



No War, No Peace: Life and Death in Eritrea

By Makeda Saba



Eritrea was an Italian colony from 1890 to 1941. Following the defeat of Italian forces by the Allied Forces during World War Two, Britain occupied Eritrea until its federation to Ethiopia in 1952. However, by 1962 Emperor Haile Selassie had annexed Eritrea, declaring that it was part of Ethiopia, and in this way ending the federation.

In 1961, a year before the annexation, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) started an armed struggle for independence from Ethiopia. The armed struggle continued for 30 years against successive Ethiopian regimes until 1991, when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), who had replaced the ELF, defeated the Ethiopian forces in Eritrea. Eritrea became formally independent following a United Nations-supervised referendum in 1993.

From the beginning, the EPLF (now the People's Front of Democracy and Justice - PFDJ)'s strategy for achieving liberation and national unity was for it to dominate all social, political, and economic spaces. The PFDJ implemented a highly centralised and opaque two-track system of administration: an unseen, powerful inner circle of elites; and public structures that projected an image of egalitarian self-sufficiency. This centralised and opaque model of governance continues today.

Since liberation, PFDJ has banned all opposition parties and treats all non-mass-movement organisations (i.e. independent civil society) with suspicion; hence there are no independent national civil society organisations in the country. Without any consultation, the PFDJ has nationalised all

land; it has established a unitary form of government, and it has changed the administrative boundaries within the country. Despite these totalitarian tendencies, in 1994, the PFDJ, as the Provisional Government of Eritrea, set up the Constitutional Assembly to draft the Constitution. The task was completed in 1997. But the Constitution remains unimplemented.

Border dispute

In 1998, hostilities and war between Eritrea and Ethiopia resumed over border demarcation issues, particularly in the town of Bademe. By December 2000, the two countries signed the Algiers Peace Agreement and established the Eritrea Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC) to determine the limits of their shared border.

The EEBC delivered its border decision on 13th April 2002, placing the town of Bademe, the flashpoint of the border conflict, on the Eritrean side. The Ethiopian government contested the allocation of Bademe to Eritrea. Therefore, a situation of “no war, no peace” ensued between the two countries as President Isaias Afewerki refused any dialogue on the issue because the parties had agreed that the decision of the EEBC was final and binding.

President Isaias Afwerki, who is also the chair of the PFDJ, took advantage of the strained relationship with Ethiopia to:

1. indefinitely postpone the implementation of the 1997 Constitution as well as the general elections;
2. arrest and disappear dissenters, especially University of Asmara students and the members of the government known as G15 who promoted a democratisation process (2001);
3. close the independent media and arrest journalists (2001);
4. abolish the Eritrean National Assembly (i.e. the Eritrean Parliament) (2002);
5. maintain a high level of militarisation of the country.

To maintain a high level of militarisation, the government vertically integrated the National Service to the National Development Programme (i.e. the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme) and to Education. This integration allows the Eritrean government to move students into the National Service and the National Development Programme from high schools (i.e. Grade 12) and indefinitely extends the period of service of the conscripts, hence taking full control over the working population.

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Through the integration of the National Service into the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme and Education, the government has limited the citizenship rights of conscripts who while in service cannot: legally obtain a mobile phone or SIM card; get or renew a business licence; access land; and access travel documents and exit visas. Deserters or objectors are denied any rights and cannot access state services. Thus, the official Eritrean concept of citizenship is intrinsically linked to conscription and the fulfilment of National Service duties.

The National Service is a combination of military training and civil service, working for little pay in non-military activities such as agriculture, the construction of roads, houses and buildings and mining. The Warsay National Development Programme relies on the deployment of the National

Service (Warsay) and defence personnel (Yikaalo) as a labour force. The programme operates under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defence.

Since 2003, the government has closed the University of Asmara (the only university in the country). It has also required that all Eritrean students complete Grade 12 at the Sawa military training camp. Students who have not completed their final year of secondary school at Sawa and have not sat for the National School Certificat, cannot access college education. The PFDJ has replaced Asmara University with regional colleges, which are administered jointly by an academic director and a [military](#) director.

National Service conscripts work for an indefinite period on development projects, the administration of ministries and local authorities, as well as in PFDJ-owned businesses. Such work is carried out for very little pay and in conditions that a UN [Commission of Inquiry](#) on Human Rights in Eritrea described as “forced labour”.

The Eritrean authorities’ control over the people includes the restriction of movement both internally and externally. Therefore, all Eritreans aged five and above cannot leave the country without an exit visa. The government will not issue an exit visa to any Eritrean above the age of five, irrespective of their situation (i.e. family reunification, health, etc.)

The government’s control over the Eritrean people is a political, social and economic process of deprivation and human rights violations for which it refuses to take any responsibility. It is systematically [impoverishing](#) the population. Therefore, Eritrean youth face having to choose between the life of slave labour or exile. They describe their [situation](#) as slavery: *“[The] situation in Eritrea and long time ago with slaves is the same. We build the houses of the elites without money. We work on farms of government officials for no money. If you are educated, they deploy you to anywhere...for a short time, you can tolerate it...but this is for life.”*

Faced with accusations of human rights violations, the government reverts to “threat” mode. It labels any reference to human rights violations as “lies” and “ploys” of its enemies to undermine the state. The PFDJ Head of Political Affairs, Mr Yemane Gebreab, [dismissed](#) the findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human rights by saying: “...[it is] really laughable.....There is no basis to the claims of the Commission of Inquiry...”

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In addition to taking control over the working population, the government also took control of the economic sectors, including finance, import and export, transport and construction. It has achieved control over the economic sphere through a process of unfair competition with private business, facilitated by the fact that it does not pay taxes and does not comply with labour, environmental, and other regulatory requirements. Also, as the regime has control over the working population, it has unlimited access to a large pool of free labour, effecting a net transfer of the workforce away from the private sector. This policy of moving human resources to labour sites identified and controlled by the government has crippled the private sector, especially the agricultural industry, which still relies to a large extent on subsistence farming.

The government’s control and domination of the economy have not increased economic activity or productivity. The economy is stagnating, further weakening the private sector and restricting [economic](#) opportunities for Eritreans.

Notwithstanding PFDJ's rhetoric, Eritrean youth experience the state as an albatross around their necks. They understand the state in terms of [spy](#) networks; as a human rights violator curtailing civil, political, and economic rights and as the source of torture and deprivation. They see it as the source of all restrictions and deprivations. This is the reason why they flee the country.

Peace Agreement with Ethiopia and its aftermath

In April 2018, the Ethiopia Prime Minister Abiy announced the acceptance of the EEBC decision, in particular the allocation of the flashpoint town of Bademe to Eritrea. In this way, he started a process that led to the signing of the Ethiopia Eritrea Peace Agreement in July 2018, thus ending two decades of "no war, no peace". The land borders opened to much jubilation in 2018. However, by April 2019, the Eritrean government had closed them all. So far, the only achievements of the Peace Agreement are the reopening of embassies and telecommunication lines and the resumption of flights.

The signing of the Peace Agreement immediately raised expectations that there would be a normalisation of relations between the two states. It also raised expectations regarding reforms within Eritrea that would lead to a reduction in the number of Eritrean youth fleeing the country. Soon after the signing of the Peace Agreement, the Eritrean Catholic priest [Aba Teklemichael](#) pointed to the sweeping reforms implemented by Prime Minister Abiy in Ethiopia, and urged the Eritrean government to also undertake necessary reforms in Eritrea and to democratise the government. By Easter 2019, the Eritrean Catholic bishops were also calling for a constitutional government and the rule of law. They also encouraged the government to release political prisoners and start a process of reconciliation within the country. However, to date there have been no reforms in the country, a state of affairs confirmed by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Eritrea who at the start of this year [reported](#) that she had: ".....no tangible evidence of a meaningful and substantive improvement in the situation of human rights in Eritrea".

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The ongoing peace process is not transparent; it has mostly remained an elite political level agreement unable to deliver on the economic front or to resolve the issue of Bademe as both Prime Minister Abiy and President Isaias Afewerki have marginalised the Tigray People's Liberation Front ([TPLF](#)) for political motives. The Eritrean government has increasingly identified the Tigray State and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as an existential threat to Eritrea, thus justifying the maintenance of a high level of militarisation. Consequently, Eritrean youth continue to flee the country. In 2018, [UNHCR](#) ranked Eritrea as the ninth-largest refugee-sending state in the world.

Ailing health sector

The totalitarian agenda of the Eritrean government did not spare the health sector either. The task of reconstructing the Eritrean health system after the liberation struggle and following the 1998-2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia border war was monumental. It was an undertaking that the late and former Minister of Health Saleh Meki undertook with passion, commitment, and zest from 1997 to 2009 when Ms Amina Nurhusein replaced him.

In his efforts rebuild the Eritrean health system, [Saleh Meki](#) sought to establish strategic partnerships with critical international health institutions, private practitioners, faith-based

organisations, such as the Catholic Church, as well as professional members of the Eritrean diaspora. The former Minister of Health carried on with his efforts despite the enormous pressure to conform to the dictates of President Isaias Afwerki, and the concerns generated by the closure of international non-governmental organisations, as well as the restriction of movement imposed on all organisations working in the country. Against all the odds, he re-established the medical school known as the Orotta Medical School.

Saleh Meki died on 2nd October 2009. Soon after his death, all the medical missions of international organisations that he had worked so hard to bring to Eritrea ended. By 2011 the Eritrean Government forced the [closure](#) of all private medical clinics. And, by 2018 a total of 29 Catholic health facilities providing maternal and child health support and serving some of the more remote communities in the country were closed. The seizure and closure, of the Catholic health facilities was carried out in complete disregard to the health and safety of the [patients](#), most of whom were left to fend for themselves.

There was no clear justification for the closure of the private health facilities. However, the closure of the Catholic health facilities was justified as an enforcement of the 1995 Proclamation to standardise and articulate religious institutions (Proclamation No 73 of 1995). The Proclamation prohibits religious bodies from engaging in [social and welfare services](#). This position is contested by all faith-based organisations, especially since there was no consultation in the development of the law. The Eritrean Catholic bishops' [communication](#) with the government on the seizure and closure of their health facilities point out that the facilities operated by abiding with all the requirements of the Ministry of Health.

Poor COVID-19 response

The closure of health facilities has reduced the number of available beds and the overall capacity of the health system. Hence, Eritrea, with a score of 0.434, was ranked 182nd out of 189 countries by the 2019 Human Development Index. The low Human Development Index combined with a hospital bed capacity of 7 beds for 10,000 people, and no available data as to the number of health professionals (i.e. doctors and nurses) available per 10,000 people, suggests that the situation might be even more dire. And the poor connectivity of the country (i.e. mobile phones, internet, broadbands) means that the country's capacity to deal with pandemics such as COVID-19 is [low](#).

The low capacity of the Eritrean health system to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic was also of concern to the diaspora Eritrean Healthcare Professionals Network ([EHPN](#)), which urged the Eritrean government to immediately implement the World Health Organization (WHO) and Centre for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines and advisories to contain the pandemic. EHPN expressed concern that the country lacks the necessary prerequisites to implement hygiene measures because: *"There is a shortage of water, disinfectants, laboratories that carry out diagnostic tests and medical professionals, including nursing and technical staff. There is also a lack of functioning intensive care units with adequate ventilation equipment needed to properly treat patients. The reality is that many Eritreans will not be able to seek and obtain medical treatment in their homeland or neighbouring countries. In short, the Eritrean health system is not adequately prepared for COVID 19."*

Fears regarding the poor state of the Eritrean health system were further heightened when the Eritrean government refused COVID-19 emergency supplies [donated](#) by the Chinese billionaire Jack Ma and his Alibaba Group. Mr Hagos "Kisha" Gebrehiwet, the head of Economic Affairs in the ruling PFDJ, [justified](#) the rejection of Jack Ma's donation by saying that it was unsolicited.

The government's willingness to reject donations has, however, launched a COVID-19 appeal among citizens. The appeal is remarkable for the lack of information as to how the funds raised will be used.

There is no single COVID-19 emergency response bank account designated for the appeal; hence, in the diaspora, funds are collected in different foreign bank accounts set up by Eritrean embassies. Consequently, there is a real danger that the funds will never enter the country and will disappear into the government's opaque offshore financial system. Also, there is no information as to how the Ministry of Health will use the funds. [Reports](#) by Eritrean human rights activists say the appeal is [coerced](#), confirming the lack of transparency and accountability of the fundraising process.

There is also no transparency in the COVID-19 data that the Eritrean government is providing. It reported the first four COVID-positive cases on the 21st and 23rd of March. One patient was an Eritrean national resident in Norway, and the other three positive patients were Eritrean nationals returning from Dubai. Because of these events, by 26th March, the government banned all commercial passenger flights for two weeks. It also closed schools. And, by 1st April, it imposed [COVID-19](#) lockdown measures.

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The lockdown measures did not include the closure of the Sawa military training camp or the release of political prisoners. The government has recently [released](#) 27 Christian prisoners, who were imprisoned without charge or trial for as long as sixteen years. Their release is conditional on their family lodging their property deeds with the government as a guarantee that the people released will not leave the country.

While maintaining a strict lockdown, the Eritrean government has allowed mass gatherings to celebrate the graduation of the 33rd round of Sawa military training camp graduates as well as the transfer of Grade 12 conscripts to the facility.

From 1st April to 18th April, the Eritrean government reported 39 COVID positive cases, all linked to Eritreans visiting or returning from their travels. Then, for two months, there were no new cases reported. After that, the number of COVID-positive cases increased, and by the 12th of October, Eritrea reported a total of 414 COVID-positive patients and 372 recoveries.

Though the government makes repeated references to quarantine centres, it has not shared a list of the centres, their location or capacity. It is also not reporting the daily number of COVID tests. Nor has it reported any COVID-related deaths or any community transmission of the virus. It continues to attribute all the new COVID cases to Eritreans returning through "irregular land and sea routes" from Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti and Yemen. But there is no explanation as to why so many nationals are travelling despite the government's strict lockdown procedure that prohibits all movement between towns and that restricts the movement of any vehicles, including buses and taxis, which require movement permits. Such permits are not easy to obtain.

Finally, there are only five incidents of Ministry of Information reporting the number of individuals tested or in quarantine:

1. [3,000](#) quarantined - 8th May 2020;
2. [5,270](#) quarantined - 3rd June 2020;
3. [7,158](#) nationals returned through irregular land and sea routes. Not clearly stated but the

- implication is that they were all quarantined - 14th June 2020;
4. [18,000](#) citizens allegedly returned through irregular land and sea routes. This movement occurred in the last four months. Again, not clearly stated but the implication is that they were all quarantined - the 12th October 2020;
 5. [41,100](#) tests - 12th October 2020.

In a [recent](#) report, the Eritrean Ministry of Information asserted that the rate of COVID infection in the country was “*a paltry 0.02%*”, based on one (1) positive result during 4659 random tests done in Asmara”. The data shared by the government (41,100 tests and 414 COVID-positive cases) suggests that the rate of infection is just 1 per cent.

The COVID lockdown in Eritrea, like in other countries, has brought economic activities to a standstill. The difference between Eritrea and other countries is that the Eritrean economy was already on its knees before the lockdown and the Eritrean government has not made any attempt - beyond extorting donations from its citizens - to alleviate the suffering of the people with economic support packages. Consequently, Eritreans are hungry and desperate and have started to ignore strict lockdowns. They are on the streets selling all kinds of goods. Women are out in the streets, making tea and cooking food for sale. Family and friends describe Asmara, the capital city, as full of mobile tea shops.

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The Eritrean Afars have, through the Red Sea Afar Human Rights Organisation (RSAHRO), issued a [press statement](#), describing their situation under lockdown as a: “... *siege imposed by the Eritrean regime on the citizens of the region.*”. They warn of the danger of hunger in their area. They also describe confiscation of boats, camels and supplies by the military, closed health centres, unprepared quarantine centres, as well as lack of medical supplies. The human rights organisation also accuse General Tekle Manjus of confiscating trucks of emergency food sent from Asmara for distribution among the Afar.

The Afar coastal area is not the only area in danger of hunger. The information from Eritrea is that hunger is very real all over the country. The government media and social media accounts do not report the danger of hunger or any of the difficulties that the people are facing during this COVID-19 emergency. Their postings give the impression that Eritrea is doing just fine.

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