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Hirt, Nicole; Mohammad, Abdulkader Saleh

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## Eritrea's self-reliance narrative and the remittance paradox: Reflections on thirty years of retrogression

Nicole Hirt<sup>1</sup> and Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*This article explores the role of remittances in Eritrea's transnational authoritarian system. The government exercises a policy of active control over Eritrean citizens living abroad, and the country's economy relies heavily on private remittances to ensure the subsistence of the population. This stands in stark contrast to the official doctrine of economic self-reliance, which has been hampered by an open-ended national service that can last for decades and deprives Eritrean citizens in productive age from making a living. The government also puts extreme restraints on the private sector. As a result, the livelihoods of Eritreans depend mostly on diaspora remittances. The authors take a historically contextualised approach based on empirical fieldwork in Eritrea from the 1990s to 2010 and among Eritrean diaspora communities in Europe between 2013 and 2019. We demonstrate how the government's self-reliance approach has shifted from developing Eritrea's human capital to securing financial support through transnational diaspora control. We conclude that in the case of Eritrea, the process of diasporisation has not triggered development and political transformation but has cemented a political and economic status quo that forces ever-growing parts of the population to leave.*

**Keywords:** Eritrea; remittances; diaspora; national service; refugees; self-reliance

JEL Classification: F24

### Introduction

This article elaborates why remittances from Eritrea's large diaspora have not facilitated development in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by improving livelihoods through economic and social capital creation. We argue that on the contrary, remittances have helped to ossify an autocratic political system and a command economy that suffocates private business engagement. Generally speaking, financial remittances can only be used productively if the homeland government provides a conducive business climate (De Haas, 2007). "Remittances are in themselves not sufficient

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Nicole Hirt, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg, Germany. E-Mail: [Nicole.Hirt@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:Nicole.Hirt@giga-hamburg.de).

<sup>2</sup> Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg, Germany.

E-Mail: [sahoita@yahoo.com](mailto:sahoita@yahoo.com).



for growth. The extent of the benefit depends on domestic institutions and macroeconomic environment in the receiving country. Unlike the 'less open' countries, 'more open' countries have better institutions and better financial markets to take advantage of the remittances income" (Dastidar, 2017: 1). In Eritrea, the government relies on remittances to prevent the breakdown of its unproductive command economy, which is based on decade-long forced labor performed by the recruits of a national service introduced in 2002. The national service deprives entire families of making a living and shaping their lives individually. This has created a state of social anomie, defined as a lack of acceptable means to achieve socially desirable personal goals (Hirt and Mohammad, 2013; see also Kibreab, 2018).

We present a synthesis of qualitative field research and decade-long participant observation of developments inside Eritrea and in the diaspora. We analyse the government's self-reliance approach during Eritrea's formative years in the 1990s and its regression since the early 2000s, when the country became Africa's largest refugee producer.

During the 1990s, Mohammad engaged in research about inclusive development strategies for marginalised groups such as pastoralists and artisanal fishermen (Mohammad, 2002a and 2002b). Hirt's research focused on the government's self-reliant development strategy. In 1997, she conducted numerous interviews with Eritrean ministers, representatives of international organisations, NGOs and diplomats to explore donor response to Eritrea's development strategy (Hirt, 2001). From 2008 to 2010 both authors observed the Eritrean society's militarisation through the open-ended national service, which led to social anomie and a growing mass exodus (Hirt and Mohammad, 2013). In recent years, our research has focused on the transnational institutions of the Eritrean regime and its diaspora policies (Hirt, 2015; Hirt and Mohammad, 2018a and 2018b; Mohammad, 2021; Hirt, 2021). From 2018 to 2019, we conducted one hundred interviews with Eritreans living in Germany, Norway, Sweden, and the UK, using snowball sampling as a qualitative research method. The respondents come from all walks of life and age groups and from different professional backgrounds and reflect the ethnic and religious diversity of the Eritrean population.

A diaspora is defined as a population that has been involuntarily dispersed from its indigenous territories but has retained its homeland orientation (Brubaker, 2005: 5-6). This paper distinguishes analytically between the established Eritrean diaspora, which consists of the one million refugees that left during the liberation struggle between 1961 and 1991 (World Bank, 1991: ii). Most of them have meanwhile become naturalised citizens of their host countries, but the Eritrean government still regards them as Eritrean citizens, and most of them still identify as Eritreans. On the other hand, the open-ended national service has caused the flight of hundreds of thousands of Eritreans since 2002. We define these



persons as refugees, because many of them are still struggling to get a secure residence status in their host countries.

The aim of this article is twofold: first, it explores if the government has reached its aim of self-reliance proclaimed during the armed struggle. Second, it analyses how the interplay between government and diaspora communities stabilises the political system. It incorporates all veins of our past research and presents a synopsis of the government's policies, which have failed to bring economic and social progress to the citizens while keeping the ruling group in power.

The analysis does not rely on quantitative economic development models (see for instance Olayungbo and Quadri, 2019), which are hardly applicable to the Eritrean case due to a complete lack of reliable data. It rather follows a qualitative approach and relies on the notion of transnational authoritarianism (Glasius, 2017; Tsourapas, 2020), which explains how diasporas can stabilise autocratic systems. We take a historically contextualised approach to study diaspora politics, as suggested by Adamson (2019: 228-229), who found that 'domestic policies are key to understanding not simply the *politics* of diasporas, but also the very *formation* and *generation* of (...) diasporas'. In this vein, we shed light on the emergence of Eritrea's policy of self-reliance during the armed struggle against Ethiopia (1961-1991). The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), a guerrilla group re-named People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994, has governed the country since independence in 1993. Self-reliance has remained the economic mantra of the ruling elite ever since, although the State of Eritrea depends heavily on external financial sources such as diaspora remittances, development aid and financial support by various Arab governments that have become active players in the Horn of Africa in recent years (International Crisis Group, 2018; Lons, 2018).

The remainder of the article discusses the emergence of the EPLF's understanding of economic development during the armed struggle; the development of transnational governance structures (for definitions of transnationalism see Koslowski, 2015; Bauböck and Faist, 2010; Lyons and Mandaville, 2012), and the government's shifting development strategies. It analyses the role of the diaspora in maintaining the stability of an economic system that systematically deprives citizens of making a living by recruiting people of productive age into a decade-long national service.

### **Remittances and development in authoritarian political systems**

Remittances generally play an important role in many developing countries, and countless poor families send a family member to work abroad as a coping strategy. Remittances can help to diversify their economic resource base and to build capital. Remittances can help impoverished nations to cope with their marginalised position in the global economy. On

the other hand, the volume of remittances can be negatively affected by economic and political developments (Hernandez and Bibler Coutin, 2006: 197).

Many authoritarian systems interfere strongly in the economic affairs of their citizens without providing a secure social safety net. For instance, Kakhkharov found that in Uzbekistan the main reasons preventing remittance-receiving households from investing are an inadequate banking system, pressing expenditure needs and a challenging business environment (2018:51, see also UNCTAD, 2012:57). Similar conditions can be found in Eritrea, where the banking sector has remained in its infancy since independence and cash flows are heavily restricted by the government.

In conflict-ridden Somalia, the persistent political instability has hampered development and the population relies strongly on diaspora remittances. The negative prospects for the future of the country, combined with strong transnational clan and family networks, has caused strong feelings of social obligation and social pressure to remit money. Somalis who became refugees to save their personal lives are now struggling to provide a livelihood for those who stayed behind (Lindley, 2009, see also Hammond, 2010). By contrast, people originating from quasi-independent Somaliland have a more optimistic motivation: "Members of the Somaliland diaspora often perceive the Somaliland homeland as under-explored, as a place of opportunity where fortunes can be made and individual dreams fulfilled" (Hansen, 2014: 145). Diaspora members that invest in the home economy also gain social standing and respect among their communities, which presents a form of social capital (Young, 2006: 27; Mohan, 2006). By contrast, the Eritrean government builds on the diaspora's feelings of social obligation while prohibiting any form of individual economic engagement. In its desire to control the economy and society and to maintain a collectivist model of development, it rejects the engagement of diaspora Eritreans in the development of their homeland.

Various authoritarian governments rely on hard currency remittances. In Zimbabwe, their flow has created an informal economy and increased social inequality. While urban middle and upper classes profit from migration to Europe and America, the urban and rural poor are either excluded from remittances benefits, or their migration is restricted to South Africa, where working conditions for migrant workers are less profitable (Brackings, 2003: 634). The socialist government of Cuba tacitly encouraged remittances in US dollars after the breakdown of the Soviet Union as an economic survival strategy (Eckstein, 2012). In Eritrea, hard currency remittances also play an important role, but the government has completely prevented the use of hard cash as a parallel currency. Every single US dollar or Euro must be exchanged into the local currency, the Eritrean Nakfa (ERN) via the state-controlled banking system or through government agents that pose as black-market traders. Informal sector activities, which play an important role in most other developing



economies, are heavily constrained and limited to lowest-level microbusiness activities such as selling lemons or paper tissues. Almost the entire population is affected by poverty and even those who receive substantive amounts of remittances have only restricted possibilities to spend monies due to a lack of opportunities<sup>3</sup>.

### **The EPLF's self-reliance approach and the emergence of the transnational state**

In modern history, Eritrea was ruled by various foreign powers, starting from Italian colonisation in 1890, followed by British Military Administration in 1941 and Ethiopian federation in 1952. The annexation of Eritrea by Emperor Haile Selassie in 1962 triggered a thirty year-long independence struggle initiated by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) with the support of various Arab countries. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) emerged during the 1970s at the height of the Cold War. In its first National Democratic Programme of 1978, the leadership declared to pursue a socialist ideology, which has been shaping the policies of independent Eritrea until present. The front's political structures followed the Leninist principle of Democratic Centralism, which was maintained after independence. Economically, the EPLF pursued a self-reliance approach because it was unable to raise substantial support from western governments due to its socialist agenda. (Iyob, 1995: 123-24).

The National Democratic Programme of 1987 favoured self-reliance as a major attribute of the EPLF's development strategy, including the dedication to a planned economy (*EPLF Political Report and National Democratic Programme, 1987: 60*). The EPLF's terminology reflected common ideas of the political left of those times (see, e.g. Amin, 1976; Senghaas, 1977), and many European and US leftists expressed their support of the armed struggle through various publications (Davidson and Cliffe, 1980; Sherman, 1998; Pateman, 1990; Connell, 1997). In 1991, the EPLF won a military victory over Ethiopia, and Eritrea became independent in 1993.

Starting from the 1960s, Eritreans who had fled abroad supported the liberation struggle financially and politically. The EPLF created transnational institutions and established mass organisations to control these emerging diaspora communities across Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Their task was to spread its political ideology and to raise much-needed funds. Simultaneously, the mass organisations served as tools of surveillance and constituted a tool of rigorous monitoring that helped to intimidate critical individuals

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<sup>3</sup> No official data of Eritrea's poverty rate or income distribution from the World Bank and other financial institutions are available due to the government's lack of transparency. It has never published the state's budget and has refrained from generating statistical data. However, organisations such as UNICEF and the World Hunger Index regularly present Eritrea as a country at high risk of malnutrition.

through means of psychological warfare and physical violence (Redeker Hepner, 2005, Conrad, 2005; Kibreab, 2011). After independence, the mass organisations were replaced by community organizations (*mabbere.koms*), and a diaspora tax was introduced and collected via Eritrea's diplomatic missions abroad. Until this day, diaspora taxation contributes substantially to the State's budget (Hirt, 2015, Hirt and Mohammad, 2018).

### **The early post-independence period: 'miracles in peaceful nation-building'**

Eritrea's formative years before a renewed border war with Ethiopia (1998 to 2000) looked promising. After independence, the victorious fighters were enthusiastic and self-confident and proclaimed ambitious aims for the future: "Our vision is to perform miracles in peaceful nation-building as we did in the war of liberation" (PFDJ National Charter, Nakfa, 1994: 7). Economic development should be based on self-reliance and the full participation of the people (*ibid*: 28). At that time, the PFDJ expressed strong moral commitment to the improvement of life for all Eritreans and re-affirmed the party's self-reliance approach:

Unless peace, justice and prosperity prevail in Eritrea, the independence we won with heavy sacrifices will be meaningless. That is to say, if we do not lift people out of poverty and deprivation, safeguard their human and democratic rights, and improve their material, cultural and spiritual lives, attaining independence will not amount to anything (PFDJ National Charter, 1994:2)

In the same year, the Office of the President published its "Macro Policy" that proclaimed development goals such as agricultural improvement through irrigation, the creation of an export-oriented industrial sector, a competitive financial system, improved health and educational systems, internal and external peace and respect for human rights (Hirt, 2001: 130). These development efforts were cherished by the international community, which was impressed by the government's unconventional rhetoric of self-reliant development (UNDP, 1997). During the early 1990s, Eritrea was regarded as a beacon of hope (Ottawa, 1999), and international donors were keen to adapt to the wishes of the ruling elite. The UNDP stated that Eritrea had an excellent track record in program execution and financial accountability (UNDP, 1997). However, the government complained that the European Union's aid was tied to too many conditions. In 1994, President Isaias told a German journalist: "Our relations with the European Union have suffered from its conventional approach, from its conditionality. If the EU is not able to adapt to our programmes, we cannot talk about partnership" (*epd* Entwicklungspolitik, 9/1998). This reflects the self-perception of the Eritrean government when dealing with donors. Many former EPLF fighters who had been appointed as government employees at ministries complained that





the various conditionalities attached to aid from were something they found very annoying<sup>4</sup>.

The government's mistrust in foreign donors was complemented by mistrust in its own population. Despite its motto "victory to the masses", the PFDJ believed that development efforts were to be executed through top-bottom command chains. Alemseged Tesfai, a PFDJ intellectual described this paternalistic approach: "Should a government postpone programmes and policies it is convinced will enhance the progress of democracy and development in order to gain the consensus of a people who may not clearly see the future value of the change proposed?" (1996: 14). This policy approach affected population groups such as pastoralists, whose life style was regarded as backward despite their sophisticated adaptation to difficult climatic conditions and their capacity to mediate inter-ethnic conflicts in regard to land and water resources. The government promoted villagization programmes and claimed that the pastoral communities were not aware of land degradation problems, disregarding the fact that they had traditionally been able to cover the needs of the local market for animal products (Mohammad, 2000a: 10). Similarly, traditional artisanal fishing communities were patronized by the Ministry of Fisheries, which denied them support and training, forcing them migrate to Yemen and Saudi-Arabia (Mohammad, 2000b: 7).

On the other hand, Eritreans who wished to return from the diaspora and tried to open businesses often complained that PFDJ officials copied their business plans with the aim of establishing party-owned businesses while denying licences to potential returnees<sup>5</sup>. The government preferred Eritreans living abroad to support the State through the diaspora tax and send remittances rather than interfering in its planned economy. Eritrea's post-independence developing strategy included the consolidation of transnational structures of governance to control diaspora remittances. Initially, some progress was made in re-establishing industrial production and improving infrastructure, and for many Eritreans the future still looked bright. However, in 1998 a devastating border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea ended with Eritrea's military defeat in 2000. In retrospective, the war did not only cost up to 100,000 lives and resulted in the displacement of about one million Eritreans living near the border areas (Tronvoll and Negash, 2000; Hirt, 2001; Mohammad, 2013), but also marked the end of all hopes for a prosperous and democratic future.

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<sup>4</sup> Interviews with eight ministers or department heads in development-related line ministries during field research in Eritrea in 1997/98, see Hirt, 2001: 150-164.

<sup>5</sup> Personal observation by the authors between 1993 and 1997.



## **The post-border war period: command economy and societal militarization**

The initial development policy that relied on partial privatization and a combination of state-led and privately initiated development was replaced by a policy of societal militarisation (Hirt and Mohammad, 2013) and the introduction of a command economy based on forced labour.

In 2002 the Eritrean government launched the so-called *Warsay-Yikealo* Development Campaign (WYDC)<sup>6</sup>. Confronted with widespread dissatisfaction inside the country, the leadership tried to revive experiences of the armed struggle by introducing an involuntary and indefinite national service. This means in practice that all students must pass their final school year at the Sawa military camp, where they receive military training and are subjected to political indoctrination. Later they are obliged to work for extended periods in PFDJ-run enterprises, agro-businesses operated by the military leadership, in the administration or the service sector. Today most of Eritrea's teachers and nurses are underpaid national service recruits (Kibreab, 2009; COIE, 2016; Human Rights Watch 2019). The forced militarization of Eritrea's society has triggered a mass exodus, and hundreds of thousands fled the country (Hirt and Mohammad, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2014; Kibreab, 2018).

This means that the lives of the post-independence generation have been reduced to undisclosed periods of hard work without remuneration. The conscripts receive food and some pocket money but are unable to maintain their nuclear and extended families, as the tradition expects them to do. Only women aged over 27 years and seriously disabled persons are exempted, and there is no right to conscientious objection. In 2006 the government prohibited private construction firms from operating and arrested many entrepreneurs for alleged corruption without due process. The PFDJ owns several construction firms that operate mainly with national service conscripts and have thus "free access to unpaid skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour" (Kibreab, 2009b: 287). Accordingly, the government, the ruling PFDJ, and the senior army officers are the only profiteers of the campaign (Kibreab, 2009a: 60; HRW, 2011) while the country's social fabric has been severely damaged. This has led to a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of people, and those who have remained depend heavily on remittances for survival, with no chance to use them for investments in a better life (Belloni, 2019b).

The government is aware of the social damage caused by the open-ended national service. Yet, it is not willing to implement at least slight reforms. Its ideological conviction has

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<sup>6</sup> *Warsay* means 'heir' or 'follower', *yikealo* refers to a wise elderly person, a reminiscence to the fighter generation.



remained rooted in Marxism with a specific admiration for Maoist ideas<sup>7</sup>. According to Kibreab the EPLF/PFDJ leadership regards the time of the struggle as a time when social capital was created and social cohesion among the multi-ethnic society emerged. Thus, there is fear that in peace time society might disintegrate. “The Eritrean national service is therefore conceptualized and implemented (...) as a substitute for war and as a means of promoting social harmony” (2017: 17). The ruling elite also profits from the mass exodus since it has delegated the supply of the population with the subsistence minimum to the diaspora.

This strategy is justified by a crude understanding of how a national economy should work. PFDJ veteran General Sebhat Ephrem explained the rationale of the national service as follows:

Even though each of the *ageglot* [national service conscripts] has between two and three children, they only receive 500 ERN [33 US\$] per month. How do they do it? Their reward is not a salary because the amount they receive is insignificant. Instead patriotism (*hilina*) is the driving force. If a private firm were to take over, it would be solely driven by pecuniary interest rather than by patriotism. In the beginning, the worker of the *ageglot* will be happy to receive 100 ERN, but soon after, he will demand more. (...). In the end, money will dictate everything. Nothing can be accomplished in this way (Sebhat Ephrem, 2008, ‘interview with General Sebhat Ephrem, 18/19 July 2008’, cited in Kibreab, 2017: 65).

This narrative shows the deep disdain Eritrea’s political rulers feel for a market economy driven by “pecuniary interest”. Yet, while the conscripts are expected to be motivated by patriotism, the military commanders and the small PFDJ elite make a fortune with the forced labor of the recruits (Kibreab, 2017: 67-69). Unsurprisingly, this ideology-driven policy has led to a mass exodus of the youth and brought development to a halt.

### **The PFDJ’s underground economy**

In Eritrea, the use of remittances is strictly limited due to the government’s command economy, which is under the complete control of the PFDJ ruling elite, and all private business enterprises have been suffocated. For instance, in 2006 all private construction firms were forced to shut down (US Department of State, 2014: 8). Information about the PFDJ’s economic empire is limited due to the secretive policies of the leadership and its

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<sup>7</sup> President Isaias Afewerki underwent military training in China in 1966. In a cable published by WikiLeaks, the US Embassy in Asmara reported: “Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, who trained as a political commissar in China during the depths of the Cultural Revolution, continues to idolize Mao, remains fond of China, and governs Eritrea and its relations with the outside world based on his decades of experience as a revolutionary guerrilla leader combined with his interpretation of Maoist philosophy” (20 October 2009, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ASMARA363\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09ASMARA363_a.html), accessed 18 November 2020).

lack of transparency. Eritrea never made its state budget public, and virtually nobody knows exactly how much income the State has derived from diaspora payments. According to World Bank estimates, in 2002 remittances made up nearly one third of the GDP, reaching US \$ 1.37 billion in 2007, and Eritrea ranked fifth in Africa in remittances received per capita (Poole, 2013: 73; Hirt, 2015). There are very few analyses of Eritrea's economic system. The most succinct description of Eritrea's economy comes from an international body of investigation, the Somalia Eritrea Monitoring Group, which was supposed to watch over the implementation of UN-sanctions imposed on Eritrea in 2009 due to its alleged support for the radical Al-Shabaab militias in Somalia. The SEMG states:

Essentially, Eritrea manages two parallel economies: a formal economic sphere ostensibly managed by the State, and an opaque, largely offshore financial system controlled by elements of the ruling party and their supporters. (...). It involves a much higher proportion of hard currency transactions than the formal economy and is managed almost entirely offshore through a labyrinthine multinational network of companies, individuals and bank accounts, many of which do not declare any affiliation to PFDJ or the Eritrean State, and routinely engage in 'grey' or illicit activities'. (SEMG Report S\_2011\_433\_E:99; see also Plaut, 2017).

This means that contrary to its claim of aspiring self-reliant economic development through people-driven efforts, the ruling elite relies on untransparent business activities, remittances, and political rents to secure its own existence. This has led to a deplorable state of the economy. The African Development Bank states that Eritrea's major challenges are

"inadequate infrastructure (...), energy, housing, and rural agricultural irrigation systems, marketing facilities, and high yielding inputs and technologies. Other challenges are (...) low agricultural productivity, weak public governance and institutional capacity, and a poorly developed industrial sector due to nascent and restricted private and financial sectors" (2017: ii).

Interestingly, Seth Kaplan, who wrote an assessment on Eritrea on behalf of the Atlantic Council, a think-tank that is known as a lobbyist of the Eritrean government, describes the government's attitude to private business as worrying:

"It has adopted policies that dissuade the population from taking initiatives to build up their wealth (forcing many to look overseas for opportunity); discouraged investment and competition in most sectors of the economy; and deterred institutions from learning and modernizing through dynamic interaction with international markets and organizations" (2016:12).



In today's Eritrea, the government, the PFDJ and the military form a monopolistic conglomerate that owns enterprises in the trade, retail market, construction, mining and cash-crop sectors. Investments by potential local or diaspora investors have been heavily restricted and are tightly controlled (BTI Country Report Eritrea, 2020). The ruling elite also controls the diaspora remittances without disclosing their usage. A defected employee of the Ministry of Finance explains:

In the beginning I thought the diaspora tax was justified, but over the past 20 years, there has not been any visible thing done in Eritrea, we don't know where the money goes. When I worked at the Ministry of Finance, I was involved in diaspora tax issues. The Ministry of Finance has no control over the spending of the money. It also does not control the mining income. In the end, it is the President's office and the Head of PFDJ's Financial Affairs that control everything. The PFDJ has a lot of companies, they don't pay tax, they are like the private property of the ruling elite (Interview by Nicole Hirt, 2019, place and date withheld).

The government does not allow private use of diaspora remittances for productive purposes; even the construction of private houses has been banned. Since the closure of the private construction sector in 2006, the government has not given permission to build new private housing in Asmara and other cities. This has caused severe shortages over the years, especially in the capital. This means that even small-scale private economic endeavours are not an option for Eritrea's citizens (Hirt, 2007: 308).

In 2015 the government demolished hundreds of houses in the suburbs of Asmara and in the towns Adi Keyh, Keren and Massawa that were financed by diaspora Eritreans. The demolition of the houses triggered a rare protest by secondary school students in Adi Keyh, met by lethal violence by security forces (UNHRC, 2015; Makeda, 2015). The government's justification was that these houses were built without permission and the remittances had not been transferred through the PFDJ-owned Himbol Bank, but had been exchanged in the black market (statement by the then governor of the Southern Region, Mustafa Nurhusein, September 2015).

The next move to gain complete control over monetary transfers was the monetary reform carried out in late 2015. Its purpose was to extinguish the flourishing currency black market that had evolved due to the prolonged severe over-valuation of the Eritrean Nakfa. Consequently, Eritreans living in exile rarely used the official transfer channel through the PFDJ-owned Himbol Bank, but transferred their remittances through *Hawala* systems. Legal Notice 124/2015 issued by the Bank of Eritrea indicated that all Eritreans had to change the ERN banknotes in their possession against new bank notes at a 1:1 exchange rate. However, any amount exceeding 20,000 ERN [some 1,300 US\$] had to be deposited

at a national bank account to curb inflation and contain the black market and corruption. Thus, people involved in contraband trade, people smuggling and other illicit activities, mostly members of the military and party elite, faced either presenting their cash to the authorities or forwent their earnings. However, nothing is known about subsequent court cases (Hirt, 2016b: 304).

Since the 2015 reform, cash transactions have been severely restricted, and only amounts of up to 3,000 Nakfa [200 U\$] per month can be withdrawn by families and business people alike. Larger sums are supposed to be handled via cheques, because Eritrea has no system of cashless payment transactions, not even ATMs, let alone online banking. This makes business activities very difficult, and remittances cannot be used in any meaningful way to develop the economy (BTI Country Report Eritrea, 2020; Kaplan, 2016: 9). They can only serve the purpose of safeguarding the subsistence of the population and are increasingly invested to finance the flight of the young generation (Plaut, 2017: 8).

### **Doubt and ambivalence in the diaspora**

The developments described so far have raised doubt even among those diaspora communities that have traditionally supported the government. They experienced over time that it is not possible to make fruitful investments in Eritrea, and that money sent to the government disappears in murky channels. Many Eritreans have therefore resorted to invest in other African countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Angola, and even South Sudan (Africa Intelligence, 2014; The Sentry, 2019). There are, however, some diaspora Eritreans that still believe in the legitimacy of the Eritrean regime (Hirt, 2021).

In recent years, the established transnational control mechanisms of the government have become less effective to control parts of the diaspora, and especially the emerging refugee communities abroad. In the 1990s, many diaspora Eritreans believed in the government's ambitious strategy to achieve rapid development and become Africa's Singapore, as manifested in the 1994 PFDJ Programme and the Macro Policy. However, after the border war, these plans were abandoned and replaced by the open-ended national service as a collectivist development strategy, which has meanwhile crippled the economy including subsistence agriculture, livestock husbandry, small and micro business activities. Eritrea currently ranks 182 out of 189 countries in the UNDP's Human Development Index. The authors' field research showed widespread feelings of ambivalence among both diaspora and refugee communities, who have contradictory attitudes and feelings towards their homeland (see also Belloni, 2019a).

When asked if the demands of the government regarding the 2% diaspora tax and other donations are justified, 98 of 100 respondents expressed the opinion that paying the tax is unjustified because it is not used for the benefit of the people. One interviewee argued: "If



the tax was spent for things like infrastructure, health and education, it would be a good thing. However, we are going backwards instead of developing, Eritrea was a better place during the Italian times” (Interview, London, 2 March 2019). Another respondent explained

“I am not willing to pay the diaspora tax because I think the government should create income in a normal way, by making it possible for the people in Eritrea to work and to pay taxes. It should stop taking money from Eritreans abroad while enslaving the people inside the country” (Interview, Reutlingen, Germany, 1 December 2018).

Nevertheless, sixty percent of the sample pay the diaspora tax at least occasionally because they are in need of government services or fear that their relatives might be punished for their non-compliance.

Even more importantly, the vast majority of Eritreans in exile send remittances to support their extended families in Eritrea, who cannot survive without their help due to their national service obligations and the absence of economic opportunities. The government has consciously delegated the task of supporting national service recruits and their nuclear and extended families to diaspora Eritreans. Making Eritreans dependent on remittances stands in stark contrast to the government’s alleged self-reliance approach, since “fostering dependency in the mindset of recipients” can be seen as a negative aspect of remittances (Berhanu, 2019:11). Nonetheless, the government has been forcing Eritreans at home to rely on money transfers for subsistence instead of engaging in business activities by themselves. At the same time, their relatives abroad feel obliged to provide the financial means for their survival. They support needy relatives on a regular basis because there is no other way to invest in the country or to create business opportunities to increase the agency of Eritreans at home. All of the diaspora Eritreans that were interviewed in Norway, Sweden, Germany and the UK affirmed that they send remittances home, and even 80 percent of the refugees who fled Eritrea in recent years and are still struggling to make a living do the same. In addition, many diaspora communities maintain cultural associations with the purpose of responding to particular needs of their communities at home, such as weddings and funerals and step in in case of acute disasters such as drought and famine.

Even outspoken critics of the government feel obliged to send money to their needy families, even if this indirectly stabilizes the regime. The failure to remit can weaken social ties and lead to tensions and alienation among extended family members, as Hammond has shown for the case of the Somali diaspora (2010: 126). One interviewee who defected from the government and sustains his own young children as a refugee in Europe, stated: “It is our culture to support each other. I have my mother and a sister inside Eritrea, and I support them with the help of my brother in Scandinavia” (Interview, London, 26 February

2019). Another refugee explained: “My relatives at home need my support due to the deteriorated economic situation, drought and poverty, especially in the rural areas where they live” (Interview, London, 18 March 2019).

This attitude corresponds to the findings of Carling and Hoelscher, who examined remittance behaviour of immigrants to Norway and found that kinship relations to the country of origin and economic integration had a positive impact on the capacity and willingness to remit (2013: 954). Yet, the moral pressure on Eritreans is exceptionally high due to the dire situation of their relatives at home, who are structurally prevented from sustaining themselves.

In spite of not being respected by their home government and feeling disempowered, most Eritreans abroad have very strong feelings towards their homeland. One refugee who fled the country in 2012 explained his emotions: “Eritrea is my country of origin, I feel a lot of attachment, my life is related to the country, my family is there, my friends, there is the warm culture, places to visit.” However, he feels reluctant about returning to Eritrea in the future: “It depends on the political situation. If we will have an accountable government, I would like to have a future in Eritrea. But as long as things are as they are, I don’t want my children to live the life that I lived, I want them to have a better future” (Interview, London, 17 March 2019).

Generally, most Eritreans in exile feel worried about the lack of development and democracy at home and have ambivalent feelings about the future. Only very few of them see a future in their homeland, although many have remained emotionally attached to their place of origin: they would love to return if things were better, but rational reasons like the economic and political situation prevent them from returning. Only five percent of the interviewed Eritreans see a future for their children in their country of origin, which indicates that they regard the government’s self-reliance approach as failed.

## **Conclusion**

This article elaborated how the paradigm of self-reliant development that was proclaimed as the mantra of Eritrea’s post-independence development strategy was gradually displaced by a system of transnational governance built on diaspora long-distance nationalism combined with feelings of obligation towards extended family networks and close transnational surveillance. Today, those Eritreans living outside the country prevent state failure and an economic breakdown of their homeland in light of the government’s unsustainable economic policies including the paralysis of the private business sector.

By taking a historically contextualized approach, the article shed light on the roots of the government’s self-reliance ideology, its ambitious top-down development endeavours during the early years of independence, and its regression into a militarized Maoist-inspired





command economy starting from 2002. The government drove the notion of self-reliance ad absurdum through the introduction of an open-ended national service based on systematic forced labor. The firm grip of the ruling PFDJ and the military on the economy has suffocated all individual attempts of entrepreneurship. In today's Eritrea, there are no opportunities to engage in even modest business activities to make a decent living and strive for self-fulfillment. Accordingly, it is impossible for diaspora Eritreans to make investments in their home country in order to enable their families to start business activities that would allow them to become self-reliant. Under the current system, diaspora remittances do not reduce citizens' vulnerability, but they guarantee the subsistence minimum that the state's command economy cannot provide. The ideology and policies of the government have resulted in ambivalent attitudes among diaspora communities, who feel strong attachment towards their homeland but have little hope to return for good or to provide their country with social remittances, for instance, through knowledge transfer.

For the past two decades, the Eritrean remittance paradox has stabilized an unsound economy built on systematic forced labour, while at the same time preventing economic development and the improvement of living conditions. With additional support from foreign sponsors such as Saudi-Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the PFDJ government feels no pressure to initiate reforms that may jeopardize its control over the economy and people. Those who suffer most under this system are those still trapped in the national service, those who risk their lives trying to reach Europe or other safe havens, and those Eritreans whose families have been forcibly separated and live shattered across the world.

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