

Eritrea's new dawn

With reports of chronic famine in Ethiopia, a brutal civil war in southern Sudan and Somalia's tragic disintegration, optimism in the Horn of Africa is rare. But next week, more than a million people in Eritrea and tens of thousands in exile will finally realise a long-cherished goal that may herald an upturn for the region. Voters are expected to endorse full political independence for Eritrea in a referendum, a century after the Italians carved it from the Red Sea coast, and 40 years after the area, then under British mandate, was federated with Ethiopia.

Few doubt the vote will legitimise a widely held consensus. The two-day referendum, which is being monitored by a small UN mission (including four British observers), will at last resolve a troubled border dispute. Independence was a central goal for the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF), which fought for three decades before finally driving President Mengistu's troops out of Addis Ababa in 1991, helped by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

Throughout the conflict, the EPLF's dream of sovereignty was stymied by international fears that Eritrea's secession would lead to "balkanisation". Major powers, including Britain, supported Ethiopian regimes against Eritrea. The Organisation of African Unity condemned the struggle. But now the EPLF, which has formed the Provisional Government of Eritrea (PGE), is set to receive more than £88 million for reconstruction from aid agencies and the World Bank.

Funds are desperately needed. During the war, the EPLF lost more than 60,000 fighters. Eritrea's infrastructure was shattered, and droughts have forced more than 80 per cent of its citizens on to food aid. The PGE must also prepare to accommodate more than 750,000 refugees, many returning from settlements in southern Sudan.

The PGE anticipates that funds promised by aid agencies will not meet the £1.3 billion needed to bring the country back to its pre-war industrial state. Haile Woldense, the economic development and cooperation secretary, says aid is an immediate palliative, but not the answer. "If it is available, foreign support is good, but we cannot have programmes based on the expectations of foreign support," he says. To promote economic self-sufficiency, the PGE has already designated seven factories for privatisation; shares in another six will soon be on offer.

But however economic development and self-sufficiency are reconciled, Eritrea's cohesive national identity sounds a note of hope in the Horn.

Julie Wheelwright

When Waseda, one of the top private universities in Japan, recently announced plans to raise tuition fees, the lack of student retaliation provided the media with food for thought. Despite the overwhelming evidence that today's students are more interested in their next TV/car/stereo than in collective action, commentators seemed disappointed that the decision provoked only minor strikes and token pickets. One Waseda official's response was typical: "When students went on strike before, there were lively debates on campus. But today most students leave campus as soon as they finish their work."

Given the rampant materialism and political corruption of Japanese society in the 1990s, it is not surprising that there is widespread nostalgia for the heady days of populist 1960s activism, when students were impoverished, idealistic and had causes to fight for. This legacy of anti-authoritarianism and belief in freedom of speech still lingers in academia, which is one reason why the presence of the left-wing extremist groups Chukaku and Kakumaru is tolerated on campus. It is not that the universities approve of the activities of these groups—which include terrorism—but they prefer to keep the police out of it until blood is actually shed.

Both Kakumaru ("revolutionary Marxist faction") and Chukaku ("middle-core faction") emerged as distinct organisations when the Revolutionary Communist League disintegrated in the early 1970s. As strident anti-imperialists, they singled out the emperor system and the postwar US-Japanese Security Treaty for vilification, and built up campus power-bases as the moderate student movement declined. Fighting between the two factions for campus control has so far caused the deaths of 87 of their members. The resulting carve-up sees Waseda dominated by Kakumaru, and Chukaku holding the reins of power at Kyoto University.

To the outsider, the difference in ideology between these two Trotskyite groups would seem too insignificant to merit dying for; but members take their identity very seriously, down to the colour of the crash helmets they wear during on-campus manoeuvres. Chukaku—who prefer to operate as a small, elite unit working to hasten civil war—wear white helmets and arm themselves with bamboo sticks, while Kakumaru—who believe expanding their group is the route to revolution—wear red helmets and carry steel pipes. In addition to this colourful riot gear, both groups don dark glasses and bandit-style scarves, giving them the appearance of two armies of remotely controlled alien robots, devoid of individuality.

But the setup is not merely to intimidate; it also serves to defeat the seedily raincoated

photographer on permanent undercover assignment at the university gates in his attempts to build up a photofile of the dissidents. His blacklist is reportedly circulated around Japanese companies (courtesy of the National Security Police).

At Kyoto University, where Kakumaru still maintains a minority presence, both factions emerge at regular intervals in groups of between five and 20 to march in military file across the grounds in time to megaphone exhortations of "Revolt now!" It is common practice for them to stake out a position near the central clock tower, where they can watch for rival spies. But although Chukaku's 30 or so members maintain a high profile, haranguing students for hours on end through primitive loudspeakers ("Stand together with the people of China and Korea to fight Japanese imperialism!"), most members of the university ignore them. "You can't argue with them," commented one final-year student. "They are prepared to sacrifice their lives to prove themselves right, and they have absolutely no interest in armchair debate!"

One favoured tactic is to disrupt lectures, which generally means thunderous hammering on the classroom door; a loud revolutionary

cheer on gaining entry; impassioned tirades delivered at full pitch; and finally, rapid retreat. During the disruption, an unspoken protocol is observed. Students either listen or leave the room, and the lecturer stands back while the helmets have their say, continuing the lecture after their departure. One unfortunate

lecturer who attempted to agree that Japan should not be shipping plutonium round the world found herself receiving torrents of abuse for not doing anything about it.

The two factions, both of which are directed by bureaucracies in Tokyo, probably have just a few hundred members across the whole of Japan. Yet their actions have become notorious. Chukaku recently timebombed the houses of two defence officials, and there have been periodic rocket-bomb attacks on the Imperial Palace. (Though these have so far caused only superficial damage, security is being stepped up in preparation for the Crown Prince's wedding in June.) Chukaku members also infiltrate what they see as "opportunist" civil movements, such as anti-nuclear groups, attempting to convert them to the revolutionary cause.

There is something surreal, indeed almost farcical, about the antics of Chukaku and Kakumaru. But both groups seem happily unaware of their own absurdity. And in the context of the thoughtless consumerism of the average Japanese University student, their revolutionary militarism can even glow with a kind of crazed integrity.

Jane Hughes

On campus, the two factions look like armies of remote-controlled alien robots