Fonseca “Ruso” for

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xvii

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The support of my friends and siblings across the world was instrumental for me to survive both the anticipated challenges and the unexpected shocks of being a globetrotting student and researcher – including getting caught up in the East Timorese conflict, narrowly avoiding the Indonesian earthquake that hit Yogya, surviving the targeted burglarizing of my apartment in Washington, DC, and the stealing of my data and research equipment. With encyclopedic knowledge of people, events, and processes, my eldest sister Almaz has always been the restraining voice of reason and sustaining encouragement during my entire research career. My sisters Natsinet and Belainesh supported me without reserve; I would not have made it this far without them. During my long nomadic existence they readily assumed my personal, family, and social responsibilities. They regularly followed my whereabouts, often calling in the middle of the night half the world away to pass family updates or to ask what kind of camera was better or what color to paint which room. My friends in Southern California were equally supportive, for which I am very thankful.

After UCLA, I spent three years in Europe as a research Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies of the University of Bologna, then as a Hiob Ludolf Guest Professor at Hamburg University, and finally as a Fernand Braudel Fellow of the Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme at the University of Paris 7, which enabled me to work on this book. I thank them and their directors and scholars for their generous hospitality. I am especially grateful to Professor Irma Taddia (at Bologna); Professors Siegbert Uhlig and Alessandro Bausi (at Hamburg); and Professors Dominique Vidal, Mahamet Timera, and Jocelyne Streiff-Fenart (at Unité de recherches “Migrations et société” in Paris and Nice).

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Clifford Geertz astutely noted that over time and after many consultations of different materials and with different people, one is hard pressed to recognize where one's ideas come from, and which are one's own and which are others'. It is my hope that the views, ideas, and data of all of my oral and written sources are accurately represented and duly acknowledged. I take sole responsibility for any misrepresentations and/or errors.

Awet Tewelde Weldemichael