

The Sovereignty of the People: Reclaiming May 24th from Intellectual Bankruptcy and Neo-Colonial Mourning

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Preface: *The catalyst for this essay was a recent, troubling exchange on social media that perfectly encapsulates the current crisis of identity within the Eritrean opposition. In a widely circulated video clip, an activist vehemently attacked the media platform **EriPM** for airing a public announcement regarding an Independence Day celebration in Seattle, USA. The event in question was not organized by the regime or its embassies, but by the **Yiakl movement** - a prominent opposition group struggling for democratic transition.*

The activist in the clip labeled EriPM as “complicit” and an “indirect supporter of the regime” simply for acknowledging the 35th anniversary of Eritrean sovereignty. This logic - that the birth of our nation is a “regime event” and that any opposition member who honors it is a traitor - is the “cancer” and “intellectual bankruptcy” this article seeks to address.

When we reach a point where opposition groups attack each other for celebrating the very independence they claim to want to democratize, we have lost our way. This incident in Seattle is a symptom of a deeper, abnormal pathology: the ceding of our national heritage to the dictator. By branding the 24th of May as “PFDJ property,” these critics are not hurting the regime; they are validating the regime’s greatest lie - that it is Eritrea.

This article is a response to that madness. It is a call to reclaim our history, to honor the People’s Mandate, and to recognize that those who mourn our independence are, in effect, aligning themselves with the neo-unionist ambitions of external powers who have never accepted Eritrean sovereignty. We must choose between a path of national self-mutilation and a path of historical reconquest.

As Eritrea marks the 35th anniversary of its hard-won independence on May 24, 2026, the nation finds itself at a psychological crossroads. While the day should serve as a transcendent symbol of national survival, a corrosive and “abnormal” sentiment has metastasized within certain circles of the Eritrean opposition. This faction argues that celebrating Independence Day is an endorsement of the current regime in Asmara, going so far as to label those who honor the day as “traitors.” This perspective is not only a sign of intellectual bankruptcy – it is a strategic surrender of our national heritage to the very dictatorship these groups claim to oppose.

The People's Mandate: A Foundation Beyond Politics

Independence Day is the “People’s Mandate.” It is the moment Eritrea transitioned from a colonial subject to a sovereign entity – a transition paid for by the blood of martyrs and the collective endurance of the population. To boycott this day because of the current political climate is a fundamental category error. It confuses the **State** (the permanent, sovereign home of the people) with the **Regime** (the temporary, often repressive, administration).

As I argued in “The Martyrs' Gift, Not the Dictator's Spoils,” the 24th of May was a historical reconquest achieved long before the current political freeze (Gebremariam 2026). If a squatter illegally occupies a family home, the children do not burn the house down or disown their father’s name; they fight to evict the squatter *because* the house belongs to them. By abandoning May 24th, the boycotters are effectively handing the PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) the “title deed” to the nation’s history.

The Abnormality of the Boycott

The refusal to celebrate one’s own national liberation is a historical anomaly. In almost every post-colonial society, the day of liberation is viewed as the property of the citizens. Even in the most divided nations, the day of “the birth” remains sacred.

In France, the celebration of Bastille Day (July 14) survived through monarchies and empires. Even those who loathed the specific government in power continued to celebrate the fall of the Bastille because the event belonged to the *citizens*, not the rulers¹ (Hobsbawm 1996, 54 – 56). Similarly, in the United States, when the abolitionist Frederick Douglass famously asked, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” he was not calling for the holiday to be abolished. Instead, he used the values of that day to shame the government for failing to live up to the promise of “liberty and justice for all” (Douglass 1852, 12).

¹ Historically known in France as *le quatorze juillet*, Bastille Day commemorates two distinct but linked events: the violent storming of the Bastille fortress on July 14, 1789—symbolizing the collapse of royal absolutism—and the *Fête de la Fédération* on July 14, 1790, which celebrated national unity and the “sovereignty of the people.” For nearly a century following the revolution, the holiday faced significant “abnormality” in its observance. Subsequent non-republican regimes attempted to erase the date from the national consciousness; Napoleon Bonaparte replaced it with the “Festival of the Emperor” on August 15, while the Bourbon Restoration suppressed it entirely in favor of royal saint days. It was not until 1880, under the Third Republic, that July 14 was officially reinstated as *la fête nationale*. The 1880 law was a deliberate act of historical reclamation by the people’s representatives to anchor the state in the “People’s Mandate” rather than the personality of a monarch or dictator. For a detailed history of the holiday’s survival through conflicting regimes, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789 – 1848* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 54 – 56; and “Bastille Day, 14 July,” *Élysée Palace*, accessed May 20, 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/french-republic/bastille-day-14-july>.

The current Eritrean trend of “canceling” May 24th lacks this intellectual depth. It is a form of political self-mutilation. To refuse to celebrate the day we became a sovereign people is to suggest that our 30-year struggle was for a single man or a single party, rather than for the existence of the nation itself.

The Neo-Unionist Trap: Mourning the Colonial State

The most disturbing aspect of this boycott is its alignment with external interests. Historically, groups that refuse to celebrate a nation’s independence are usually those who mourn the *loss* of the prior colonial order. In Australia, Indigenous activists label January 26 “Invasion Day” because it marks the loss of their sovereignty (Reynolds 2021, 112). In Vietnam, the overseas diaspora marks “April 30 or Black April” because it represents the collapse of their former state (Hagopian 2011, 45).

In the Eritrean context, however, those who attack May 24th are attacking the very sovereignty that saved them from Ethiopian annexation. On the ground, we observe a chilling trend: those who most vocally condemn the celebration of Eritrean independence are often the same individuals who align themselves with the expansionist rhetoric of the current Abiy Ahmed government in Ethiopia.

By labeling patriots as “traitors,” these extremists are acting as “Neo-Unionists.” They are effectively mourning the colonial state of Ethiopia and signaling a willingness to return to a time when Eritrea was a mere province. This is not “opposition” to a regime; it is “opposition” to the existence of Eritrea as a sovereign state. They have allowed their hatred for the dictator to morph into a hatred for the country, a psychological shift that serves no one but those who wish to see Eritrea dismantled.

The Way Out: Reclaiming the Narrative

To heal this “cancer” in the opposition camp, we must adopt a more sophisticated and patriotic political strategy. We must decouple the flag from the leader. Reclaiming May 24th is, in itself, a revolutionary act. It is a statement that the nation belongs to the people, and the regime is merely an obstacle to the nation's progress.

We must propose a “People’s Independence” protocol:

Celebrate the Martyrs: Shift the focus from government parades to the individual sacrifices of the tens of thousands who died for sovereignty.

Celebrate the Unfinished Promise: Use May 24th to demand the implementation of the 1997 Constitution. This makes the day a platform for democracy, not a celebration of the status quo.

Expose the Neo-Unionist Rhetoric: We must call out those who use “anti-regime” slogans as a cover for pro-Ethiopian expansionism.

Conclusion

Independence Day is a landmark of human dignity. For Eritreans, it represents the end of a century of colonial degradation. To treat this day as “regime property” is an act of intellectual bankruptcy that only empowers the dictator by granting him total ownership of our past.

Let us celebrate the 35th anniversary with a clear conscience. We do not celebrate for the men in the palaces of Asmara; we celebrate for the mothers in Nakfa, the students in Sawa, and the martyrs in the soil. May 24th is our heritage. It is our reconquest. It is the People's Mandate. Anyone who tells you otherwise is not fighting for a free Eritrea – they are mourning a colonial past that we fought too hard to leave behind.

References

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