Where is your Brother? Religious Leaders in Eritrea Offer a Counter Narrative to Totalitarianism

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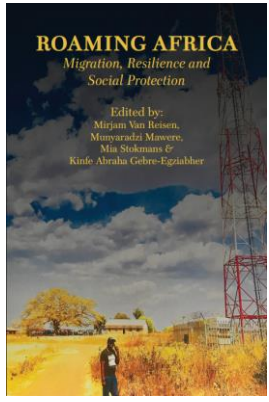

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Makeda Saba

Introduction

Referred to as an 'open-air prison' and the 'North Korea of Africa', Eritrea is ruled by an iron fist. The regime has taken full control of the civil and political space, including that of religious communities. In this extreme situation, the religious leaders in Eritrea have risen up to pose a different narrative to the one of totalitarian rule. By asking 'where is your brother?' they have shown that there is a space that the government can't own and thoughts that they cannot control. By reminding people that we are human beings with a responsibility to care for each other they are calling the government to account for the atrocities it has committed and standing up for people's right to family, to pursue a living and to live in dignity.

On 12 October 2019, the Nobel Prize Committee awarded the Prize for that year to the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed Ali. This focused the spotlight on the peace process between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which started in June 2018. However, what has transpired as a consequence of the internationally proclaimed step by Prime Minister Abiy to open a process seeking peace with Eritrea? In October 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Eritrea congratulated Eritrea and Ethiopia on the Peace Process, but also affirmed that, irrespective of the peace process, the human rights situation in Eritrea remains grim and crimes against humanity continue to be perpetuated. The Rapporteur concluded that while: "The achievement of peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia must be duly celebrated. However, Eritrean authorities

must urgently embrace and implement bold measures to strengthen the protection of and respect for human rights, justice and accountability" (OHCHR, 2018).

The unexpected Peace Agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea concluded in July 2018 immediately raised expectations of a reduction in the number of refugees from Eritrea. Unfortunately, this has not materialised (UNHCR, 2017; 2018a; 2018b). Since 2018, Eritrea has increased in ranking from seventh to ninth largest refugee sending country in the world (UNHCR, 2018c). The overall population of the country is unknown, but estimated to be anywhere between 3.5 million (World Population Review, 2019) and 6 million (Plechner, 2019). Eritrea also has the highest number of refugees per capita who have fled the country (Connell, 2018). According to UNHCR (2018c), officially registered refugees from Eritrea stood at 507,300 at the end of 2018, an increase from the end of 2017 when this population stood at 486,200.[1] These figures do not take into account the unregistered (forced) migrants in Ethiopia.

This chapter examines the reasons for the exodus of Eritrean youth and other refugees and the attempts by religious leaders to preserve spaces that are not controlled by the government. It sets the exodus in the context of the developments in the country during the first two decades since its liberation from Ethiopia in 1991. It sheds light on the social and political structure that the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) has established and its consequences for the people, particularly the youth. This chapter investigates the control Eritrea's highest authorities have over Kingdon's three policy streams – political, problem and policy – and, thereby, agenda setting in the country. However, in every environment, there are policy entrepreneurs who, sometimes at great personal risk, interact with the

[1] The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that "Most Eritrean refugees (57%) were hosted by Ethiopia (174,000) and Sudan (114,500), but many also found protection farther away, such as in Germany (55,300), Switzerland (34,100), Sweden (27,700), Norway (15,200), the Netherlands (14,900), Israel (14,500) and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and northern Ireland (United Kingdom) (13,000)" (UNHCR, 2018c, p. 17).

policy agenda and attempt to take advantage of any policy window opening to influence the formulation of policies. This chapter asks: *What is the role of religious leaders as policy entrepreneurs in Eritrea and how do they engage with the policy agenda to put human rights and the wellbeing of the Eritrean people on the policy agenda?*

The next section gives a quick overview of the situation in Eritrea, including the ruling regime and the political narrative. The chapter then introduces the theoretical concepts used – Kingdon's policy streams and the idea of a political myth – which are used as lenses through which to understand agenda setting in Eritrea and the role of religious leaders. The methodology of the research is then presented. The section that follows examines the historical context of governance and the legitimisation of power in Eritrea through the ideological narratives that framed its independence. The current political narrative is then explored to explain the relationship between those in power and the subjects of this power. Having examined the key elements through which power is defined, the investigation then focuses on the central policy of the government, namely, National Service, which is integrated with the national development policy and education. We then look at the restrictions imposed by the government on the movement of people and the resistance to this, including fleeing the country. In the next section, the religious leaders in Eritrea are studied as policy entrepreneurs in the context of their contribution to an alternative narrative and their role in agenda setting. Finally, some brief conclusions are drawn.

Background

The PFDJ is the only political party in Eritrea and it has near total control of the country. Its nation-building project is geared towards neutralising any opposition and attaining total control over its citizens, as it was during the liberation struggle (Mengisteab & Yohannes, 2005). To achieve this, the PFDJ has established a new social order based on the political myth of struggle against all odds and self-sacrifice for the nation.

This political narrative has raised the status of former liberation fighters (*tegadelay*) to 'citizens' and established the leadership of the PFDJ as political elites. The PFDJ has centralised all government administration within the office of the president, which is run by a small group of political elites trusted by him. In this new social order, not all Eritreans are citizens. Only members of the PFDJ and armed forces, are considered 'true citizens', while the rest are considered masses to be moulded into 'true citizens' (Woldemikael, 2013).

By redefining citizenship based on struggle and sacrifice, elites within the PFDJ have gained complete control over the policy agenda. Eritrea is a one-man, one-party state without an active constitution, where civil liberties, such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and space for civil society are severely restricted and controlled. To consolidate its position of total control, based on the narrative of 'self-sacrifice', the government (i.e., the PFDJ) has implemented integrated policies for National Service, national development (the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme), and education (Dorman, 2003b; Van Reisen & Gerrima, 2016). The integration of National Service with development and education has officially extended National Service from the statutory 18 months to indefinitely, meaning that young people in Eritrea face a lifetime of compulsory and continuous service to their country. As a result of such policies, since 2002, young Eritreans have been leaving the country in vast numbers. In 2001/2002, there was a reported increase in the number of people leaving (UNHCR, 2006). Combined with Eritrea's restrictions on the movement of people abroad, these policies have pushed more youth into the arms of traffickers and smugglers (Amnesty International, 2015).

Theoretical framework: Agenda setting and political myths

This chapter analyses the political environment in Eritrea through the lens of Kingdon's (2014) multiple streams framework of policy development and Bottici's (2007) political myth.

Kingdon's proposes three streams to describe and understand the process of public policy agenda setting:

- Problem stream: This stream is made up of public problems requiring government action to resolve. Usually such problems reach policymakers because of specific events or crises.
- Political stream: In this stream it is expected to see factors that influence the body of politics, such as change in government.
- Policy stream: In this stream it is expected to see the participation of the public and civil society, as well as experts who are analysing the situation and proposing solutions.

Each of the streams flow independently until a 'policy window' opens, after which three streams come together to resolve an issue. According to Kingdon, the opening of policy windows may be triggered by: "apparently unrelated external factors focusing events, such as crises, accidents, or the presence or absence of Policy Entrepreneurs both within and outside the government" (Kingdon, 2014). So called 'policy entrepreneurs' engage by: "coupling policy problems and policy solutions together with political opportunities" (Béland & Howlett, 2016, p. 223).

The policies of the Government of Eritrea are linked to the experience of the liberation struggle and the associated political myth of struggle, martyrdom and self-sacrifice for the nation. In this chapter, the term 'political myth' is understood in the terms proposed by Chiara Bottici, who describes it as: "work on a common narrative by members of a social group (or society), to make significance of their experience and deeds" (Bottici, 2007, p. 133). This chapter proposes that the liberation struggle generated a powerful and dramatic narrative of struggle against all odds and self-sacrifice of the individual for the nation, which links the liberation experience to the present and projects it into the future as the struggle to build a nation. According to Bottici (2007), a political myth must have 'purpose'; therefore, the common narrative of a political myth is not just any

narrative, it is a dramatic narrative that is shared and connects past, present and future events. It must have a prophetic sense to it and, specifically, it has to have significance for a group of people. It is a political story that talks about power, resources, and things that fundamentally matter.

Using the lenses of the multiple stream framework and the political myth, it is proposed that the PFDJ is using the 'liberation struggle' experience and narrative of 'self-sacrifice' to maintain control of the country. The narrative used during the liberation struggle has become the foundation of the nation-building project. It is used by the government to justify the high level of centralisation of power and control over all aspects of Eritrean life.

Methodology

The study combines a historical and ethnographic research design. The study is based on analysis of a collection of secondary data, included desk reviews of documents. An extensive library of policy documents is available to the author and was analysed for the desk review. In addition, qualitative research was conducted, consisting of the collection of both primary and secondary data. This included immersion in Eritrea, where the author worked. Key primary data was collected over a period of 8 weeks in 2016. To collect primary data, the snowball technique was used to obtain referrals of participants for the interviews and discussions. Conversations were held with various people in Eritrea of various ages and genders, and from different backgrounds. In addition, seven Skype interviews (with six men and one woman) were conducted with Eritreans in different locations (i.e., Ethiopia, Sweden, Norway). The individuals who participated, represent a cross-section of Eritreans, including some who chose to leave the country from 2001 to 2018, when the last interview was held. For reasons of security this chapter has been written under a pseudonym. The real identity of the author is known to the editors.

Liberation and the creation of a political myth

The Eritrean Government's revolutionary model of social transformation is influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology on the reorganisation of society and control of the means of production by the state. The purported aim of the 'elite' inner circle is the liberation and advancement of the masses, which is achieved by total control. According to Kebede in this undertaking, the elites are not taking on a representative role of particular interests or constituencies, they are creating:

> …. *[a] tutorial power: in the name of a class or large sections of the people, conceived unfit to conquer political hegemony, an enlightened group aspires to or seizes power. It claims to have the mandate for tutorship until the class or the people become mature enough to assume the task of self-government.* (Kebede, 2003, p. 9)

African revolutionary leaders have historically used socialist theories not only in the organisation of their respective revolutionary movements, but also in an attempt to modernise Africa (Nkrumah, 1975, cited in Serequeberhan, 1989, p. 8). In 1983, in a New York Times article, Colwell described the situation in the following terms:

Socialism of one kind or another took root in Africa in tandem with decolonisation, a reaction to what was perceived as the oppression of foreign capitalists who ruled and exploited them from distant cities. It was a reflex that seemed to fit Marx's division of the world into oppressors and the oppressed. An African Brand of socialism. (Colwell, 1983)

The Black radical freedom and independence movements of the late 1950s and 1960s, analysed the colonial experience in terms of the Western appropriation of Africa's means of production (Robinson, 1983, p. 72). For the students who established the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF), the predecessor to the PFDJ, the adoption of the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary approach was based on frustration, not only at the annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia, but also at the ineffectiveness of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). This led

them to conclude that the only way Eritrea could be liberated, and its perceived 'backwardness' reversed, was through a socialist revolution led by them (Kebede, 2003). This approach legitimised the political ambitions and aspirations of the student leaders and provided a strong backing for the elitism that has developed since (Kebede, 2003).

To achieve their purpose, in 1970, the founders of the EPLF established the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), a communist party. The objective of EPRP (which in 1986 became the Eritrean People's Socialist Party) was to ensure that the liberation struggle would have the appropriate coordination, organisation and political orientation. According to Serequeberhan:

> *The EPLF was established as the embodiment of nationalist efforts to overcome the obstacles created by the historically incompetent ELF leadership. In establishing itself the EPLF did so by undertaking a radical critique of the history of the struggle up to that point…* (Serequeberhan, 1989, pp. 28–29)

The EPRP became a tool for the centralisation of power by a secretive, elite, collective leadership that managed to unify the dissident factions in the ELF and guide the EPLF's liberation efforts (Connell, 2005).

The EPLF considered the liberation of Eritrea as a revolution to free the masses and redesign society (Weldehaimanot & Taylor, 2011). From its inception, the EPLF (now the PFDJ) thought to achieve its goal of liberation of the masses through the total control of all aspects of the economic, social and political life of the people to be liberate. The intention of the PFDJ is to exercise such power until the masses become mature enough to assume the task of self-government (Serequeberhan, 1989).

In 1971, the EPLF leadership produced a document called *NHnan Elaman* (Our Struggle and its Aims) (Weldehaimanot & Taylor, 2011). This document is also known as the 'Eritrean Manifesto'. The Manifesto lays the foundation for the political narrative of a 'struggle

against all odds', of Eritrea surrounded by enemies, and of self-sacrifice of the individual for the nation. According to the Manifesto:

> *[….] Our present struggle against Ethiopian oppressors is nothing more than an extension of our militant Eritrean struggle against foreign oppressors. We are sacrificing our lives to free our people from the shackles of Haile Selassie [Emperor of Ethiopia] and his master [US imperialism] to attain independence for our country and to realise the self-reliant progress, of the Eritrean people […] a society where no economic exploitation or political oppression of man by man exists… [A prosperous] nation with educational, agricultural and industrial development based on a 'National United Front'* ... (Weldehaimanot & Taylor, 2011, pp. 569, 570, 582)

From the beginning, the EPLF strategy for achieving national unity and liberation and addressing the perceived social and economic backwardness of the country, caused by the colonial experience, was for the EPLF to dominate all social, political and economic spaces and all aspects of policy formulation and implementation.

The EPLF implemented a highly-centralised and opaque administration that continues to operate today (Buysse, Van Reisen & Van Soomeren, 2017). It works on a two-track system: an unseen, powerful, inner circle of elites and public structures projecting the image of egalitarian self-sufficiency. This approach is in line with Lenin's ideology, as described in his work *What is to be done?* (Lenin, 1987). For the EPLF, as with Lenin, it was not enough to achieve independence of a society that was considered backwards and holding on to "traditional, religious and social values". The revolution had to redesign society and create a new "progressive social order" (Mengisteab & Yohannes, 2005, p. 35). This process required not only the indoctrination of members of the armed forces, but also the mobilisation of the civilian population.

Prior to 1991, the EPLF was focused on liberation. After 1991, its focus shifted to nation building. The nation-building project borrowed concepts from the liberation struggle, such as 'struggle against all odds', 'martyrdom' and 'self-sacrifice' for the nation,

absorbing individuals within the political narrative of an Eritrea beset by multiple enemies and struggling against all odds (Dorman, 2003a; 2003b). The resumption of hostilities with Ethiopia, and the 'no war, no peace' status that followed, reinforced the narrative and the associated political myth of struggle against all odds (Bundegaard, 2004).

Post liberation, to correct what the EPLF perceived to be the social and economic 'backwardness' of the people, it continued to administer the state in a highly-centralised manner. It banned all opposition parties and treated all non-mass movement organisations (i.e., independent civil society) with suspicion and as usurpers of the people's sovereignty. It reacted to any challenge to its authority with force. In addition, without any consultation, it nationalised land (State of Eritrea, 1994), established a unitary form of government, and changed the administrative boundaries within Eritrea to establish Zobas (State of Eritrea, 1996). This approach deliberately ignored the fact that, despite colonisation, Eritrea has a history of self-administration (Tronvoll, 1998).

Political narrative: Martyrdom and self-sacrifice

The culture of martyrdom and sacrifice established in the post-independence period, transformed the concept of citizenship and the social contract between citizens and the Eritrean state. It is no longer a contract based on the protection of the rights of citizens (such as the protection of life and property), it is an expression of the willingness of Eritreans to sacrifice themselves in service of the nation (Bernal, 2017). This culture is based on the narrative of Eritrea as beset by multiple enemies opposed to its independence (Dorman, 2003a). However, through discipline and sacrifice the Eritrean people were able to defeat, without outside help, Ethiopia, a numerically superior enemy supported by a superpower, the Soviet Union (Kaplan, 2003, cited in Bundegaard, 2004, p. 36).

In the aftermath of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war (1998–2000), the PFDJ narrative of struggle and sacrifice for the nation focused on the

threat of Ethiopia. Seizing the opportunity presented by the continuation of hostility between the two countries, and building the narrative of multiple existential threats, the PFDJ indefinitely postponed the implementation of the 1997 Constitution, development of a multiparty system, and the national elections (Al Jazeera, 2008; Chapter 19, *Peace, but no Progress: Eritrea, an Unconstitutional State,* by Bereket Selassie & Mirjam Van Reisen). Instead, it centralised all political and economic power (Human Rights Concern Eritrea , 2018; Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2002), and proceeded with the implementation of a series of policies to ensure the deployment of the country's youth for nation building, thus retaining a high level of militarisation (an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 personnel) (AECID, 2007). In this way, the Government of Eritrea replicated the liberation experience of struggle, sacrifice and martyrdom: "In Eritrea, the expectation that the youth will defend the nation, and also serve the nation in peace time has been much more widespread" (Dorman, 2003a, p. 13).

Those who fail to participate in the government's nation-building activities are denied the rights and benefits of citizenship:

> *Groups which refused to participate in these programmes (i.e. Service Programmes) are denied the right to citizenship. The first group to resist national service was the small community of Jehovah's Witnesses. This led the government to claim that they had 'relinquished' their rights to citizenship by categorically and repeatedly refusing to recognise the state of Eritrea and its laws.* (Dorman, 2003a, p. 10)

The term citizen is used to refer to those who fought and sacrificed themselves for liberation: members of the PFDJ, armed service personnel and former liberation fighters (i.e., *tegadelay*). The masses (i.e., the *hafash*, and taxpayers or *gabar*) are citizens in the making. They constitute the majority, are considered to be backward and have not yet struggled and sacrificed for the nation. This group includes members of the National Service and the diaspora. Non-citizens are people who refuse to participate in the nation-building project (i.e., Jehovah's Witnesses, youth escaping National Service, and members of the opposition).

The experience of exclusion from citizenship is supported by the distinction between different classes of people in which only those loyal to the PFDJ can be qualified as citizens, who are protected by the regime and can participate in the political and economic life of the country and benefit from it. Those who are excluded from this status, are either forced to prove their allegiance through near-total obedience (the masses) or are denied Eritrean identity and recognition of citizenship and are totally excluded from any form of protection.

Nation-building: The integration of National Service, development and education

In 2001, following the arrest of 15 members of the government (known as the G15) who promoted a democratisation process, there was a crackdown followed by the incarceration of students from Asmara University. At the time 5,000 university students were arrested and taken to Wi'a and Gelaalo, two notorious military prisons, and accused of siding with the G15 (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017).

Subsequent to the 2001 arrests, National Service, which had started in 1994, was integrated with the education system. In Eritrea, 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, buildings, and mining. From 2002, National Service was linked to the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme. The objective of this programme is to secure the country's post-war economic rehabilitation and bring about radical change in all development sectors. The programme relies on the deployment of National Service (Warsay) defence force personnel (Yikaalo) as labour. All Warsay Yikaalo activities are carried out under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defence. Therefore, conscripts work for an indefinite period of time on development projects and the administration of ministries and local authorities, in many cases also working for government or PFDJ-owned businesses.

Such work is carried out in conditions that are considered to be forced labour (UN Human Rights Council, 2015).

In September 2003, the Ministry of Education announced the comprehensive reform of the national education system. The view of the government was that the existing education system was too academic and did not serve the country's development objectives (Ministry of Education, 2003, Article 31). Under this reform, Asmara University was closed, an additional year of high school was introduced (to be completed at the Sawa Warsay Yikaalo Military School), and higher education decentralised by establishing a network of regional colleges. Since the 2001 Asmara University student protest,[2] the view of the government is that the higher education offered by Asmara University is a troublesome and bourgeois and has nothing to contribute to the revolution. Hence, the University of Asmara was closed in 2003 and the building has since fallen into decay (Asmarino, 2017b).

Under this system students who have not completed their final year of school at Sawa and have not sat for the National School Certificate, cannot access a college education. The regional colleges subsequently developed are administered jointly by an academic director and a military director:

> *The Eritrean Institute of Technology at Mai Nefhi is located only a few kilometres South of Asmara. Built on an open field site, it feels isolated and remote. Run jointly by an academic vice director and an army colonel, Nefhi resembles a military camp more than a place of higher learning. Students, at least in theory need permission to leave campus, and in private conversation it's often referred to as the 'camp'.* (Müller, 2008, p. 122)

Through the integration of these policies, the government is recreating the liberation experience of fighters working for the nation. The effect of these policies is to move students into National Service

[2] This protest was over students being required to conduct research in the field without sufficient allowance for accommodation and food (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017; Dorman, 2003b).

and the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme earlier and indefinitely extend the period of service, taking full control over the working population.

At the same time as taking control over the working population, Eritrea has also taken control of economic sectors, including finance, imports and exports, transport, and construction. This was done through a process of unfair competition with private businesses, facilitated by the fact that the government does not pay taxes and does not comply with labour, environmental, and other regulatory requirements. Also, because of the control by the regime over its working population, the authorities have unlimited access to a large pool of free labour, effecting a transfer of labour away from the private sector and keeping it fully government controlled. This policy of moving labour away to labour sites identified and controlled by the government, has crippled the agricultural sector, which still relies to a large extent on subsistence farming (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). Kibreab, referring to the construction sector, summarises the situation as follows: "Since April 2006 only PFDJ firms are allowed to engage in construction activities, after private firms and individual entrepreneurs were banned from the construction industry as part of the government's crackdown on the private sector" (Kibreab, 2014, pp. 62–63).

The government's control and domination of the economy has not increased economic activity or productivity. In fact, the economy is stagnating, further weakening the private sector and restricting economic opportunities for Eritreans. According to the World Bank's economic review:

> *[Despite] recent growth, Eritrea remains one of the least developed countries in the world. Anecdotal evidence indicates that poverty is still widespread in the country, where 65% of the population lives in rural areas and 80% depend on subsistence agriculture for their livelihood, negatively impacting human development statistics. In 2012, Eritrea's Human Development Index at 0.351, was below the average of 0.446 for countries in the Low Human Development group and below the 0.475 average for countries in the Sub Saharan Africa region.* (World Bank, 2018)

Since 2002, there have also been aggressive round-ups of youth for National Service, expanded by the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme and the 2003 education reform. Consequently, the number of Eritrean youths fleeing the country has increased. According to UNHCR, the first significant, post-liberation movement of Eritrean youth started in 2002, coinciding with the introduction of the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme. By 2010, National Service and the Warsay Yikaalo Development Programme were augmented by the Hizbawi Serawit (People's Army), as an additional service requirement for people aged between 50 and 80 years (Amnesty International, 2015; Globalsecurity.org, n.d.). Members of the Hizbawi Serawit are required to carry out compulsory duties such as guarding public spaces and government property and patrols, as well as working on national development projects. These compulsory duties have in some cases resulted in people having to discontinue their paid employment (Human Rights Concern Eritrea, 2018), thus, contributing to the process of deliberate impoverishment of Eritreans (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017). The situation is eloquently described by Kibreab:

> *Present day Eritrea is among the most militarised countries in the world. Even the education system is militarised. After ENS [Eritrean National Service] became open ended and consequently militarisation affected all aspects of life in the country, the unpopularity of the ENS among citizens within and/or approaching the age of conscription increased dramatically. This was reflected on the one hand, in the large number of people fleeing the country, and on the other, hiding within the country to avoid conscription.* (Kibreab, 2014, p. 9)

The youth experience the state as an albatross around their necks. They understand the state in terms of spy networks (Bozzini, 2011), as a human rights violator curtailing civil, political and economic rights, and the source of torture and desperation. They see it as the source of all restrictions and deprivations.

The state has maintained a narrative of threat and struggle for the survival of Eritrea and has proceeded to exercise centralised control, restricting the space for citizen participation in decision making and suffocating any nascent indigenous civil society that could challenge its power (Hepner, 2008, p. 478). In 2014, members of the People's Army refused to report for training during harvest time (Awate, 2014a). At the time, during an interview with Eri TV, the President stated: "Since training is a priority, harvesting can wait, we can afford weeks or months to do that… And one has to make decisions… We made a trade-off" (Awate, 2014a).

The control over people is linked to a systematic process of political, social, and economic deprivation, and human rights violations – violations that the government refuses to take any responsibility for and, reverting to its 'threat' stance, has labelled 'lies' and 'ploys' of its enemies to undermine the state. A position confirmed by Yemane Gebreab (Head of Political Affairs, PFDJ) who dismissed the finding of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea that Eritrea may have committed crimes against humanity (UN Human Rights Council, 2015): "…[it is] really laughable ... There is no basis to the claims of the Commission of Inquiry …" (Harper, 2016a; 2016b).

Through the integration of National Service, 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; legally obtain or renew a business licence; access land; or access travel documents and exit visas (Bozzini, 2011). Deserters or objectors are denied any rights and cannot access state services. Thus, the Eritrean official concept of citizenship is intrinsically linked to enlistment and the fulfilment of National Service duties, which also defines who is a proper national subject.

Eritrean youth 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 anywhere…. for a short time, you can tolerate it… but this is for life. Freedom is to do your duty and ask for your rights. If you are doing your duty, but do not get rights – then you can complain that you do not have rights… In Eritrea even if you do your duty, you cannot move freely within the country; cannot open own business for yourself. If you cannot do what you want (legally) etc., you can't say 'I am free'.* (NTN, interview with MS, face-to-face, 2018)

A law graduate from the former Asmara University (KN, interview with MS, Skype, 2016) explained that there are people in Eritrea who have been in the military for 20–30 years. After military training, he served 8 years in the National Service, as a legal advisor at the Ministry of Justice, for 500 Eritrean nakfa (USD 10) a month. Despite the many opportunities for training at the Ministry of Justice, National Service conscripts cannot participate. KN felt that the situation destroyed any hope he had of progressing in life: "They [the Government] took my age and my opportunities" (KN, interview with MS, Skype, 2016).

A young veteran of the Eritrea-Ethiopia war explained that after the year 2000, he continued with National Service as a legal advisor for the government. During this time, he was repeatedly arrested at the whim of his commanding officer. On one occasion he was incarcerated in a container. For this veteran: "Staying at home [in Eritrea] is almost valueless as people cannot improve their economic status, people do not own themselves – so people are moving away for the sake of freedom" (HA, interview with MS, Skype, 2016).

A National Service conscript who had been assigned to work for the Ministry of Information in Asmara, explained that even though he had an interesting job and was close to his family, he decided to leave because his monthly salary of 145 Eritrean nakfa did not meet his basic needs (T, interview with MS, Skype, 2016). He could not achieve

the status of an 'independent adult'. Also, as a graduate of the Italian School in Asmara, he could not sit for the National School Certificate and as a result had no access to tertiary education.

A former Italian School student who was excused from National Service because of a family situation, explained that this was not the same as clearance or a demobilisation (MA, interview with MS, Skype, 2016). She was still subjected to economic and mobility constraints imposed on National Service conscripts. As a former student of the Italian School, now excused from National Service, she could not pursue higher education at any of the colleges in Eritrea and, as a result, had no opportunity to improve her family's economic situation.

A priest who had been excused from National Service was subsequently required to report for duty due to a change in policy in 2008 that required all members of a religious order to report for National Service (Y, interview with MS, Skype, 2016). He had a long history of family members who sacrificed their lives for the nation. Some died during the liberation struggle, while others were still serving. However, this did not make a difference to his obligation to serve.

A former military doctor explained that after independence, and especially after the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war, Eritreans were leaving the country because of the political breakdown and suppression of civil space (KB, interview with MS, Skype, 2016). According to him, the phenomenon of Eritreans leaving is linked to extreme impoverishment and a lack of freedom, associated with indefinite National Service – a situation made worse by the government's decision to close all private health clinics since 2011. As a result of this policy, medical professionals are now leaving the country, further weakening an already fragile health system.

The Ethiopia-Eritrea peace process has not changed the situation within Eritrea and, unfortunately, at the time of writing, there is no indication of any policy change. In an interview with Nizar Manek,

Madame Luul Gebreab, Minister of Labour and Human Welfare (former Director of the National Union of Eritrean Women) explained that: "Definitively a small army will remain, and the others will concentrate on the development work as planned" (Manek, 2018). The 'development work' referred to is the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme. This means that the government is not planning to overhaul the system through which it can exercise direct control over labour in the country. Nor has the practice of arresting and disappearing of dissenters changed, as they try to open up a discussion on the dire situation in the country. This is evidenced by the arrest of the former Minister of Finance, Berhane Abrehe, who sought to open up debate on need for reform of the current situation in Eritrea, following the peace agreement (Daily Reporter, 2018).

Restriction of movement

The sense of ownership by the authorities over its people is complemented by the restriction of movement forced upon the population. This applies to both internal and external movement. In order to leave the country, all Eritreans aged five and over must obtain an exit visa. The government will not issue an exit visa to any children above the age of five, irrespective of their situation (i.e., health, family reunification, etc.) (Amnesty International, 2017; Freedom House, 2018; Home Office, 2015, p. 12).

The restriction of movement of children above five years old, particularly affects families seeking to reunite in a foreign country. In the case of one family, the parents migrated from Eritrea legally and obtained the relevant migration documents for their seven children from the host country. However, the Eritrean government issued an exit visa only for the child below age five. As a result, the remaining children, aged 8 to 17, were not able to migrate safely with their parents. The family resorted to smuggling the children to Sudan through Karora (the north east border between Eritrea and Sudan). The first attempt failed and resulted in the arrest of all the children, who were released after the payment of a fine. However, the second attempt succeeded (Family A, interview with MS, face-to-face, 2016).

The restriction on external movement forces families to seek the services of smugglers. As a result, human smuggling has become a lucrative activity and many Eritreans are taking up the work (KB, interview with MS, Skype, 2016): "Due to the illegal nature of travel and migration, leaving the country involves illegal payments and illicit money transfers" (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017, p. 98).

Despite PFDJ rhetoric to the contrary, because of policies that the PFDJ is implementing, a wide rift has developed between the government and the Eritrean people. The government has systematically impoverished the population, leaving the youth to choose between a life of slave labour or exile: "Everything on the ground that happened and was done was not only pushing, but forcing people to leave" (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017, p. 108).

Eritrea remains food insecure and it is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranked 176 out of 180 countries in the World Economic Freedom Index (Miller, Kim & Roberts, 2018). According to the Global Hunger Index 2017, Eritrea has a child stunting rate of 53% and a child wasting rate of 14.7 % (Von Grebmer, Bernstein, Brown, Prasai & Yohannes, 2017). The Mo Ibrahim Index 2018 of African Governance ranks Eritrea last (54th place) in the category 'participation and human rights' (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2018). This category measures civil and political rights, citizen participation in political and electoral processes and respect for basic rights. Such a low ranking is a reflection of the fact that Eritrea is a one-man, one-party state that lacks a constitution; there is no freedom of speech or assembly; and rule of law is lacking (Human Rights Concern Eritrea, 2018).

Even though it is not possible for Eritreans to organise themselves politically and to openly express dissent in the country, they do express defiance and resistance by: refusing to report for National Service (Globalsecurity.org, n.d.); refusing to hand over community schools to the government (ERi-TV 2, 2015); and leaving the country. The religious leaders in Eritrea have supported the people in this resistance by providing an alternative narrative and acting as policy

entrepreneurs in the limited space they are allowed. The next section examines this narrative and investigates their role.

An alternative narrative: The pastoral letters of the Bishops of Eritrea

The PFDJ has established a policy environment in Eritrea that is very difficult to engage with or challenge. In relation to religious leaders, Proclamation No.73 of 1995 requires religious groups to register with the government and limits their activities to pastoral work (Human Rights Concern Eritrea, 2018, paragraphs 144–159). Despite the very restricted space and the limitations imposed on faith-based organisations, religious leaders in Eritrea have sought to continue their tradition of interceding on behalf of Eritreans and championing their wellbeing (Negash & Weldemichael, 2018).

Since independence, despite the restrictions imposed by Proclamation No.73 of 1995 and the harassment, arrests and disappearance of religious leaders, faith-based organisations have continued to present alternative voices. Muslim clerics have repeatedly challenged policy on matters such as education and National Service for women, with many of them being arrested and disappearing (Christian Solidarity Worldwide & Human Rights Concern Eritrea, 2009). In response, the Eritrean government has sought to silence them:

> …*[the] Commission finds that former freedom fighters belonging to the ELF, Muslim scholars and businessmen, members of the Afar ethnic group, alleged participants of the Forto incident in January 2013, were particularly targeted by the Eritrean Government, who organized their arrests in the streets, mosques and workplaces by masked Eritrean security agents either in uniform or in civilian clothes.* (UN Human Rights Council, 2015, paragraph 44)

In 2004, Patriarch Antonius spoke out against the arrest of three Sunday school instructors and refused to comply with the Government's request to excommunicate more than 3,000 members of the Church associated with the Medhanie Alem movement. The

government reacted by placing him under house arrest and replacing him with its own nominee, Yoftahe Dimetros (Hepner, 2014). The Eritrean Government's intimidation and harassment tactics have not worked on many Orthodox clergy, who like so many Eritreans, have sought refuge in the diaspora, particularly Ethiopia. These clergymen have reported the destruction of monasteries, arrest of fellow clergymen for demanding the release of Patriarch Antonious, and the closure of the school at the Enda Marriam Cathedral (Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2018).

In October 2017, the government demanded the surrender of both Al Diia Muslim School as well as the closure of the Catholic Medhanie Alem Secondary School of Asmara (Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2018). Both communities refused to comply. The government responded by arresting the dissenters.

> *…the government imprisoned the sister working at the pastoral office in Asmara, a Combonian, Sr. Tinsae and the administrator of the school, Abba Haile Paulos, a diocesan priest (he volunteered to be imprisoned in replacement of Sr. Tsigewoini, the director of the school).* (Asmarino, 2017a)

Prior to his arrest, the leader of the board of the school, Haj Musa Mohamed Nur addressed a meeting of parents and teachers of Al Diia Muslim School. At that meeting Haj Musa resolutely refused to comply with the government's directive to hand over the school (ERi-TV 2, 2015). He argued:

> … *[because] this school is ours, even now, whatever its shortcomings, [your] suggestions that are not compatible with our views will not have acceptance. And because we have full rights there is nothing that should frighten us or scare us.* (Awate, 2017a)

The arrest of Haj Musa and members of the Al Diia school board as well as of the Catholic clergy sparked a demonstration in Asmara that was dispersed using force and live fire by the military (Christian

Solidarity Worldwide, 2018).[3] The government attempted to justify its drastic reaction by describing the protest as sectarian:

> …. *[the unruly] group, who were chanting sectarian and inflammatory slogans all the way, proceeded to Liberation Avenue and the Ministry of Education. At this stage, they began to throw stones and to attack the Police.* (Letter from the Government of Eritrea to the UN, quoted in Shaban, 2018)

Haji Musa continued his defiance when he refused to be released from prison without his companions (Awate, 2017b). He died in March 2018. According to the Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the Al Diia Muslim School has been reopened and some of the school community members have been released. However, Haji Ibrahim Yonus, a member of the Al Diia School Executive Committee also died in prison in January 2019 (Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2018; 2019).

The pastoral letters of the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea are part of an ongoing tradition of providing alternative voices. Since liberation, the Catholic Bishops have written a series of letters marking the key transitions of Eritrea. In 1991, they thanked God for liberation and the end of the long liberation struggle (Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 1991, cited in Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2002 p. 7). In 2001, they lamented the destruction caused by the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war; the top-down approach taken by the government, as well as the harsh repression of dissent (Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2002). The Government's response to this mild rebuke was to close the Catholic press and demand that clerics report for National Service – a request that was declined on the basis that the "bearing of arms was 'not in accordance' with the role of clergy" (Christian Solidarity Worldwide & Human Rights Concern Eritrea, 2009). In retaliation the government closed Catholic schools and clinics, expelled clergy and other personnel, and denied exit visas for national clergy (Christian Solidarity Worldwide & Human Rights Concern Eritrea, 2009).

[3] See also home videos of the protest: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Khjf1-oAuDc and: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROFs8jAonZE.

Irrespective of this, the Catholic Bishops have continued to issue pastoral letters. In 2004, they acknowledged the growing diaspora and praised them for their efforts to support family and friends in Eritrea and urged them to *Be Steadfast in Hope* (Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2004). In 2014, following the tragic drowning of more than 300 Eritreans off the coast of Lampedusa, Italy, the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea wrote a letter asking, *Where is Your Brother?*. By quoting Genesis 4:9, the Bishops reminded the people of Eritrea and the regime that we 'are our brother's keepers' (Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2014). It was a strong rebuke of the government for its lack of care for Eritreans leaving the country. The action of the Bishops was supported by Abuna Menkerius, the Arch Diocese of North America, Eritrean Orthodox Church (Awate, 2014b; Arch Diocese of North America, 2014; Tewahado Eritrea, 2013).

With *Where is Your Brother?*, the Bishops have set a precedent. They have reached out and touched the youth deeply. This letter has reached Eritrean youth at home, in refugee camps, on migration routes and in destination countries. In this letter, the Bishops, in keeping with tradition of Catholic social teaching and liberation theology, firmly place themselves on the side of the: "disenfranchised citizens of the country (the poor, the exiled, the victims of accidents at sea and the desert, and the imprisoned)" (Negash & Weldemichael, 2018). The 2014 pastoral letter speaks directly to the heart of the Eritrean people and addresses the deep betrayal that is felt due to the conduct of the PFDJ. In the letter, the Bishops clearly identify the indefinite and poorly-paid National Service and the imprisonment of many young people in detention centres or punishment camps as the direct cause of their misery. They point out that:

> *[…] There is no point in just asking: 'Why are the youth choosing to go abroad? For no-one leaves a country of milk and honey to seek another country offering the same opportunities. If one's homeland is a place of peace, jobs and freedom of expression there is no reason to leave it to suffer hardship, loneliness and exile to look for opportunity elsewhere.* (Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2014, paragraph 19).

On 12 October 2018, during mass, Catholic Priest Aba Teklemmichael pointing to the recent reforms in Ethiopia. He urged the Eritrean government to also make the necessary reforms in Eritrea, and to democratise the government to enable Eritreans to influence the formulation of policies and participate in their own governance (Solomon, 2018).

On Easter Friday 2019, the Catholic Bishops, issued a new Pastoral Letter entitled: *Peace to You Who Were Far Off, and Those Who are Near, Call for National Reconciliation* (Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2019a). In the letter, once again, the Bishops, recognised the sacrifice and suffering of the youth, pointing out that the regime has failed them and that this failure is responsible for their flight from the country. While, the Bishops welcomed the peace process with Ethiopia, they pointed out that much work must be done internally to achieve peace and reconciliation among Eritreans. They called for: a constitutional government and the rule of law. And, referring to the many Eritreans imprisoned without due process, the Bishops called for justice, pointing out that there can be no peace without justice (Catholic Bishop of Eritrea, 2019b).

On 12 June 2019, two months since the publication of: *Peace to You Who Were Far off, and Those Who are Near*, the Eritrean Government, in what is believed to be an act of retaliation, closed 22 Catholic health centres. The Bishops vigorously protested the action, writing to the government (Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2019b) expressing their concern and dismay at the action. At the same time, they called for 17 days of prayer and fasting until 12 July 2019 (Unah, 2019). They have also recently issued a *Further Clarification on the Recent Take-over and Closure by the PFDJ of the Catholic Clinics in Eritrea* (Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2019c)

Through the pastoral letters, the Bishops are engaging in policy dialogue. They review the context, identify issues, and suggest policy options and a holistic approach to development to fulfil all aspects of human life, bringing to life Catholic social teachings and echoing

Amartya Sen's concept of development as freedom (Sen, 1999; Catholic Bishops of Eritrea, 2002).

The actions of religious leaders are significant because they have deep historical roots within communities and can speak from experience and a higher moral ground. They can connect the diaspora to communities in Eritrea and, therefore, exercise an incremental influence, preparing the ground for the development of a policy window for future action. These leaders are recalling the primary duty of the authorities to serve the people, respect their dignity, and recognise them as citizens. Although their expressions are non-confrontational, there is no doubt that this narrative is a challenge to the almost total control exercised by the PFDJ. In the current atmosphere in Eritrea, it is community leaders (many of whom are also religious leaders) who are steering initiatives for people-to-people reconciliation and normalisation along the Eritrea-Ethiopia border.

Conclusion

Using Kingdon's multiple stream framework (political, problem and policy streams), this chapter argues that the regime in Eritrea is exercising control over all aspects of the policy stream in the country. The top-down centralised form of government and the targeting of youth is designed to dispel any potential opposition to the ruling party the PFDJ and President Isaias Afwerki. The regime does not allow any space for policy entrepreneurs, outside those in power.

This chapter identifies various policy mechanisms developed by the government to exercise near-total control over Eritrean society especially the youth, namely, the integration of National Service with the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme and the education system. This integrated mechanism traps youth in a system of indefinite forced labour, in which their right to a family and to work to support themselves is violated. Eritrean youth, experience this as state ownership of their lives – the total control over its people, is tantamount to modern-day slavery. In their experience, the state controls their public and private lives. This repression has contributed

to a rapid increase in the exodus from Eritrea and human trafficking of Eritrean youth.

The PFDJ's Marxist-Leninist approach supports the achievement of almost total control of all political narratives and policy development, resulting in repression of the people. This includes the direct targeting of people who are active members of religious organisations and who express themselves religiously, especially among the smaller, minority, faith-based organisations. The PFDJ has supported a political myth that the nation-building project is one of sacrifice, in which the Eritrean people live for the good of the nation. Except for those in the inner circle of the regime, all others are excluded from this status and need to continuously prove their allegiance – those who defy the narrative of power are completely excluded.

Despite the almost total control maintained by the government, the youth and others have shown various covert ways to express their resistance. They do so by refusing to report for National Service, the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme and Hizbawi Serawit (the people's army). The youth are also showing their resistance by leaving the country.

Religious leaders have emerged to challenge the status quo by elevating Eritreans first and foremost as human beings of faith and with a responsibility for the wellbeing of their fellow community members. They have spoken out, expressing their sadness over the loss of life of refugees fleeing from the country. They can be seen as social entrepreneurs in that they propose a narrative based on the freedom of a spiritual belonging as a strong alternative to the dominant ideology of exercising control over people's lives. Emphasising the importance to care for fellow Eritreans respecting their dignity, these messages challenge the narrative of the PFDJ that the only goal of Eritreans is to serve the PFDJ and sacrifice themselves for the nation.

Risking their life and freedom, elders such as Abuna Philipos and Abuna Antonious (Eritrean Orthodox Church), Haj Musa (who died

in prison after his arrest), the board members of the Al Diia Muslim School, and the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea have been speaking out. Deriving strength from their historical roots in communities and ability to spiritually connect with young Eritreans in the diaspora, they have been able to speak the truth from a higher moral ground and offer human dignity as an alternative to the total civil control exercised by the government.

Asking the rhetorical question 'Where is your brother?', the Catholic Bishops of Eritrea have shown that not every space can be controlled by the Government. By posing this question, the religious leaders have called the Eritrean Government to account. The efforts of the religious leaders may be the strongest yet in Eritrea, showing that new ideas may emerge for the policy agenda in the country, namely, that a government may care about its people; that the people of Eritrea may express their thoughts; and that the Eritrean people are human beings, born as spiritually endowed members of the universe, and they deserve to live in dignity.

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