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‘Dreams don’t come true in Eritrea’: anomie and family disintegration due to the structural militarisation of society*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses contemporary Eritrea’s acute crisis within the framework of the theory of anomie. It is based on the hypothesis that militarisation, forced labour, mass exodus and family disintegration can be interpreted as the consequences of two incompatible norm and value systems: the collectivist, nationalistic and militaristic worldview of the former liberation front and ruling party People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), and the traditional cultural system of Eritrea’s society. In 2002 the regime introduced an unlimited ‘development campaign’, thereby forcing large parts of the society to live as conscripts and perform unpaid labour. This has caused a mass exodus of young people and a rapid process of family disintegration. The article is based on empirical fieldwork and evaluates the ongoing developments which have led to rapid economic decline and the destabilisation of the entire fabric of society.

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INTRODUCTION

When a correspondent from the *Financial Times* visited Eritrea in summer 2009, a young woman told him, ‘When I was younger, I had hopes and dreams here. Now I don’t expect anything. I take things as they come. Dreams don’t come true in Eritrea’ (*Financial Times* 2009). ‘When I was younger’ refers to the time prior to the introduction of the Warsay-Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC) in 2002, which was implemented two years after the end of a devastating war with Ethiopia (1998–2000). When the ‘border war’ broke out in May 1998 due to the failure of both the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments to solve a bundle of latent conflicts related to economic, political, psychological and border issues peacefully,¹ many young Eritreans were prepared to defend their country’s independence because at that time most of them trusted in the capability of their leadership to bring about a better future and considered the ‘TPLF-led Ethiopian invasion’ as a threat to their new-born nation. When the war ended with the defeat of the Eritrean troops and the occupation of Eritrean territories by the Ethiopian army in summer 2000, there were feelings of both disillusion and relief that the war was over.

The youth of the country now aspired to finally live life in peace, to complete their educations, to have families, and to enjoy life together with their loved ones. Most of them were ready to fulfil their ‘national duty’, 18 months of military training and reconstruction service, but then they expected to return to a civilian lifestyle.

In November 1995, the government of Eritrea, formerly the Eritrea People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), introduced a mandatory national service (Proclamation on National Service No. 82/1995), for all Eritreans, male and female, aged 18–40. Initially, this service included six months of military training and twelve months of work on reconstruction and development projects. One important aim of the national service is ‘to serve as an instrument for socialising Eritrean youth into the values and characteristics of the EPLF’ (Kibreab 2009a: 44). In early 1998, a few months before the war with Ethiopia started, a national development campaign was announced and all those who had participated in the national service since its initiation in 1994 and who had since finished their military training were remobilised (*ibid.*).² When the war started, they were directly integrated into their specific army positions. Since the end of the war in 2000 there has been no significant demobilisation of the army,³ which consists of more than

350,000 people, while every year new rounds of young men and women have been drafted (see Hughes 2005).

In summer 2002 the government announced the so-called Warsay-Yikealo Development Campaign. The younger generation is referred to as *Warsay*, meaning ‘inheritor’ or ‘follower’, while *Yikealo* denotes a wise elderly person, a term the government uses explicitly for the fighter generation. The younger generation is supposed to follow in the footsteps of the former fighters by internalising and practicing the values of self-sacrifice, hard work and dedication to the Eritrean nation in the form of unlimited reconstruction and development service for which they receive food for themselves, but not for their dependants, and some pocket-money. The introduction of the WYDC meant *de facto* that the national service was no longer limited to 18 months but rather became open-ended. With the exception of women over 27, married women, and those with children, only those with serious medical problems are discharged. The rest of the younger generation work on infrastructure projects or are employed at large cash-crop farms run by the army or at party-owned business enterprises in the construction service after completion of their military training. They earn a ‘salary’ of approximately 500 nakfa per month (about €25)⁴ and live under military discipline even when working on civil activities. Party-owned construction firms operate mainly with national service conscripts and have thus ‘free access to unpaid skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour’ (Kibreab 2009b: 287). The four military command zones are involved in economic activities such as trading, farming, property development and infrastructure construction, all of which are based on the labour of the conscripts. Better-educated conscripts may also serve in the public sector as teachers, nurses or office clerks (Bozzini 2011: 96). Thus, it is the government, the PFDJ, and the senior army officers that are the beneficiaries of the campaign (Kibreab 2009a: 60; Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2012). Before private firms were banned from the construction industry in April 2006, they could ‘hire’ conscripts for employment – their wages being payable to the Ministry of Defence (Kibreab 2009a: 62–3). Since 2011, they have also been used as forced labourers at the Bisha mining project in Gash-Barka, which is operated as a joint venture by the Canadian company Nevsun Resources and the Eritrean Mining Corporation (see Asmarino.com 2011).⁵ Large parts of the population are thus unable to establish a family or care for their wives and children or their elderly parents. The way of life forced upon the recruits stands in stark contrast to the established forms of making a living. As this paper will explain, the WYDC is causing social

anomie by making it impossible to reconcile private norms and values, such as concentrating on education and aspiring to a career, with the nationalist demands of the government. This creates a highly anomic situation in which traditional and national norms and demands are incompatible.

This paper discusses the theoretical background—the concept of anomie developed by Durkheim (1897), modified by Merton (1965), and adapted to the context of authoritarian societies by Waldmann (1998)—and then applies it to the Eritrean context. The following sections analyse the profound anomie that has developed in the 2000s in the aftermath of the political clampdown on internal critics of the president and on journalists of the free press, and the totalitarisation of the political system. In the absence of rule of law and the freedom to travel, crossing the borders illegally under the threat of death is the only alternative young Eritreans have if they want to escape the militarised life imposed on them. It is the only way in which returning to a life where basic cultural goals (in the sense of Merton) such as making a living for oneself and one's family can be realised. Trying to earn a decent income today means violating the norms institutionalised by the government. The paper is supplemented by case studies which provide typical examples of how Eritreans are affected by the WYDC and their attempts to handle the situation. The case studies, which typify countless individual fates, make clear that even the simplest personal aspirations are unrealisable in today's Eritrea.

THE CONCEPT OF ANOMIE

The term 'anomie' was first applied by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, most prominently in *Suicide* (1897). It describes a state of relative normlessness, or a lack of rules (*dérèglement*). Durkheim also described it as a 'state of disturbed order'. He pointed out that anomie is not a sort of individual disease, but rather affects the state of a given society as a whole.

The theory of anomie was further elaborated by Robert K. Merton in his work *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Merton claimed that deviation or deviant behaviour is linked to the state of a given society. His question was why the frequency of deviant behaviour varies within different social structures, and why these deviations have different forms and patterns in different social structures (Merton 1965: 131–2).

Merton's definition of anomie is linked to his definition of cultural structure, which 'may be defined as that organized set of normative

values governing behavior which is common to members of a designated society or group', while social structure is defined as an 'organized set of social relationships in which members of the society or group are variously implicated. Anomie is then conceived as a breakdown in a cultural structure, occurring particularly when there is an *acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them*' (*ibid.*: 162, emphasis added).

His central hypothesis was 'that aberrant behaviour may be regarded sociologically as a symptom of dissociation between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues for realising these aspirations' (*ibid.*: 134). A social condition in which culturally internalised goals cannot be reached by socially accepted means is described as anomie and favours deviant behaviour. Merton's theoretical concept has often been applied in the framework of deviance in the form of criminality, but his approach was much more diverse. Anomic behaviour may also occur in repressive political systems (see Waldmann 2003), especially when the rulers try to suppress norms and values the majority of the population has internalised during their socialisation, as we shall see in the case in Eritrea.

An important point in Merton's analysis is that there are various types of deviant behaviour, far beyond criminality. In his scheme there are five modes of individual adaptation in order to deal with cultural goals and the institutionalised means to reach them:

1. *Conformity*: Both goals and institutionalised means are accepted – this is not deviant behaviour.
2. *Innovation*: Cultural goals are internalised, but institutionalised norms are not equally internalised as the sole strategy for reaching these goals. In order to reach the goal 'success', 'innovative' means such as criminality or corruption are applied.
3. *Ritualism*: Cultural goals are abandoned, while conformity of behaviour is maintained. In order to avoid permanent frustration through unfulfilled ambition, the level of one's expectations is permanently lowered. It is a form of private escape, like the zealously conformist behaviour of employees in the lower bureaucracy.
4. *Retreatism*: Both cultural goals and institutionalised means are abandoned. The individual drops out of society.
5. *Rebellion*: Alienation from both ruling goals and institutionalised means, which are replaced by alternative goals and mechanisms (Merton 1965: 140–57).

These different kinds of deviant behaviour will occur more often in a disintegrated society, where the social structure precludes forms of behaviour demanded by the cultural structure. In this situation, there is a tendency towards the breakdown of existing norms and increasing normlessness, that is, social anomie (*ibid.*: 163). Merton stated that anomie is not a stagnant situation; rather, the emergence and growth of anomie are the results of an ongoing process. When deviant behaviour proves 'successful' (or remains unsanctioned), the legitimacy of institutional norms will be lessened or even eliminated, thus enlarging the extent of anomie in the system and the frequency of deviant behaviour (*ibid.*: 180).

In the political context of a society ruled by a dictatorial regime, it makes sense to apply Merton's elaborated theory of a discrepancy between cultural (normative) structure and social structure. Moreover, the various forms of deviant behaviour he elaborated provide valuable indicators for measuring anomie. While rebellion may be hard to realise in an authoritarian or totalitarian context, innovation, ritualism and retreatism can be good indicators of growing anomie.

Peter Waldmann, a German sociologist who devoted himself to the adaptation of 'anomie' as a classical sociological concept to dictatorial political systems, discusses the problems of empirical research based on this concept. He stresses that in order to detect an anomic system, the subjective feelings, psychological strain, or levels of suffering of individuals are decisive criteria (2003: 26). There are also indirect or secondary indicators of anomie which can be deduced from empirical observation. The most important indirect indicators of an anomic situation are the different forms of deviant behaviour that occur in the system. He summarises that the primary variables indicating anomie are a hybrid normative structure and reduced commitment to accepted norms; the different forms of deviant behaviour are the secondary variables (*ibid.*: 26–9). Merton has also identified subjective and objective components of anomie, namely, personal feelings and life conditions (Merton 1965: 175).

THE CONCEPT OF ANOMIE IN THE ERITREAN CONTEXT

In regard to Eritrean society and its growing level of anomie, we rely on Merton's concept. One major reason for choosing his approach is the fact that Eritrean society does not suffer from normlessness or *dérèglement* in the sense of Durkheim; there is, rather, a hybrid system of norms and values strongly dominated by traditional norms, as we have shown in

earlier empirical research conducted 2004–2006 (Hirt *et al.* 2008; Hirt & Saleh 2008; see also Favali & Pateman 2003). Traditional norms and values have developed over centuries among the various ethnic groups of Eritrea: they are influenced by religion, modes of production (sedentary agriculture, semi-pastoralism or pastoralism), primordial ties and language (Saleh in prep.). They are based on different patterns of social organisation and aim at safeguarding the stability of existing modes of production and conflict mediation systems. A large variety of traditional norms exists in Eritrea. Traditional norms find their expression in elaborate customary laws and their regulations, which have ruled social life and conflict resolution throughout the centuries up to the present.

This fact is even acknowledged by Eritrea's ruling party. Alemseged Tesfai, one of the more distinguished PFDJ intellectuals, puts it as follows:

We have referred (...) to the existence in Eritrea of a traditional civil society. This may take the form of religious, self-help (...) – or purely social associations and gatherings (...). Not only this, but, since in Eritrea, age and the experience which goes with it are respected, community elders are considered and accepted as an important social force (...). The same has always applied to the clergy – the churches and mosques – the spiritual and, therefore, highly influential leaders of Eritrean communities. (Tsfai 1996: 6; see also Kibreab 2008)

In spite of its recognition of these forms of social organisation, the EPLF/PFDJ has tried to replace traditional forms of mutual solidarity by government-imposed practices. Amanda Pool, who carried out fieldwork in Hagaz in the western lowlands in 2004–2005, presents an example: she observed that the traditional practice of '*wofara*', traditional community work based on the principle of reciprocity, had been replaced by '*ma'atof*', i.e. mandatory state labour. As one of her informants put it: '*ma'atof* was "a word coined by the government, just calling youngsters to work, nothing in return"' (Pool 2009: 40).

This does not mean that the traditional forms of societal organisation are per se peaceful and free of violence. As Reid correctly notes, in a region which has been influenced by long-term instability and violence due to its geographical situation, militarised cultures and identities have been nurtured and have manifested themselves in organisations such as the EPLF and TPLF in the recent past (Reid 2011: 201). Moreover, '[v]iolence was not only a top-down imposition: communities had supported and participated in violence against enemies old and new, real and imagined' (*ibid.*: 202). However, violence initiated at the grass-root level of society has overwhelmingly been rooted in land conflicts

which were frequently instrumentalised by the ruling powers to serve their own ends (see Tronvoll 2009). Against this background, the ability of established traditional institutions (or ‘traditional civil society’) to mediate conflicts and safeguard survival in an often hostile environment has been of utmost importance.

As in all contemporary societies, norms are in flux in Eritrea, and we assume that a hybrid system of three distinct norm and value systems exist in the country today:

1. The traditional norms and values of the various ethnic groups.
2. The norms and values introduced by the EPLF during the armed struggle, which are based on a socialist ideology, nationalism and the principle of self-reliance.
3. Liberal values of individualism and democracy, which have a certain impact on the educated urban population and on the diaspora.

The struggle of the EPLF/PFDJ to dominate this hybrid system has been going on for a long time: ‘Three decades of dramatic upheaval produced an independent state as well as a ruling nationalist ideology and a revolutionary movement that emphasized, above all else, popular and obedient mobilization for development and defence’ (O’Kane & Redeker-Hepner 2009: ix–x).

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the different patterns of traditional Eritrean norms and values in detail; we believe that the case studies we present will give an impression of the specific normative and role conflicts persons affected by the WYDC find themselves in. However, we assume that before the introduction of the campaign, in spite of the numerous violent conflicts the population was exposed to in the past, inner-societal stability was high and the degree of anomie low; a breakdown of the normative system has so far never occurred. This is mainly due to the perseverance of the traditional norms. The EPLF/PFDJ *nolens volens* still tolerates the role customary institutions play in maintaining peace and stability. Jurisdiction based on customary laws is widely practiced in civil law (for instance by *Shari’a* Courts and the Community Courts introduced in 2004), but even criminal cases are often relegated to traditional mediators (*Shemagelle*) by the courts (Hirt *et al.* 2008: 128–37).

The WYDC is a new strategy of permanent military mobilisation justified by the destruction caused by the ‘border war’ and the stalemate in Ethiopian–Eritrean relations (Bozzini 2011: 96), combined with ideological indoctrination of the young generation. According to Kibreab, President Isaias claimed that Sawa⁶ was not founded for

military purposes. The aim was rather to overcome 'primordial affiliations' which bedevil the ruling party and to create national loyalty and 'work ethic' (Kibreab 2009a: 45–6). It means extreme interference in the private lives of people and has a strong impact on the fabric of society, rendering individuals unable to follow long-established role expectations. The traditional norms cannot be applied in the national service, which is a form of collective life under military discipline. Moreover, the WYDC endangers the very existence of the entire population by forcing people into illegality for the simple purpose of earning money to sustain their families. In Eritrea, all generations have so far internalised respected customary values and cultural goals. Merton defines the dominant cultural goal prevailing in the US as 'monetary success'. In Eritrea, as a poor society, aspirations may be more moderate, but of course, founding a family and providing for it is the most basic goal (probably common to all human cultures). The lineage or extended family is the basic form of social belonging and has so far guaranteed survival in the absence of a governmental social security network. Many Eritreans depend on support from their relatives in the diaspora, but they see it as their duty to contribute as much as they can to the wealth of their (extended) family. We assume that basic cultural goals which are common to all Eritreans irrespective of their specific ethnic or religious belonging, and which at the same time are incompatible with the nationalist demands of the PFDJ are the following:

To establish a nuclear family and regularly spend time together with one's spouse and children as well as with one's extended family.

To sustain oneself and safeguard the subsistence of one's family through work.

A widespread, although not universally internalised goal is to seek education and strive for a better life for oneself and the coming generation, specifically among the urban segments of society.

To live up to personally defined, individual or family-oriented goals (these may vary widely depending on the socialisation into one's particular cultural environment; see for example the cases of Halima and Daniel below).

By introducing the WYDC, the government is preventing a whole generation from reaching these internalised cultural goals through legitimate means. Avoiding indefinite military service is only possible if one lives as a draft dodger; bribes military commanders; works as a government spy; or flees the country. As deviant behaviour is a good secondary indicator of anomie, the four variations elaborated by Merton, namely innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion – in distinction to conformity – will be applied in the Eritrean context.

The 'border war' with Ethiopia (1998–2000) and the WYDC have had serious impacts on individuals and families; these range from resource conflicts, separation, loss of life and property, violence, and physical assault to the imprisonment and killing of those who try to cross the borders to neighbouring countries. This section analyses the anomic situation which has seized the organisational structure of Eritrean society's nuclear- and extended-family system.

The first attempt of the EPLF/PFDJ⁷ to expand the influence of its norm and value system during and after the armed struggle failed because the fighters, though dominant in the state apparatus, were a minority in the country⁸ and demobilisation exposed them to the traditional structures they had come from. The values of the struggle were wartime values, including self-sacrifice and the extinction of individualism; however, they also included positive values such as belonging to an egalitarian community entailing shared responsibility. However, it proved impossible for the leadership to convince the ex-fighters to maintain these values in peacetime, as they now had to take over the responsibility for their families and redevelop a sound individualism, while also relying on the support of the extended family. The government was unable to create a social environment that could reconcile both normative systems.

As Mahrt demonstrates in his study of peasants living in a highland village, the rural civilian population did not adopt the EPLF's creed of national independence and self-rule, but rather supported the liberation movement in the hope that it would provide better governance than the Derg regime did. The peasants understood the liberation struggle as a 'traditional fight' between those in power and *Shifta* [rebels, outlaws], while they maintained their own forms of political organisation, including a *Chica-shum* (chief), *Danya* (judge) and *baito* (council) (2009: 18–24). While the villagers believed that the right to govern was not derived from inheritance but had traditionally been gained from war, the right to work land originated from inheritance, kinship or marriage and thus fell in the traditional realm. The EPLF/PFDJ had thus not been able to convince the peasants of its political ideas (*ibid.*: 30–32).

The war with Ethiopia and its aftermath brought a 'second chance' for the PFDJ cadres to impose their ideology on the entire society. As has been mentioned, the government had introduced the national service

not only as military training and a development service but also as a tool for imposing the EPLF's values on the younger generation, especially in regard to overcoming 'sub-national' orientations—meaning loyalty to ethnic, regional and religious networks—and developing a culture of nationalism and self-sacrifice. The introduction of the WYDC in 2002 can be seen as an attempt to perpetuate the revolutionary wartime ideology and thus win a late victory over traditional values and sentiments. As Woldemikael states:

The new Eritrean state aims to establish absolute state power by bringing the whole society under the hegemony of the party in order to transform and reshape that society in accordance with its own vision (...). The PFDJ has been trying to (...) create a mode of citizenship characterized by *submission of individuality, culture, traditions, political aims, and human rights to the state's demands without resistance*. (Woldemikael 2009: 11, emphasis added; see also Bondegaard 2004: 54)

Even though they live in relative peace, the members of the younger generation are supposed to live in an enduring war-simulating situation. In an imitation of the situation in the field during the struggle, all civilian activities are subordinated to a militarised lifestyle. Individualism is bedevilled, and all personal interests must be negated. Moreover, during recent years it has become increasingly clear that the demand to 'overcome sub-national loyalties' is primarily directed at the eight non-Tigrinya ethnic groups of Eritrea and applies to a much lesser extent to the Tigrinya as the largest ethnic group. The current political system is dominated by Tigrinya who depend to a large extent on the support of other ethnic Tigrinya to maintain their dwindling power base; thus they use their language as a tool of domination in the administration and the military. In Sawa, Tigrinya serves as the medium of instruction, military training and communication. The use of minority languages is not tolerated, which is a contradiction of the government-sponsored mother-tongue policy in primary education. Students who use languages other than Tigrinya or Tigre (the mother tongue of roughly one third of the population) are intimidated, because they are suspected of planning illicit activities such as flight. Tigrinya cultural demands are also treated more favourably; for instance, students get leaves during Christian holiday periods while Muslim students are denied the wish to spend their holidays at home. This policy can be called a process of 'hidden assimilation' into the Tigrinya cultural mainstream.

It is an obvious fact that this second attempt to impose the EPLF value system is about to fail and is leading to an ever-greater state of social

anomie, which is most clearly visible in the mass exodus of the younger generation. Contrary to the hopes the former freedom fighters had to achieve a better future, the *Warsay* generation has been forced into a lifestyle which not only seems senseless to them but also deprives them of hope for the future. Every individual is now forced into military life, forced to leave his or her family and the responsibilities towards it behind, and forced to engage in activities which are simply imposed on him/her by military commanders. Even seeking comfort in religion has been prohibited,⁹ as this would run contrary to the PFDJ's nationalist ideology. It is an obvious fact that the promised rewards, such as the rapid development of the economy, food security and national self-reliance, are an illusion; the actual outcome of the campaign has been, on the contrary, a rapid decline in economic performance and the living standards of the population.

ANOMIE CAUSED BY THE WARSAY–YIKEALO DEVELOPMENT
CAMPAIGN AND POSSIBLE COPING STRATEGIES

Since the introduction of the indefinite national service, members of the younger generation have experienced a severe conflict of roles in attempting to fulfil their national obligation and to live a meaningful life by realising their personal educational and career ambitions. Equally importantly, they have been deprived of the ability to contribute to their families' incomes. In order to maintain a system that has none or little support among the population, the government has set up a far-reaching surveillance system, of which Bozzini (2011) presents an in-depth analysis. Military deserters and objectors are regularly hunted by the military police and observed by various overlapping security systems of the military, the police, the regional and local administrations, the President's Office, the PFDJ and the mass organisations (Bozzini 2011: 106). In spite of the shortcomings of Eritrea's 'low-tech surveillance' system, the arbitrariness and unpredictability by which rules and regulations are implemented and by which force is used creates anxiety and mistrust as well as fatalism among the *Warsay* generation. On the one hand, it creates a sort of resignation (or retreatism in the sense of Merton), as according to Bozzini's observations, people of conscript age seemingly become uncomplaining and unconcerned of the misfortune of their friends captured by the military police. It leads to compliance and despair, as concerned individuals want to avoid state repression in the form of torture and months of imprisonment. This can be seen as a 'calculated manipulation' that 'produces homogenised

docile bodies through the internalisation of moral and behavioural norms promoted by the surveillant' (Bozzini 2011: 106). This conformity of behaviour which the government tries to produce is, however, not adapted by the conscripts as the EPFL/PFDJ leaders wish. In reality, obedience is coerced, and forms of resistance ranging from silent antipathy (a form of ritualism) to desertion (a form of innovation) develop (*ibid.*).

The following section discusses the reactions and coping strategies evident as a result of the prevailing state of social anomie using Merton's categories of deviant behaviour.

Characteristic features of anomie

Our empirical study examines primary (direct) indicators of anomie in relation to established norms and cultural goals. These indicators include feelings of dissatisfaction, insecurity, guilt and depression. Secondary indicators, such as an increase in deviant behaviour in the form of innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion, will be demonstrated using exemplary case studies. As empirical research opportunities are extremely limited in present-day Eritrea, long-term participant observation was our most important research tool. The specific information presented in the case studies was gathered through narrative interviews and target-oriented conversations carried out during fieldwork by both authors between 2008 and 2010. This paper presents six cases out of a sample of fourteen. All names have been changed to grant anonymity, and in some cases specific characteristics have been altered in order to further protect the person's identity. However, Muslim and Christian names indicate the real religious affiliation of the individuals.

Our sample of fourteen case studies does not claim to be representative, but it does demonstrate features common to the majority of those affected by the WYDC. Seven members of the research sample were Muslim, seven were Christian. Five were women; nine were men. Among the women, three were national service recruits and two (both of them Muslim) had not registered for the service but both had husbands who were soldiers. Eight members of our sample had a grade-eleven education or higher, and the remaining six had no formal education, were housewives or maids, or worked in the agricultural sector before being conscripted. Nine people were from Asmara or had lived there for a long period; the rest were from a rural or semi-urban environment in the Southern Region. Seven out of the nine males of our sample group had escaped Eritrea by 2011, which reflects the uncontrollable mass

exodus which is currently taking place. The ages within our sample group ranged from 24 to 43 years, with an average age of 32 years. Those who were in the army and national service had served from two years up to 10.5 years, with an average length of five years (with the three cases doing only nominal service excluded). Among the men, the average duration of service was eight years (these numbers are as of summer 2009). None of them had any hope of being released anytime in the near future.

In all cases, with the exception of three people who avoided serving in the WYDC by bribing officers or obtaining a medical exemption, the desired biography of the person in question has been severely disturbed: Eight members of the sample were deprived of the right to carry on their education or practice the profession they had studied; as a result, seven were unable to care for their family financially. In three cases, the national service led to divorce or separation from a partner, and one woman was widowed when her husband was shot while trying to cross the border. All of them had experienced personal harm caused by the WYDC during the research period. In a highly anomic environment, all members of our sample group had to resort to deviant behaviour in the sense of Merton in order to find a solution to their dilemma. It should be noted that our aim is not to show exceptional cases, but similar experiences belong to the everyday life of all Eritreans. The following behavioural patterns are frequent as a consequence of the WYDC.

Innovation

Innovation is practiced when cultural goals are internalised but institutionalised norms are not equally internalised. Given the fact that the vast majority of the Eritrean population tries to achieve traditional cultural goals, a great deal of creativity is used to avoid the institutionally prescribed national service. Various strategies are utilised to circumvent life as a recruit.

Innovation by draft dodging

Many young Eritreans try to avoid being conscripted into the army. They do not register for military service as they are required to do when they reach the age of 18; they hide from the security agents who are roaming the streets in search of civilians without exemption certificates; they do not report back to their military unit after their annual holiday has passed; they voluntarily fail in school exams in order to repeat a school

year instead of going to Sawa for their twelfth school year. Girls marry at an early age and become pregnant – sometimes even without being married – in order to avoid the service. Thus, the government's military security employs a large number of secret agents whose sole task is to search for draft dodgers in streets, in bars, and by collecting information from draft dodgers' neighbours and acquaintances (see Treiber 2005; Bozzini 2011).

The case of Halima and Ismail shows how the arrest of draft dodgers can destroy entire families. Halima (30 years old) is from the Southern Region. In 1996, she married Ismail, who was an agro-pastoralist. He joined the army during the war with Ethiopia and was not demobilised. In 2003 he refused to go back to his military unit after a one-month holiday because his monthly salary of 450 nakfa (€23) was too small to make a living. He worked illegally at a private construction firm and became one of the many wanted draft dodgers. He was arrested in 2005 on charges of betraying the nation and was sent to Wi'a, a military prison site.¹⁰ The family was cut off from the financial support provided by Ismail. The arrest of her husband changed everything for Halima and her two little daughters. She received occasional support from her husband's family, but it was not enough to cover her needs to survive. So she moved to Massawa, the coastal port city, to search for a job and to educate her children, which was only possible in an urban environment. While in jail, Halima's husband became displeased with her, as his family passed on false information regarding her activities in Massawa,¹¹ where she was working as a housemaid. After one year of imprisonment, Ismail was released and sent back to his military unit, which was stationed in the Gash-Barka Region, near the Sudanese border. After four months of rehabilitation, that is, service under strict control to observe his behaviour, he decided to risk his life and attempt to cross the border to Sudan with two of his friends. However, all three of them were shot and killed by border commandos. Halima was devastated when she received the news of Ismail's death, and her pain was exacerbated by the frequent queries of the children regarding their father. The three are now alienated from the extended family because of Halima's job and live under extremely poor economic conditions. The children will not be able to finish their education and will have to look for work as soon as possible.

Halima's case is an example of how state violence against national service recruits affects all family members, particularly women and children. The husband, for the sole 'crime' of trying to feed his family, was jailed, alienated from his wife and ultimately shot while trying to

cross the border to find work in Sudan. His wife had to leave her place of origin and violate traditional role-expectations, against her will, by working as a housemaid. The children not only lost their father at an early age but also ended up in poverty and isolation.

Innovation by trying to avoid the service

Exemptions are another way to escape the fate of being recruited into the national service. They are hard to obtain, as only persons who are considered physically or mentally unfit are exempted from the service. People try to get the certificate by pretending to be ill, mad or over-aggressive. Those who have the financial capacity try to bribe officials in order to be discharged. Another way people attain an informal exemption from the service is by bribing officers to allow them to enjoy extended periods of leave or to work in the administration, where they can go about their own business while doing their service for only an hour a day.

The case of Mekonnen (36 years old) is typical of those who are 'on the better side of life'. Mekonnen comes from a well-to-do family in Asmara; his parents own a large retail shop and have good relations with the government. During the 1990s, they opened a restaurant, which is managed by Mekonnen. When the war started in 1998, he was conscripted but managed to get a job as the driver of a high-ranking officer, who employed him more or less nominally and who accepted bribes in return for leaving him undisturbed. After the end of the war, Mekonnen was not demobilised but continued his nominal job. He is formally regarded as a national service recruit. About once a month he is called to drive the officer around for a few days; the rest of his time is at his own disposal, and he is free to get on with his business. He stresses that he is a soft and peaceful person and is glad that he never had to go through the hard military training. He feels content with his life, without considering his privileged position as something exceptional or unjust. His conviction is that whoever is in a position to avoid the national service will do so. However, even privileged persons such as Mekonnen are living under anomic conditions, as their maintenance of their comfortable lives and business enterprises is never secure.

Innovation by exodus

Exodus is the last alternative for those who cannot deal with the situation any longer. Fleeing the country has become a mass phenomenon in

recent years. Young people cross the borders to the neighbouring countries under the threat of death. If they are discovered while trying to escape they may be shot on the spot or arrested and placed in a camp for an unspecified period, usually for about two years. After the prison term is up, they are sent back to their military unit, where they remain under tight control and have to perform hard labour. Torture, physical abuse and beatings are common in military prison camps, although former inmates are reluctant to talk about what happened to them there, at least if they are still in Eritrea.¹² Those who leave the country to escape from the national service put their families and parents in a critical situation. The parents are accused of facilitating the escape of their sons and daughters, either financially or morally, which in the logic of the government is an act of treason. They are obliged to pay 50,000 nakfa (€2,500) when one of their dependants escapes; otherwise they go to prison, unless they are released on bail (Amnesty International (AI) 2006). This punishment has been introduced as a subtle weapon to generate a moral conflict for those who feel responsible towards their relatives; however, given the desperate situation in the country, this strategy has not paid off. In 2010 almost 222,500 Eritrean refugees were registered in Sudan (UNHCR 2010: 15), not including the large number who had not reported to the authorities, but had instead sought work in Khartoum and other large cities. In 2011, about 1,600 Eritreans crossed the border to Sudan every month (IRIN 2011). In February 2012, 55,880 Eritreans were registered as refugees in Ethiopia (UNHCR 2012a: 3). Many of those who manage to reach Sudan try to make their way to Europe via the Sahara Desert to Libya and from there by boat to Malta or Italy. Accordingly, the number of registered Eritrean refugees in Italy rose from 94 in 2002 to 10,865 in 2010. The respective figures for Malta, which is infamous for having deported hundreds of Eritreans back to their country, are seven for 2002 and 1,270 for 2010. The numbers of Eritreans asking for asylum in Switzerland rose from 201 in 2002 to 6,859 in 2010; the figures for Sweden are 232 and 3,129, respectively. Israel has become a favoured destination for Eritreans, too, and reported an influx of almost 17,000 in 2010 (UNHCR 2012b). This list could be continued and does not indicate the complete number of refugees. There is without doubt an evident connection between the introduction of the WYDC and the steady increase in the number of Eritreans leaving their country.

Ali's case is typical of those who try to leave the country by all means. He is 32 years old, from the Central Region, and was recruited in 1997.

He experienced the war with Ethiopia, and his two best friends lost their lives in the third Ethiopian offensive. After the peace agreement in 2000, his hope was to be demobilised, but he was kept in a military position. He felt desperate and made plans to escape with some like-minded friends. In 2004, when his military unit was shifted to Gash-Barka, some of his friends managed to cross the border, but he could not join them. At that time, his family's situation was miserable because his father had become ill. The family had no money with which to seek adequate medical treatment. Ali's younger brother left school and began to work various daily-wage jobs to support his family. Some months later he was arrested because he had reached the age of 18 and had dropped out of school but had not reported for his national service. Ali felt ashamed that he, as the eldest son, instead of supporting his family was unable to assist them. The only option he had to improve the financial situation was to try crossing the border and find employment in Sudan. Thus, it was only a matter of time before he made another attempt. Unfortunately, Ali was arrested at the border along with four others in 2005, and all of them were sent to prison for one year. When he was released, he was sent back to his unit. As he explained, it was hard for him to survive in the hostile environment of the military camp, where his superiors viewed him as a traitor. Finally, in late 2008, Ali managed to escape, together with two friends. His family learned about his flight from a relative in Sudan.

This case is a typical example of the incompatibility of the normative system imposed by the government and the civil normative structure which implies that the eldest son is responsible for maintaining the family when the father gets sick. Although Ali was not married, he experienced great psychological stress because he was not in a position to care for his parents and younger siblings. As the anomic pressure was very strong, he tried to flee at all costs. By working in Sudan he is able to fulfil his family's expectation that he will support them, a possibility he is denied in his own country.

Treiber presents an example of a young man from a different cultural background, but with a similar pattern of innovative behaviour: Biniam, a former university student, seemingly accepted his national duty by working in the administration as a national service recruit; at the same time, he was running his girlfriend's bar while silently planning his flight into exile, 'from where he hoped to better support his children and live a life of security and peace' (Treiber 2009: 95). As in many cases, it is unknown if his attempt to fly to Ethiopia was successful.

Human trafficking – the other side of ‘innovation’

The anomic situation caused by the WYDC also yielded innovative behaviour in the more conventional sense, i.e. in the form of criminality and corruption on the part of army officers and other individuals who are making a profit out of the mass exodus: In its report of July 2011, the UNSC monitoring group on Somalia and Eritrea revealed that high-ranking Eritrean militaries, most prominently Major General Tekle ‘Manjus’ Kiflai, were involved in human trafficking across the border to Sudan: they charged about US \$ 3000 for a border-crossing and for smuggling the escapees to Egypt through the Sudanese desert (United Nations 2011: 109–10). Hundreds of Eritrean refugees who tried to reach Israel fell into the hands of human traffickers from the Rashaida ethnic group who cooperated with both agents of the Eritrean and the Sudanese governments. The escapees were held hostage in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula by Arab Bedouin clans where they were subjected to physical abuse and mistreatment, while ransom payments of about US \$ 20,000 were extorted from family members residing in the diaspora to let them continue their journey to Israel. A part of them even fell victim to illicit ‘organ harvesting’ operations. A large number of Eritreans is involved in these criminal human trafficking activities (for details, see International Commission on Eritrean Refugees (ICER) Press Release 17.2.2012).

Ritualism

Ritualistic behaviour means that cultural goals are abandoned while conformity is maintained. In the Eritrean administration, there are numerous individuals who have been ‘frozen’ (*medeskal*) by the government, which means they receive their salary but do not have any meaningful tasks. Nevertheless, they appear at their office every day, as they are deprived of alternatives. This pattern of behaviour also applies to those national service recruits who accept their fate and never attempt to flee or overstretch their holidays. They either do not marry or neglect their families. Many of them suffer from psychological problems caused by delusion. Ritualism may even start during childhood: many elementary and secondary school students study only half-heartedly because they want to avoid being recruited into the military and having to work for the national service for an unlimited number of years once they have finished the twelfth grade.¹³

Riggan carried out fieldwork in Assab in 2003, shortly after the introduction of the twelfth school year at Sawa had been announced.

Simultaneously, the Ministry of Education had issued a directive to the teachers that no student should fail in the exams, irrespective of his or her personal performance. She observed the profound effect of this measure: 'Many students expressed sentiments that education had no worth anymore. Others tried to fail, and, when they realized they could not fail, tried to find other ways to delay completing eleventh grade' (Riggan 2009: 87). It is interesting to note that 'education' as a cultural goal internalised by many young people as a means to future success was immediately abandoned when the goal 'success' seemed no longer available. According to Riggan, prior to the introduction of the WYDC, both teachers and students believed that education should provide both bright futures for individuals and development for the nation; this was incompatible with the fact that now Sawa had become the last destination. For the government, schools had become institutions meant to create obedient students of military discipline with docile minds, while teachers desired respectful students, too, but for the sake of playing a role in the development of the nation as educated citizens (*ibid.*: 90–1). Both goals have proven to be largely incompatible.

Retreatism

In the case of retreatism, both cultural goals and institutionalised means are abandoned. The individual drops out of society. Alcoholism, as one form of retreatism, is common in Eritrea among men who have given up trying to cope with the difficult situation. Treiber, who conducted an ethnographic study among the youth in Asmara during the early 2000s, came to know many young men who spent their time in bars or nightclubs and vividly portrays a situation in which such activities have become 'strategies for controlling one's own body amid heavily circumscribed demands on time, leisure, and personal agency' (2009: 93). This control is, however, only imaginary for many youths. Mesfin, a young man in his late twenties whose fate Treiber describes as one who had become a 'nihilist drunkard' as he saw no better alternatives for himself, died in 2004 as a consequence of his alcohol abuse (*ibid.*: 92–3).

Those who drink often become aggressive towards their wives and children.

The case of Salma (35 years old) demonstrates the fate of a woman who has suffered from the violent behaviour of her husband, who is trapped in the national service. Salma was married in 2002 at the age of 28. Her husband Mohammed was 40 years old and had been

conscripted since 1998; he received a payment of 500 nakfa per month, of which he was supposed to give 300 nakfa to his wife. Soon after the marriage, however, it became clear that he did not care to support Salma financially, even though she was pregnant. Mohammed had grown up in a rural environment in the Southern Region. Before joining the army, he had supported his family by cultivating and harvesting. Once in the military he started to drink, even though he was a Muslim from a conservative background. He was not satisfied with his life and was frustrated by his poor economic situation. After his marriage he took his frustrations out on his wife, as he could not fulfil her expectations and those of his clan. Salma eventually had to move to her uncle's house in order to survive, and her daughter became sick due to being underweight. Salma was now determined to get divorced. Mohammed refused to accept a divorce, as this would be an admission of his personal failure, but Salma refused to return to his house. Finally, in 2006, the leaders of Mohammed's clan intervened and convinced him to accept the divorce. Salma decided to take her life into her own hands and managed to find work as a housemaid, leaving her daughter with her uncle's family.

Military recruits often develop psychological disturbances due to the conflict of roles they find themselves in. In this case the husband wanted to maintain his nominal role as the family head while leaving the responsibility for his wife and child to her uncle. His reaction is a typical case of retreatism. He was alienated from his cultural roots and retreated to alcohol abuse and aggression. From Salma's point of view, her aspirations to lead a family life with a caring husband and several children were not fulfilled. She now finds herself in the difficult position of being a divorced woman with a child, something which makes it hard for her to remarry within her conservative cultural environment. Without the support of her extended family, she would have been unable to manage her life. Her fate is typical of the majority of mothers in Eritrea, who do not receive any support while their husbands are in the national service.

Retreatism in cases of psychological trauma

Many young people have suffered psychological trauma and/or suffer from a mental disorder. A great many of those who fought in the Ethio-Eritrean War were traumatised and did not receive adequate professional support (see Fleischhauer 2008). Those who were arrested and tortured after an attempt of draft-dodging often end up in retreatism as well. Treiber presents the case of Andom, who was detained at the

notorious Nokra Island prison and, after his release, became apathetic and uninterested in his environment. Similar to Mohammed, he became aggressive when he was drunk and randomly attacked people, which made others believe that he had become 'antisocial' (Treiber 2009: 93–4), an indication that he had abandoned his once internalised norms and values.

Equally traumatised were those women who suffered sexual assaults and rape. It is an open secret that involuntary relationships and rape occur in the military, but our respondents, thereby representing the attitude of the general public, were reluctant to report cases of sexual harassment because they are a social taboo and there is no chance that such assaults will be brought before a court. Young women who join the national service have to suffer this violence silently. If it becomes known that a woman has been a victim of rape, she is stigmatised and will have great difficulty finding a husband.

Yordanos (33 years old), whose mother was an unmarried hairdresser, was drafted into the military when the border war started in 1998. After the end of the war, she was kept in the national service and assigned to an officer to work as his maid. He soon started to make advances towards her. When she refused to start a relationship with him, he made her work in the hot sun for hours without rest. Yordanos felt desperate, but she was determined to defend herself and not to give in to his demands. After some time, she learned that her officer's superior was moving into a military camp some miles away. While she was on duty she managed to escape to that camp and tell her story to the superior officer. She was lucky, as he was more honourable than her immediate superior and she was transferred to another unit and demobilised in 2002. But now she faced isolation: although she had fought as a soldier in the war against Ethiopia, she was not honoured by society; instead, she experienced stigmatisation and exclusion. She began to work as a hairdresser like her mother, but she felt isolated and lonely and was barely able to make a living. Two years later she managed to go to Saudi Arabia, where she now works as a housemaid for a rich family. Yordanos was not able to fulfil any of her aspirations to lead a dignified life and improve her personal situation. She would have liked to get married and to have a beauty salon of her own, but due to her 'career' in the military, people viewed her with even more suspicion than they had done before because of her being an illegitimate child. Her work in Saudi Arabia allows her to earn a relatively better income, but she is deprived of a private life, marriage and children and is completely at the disposal of her employers.

This case, which demonstrates the typical fate of many female conscripts, shows clearly that the so-called 'heroines' of the war are in no way rewarded by the government, despite its nationalist and war-glorifying ideology. Once they return to civil life, these women's destiny is determined by traditional role expectations which they were forced to break against their will.

Asia Abdulkadir, an Eritrean scholar who interviewed refugees in Sudan, has discovered that incidents of sexual violence in the military are frequent but that the women affected are reluctant to report them and completely unwilling to talk about their personal experiences (Abdulkadir 2008: 86).

Retreatism in the form of suicide is the last resort for many of those trapped in the military. During the period from August 2008 to August 2009, we learned of twelve cases of suicide in different neighbourhoods of Asmara, a number which indicates the prevalence of suicide. While young men often shoot or hang themselves, young women reportedly swallow liquid poison or burn themselves after pouring kerosene on their body and their clothes. The parents are not supposed to talk about how their children died, as the government wants to maintain the picture of the heroic youth serving their country with enthusiasm.

Rebellion

The mass exodus of many young people can also be seen as a form of rebellion, which in Merton's characterisation means alienation from both ruling goals and institutionalised means, and the replacement of these with alternative goals and mechanisms. In some cases, young people leave the country to be free of both the traditional role expectations of their families and the government's nationalist expectation of self-sacrifice. Those who rebel against private and EPLF/PFDJ norms are more likely to be young women from the urban middle class and those who have not been thoroughly exposed to both the traditional and the government's norm systems, for instance, young Eritreans brought up in the diaspora whose parents returned with them during the 1990s.

Daniel (24 years old) is the son of a family that resided in a European country for many years and returned soon after independence to build a new life in Eritrea. Unlike many Eritreans who lived abroad, Daniel's family did not acquire European citizenship for the family members, so Daniel had no chance to leave the country when he got into trouble. In 2002 he was 17 years old and frustrated with his life. He had never managed to thrive in the Eritrean school system, as he had spent his first

school years in Europe, and he complained that the Eritrean system was very rigid. He had no idea which professional career he should follow and longed to return to Europe. Daniel liked to spend the weekends at discos for some entertainment, and he had somehow managed to get a false foreign passport indicating that he was 18 to get admission. This would turn out to be very unfortunate for him, as a security agent searching for draft dodgers discovered this fact and turned him in. Daniel was arrested for forgery of documents and kept in prison until he reached the age of 18. He was then immediately sent to military training and was later kept in the national service. About four years later, in 2007, he managed to escape to Ethiopia with some friends. He did not stay there but instead continued his journey to Sudan, where he hoped to be able to get support from relatives in Europe. After crossing the border from Ethiopia to Sudan, Daniel and his comrades were arrested by Sudanese border guards who stripped them of all their belongings. Daniel had a hard time but was able to make it to Khartoum, where he stayed throughout 2008. In 2009 he managed to get to Libya with the help of an organised human trafficking organisation, which he paid for the transport across the Sahara Desert to Libya. From there he was able to inform his friends living in the diaspora that he intended to board a boat and continue his journey to Malta or Italy, like most Eritreans who try to make their way out of Sudan. At that time Daniel faced two different risks: being arrested by the Libyan authorities like thousands of his countrymen, who subsequently remained stuck in Libyan prisons or refugee camps or were even deported to Eritrea¹⁴ or drowning in the Mediterranean like hundreds of other illegal migrants who have tried in vain to reach European soil by boat.¹⁵

From the time of his youth, when his parents decided to return to Eritrea, Daniel has not been able to follow his own ambitions to finish his education in Europe; instead he had to spend the first years of his adult life in prison and in the military without being able to complete his secondary education. His attempt to make it anyway is a form of rebellion against both the government and his parents' aspirations to have him live in his mother country.

A widespread form of rebellion had been the massive movement of the *Warsay* generation towards evangelical churches since the end of the Ethio-Eritrean War, which is an indicator of alienation from both traditional values and the political values of the PFDJ—a turn towards the alternative normative system provided by these religious communities. Before their ban in 2002, members of the '*Penté*' churches, as they are dubbed by Eritreans, used to proselytise aggressively, especially

among the youth. Treiber argues that the crackdown on these churches can be quite easily understood: the evangelical churches observed a much stronger intake than the National Union for Youth and Students, the PFDJ mass organisation, did. They had become a counterbalance that developed autonomously, was hard to control and politically unreliable. Thus, the government tried to stop the 'Pentes' before they could become dangerous for the PFDJ. In fact, 'Pente' Christians refused to be 'political' in the sense of the PFDJ, this being a political act in itself demonstrating fundamental opposition to government policies (Treiber 2005: 172, 176).

A FORM OF FORCED RETREATISM: THE INCREASING NUMBER
OF BEGGARS AS A CONSEQUENCE OF ANOMIE

During the 1990s the number of beggars in Asmara was small and Eritreans often stressed that they were proud not 'to be a society of beggars'. Poor children were selling cigarettes, chewing gum, peanuts and the like to improve the income of their families, but they did not resort to directly asking people for money. The gradual but continuous increase in begging which has taken place in recent years has coincided with the introduction of the WYDC. There has been a steady increase in the number of beggars from year to year, with a dramatic expansion of the phenomenon in 2009 and 2010.¹⁶ The prolonged national service has rendered the traditional solidarity network defunct, as the members of the workforce are no longer earning enough money to support their families. In addition, increased divorce, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and psychological disturbances are forcing more and more people to sit in the streets and beg for money. Since 2010, the number of beggars, as one of the authors could observe until the end of 2011, has remained stable on a high level. There are regular razzias by the government in which the streets are 'swept' and people found begging are transported to so-called 'rehabilitation centres' or to their respective home areas.

The beggars sitting at street corners waiting for handouts are typically elderly women and young mothers with small children. The elderly women have fallen through the cracks of the social networks as their children have died in the war with Ethiopia, have left the country, are imprisoned, or have been kept in the national service and are unable to send money. The number of young mothers begging with their children has significantly increased over the past couple of years. Recently more and more young mothers with several children, from babies up to five- or six-year-olds, have become beggars. The fact that they have two or three

children is an indicator that these women are married, and that their husband is no longer able or willing to feed and house his family. He may be trapped in the national service, be serving a prison sentence for draft dodging, or be stranded in Sudan or another country without being able to remit money.

Only in the past couple of years have children resorted to directly begging for money. According to the traditional values of Eritrean society, sending children out to beg is intolerable; it can thus be assumed that these children have parents who are unable to make ends meet, and thus let their children go begging out of desperation. This is a further indicator of the familial disintegration caused by the so-called development campaign, which keeps husbands far from their families, meaning that the latter have to cope without any income or compensation from the government.

CONCLUSIONS

In the period since 1961 the Eritrean people have experienced thirty years of a liberation struggle, a short period of peace that lasted for seven years, two years of a devastating 'border war' with Ethiopia, and eleven years of a no-war/no-peace situation. Remarkably, the level of societal disintegration during these challenging times has never been as high as during recent years, namely, since the introduction of the WYDC. Its implementation was justified with the unsolved conflict with Ethiopia, which did not accept the verdict of an international border commission and was not ready to cede territory awarded to Eritrea. The Eritrean government reacted by abandoning plans for demobilisation and by recruiting more youngsters into the army of more than 350,000 conscripts every year. It has since effectively turned the economy into a party- and military-controlled venture based on the 'free' labour provided by the *Warsay* generation. Forced labour has replaced the free labour market, especially in the fields of cash-crop agriculture and construction. As demonstrated in this article, this has led to a rapid increase in anomie and family disintegration and to the spectacular mass exodus of the younger generation.

It is hard to grasp the logic of this social experiment. The unlimited service completely undermines the morale of the armed forces: instead of defending the country, conscripts dream of fleeing to the neighbouring countries to escape their fate. If the Eritrean government's primary aspiration was to train a reliable defence force, it could have maintained the original 18-month duration of the service. The official argument for

the campaign is that in order to rebuild the war-devastated country within the framework of the government's self-reliance strategy, voluntary labour is necessary for sufficient infrastructure construction to initiate a process of development. At the same time, the economy is being strangled under a command economy that heavily restricts the private sector and foreign investment. What is worse is that the national service recruits do not even receive a salary adequate to support themselves, not to mention their nuclear and extended families. There is no longer any 'normality' of life: one can no longer live up to the general norms and values without breaking the laws of the government. The widespread network of state surveillance based on police violence and the encroachment on the population by national security agents endangers the fabric of Eritrean society by jeopardising social relationships and mutual trust (Bozzini 2011: 107) and by forcing the people into various forms of 'deviant behaviour' such as desertion and illegal exit of the country. This is done under the pretext of the government's (futile) effort to impose ideological and physical control on its subjects. As an International Crisis Group report aptly remarks: 'The social fabric [of Eritrea] is now under great strain. While the government has long believed it can rely on a fundamental patriotism and that Eritreans can accept prolonged hardship, millions are increasingly disengaging from the state and even their own communities – and focus only on immediate family, preoccupied with seeking ways to survive and ultimately escape' (2010: 15).

The negative consequences of this strategy are affecting the economy, the educational sector, state institutions and the core of societal organisation. They will be felt for years to come, and may ultimately lead to state failure, if no immediate policy changes are introduced – an action which is unlikely under the present leadership.

NOTES

1. For different analyses of the Eritrean–Ethiopian war, see: Trivelli 1998; Gilkes & Plaut 1999; Tadesse 1999; Negash & Tronvoll 2000; Hirt 2001; Entner 2001; Reid 2003; Habte 2007.

2. In early 1998, President Isaias announced on the Eritrean State Television a so-called 'environmental campaign': all reservists who had finished their 18-month military training at the Sawa camp and their subsequent national service from 1994 onward and had thus been demobilised were called back on duty to participate in a campaign which included reforestation efforts. This event, which equals to a hidden mobilisation a few months before the war broke out has, to the knowledge of the authors, not been documented in any analysis of the war, but both of them personally remember the event.

3. In 2002, approximately 5,000 persons were demobilised, many of them women. In 2004, approximately 60,000 people were demobilised – most of them had already been working in government offices and did not change their type of work, but they received regular salaries after demobilisation (see World Bank 2009).

4. National Service conscripts receive 50 Nakfa during the first year, 150 Nakfa during the second year, and between 500 and 1,000 Nakfa during subsequent years of their service, depending on their educational qualification (personal observation and communication of the authors with conscripts).

5. The *asmarino.com* report is based on interviews conducted by HRCE (Human Rights Concern Eritrea) with two former workers at the Bisha site who had escaped to Ethiopia. It has to be noted that *asmarino.com* as an Eritrean opposition website cannot be considered an independent source of information, but the interviews appear credible and fit into the strategy of the government to employ WYDC conscripts in all fields of the Eritrean economy.

6. Sawa is a military training camp in the western lowlands (Gash-Barka Region), where the military training usually takes place and where a boarding school for all twelfth-grade students was established in 2005. In everyday language, 'going to Sawa' is equated with being a national service (*ageglot*) conscript.

7. At its third (and so far last) congress in 1994 the EPLF renamed itself the PFDJ without making significant changes to its Marxist organisational structure (see EPLF 1994).

8. Towards the end of the liberation struggle in 1991, the EPLF's membership reached a peak of approximately 95,000 combatants, out of a population of approximately three million (see Bruchhaus & Mehreteab 2000).

9. In Sawa and the other military camps, reading the Bible or the Quran is forbidden. In numerous cases those who refuse to hand over their respective holy books to the military officers have been arrested and placed in metal containers for punishment (for details of human rights violations in the military see Human Rights Watch 2009).

10. Wi'a, situated in the Southern Red Sea Region and one of the hottest places on earth, is used as both a military training camp and a military prison.

11. The port city of Massawa is known as an urban area where prostitution is widespread; thus, the mere decision by a woman to seek a job there can lead to suspicion in her family that she might earn her income through prostitution.

12. For human rights conditions and methods of torture and mistreatment, see Human Rights Watch (2009) and Amnesty International (2004).

13. In 2009, 24,000 students attended the twelfth grade at Sawa. Only 3,000 of them passed the matriculation exam and were thus able to attend the technical colleges, the only form of tertiary education left in the country since the university was closed in 2006. The remaining 21,000 students received some educational training or were directly transferred to the army (source: informant, name withheld).

14. In 2008, some 700 Eritreans were held in the Misratah detention center in Libya. Amnesty International warned that 230 of them were about to be forcibly returned to Eritrea. Although the deportation did not take place, Eritreans are in a precarious situation in Libya, which is not a signatory of international treaties to protect the rights of refugees (see AI 2008).

15. In August 2009, 73 Eritreans died on their passage from Libya to Italy after their boat ran out of fuel. They were not picked up by passing vessels or Italian boarder guards. Five people were rescued after having spent three weeks on the boat (Welt online, 2009).

16. This section is based on personal observation over extended periods between 1995 and 2011.

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