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Weber, Annette

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Stellungnahme / comment

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Weber, A. (2015). *Eritrea - paths out of isolation*. (SWP Comment, 37/2015). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-441848>

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Eritrea – Paths Out of Isolation

Annette Weber

Two decades after achieving independence from Ethiopia, Eritrea is back in the European headlines – above all for a wave of refugees arriving in Europe. At the same time, a recent United Nations Commission on Human Rights report accuses the Eritrean regime of gross human rights violations. President Isayas Afewerki sees Eritrea's regional and international isolation since its war with neighbouring Ethiopia (1998–2000) as evidence of a conspiracy between Ethiopia and influential Western states. Every month between three and five thousand Eritreans attempt to flee the total mobilisation instituted for national defence. Reintegrating the country in regional structures could build trust and neutralise the Eritrean narrative of Ethiopian aggression and international conspiracy.

In 2014, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 360,000 refugees left Eritrea, 37,000 of whom came to Europe. Altogether, more than 6 percent of the population have fled the country, despite Eritrea suffering neither famine nor war nor terrorism. It would therefore appear that emigration is driven by other motives. The main cause is in fact the potentially unlimited military service that was introduced in 2002. Both men and women are obliged to complete this “national service”, which must officially be completed between the ages of eighteen and fifty. While the duration is supposed to be limited to eighteen months, it can in reality last ten years or more. Apart from national defence, citizens may be ordered to work in agriculture, roadbuilding or mining. For the Eritrean government in Asmara, national

service therefore represents a significant economic factor.

In the interests of creating a national identity transcending ethnic ties, the government has taken to rotating conscripts between locations (a strategy already applied by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front from which today's governing PFDJ emerged). In combination with the lack of a time limit, however, the concept leaves young people spending long periods far from home without contact to their families. Where they are rewarded at all, conscripts are also so poorly paid that they are unable to provide for a family or make any kind of investment in their future.

The government, on the other hand, regards compulsory service as a vital safeguard for Eritrea's national defence and independence. For the ideologists of the

ruling party, the country's defence and autonomy form an imperative more important than individual liberties. Fleeing the service is tantamount to treason, so returnees must expect persecution and imprisonment.

Because it is more or less impossible to leave the country legally, a dense network of organised traffickers has arisen specifically serving Eritreans. A range of methods are involved. In "normal" trafficking, refugees are taken to Israel or Libya via Sudan. But traffickers also make money by kidnapping refugees and blackmailing their families in Eritrea. A string of beneficiaries, including members of the border police and the Eritrean and Sudanese armed forces, members of nomadic groups in eastern Sudan and the Sinai, and trans-African trafficking networks, profit enormously from Eritrean asylum-seekers, whose journey and ransom cost upwards of \$10,000.

Background

Eritrea achieved independence in 1993, after thirty years of fighting against Ethiopian rule. The Eritrean and Ethiopian liberation movements were originally closely linked, having jointly toppled communist military dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991. This led to hopes of peaceful co-existence following Eritrea's secession, for which ideal preconditions appeared to exist. The two states shared an interest in regional trade, while Ethiopia wished to use the Eritrean ports of Massawa and Assab after losing its access to the Red Sea through the secession.

But only five years after Eritrean independence, war broke out between the two allies – over exactly those supposedly shared interests, such as Ethiopian access to the sea. The conflict quickly escalated, with border disputes leading to occupation of territory by both parties and air strikes on each other's airfields. The war lasted two years and cost about one hundred thousand lives, before ending as a "frozen conflict".

The Algiers Agreement of 2000 and the 2002 decision of the Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) delimiting the border created the formal preconditions for peace. Yet Ethiopia refuses to this day to recognise the proposed border line and continues to occupy Eritrean territory. Neither the African Union nor the UN nor bilateral partners demand that Addis Abeba observe the agreements and implement binding decisions. Ethiopia is one of the West's closest allies in the "war on terror" and valued as a stable (albeit repressive) regional power in the Horn of Africa. The AU even has its headquarters in Addis Abeba. Ethiopian pre-eminence creates a situation where the West is much more conciliatory towards Ethiopia than to other countries in the Horn of Africa, generally turning a blind eye to repression, human rights violations and anti-democratic measures. In fact the states in the region are not far apart in the relevant indices of human rights, political freedoms and democratisation. The Asmara government, in turn, sees Ethiopia's refusal to implement valid agreements, in conjunction with the attitude of Western states, as a wholesale betrayal.

Human Rights and Liberties

Repression spiralled in Eritrea following the war of 1998 to 2000, with Isayas Afewerki instrumentalising the external enemy Ethiopia and the West's "complicity" to largely suspend civil liberties, democratic mechanisms and rule of law structures.

Instead, Afewerki established an autocratic one-party regime under his rule. He was, like his cousin Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia, initially the leader of the national liberation movement before assuming the presidency after independence in 1993. The parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 2001 were cancelled, and the constitution adopted in 1997 never came into force. To this day political decisions are promulgated by presidential decree.

Shortly after the war a group of Afewerki's closest advisers, the so-called G15,

criticised his policies as “illegal and unconstitutional”. Eleven of them were detained, and it remains a mystery where they are being held, whether they will ever face charges, and whether they are even still alive. According to the UNHCR report, disappearances, torture and detention without trial are common practice in Eritrea.

In 2001 President Afewerki closed all independent newspapers and had a number of journalists arrested. According to Reporters without Borders, sixteen journalists were still in prison in 2015, and Eritrea has occupied last place in its regular World Press Freedom Index for the past seven years.

The Economy

Investment in the future of the population has been sacrificed to the imperative of security. As in the rest of the continent, the Eritrean population is young, with more than 60 percent under 35 years of age. As already mentioned, many regard military service as an odious burden rather than a legitimate and necessary patriotic duty.

More than 70 percent of the population work in agriculture, which contributes less than 10 percent of GDP. Eritreans live largely from subsistence farming, livestock herding and fishing. Conscripts doing their national service also work on state-run farms. The mining sector has grown rapidly in recent years, with China and Canada most strongly involved in the country’s gold and copper mines. Russia and Turkey have also shown interest in the sector. The mining expansion was responsible for a jump in GDP growth from 1.3 percent in 2013 to 4.5 percent in 2014. The relatively high price of gold and copper in 2015 means that the government in Asmara can expect strong foreign exchange revenues. But with almost all resources channelled into the defence budget, Eritrea’s economy lags far behind its potential. The inflation rate is estimated to be 11 percent.

Remittances from migrants represent an important source of revenues, both for

private households and for the government. In that context, growing numbers of Eritrean refugees arriving in Europe guarantee a steady flow of cash to the homeland.

Eritrea introduced a diaspora tax to fund national reconstruction, and for a time this represented an important pillar of the government budget. The levy took 2 percent of the income of diaspora Eritreans, mostly collected by embassies without violating international law. But when the UN imposed sanctions in 2011, it became illegal to collect taxes abroad. The regime now instead demands payments to be made in Eritrea itself, treating the tax as a development levy enabling the state to invest in infrastructure without becoming dependent on foreign donors.

Regional Situation and Outlook

In the Horn of Africa the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is an important regional organisation, especially as a conflict mediator and integration motor. However, Eritrea suspended its membership of IGAD in protest after Ethiopia’s 2006 military intervention in the Somali civil war. Asmara applied to rejoin in 2011, but has yet to be readmitted. In response to the Ethiopian intervention, Eritrea granted asylum to the leadership of the “Islamic Courts Union”, which governed Somalia from June to December 2006. The UN Monitoring Group on Eritrea and Somalia also accuses the Eritrean government of having supplied military and financial support to the jihadist al-Shabaab militia in Somalia. This led to UN and EU sanctions against Eritrea. Eritrea has thus acted as a spoiler in the region, whose other states support the anti-Shabaab mission of the African Union (AMISOM).

The conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia is deadlocked and it is unlikely that they will be able to “thaw” it themselves in the foreseeable future. In view of the large numbers of refugees, however, a solution for Eritrea is urgently needed. Above all, the lives of the population need to be im-

proved. The country is part of a region, and use should be made of the regional mechanisms both for conflict mediation and for trade and economic integration. Regional integration of Eritrea could defuse the threat scenario of external intervention and thus delegitimise the regime's policies. This would contribute to transforming Eritrea from regional spoiler to constructive actor.

The African Union could assume an important function by for example assuming a security guarantee for Eritrea. The international community would need to increase pressure on Ethiopia to implement the Algiers agreements. In return Eritrea could be expected to curtail its military service and engage constructively in the region.

The international community could assume the role of a guarantor of regional integration, and should work to neutralise the Eritrean conspiracy narrative. But to reduce Eritrea's mistrust the West will have to pursue a more balanced policy towards the different countries in the Horn of Africa.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761

Translation by Meredith Dale

(English version of
SWP-Aktuell 64/2015)