

Censorship Within Eritrea: The Effect On the People

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Eritrea, the most censored country in the world, is decaying from the inside. The lack of expression is causing national outrage within the country. Censorship within the country is so severe that all media agencies were forced to leave the country as of 2016. Representatives from some of these agencies were even held captive and have yet to be heard from.¹ In order to fully understand the topic of censorship, one must have a basic knowledge of the background of Eritrea. Eritrea is a small country bordering Ethiopia, Sudan, and Djibouti on the Horn of Africa. In 1958, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was formed. ELF was an organization fought for independence from Ethiopia. Shortly after ELF was formed, the Eritrean War of Independence began, on September 1, 1961, between ELF and the Ethiopian Government. The Eritrean War of Independence started because of civil unrest in Ethiopia. The tension between the two organizations spurs from ongoing land disputes after Eritrea was claimed by Ethiopia following World War Two. The Eritrean War of Independence ended on May 29, 1991. With the newfound independence Eritrea struggles to establish a stable government and soon after the Eritrean War of Independence, a full scale civil war erupts within the country. The scale and guerrilla style warfare started around 1967 and lasted three years until 1970, when members of ELF started their own organization known as Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).² When ELF split and EPLF was formed another civil war broke out. The civil war was declared by ELF who were unhappy that EPLF was formed. The civil war was fought in multiple periods in 1972 and ending in 1974 and again in 1978 through 1981. Eventually ELF was rendered powerless. The series of wars fought over the last 100 years within the country have caused many casualties and split

¹Antoaneta Roussi, "Despite the peace deal with Ethiopia, Eritrean refugees are still afraid to return home," Pri, last modified September 13, 2018, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-09-13/despite-peace-deal-ethiopia-eritrean-refugees-are-still-afraid-return-home>.

² Christine Matzke, *Surviving (with) Theatre: A History of the ELF and EPLF Cultural Troupes in the Eritrean War of Independence* (London, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), [Page #], accessed February 21, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137454270_2.

families, much like the American Civil War. Currently Eritrea is still controlled by EPLF and tension within the country and with Ethiopia is prominent. The current president of Eritrea is Isaias Afwerki. Afwerki was one of the main leaders of ELF and the EPLF movement. When he was appointed president, Afwerki promised six things to the people of Eritrea.³ He promised the right to an equal share of natural resources, the right to equal opportunity, human rights, the right of life/unhindered movement, the right for appropriate legal and institutional guarantees, and the right to a non-corrupt government that upholds the rule of law. However, Afwerki's policies suggest otherwise. The people of Eritrea are not allowed to speak out against the government, practice certain religions, and move freely within the country due to Afwerki's current policies.⁴ Due to the current state and level of censorship within Eritrea, the country is suffering.

The only local media in Eritrea is produced by the state. There is only one newspaper, one, radio station, and one television station. The only way to access any alternate broadcasts is through satellite radio, which almost no one in Eritrea is able to afford. The lack of perspective show the country in a state of progression when, in fact it is in a state of regression. Roughly 5,000 Eritreans migrate daily.⁵ These people migrate for several reasons, they are silenced in any way possible, they have no rights, and they are forced into state mandated hard labor and military training.⁶ The challenges faced by these individuals include human trafficking, competition from

³ Richard J. Reid, *Eritrea's External Relations: Understanding Its Regional Role and Foreign Policy* (London, England: Chatham House, 2009)

⁴ Abraham T. Zere, "Democracy according to Eritrea's Afwerki, then and now," Aljazeera, last modified May 24, 2018, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/democracy-eritrea-afwerki-180522132939764.html>.

⁵ "Erena," Erena, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://erena.org/index.php/web-links>.

⁶ Tanja R. Müller, "Bare Life and the Developmental State: Implications of the Militarisation of Higher Education in Eritrea," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 46, no. 1 (2008): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30224876>.

other refugees, and the possibility of being captured by the government.⁷ The magnitude of the amount of people making this perilous migration to other European countries suggests extreme mistreatment within the country. However, there are resources for refugees and citizens of the country to help them escape or change their communities. The leader in these sources is an organization known as Erena. Erena is comprised of a group of reporters who were exiled from Eritrea in 2016. The group now based out of Paris, is a satellite radio station that offers advice to those seeking to leave the country. The station also serves as a medium to convince Eritreans not to flee but instead work to fix the country. Erena allows listeners to call in when their loved ones have been taken for ransom and need money. Erena comes up with the funds by fundraising on social media and via other means.⁸ Similar to Erena is Pen Eritrea a group of exiled reporters and journalists fighting for the freedom of expression within Eritrea. Pen Eritrea focuses on the stories of those held captive by the government for expressing outrage and distrust. One journalist, Yirgalem Fisseha recounts that a few days out of the six years she was detained for having an email address that referenced the “justice-seekers”, Eritrean opposition activists. Her story and many more can be found on Pen Eritrea’s site.⁹

Due to Afwerki’s dictator like role there have been countless numbers of uprisings and rebellions within the country. These uprising were not only brought on by forced labor, constant torture, and the tension between feuding countries, but also by the amount of censorship within

⁷ Dan Connell, "Eritrea: Starting from Scratch," *Review of African Political Economy* 22, no. 66 (1995): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4006307>.

⁸ Abraham T. Zere, "Democracy according to Eritrea's Afwerki, then and now," Aljazeera, last modified May 24, 2018, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/democracy-eritrea-afwerki-180522132939764.html>.

⁹ Yirgalem Fisseha Mebrahtu, "A Few Days in my Six Years Detention in Mai-Serwa," interview, Pen Eritrea, last modified September 28, 2018, accessed February 21, 2019, <http://www.peneritrea.com/blog/few-days-in-my-six-years-detention-in-mai-serwa>.

Eritrea. As Sofia, a Eritrean refugee states, “The person next to me [in a cafe] could be a spy, and they are looking at what you are doing. People disappear every day. One day, a friend made the innocent mistake of striking up a conversation with a man in a cafe who later turned out to be from the Libyan embassy. They were just chatting. And they said she was a spy passing information to him. We don’t know what happened to her. She is in jail till now. One day they told us she was in hospital with high blood pressure but we were so afraid that we didn’t go because we feared they might arrest us too.” Sofia later goes on to say that Eritreans are second to Syrians when it comes to crossing the Mediterranean in search for a better life in Europe.¹⁰

It is clear that the large amount of censorship put on the people of Eritrea is not helping the country progress. As a country already torn by countless wars, the added censorship is hindering Eritrea’s ability to function as a stable government. The amount of censorship and other restrictions on the people of Eritrea are causing a mass migration that is hurting Eritrea and countries with no room to house the refugees. If Eritrea was not as censored there would be less migration and more room to establish a government that represented the people. According to some UN experts the conditions in Eritrea could easily be changed if some sort of mutual agreement between Ethiopia and Eritrea occurred. This would help by relieving some stress of lingering hostility.¹¹

¹⁰ Sam Jones, Patrick Kingsley, and Mark Anderson, "Escaping Eritrea: 'If I die at sea, it's not a problem – at least I won't be tortured,'" *The Guardian*, April 21, 2015, [Page #], accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/apr/21/escaping-eritrea-migrant-if-i-die-at-sea-at-least-i-wont-be-tortured>.

¹¹ "Use Ethiopia-Eritrea thaw to improve rights: UN expert," ENCA, last modified June 27, 2018, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.enca.com/africa/use-ethiopia-eritrea-thaw-to-improve-rights-un-expert>.

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