

Journalists' Safety in the World's Most Restricted Regime

The Case of Eritrea, Northeast Africa

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Abstract

The TV station located within the premises of the Ministry of Information in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea, went out off air on the 21st of January 2013 for the entire day. There were reports that 200 mutinied soldiers seized the station with the help of two tankers compelling the station director to announce the release of political detainees and journalists, who were held since independence, and demanded the implementation of ratified constitution. It was indeed a demand in pending for the past two decades, ever since Eritrea turned into a free nation. The mutiny came to an end with the soldiers surrendering their arms.

In February 2009, the government of Eritrea raided a tiny radio station located in the downtown Asmara, adjacent to the Ministry of Education, detaining the entire staff and crew of Radio Bana that broadcasts programmes for adults and neo-literates. They were arrested without any charges and were never produced in the court. Six journalists of Radio Bana were released by January 2015 after prolonged imprisonment. These two incidents provide only a glimpse of the ongoing, never-ending, government-sponsored terror on the journalists of Eritrea.

In a country where free political debate, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, right to academics, and freedom of religion are denied and suppressed, it is absolutely not possible to study journalist's safety. Based on fieldwork and personal interviews with journalists, students and citizens serving indefinite national service, the study aims to illustrate the government-sponsored terror on the people of Eritrea in general and journalists in particular.

Keywords: *Freedom of press, journalist safety, denied political debate, closed nation, independent media*

I. Introduction

Said Ibrahim, 21, orphaned and blind, was making a living as a singer at Adi Quala bars when a member of Eritrea's national security force claimed one of his songs had "political" content and detained him at Adi Abieto prison. Said was released after a month but he was stripped of his monthly disability payments for the next two years when he refused to identify the lyricist. (Connell, 2012)

Eritrea, the tiny nation in the Horn of Africa, is a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and religiously diversified country. Located just adjacent to the Red Sea in the Horn of Africa, the ethnic nationalities that form part of Eritrea's population today are migrants from the neighboring Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia from time immemorial (Trevasky, 1960; Pullera,

1935). Eritrea's strategic location in the Red Sea region has been the cause for innumerable conflicts, leaving a long lasting impact on its socio-economic, cultural fabric (Trevasky, 1960).

Italians followed by the British colonized Eritrea for a period of six decades until the end of World War II, and the UN General Assembly federated Eritrea as the 14th province of Ethiopia against public opinion. Although Eritrea was treated as an autonomous province in the beginning, this was short-lived as Ethiopia forcefully annexed Eritrea, abolishing its independent status. Eritrea fought a decisive war for independence for a period of 30 years to get rid of the colonial aggressor Ethiopia. The Eritrean People's Front (ELF), and later the Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF), waged one of the bloodiest wars in the history of the continent, and Eritrea attained independence in the year 1991 and became the Republic of Eritrea by 1993 (Connell, 1997). Eritrea's experiments on democracy, self-rule and the massive involvement of women, youth, labor, and peasants, right at the grassroot level while it was fighting a guerilla war for self-rule, was unprecedented (Connell, 1997; Patemen, 1990; Tronvoll, 1998; Gottesman, 1998) in the continent's history. It attracted the attention of many international scholars and journalists including A. R Babu, a Tanzanian journalist who described Eritrea as 'future hope for democracy' in the continent.

Eritrea failed to establish a duly elected government upon attaining independence as the transitory government, headed by the President Isaias Afwerki, did not resort to institutional building during the post-liberation period. Journalists' safety as a phenomena thus cannot be studied in isolation in Eritrea as freedom of association (both political and civil), religious freedom, academic freedom, freedom of movement, and freedom to have information and expression are restricted and denied in this country. Raids, detentions, and frequent conscription of civilians, political leaders and journalists are very common in Eritrea. The present study

illustrates the challenges that journalists face in Eritrea by unfolding series of events that have led to the totalitarian rule in the country. It depicts the vulnerable lives of journalists in the backdrop of denied political debate, religious freedom, academic freedom and freedom of speech and expression.

II. Denial of Political Freedom and Debate

In 1993, Eritrea People's Liberation Front (EPLF) that steered the country victorious in the war formed the transitional government and assumed power following the UN sponsored referendum. Isais Afwerki, the Commander-in-Chief of the EPLF headed this government, and the EPLF became People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). A constituent assembly comprising of 527 members prepared a draft constitution, assuring its people broad and active participation in political, economic, social and cultural life in the country.

The Parliamentary Commission set for this purpose recommended the establishment of a multi-party system in the country and laid the groundwork for national elections. During 1998-2000, Eritrea was in war with Ethiopia which killed tens and thousands of soldiers, displacing about 6, 50,000 (Bezabih, 2014) citizens on either side. The PFDJ took the excuse of the state of emergency and war with Ethiopia and postponed elections several times before banning it indefinitely. The National Assembly made a resolution to this effect and prohibited the emergence of new political parties in Eritrea. As a result, Eritrea remains a nation without opposition parties today, and the only political party (PFDJ) has been ruling the country for the past two decades. Several opposition parties – including the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) that was also part of Eritrean struggle for freedom, the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP), the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) and several other splinter groups of the ELF and the Sudan-based

Eritrean Islamic Jihad – are operating from outside the country or in exile (Mohammad et al, 2014).

With the border dispute in the years 1998-2000, there was a power struggle within the cadres of EPLF/PFDJ that received wider coverage in the private press during spring 2002. As many as 15 senior leaders (popularly known as G-15) that took active part in the struggle for independence were arrested without any charges because they signed a petition questioning the President's intention in suppressing debate and called for the implementation of the Constitution and demanded initiatives on the democratic process in the country (Mohammad et al, 2014).

Popularly known as G-15 members, they included Mahmud Ahmed Sheriffo, former Minister of Local Government; Haile Woldetensae, former Minister of Trade and Industry; Petros Solomon, former Minister of Fisheries; Saleh Idris Kekia, former Minister of Transportation and Communication; General Ogbe Abraha, Chief of Staff of the Defense Force; Astier Feshatsion, former Minister of Trade and Industry; Berhane Ghebre Eghzabiher, Hamid Himid, Estifanos Seyoum, Germano Nati and Beraki Ghebre Selassie, former members of the government who were arrested in the 2001 crackdown for writing an open letter to President Isaias demanding the implementation of political reforms in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2005). During the first parliamentary session in 2002, President Isaias claimed the acts of the G-15 members as betrayal to the country and its people, and the National Assembly condemned this act as a serious offense. These members were not subjected to trials, and they remained incommunicado ever since their arrests. In the year 2009, Amnesty International confirmed the death of 9 out of 15 leaders in custody due to ill health and denied access to medical facilities (Pen International, 2014). Despite acute pressure from international agencies like UNHRC, Amnesty International, the European Parliament, and civil liberty groups and activists, Eritrea remained stubborn and never disclosed

any information related to their whereabouts nor did it confirm their deaths in detention. International agencies have confirmed their deaths with information received from the refugees and Eritreans who flee constantly to avoid the prevailing hostile situation in the country, including the guards who worked for many of these secrete prisons (Reporters without Borders, 2012).

Election to the regional and local bodies is generally held under the strict control of the PFDJ observers. Though citizens from all walks of life are free to contest the elections, no political debates, public meetings and campaigns in support of their candidature are allowed. Except small pamphlets pasted to the bus stations at Asmara, candidates are prohibited from participating in any public debate in the country (Connell, 2009; personal communication, January 2007).

The President and an informal core group that is very loyal to him take all the policy decisions, degrading the status of the National Assembly and the Cabinet, and these decisions are briefed to the press and media outlets for circulation. Information on Eritrea's economy, national budget and demography is not authentic and precise as no independent assessment is possible, and the available information is always fabricated for the sake of the general public and for the world outside (Connell, 2009). For example, the earliest census on Eritrea dates back to 1935, during the Italian colonial period. Projections are made every year on demography. The government has its own political and military interests in disclosing hyped figures. At a time when tens and thousands are fleeing every day, risking their lives, these assessments appear highly fabricated ones for military reasons (Tronvoll, 1996).

III. Arbitrary Arrest of Journalists and Denial of Freedom of Press

September 11, 2001 was a black day in the history of the press in Eritrea as several independent newspapers were banned, arresting the owners and the editors of these newspapers, as they gave wide coverage to the ongoing political activity in the country.

Setit, *Meqaleh*, *Keste Debenä*, *Tsigenay*, *iganay*, *Zemen*, *Wintana*, *Admas* and *Mana* were the nine privately owned weekly newspapers published from Asmara in English, Tigrinya and Arabic, and all of them were closed in the year 2001 after the border dispute on charges that they violated the press laws of the country (CPJ, 2001).

As many as thirteen local journalists who were the owners and editors of the private newspapers and two other foreign journalists were imprisoned in the year 2001. Medhane Haile (*Keste Debenä*); Dawit Habtemichael, Chief Editor/co-founder of *Meqaleh*; Dawit Isaac, reporter/co-founder of *Setit*, who holds Swedish citizenship; Seyoum Tsehay, freelance editor/photographer & director of the Eritrean state television in the early 1990s; Emanuel Asrat, editor for *Zemen (The Time)*; Mattewos Habteab, the editor and co-founder of *Meqaleh*; Temesgen Gebreyesus, a sports reporter and amateur actor were among the imprisoned (CPJ, 2001) .

The journalists invited the wrath of the ruling party by publishing the Open Letter that Issais's colleagues ('G-15') shot to the government demanding the implementation of the Constitution and revival of the democratic process in the country. Journalists were detained at secret detention centers and were denied access to communication with their families. They were not tried in courts as no legal procedure was initiated against them ever since their arrest (CPJ, 2013). They remained incommunicado and their health and legal status was not disclosed.

Fesshaye "Joshua" Yohannes, Habtemichael, Mattewos Habteab, Yusuf Mohamed Ali, Medhanie Haile, Said Abdelkader, Wedi Itay and Dawit Isaac were some of the detained journalists who died in the Eiraeiro detention centre in the remote northeastern desert as a result of torture, denied medical facilities and inhuman prison conditions in Eritrea (RSF, 2006).

Journalists have been detained in secret underground cells in the Northeastern desert area, which is known for its scorching heat. Detained journalists were placed in a 1.5×1.5 cell with a height of 2.5 meters, and as per the reports Yohannes was subjected to severe torture including having his finger-nails ripped off (RSF, 2006). None of these deaths have ever been reported in the media as the entire media of mass communication, including the newspapers, radio, and TV have become extended government organs and have been serving as tools of propaganda. Reuters (2012) also confirmed the death of several of the political opponents arrested and detained at the Embatkala and Eiraeiro camps of Eritrea during 2001 due to extreme weather conditions, where the temperature reaches 50° celsius.

As per the reports, prison conditions in Eritrea are notoriously brutal, where torture along with poor ventilation and lack of medication deteriorate detainees' physical and mental health. Reports have also quoted that the journalists and the political detainees are locked up in solitary confinements often in metal ship containers and underground cells in the Dehlak Archipelago known for its scorching heat throughout the year (Amnesty International, 2013).

Arrests did not stop by 2001 as there were successive incidents of journalists working even for government-controlled media being arrested. CPJ confirmed the arrest of Hamid Mohammed Said who worked for Eri-TV in 2002. Saleh Al Jezaeeri, a reporter of the Arabic radio, was also arrested in the same year. Daniel Mussie, who was working as reporter for the Oromo section of *Radio Dimitsi Hafash*, was held in 2006. Several of the journalists who were working for the

government-controlled radio *Dimtsi Hafash* (The voice of the people) including Eyob Netserab (Amharic section), Ghebrehiwet/Eyob Kessete (Amharic-language service), Girmay Abraham, Hamid Mohamed Said (news and sport editor), Identité Inconnue Hadas Eritreaweekly, Nega Woldegeorgis (*Radio Zara*, *Dimtsi Hafash*, and *Hadas Eritrea*) were held in the year 2007. Their whereabouts are not known till now.

As many as 50 individuals who were journalists, staff, librarians, and the station director of *Radio Bana*, the educational radio run by the Ministry of Education, were held in the year 2009. Basilios Zemo, the station director, Bereket Misghina, Esmail Abd-el-Kader, Meles Negusse Kiflu, Senait Habtu, Yemane Hagos, and Yirgalem Fesseha were among the journalists detained in the year 2009 on charges that they collaborated with a foreign NGO and broadcast a programme on "participatory government" (RSF, 2015). In "the continent's largest prison for journalists" (in the words of Reporters without Borders), there is no independent news media in Eritrea.

Mohammed Said Mohammed, Biniam Ghirmay, Esmail Abd-el-Kader, Araya Defoch, Mohammed Dafla, Simon Elias and Yemane Hagos were seven journalists released on probation in March 2013. Six other journalists including Bereket Misghina, Yirgalem Fisseha Mebrahtu and Basilios Zemo of *Radio Bana*, Meles Negusse Kiflu, who worked for *Radio Bana* and *Radio Zara*, Girmay Abraham of *Radio Dimtsi Hafash* and Petros Teferiof *Radio Bana* and *FM Radio Zara* were set free by 2015 (RSF, 2015).

British nationals who were serving as Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) were assisting the staff of *Radio Bana* in preparing English lessons for the neo-literates when the researcher was also working for the same radio station. According to a British VSO who was active in preparing English language radio lessons in 2006-2007:

The journalists or the staff in general is (*sic*) intimidated due to constant surveillance on them. They don't open up freely as they fear the presence of spies and are apprehended of consequences. They adhere to self-censorship and they are rather tight lipped fearing the arbitrary arrests.

Eritrean News Agency (ERINA) carefully hand picks the news to be circulated through the media. It consists of perfectly crafted, pro-government news that never voices the socio-economic vows of the people. As a result, we don't come across any mention of the military excesses in the day today affairs of the people of Eritrea. Most of the senior officials and policy makers who are enjoying top positions in the government today are veteran soldiers grounded in the revolutionary ideology of the front. An official who works for the Ministry of Education observed:

We have experienced the suppression of the Dergue (Ethiopia) and we are free today because of the sacrifices we made. The present generation of youngsters must be part of the nation building, and we are preparing them by giving only the relevant information useful for them. (Ministry of Education official, Asmara, 2007)

Informally, several journalists who did not want to mention their names were not very happy because they had to rely on the news briefs of the President's office or the news briefs of ERINA, the official agency that carefully orchestrates the messages and images. The result is dull, boring government propaganda filled with the visits of the President (most of the time) or his ministers' foreign tours, inaugural ceremonies and review meetings with little information relevant to the general public. There is absolutely no scope for free and independent news gathering in the country. Pro-government writers represent government views through their

articles in Eritrea profile and the other government run local language weeklies, and no counter discourses are ever allowed in them, so it is top down, censored information.

There is little scope to know about Eritrea from international media like the BBC or CNN as John Fisher, the only international journalist that worked for BBC, was expelled in the year 2004 on the pretext that he travelled beyond the capital Asmara without official permission. The government of Eritrea was not happy with the news broadcast in which he quoted “the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia as ‘disputed.’” As per the Eritrean government, the border demarcation was over, but Ethiopia is not honoring it (Fisher, 2004).

Information and independent analysis on the domestic and international issues on Eritrea reach its citizens largely through the radio and web-based media originating from abroad. Three political parties – the EDP, ELF-RC, and ENA – beam weekly shortwave radio programs to Eritrea via satellite. Several opposition and unaffiliated groups in Eritrea's very active diasporamaintain websites, and they are highly critical of the Isaias's regime. The most prominent of those opposed to the current government are Awate.com and Asmarino.com. Government supporters in the diasporas also maintain a number of sites, and Dehai.org is the most prominent among them.

Eritrea was the last African country to gain Internet access, and cell-phone networks began to operate in the year 2003. Eritrea has seen an explosion of Internet usage, particularly among young people in the urban centers; however, the four privately owned Internet service providers are strictly monitored by the state. On October 19, 2004, the Ministry of Information announced new controls over Internet cafes and public libraries. Though the government announced that this act is aimed at controlling pornography, many view this as an effort to block links of the proliferating independent websites based outside Eritrea. The only alternative media available

on Eritrea today are the concerns raised by the Eritrean diaspora through various websites and the international bodies that keep a strict vigilance on it as Eritrea is among the countries of 'Particular Concern' (Amnesty International, 2013).

There were around 377,000 Internet users (6 per cent of the population) in Eritrea by December 2013 according to the Internet world statistics website. Although there is no widespread filtering, diaspora websites have been blocked. Bloggers and other web users have been abused and threatened (CPJ, 2015). The government is deliberately not encouraging the bandwidth and broadband services to restrict Internet activities to mailing and chatting as it fears a Syrian kind of revolution in the country (Bozzini, 2011).

Most of the available literature on Eritrea has been written from the perspective of war and nationalism, consisting of arguments supporting Eritrea's efforts in nation building and denouncing Ethiopian or Western powers. Very little information about society and its people is reflected in it.

National ideology is euphorically celebrated and propagated in every possible way. From March till the end of May every year, Eritrea holds a series of events, carnivals, parades, and exhibitions commemorating nationalism. Wall paintings on the major streets of Asmara depict the historical and heroic acts of the struggle period. The government also symbolically represents a gigantic model of 'sheeda' (a pair of plastic shoes) that freedom fighters used during the struggle period downtown Asmara as a monument representing the hard won independence. Independence Day is celebrated on May 24 every year, engaging people of all nine ethnic nationalities with songs, dances, drum beat and parades. The events are celebrated with much nationalistic fervor as if the people are overwhelmed in the participation (Woldemikael, 2009; Field Notes, 2007). Government-controlled media bombard images of

nationalism, legitimizing its acts as efforts of nation building (Dorman, 2005). According to Gilkes (1991):

[Much] indeed of the writing on Eritrea has been at the level of polemic or a product of the 'guerilla groupie.' A surprising number of eminent scholars and journalists have taken the leading front in the Eritrean movement, the EPLF, at its own evaluation, and its historical claims as fact. The results have impoverished the literature on Eritrea and have created a distorted national mythology.

IV. Lack of Religious Freedom

Law and the unimplemented Constitution grant freedom of religion; however, the government restricted this right in practice. Only four religious groups approved by the government are allowed to meet publicly in their respective places of worship and practice their religious faith. These are Orthodox Christianity, Sunni Muslims, Catholics, and members of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Several Protestant churches affiliated with the Lutheran World Federation and members of non-registered churches are arbitrarily arrested throughout the year.

Security forces have continued the arrests and detentions of the non-registered churches, sometimes leading to death. The government does not recognize Jehovah's Witnesses as they oppose compulsory military service in the country. Followers of Pentecostal Christianity and Jehovah's Witnesses are arrested arbitrarily and are subjected to treatment similar to that given to political prisoners. Over a thousand Pentecostal followers who have been detained for unlimited period were tortured and were denied access to employment even after their release (US Department of State, 2011).

V. Ban on Civil Societies

NGOs that provided staunch support to the Eritrea's cause throughout the struggle period in the form of humanitarian assistance and relief left Eritrea as the government issued a proclamation prohibiting the operation of the national and the international NGOs (Vernon, 2009). NGOs were asked to restrict their operation to relief and rescue alone, and they are not allowed to extend political and economic services. The government levied heavy taxes on the food, medicine and other relief materials that NGOs sent to Eritrea for distribution. The government ordered international agencies to maintain \$2 million dollars as liquid currency, and national agencies were expected to maintain \$1 million dollars. With the exception of the 'Citizen for Peace in Eritrea' and the Red Cross, civil societies ceased their operation in this country. The PFDJ government exerts direct control over the three indigenous NGOs, namely the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), the National Union of Eritrean Students and Youth (NUESY), and the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers as they are working without any independent agenda of their own, and they are expected to implement government policies (US Department of State, 2011).

VI. Suppression of Academic Freedom and Compulsory Military Service

The 50-year-old University of Asmara was the only institute of higher learning in the country that used to offer diploma and bachelor's degree programmes. The university was closed in September 2006 once and for all as the students started questioning the validity of the indefinite military service and the legitimacy of the present government (Field notes, October 2006). In July 2001, Semere Kesete, the president of the Student Union at the University of Asmara criticized the government's 'compulsory military service' policy during the graduation ceremony. Keset was detained and put in a solitary confinement. The government of Eritrea

established the Eritrea Institute of Technology in the year 2003 to replace UoA (Dorman, 2004) only to control the young Eritreans in the government-run military college.

Under the guise of national development, the government has imposed several social, economic and military sanctions in the country, particularly on youth. The prominent among them was 'compulsory military service,' popularly known as 'National Service Programme' or 'Warsai Yekalo.' According to this programme, Eritreans who pass secondary school and those who are in the age of 18 and 45 are required by law to attend 18 months of military training at SAWA, a military base in the northern part of Eritrea. Youngsters are deployed in the armed forces or in the government-run public works in the arenas of defense, infrastructure building, agriculture, education and capacity building. However, since the outbreak of the war with Ethiopia in 1998, conscripts have been kept in service on a continuous basis for an indefinite period in low- or no-paying jobs. There have been frequent, often brutal, house-to-house round-ups to identify, induct, or detain evaders. Re-induction for those who have already served is used as political punishment (particularly for journalists and those who resort to public criticism of government policy). A steady flow of refugees into neighboring Sudan is one by-product of this policy (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Once the youngsters complete their 10th grade, they should attend the 11th grade only at a centralized place called 'SAWA,' a military training center. As a result, there is no higher secondary education in the entire nation other than the one at SAWA, and no academic and professional progress is possible without going through this 'SAWA' training. Only the pass outs from SAWA are allowed to take courses at Eritrea Institute of Technology (EIT).

Till the year 2000, young people were happy to complete their National Service and could go in search of greener pastures, including pursuing a career abroad. The conditions, however,

reversed from 2000 onwards as the national service became indefinite. Unless they are free from the national service, youngsters are not allowed to earn a living outside the government (in private sector) and only Nakfa 400 (15 Nakfa = \$1USD) is paid per month as long as they are in the national service, and they are not allowed to leave the country. This has created havoc in society (Kimball, 2008).

Strict vigilance is observed throughout the country prohibiting the free movement of people fearing their escape from across the borders, and written documents should be furnished across hundreds of military check posts in the country. Foreigners were not allowed to travel beyond the capital Asmara on the pretext of security reasons (Field notes, December 2004).

The war, apart from the lack of income generating activities, ravaged the economy. The country that depends primarily on food aid and remittances from Eritrean diasporas was under tough international scrutiny as most of the donor nations including the UN organizations stopped food aid and blacklisted Eritrea as a country of particular concern due to its poor human right records (Human rights Watch, 2012).

Macroeconomic conditions in Eritrea deteriorated in 2003-06 when the data were collected. Real GDP declined, inflation accelerated, and gross for-ex reserves declined. A review of Eritrean economy points to serious drought, legacy of war, and political and governance deficiencies.

Food import became impossible without foreign exchange reserves and zero percent exports. Indigenous food production is negligible as the rain-fed agriculture contributes meagerly to the economy. Industrial production almost stood still as the infrastructure was destructed in the war, and there was a severe food shortage in the country, including milk and basic medicine. There was acute shortage of staple food grains like wheat, teff and maize, and people had to wait for

long hours in lengthy queues for a loaf of bread and a pocket of milk. The government started rationing milk, oil, sugar and coffee beans by 2004. To quote Edward Denison, an English writer:

Eritrea's dreams have been shattered. In today's Eritrea, all men between the ages of 18 and 45 and all women between 18 and 27 are obliged to do national service on a wage equivalent to £17 per month. Many things are disproportionately expensive -- petrol now costs £1.25 per liter, up from twenty-three pence in 2001. Long queues for staple foods, such as bread and milk, snake around many of Asmara's city blocks from the early hours.

VII. Research Methodology

The author was on a teaching assignment in Eritrea from 2003-2007 and was collecting data for her doctoral study. Given the prevailing political atmosphere in the country, the author opted for anthropological research tools like ethnography and took extensive notes through a series of field studies throughout her stay in Asmara, the capital. Qualitative data quoted as conversations were collected from 1st January 2006 to 25th January 2007, in a span of one year. Fieldwork as a research tool offers enormous scope for the researchers to unearth and present a detailed picture of the surroundings, and personal interviews are handy in digging several untold facts that are otherwise not possible to elicit through surveys.

There were many challenges and limitations to conduct any independent study due to the prevailing political conditions that would not allow any open debate or discussion. As foreigners are not allowed traveling beyond Asmara, the capital, the researcher was confined to Asmara and the Eritrea Institute of Technology, Mainafy, which is located 12 kilometers southwest of the capital where the researcher served as faculty. Deploying fieldwork as a research tool, the researcher tried to document the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions in the

country. Using the purposive sample technique, the researcher collected data with the help of personal interviews during the period 2003-2007. Although the researcher contacted several informants, forty key informants –journalists, students, writers, playwrights, government officials, NGO and private sector employees, house wives– have actively participated as key informants. Restricting this study to journalists alone was neither possible nor desirable as they did not willingly participate in it due to the strict surveillance on them. This would not be complete without tackling human right violation in general in order to present the issues related to journalists' safety in this country. There is acute shortage of information and people donot dare to give any such thing fearing the threats to their lives.

VIII. Data Presentation

It was a cold winter morning during December 2003 when the researcher was waiting for the bus that takes route no. 13 at Space-2000, the suburbs of Asmara. The bus that goes straight to the German colony passing Space-2000 empties the passengers before returning to Space-2000. It passes via Tiravolu, Barka School, Nyala Hotel, and the Ministry of Education at downtown Asmara, and it finally reaches Meda Erithra, the starting point where the buses traveling through routes 1-24 halt.

Military police in civil dresses with sticks in hand were stopping the vehicles and were talking to people. Young boys and girls from these vehicles were asked to stand apart and wait for their turn. Having landed in Eritrea in November 2003, the researcher assumed that policemen were verifying the driving licenses and the other documents related to vehicles. While coming home in the afternoon for lunch and in the evening after completing work, the researcher found policemen stopping even the buses and asking the youngsters to get down. The researcher could not get the exact meaning of these incidents.

The next day when I reached my office (the author was with *Radio Bana* for one year), my colleagues were talking about something in a very low voice. When asked for the details, they said nothing. This particular incident was not reported even in the newspaper. The drive was on for two to three days. Young men and women thus gathered were asked to board huge, topless, open carriers used to transport goods to unknown destination. An old man passing by looked at the researcher and asked "Are you a Hindi? (Indians are called as Hindi by local people). (Names of the informants are changed to protect their identities.)

Re: 'Yes.'

Old man: 'Does your government capture people like this?'

Re: 'What for?'

Old man: 'For military service'

Re: 'Human beings are not captured and taken this way.'

The old man turned sad and went away. (personal communication, December 2003)

Within a couple of weeks, I came to know that the people captured during the week-long drive were caught and stranded in a warehouse. Once the warehouse capacity exceeded, there was a stampede and people tried to push each other due to suffocation. This unrest resulted in police firing and death of several young men and women. All these details were never talked about in public, and foreigners had no clue about what is happening in society.

Rupurt (40) who served as a baby-sitter and maid for the researcher did not turn up suddenly for one week. On her arrival, she narrated shocking stories on the way her 16 year old son Samuel runs for life, evading military service. She said:

They (The police) catch them and beat them up severely, hitting them hard on their ribs and backbone so that the children get frightened. We never know what happens to them once they

are caught. They are crushed with the military boot. They are injured, they may bleed. They return home after several months or years if they are alive and free. Parents receive no communication if they die during this phase. We are not supposed to enquire their whereabouts. Officials simply deny any information, including their detention.

She added, "My son, Samuel, did not want to go for higher education and progress in his life. He just wants to stay alive and healthy and would like to migrate to Sudan, where my elder brother is working. Youngsters are not happy with the very mentioning of the word 'SAWA,' the military camp for obvious reasons.

The extreme temperature, humidity and the harsh punishments in the military are threatening the youth. Goitom, 20 years old, who was on brief vacation said, "Our day begins at five in the morning with several hours of running, jogging and exercises. As the day progresses, we go to our dormitories (at SAWA) only to take our breakfast and return to get the intricacies of warfare. In fact, any discussion in Asmara, especially with families always leads to the 'National Service Programme' as it was the dominant point for discussion at home, bars, restaurants and offices.

Education starts at the age of six in Eritrea and children progress up to grade five in elementary schools before proceeding to junior schools. Grades 8 up to 12 were attended at their respective zobas (provinces)/towns. Students used to approach the University of Asmara and several other professional colleges in the capital city for higher education. This was the scenario until 2000.

The government conscripted youth (between 18-40 years) in huge numbers for the border dispute that lasted for two years (1998-2000). Although in principle it said that only boys older than 18 were serving in the army, in practice young boys and girls in their early teens were

caught and were forced to fight with meager skills, risking their lives. Ato (Mr.) Kidane (40) who visits home only once in a month explained:

Youth of the present day did not know the hardships we have experienced during the struggle period. Our most fruitful years were spent in the freedom struggle. Our children must learn the spirit of patriotism and remain tough in order to face any eventuality. We want them to get exposed to all-sorts weather conditions and hard realities, including military training, where girls are not excluded.

He works at port city Massawa while his extended family lives at Asmara. His wife was anxious to see him at least once in a month, and she was worried about his stay in the extreme desert climate, without a personal/family attention.

Mariam ran a petty shop at Asmara. In the absence of her husband who died in the previous war, she was living with her 18-year-old son Abraham. Abraham could not assist his mother publicly in running the shop as he was evading the National Service Programme (NSP). He could not fetch materials to run the shop as the military might capture him anytime and imprison him for not attending the NSP. He had always to stay watchful while going home in the evenings from his shop. Many youngsters like Abraham and Samuel have no hopes of going to school.

As per the new educational policy, the students who complete their 11th grade in their towns must go to 'SAWA,' a military base and training center at Assab, 110 kilometers away from Asmara known for its extreme weather conditions where temperature often goes above 50°C, to continue the 12th grade.

Initially the programme was for 18 months, and the students used to receive six months military training with fundamentals on handling the weapons and political education before taking up academic programmes. With the outbreak of border dispute, the NSP became

indefinite, and the government did not demobilize youth engaged in the army even after the ceasefire in the year 2000. Many youngsters who did not want to be part of the 'SAWA' training resisted it. Daniel (24), one of the luckiest graduates of the University of Asmara, who could complete his national service and he is working in private service, observed:

As long as NSP was only for 18 months, students cooperated with the government with a hope that they could go to higher education once they are free. The moment it became indefinite, students opted to deliberately fail the 10th grade as the 11th grade pass outs are chosen for NSP.

The government retarded to it by amending the rules. According to the new rules, students must attend SAWA on turning 18, irrespective of their educational status. It became mandatory from the year 2004. How are Eritreans coping with this? "Everyday tens and thousands of young Eritreans try to flee from across the borders," explained Kudasán (30), a house wife. "My brother works at Sudan as mechanic and he would help my son over there in securing a job and shelter. We are ready to see them off rather than dying in the hands of our brutal military," she added. This was the opinion of several other parents who have young children at home. An informant who does not wish to express his identity observed:

Children as young as 14 or 16 are also captured. The government ordered to shoot them dead if they are caught fleeing the borders. If the youngsters happened to escape successfully and if the government happened to trace this information, their parents must either pay a heavy penalty or undergo severe punishment, including imprisonment. Ato Tesfu (82) was imprisoned for six months. He lives at Thiravolu and is a divorcee. He was imprisoned because his son escaped to Saudi Arabia without serving the national service. He had no attendants to serve him food at prison everyday as he had no family members. The

government does not provide food to detainees, and it is the responsibility of family members to supply food every day. I happened to see many visitors waiting outside the prisons of Asmara daily, only to pass the basket to the security personnel. They do not get a chance to meet the detained. An informant (35), who owns a business downtown Thiravolu, stated, "There is rampant corruption among the military and the bureaucrats who often take huge money or favors. We never know why a section of youngsters could be exempted from military service and allowed to go abroad."

Nejat (24) lives at Space-2000 that completed her four year degree course in sociology and works for the Ministry of Labor as a researcher. I have been friends with her family ever since I rented a house there. Nejat's father is a retired army man in his 60s. On that particular day when I went to interview her, she did not reach home even after 6.30 P.M. Her father was anxiously waiting for her arrival.

Re: kimayallaka (How are you) Ato Habte? (Mr. Habtemariam)

Habte: 'Dehan yalka (Good)! Yekeniele (Thank you)

When asked about the reasons for his anxiety, he said, "We would be eagerly waiting for our teenage daughters to return home safe without any hindrances. We would not be able to detect if they are caught." "Girls choose to invite unwanted pregnancy to avoid military training," said Nejat who reached home late that evening. Married and pregnant women are exempted from military training:

Young girls are using marriage as a shield to escape the NSP. "They are taking the help of their kith and kin abroad in producing papers that they are married to a man (mostly relatives), and they are travelling abroad so that they are able to pursue education without any

constraints,” explained a girl (25). My own younger sister could make it to Europe. My uncle helped her to migrate in the guise of marriage.

Young people in Asmara have several such heartbreaking stories to narrate. However, they hesitate to share this with their fellow Eritreans, unless they happen to be in their close circles as anybody can be a spy. Temesgen (32), who worked for an NGO, recollected this:

Although Eritrean assembly decided to hold elections in the year 2001 and agreed to demobilize the longstanding military, the hard liners did not favor it. Government thought of mobilizing students in the name of summer work programme to utilize their services for road construction, and other infrastructure building activities with a view to divert (*sic*) their attention from the ongoing political tussle in the country. Students resisted it bitterly calling it as compulsory slavery. They have rejected the government's call. Authorities suppressed it violently and many protesters were arrested and taken to places incommunicado.

The government decided to close the University of Asmara gradually as it could detect its potential threat to its authoritarian rule. By 2003-04, the government denied freshmen enrollments at the UoA, and all 12th grade graduates were transferred to the Eritrea Institute of Technology (EIT) at Mainafy, 12kilometers away from Asmara.

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Defense jointly operate the EIT, and Colonel Ezra, a former administrator of SAWA is controlling this educational institution. Although students appear to have been learning here, they are under strict military surveillance. “It is nothing but a concentration camp”, observed a teacher serving at the college. A demobilized soldier (32) observed, “Ezra is cruelty personified in the form of military officer. Many girls turned pregnant after joining the military service as the military men abused the teenage girls and

this created uproar in the traditional Eritrean society. There was neither trial nor punishment for those men that misbehaved with girls.

As a faculty member working for EIT, I could see and gather firsthand information on the sufferings of the students. They are almost in captivity as they are forced to learn in boarding college. There is no guarantee that students would go home even at the end of the semester. Huge military carriages used to carry them to unknown destinations, and these students were put to rigorous labor. A female informant (22), pursuing a degree course in the department of engineering added, "Those that failed to comply with rules are always subjected to stringent punishment."

EIT College, a makeshift arrangement made out of corrugated tin sheets, is nothing but an extended 'SAWA' camp. Students are under the control of academicians from 8A.M. to 4P.M., and they would be at the mercy of military leaders during the rest of the day. Unable to withstand the rigorous military punishments, students risk their lives and flee from Mainefy very often. Young boys are made to lie down bare skinned (without a shirt) on fine, sharp stones in the hot sun for hours for disobedience. Mohammad (19), a student of Mainafy explained, "There are secret prisons within the campus, with no air and light and students remain in this prison for several days if they fail to comply with the rules. Both boys and girls are subjected to this punishment." "We are expected to fill barrellful of water using container that leaks. It takes several hours to complete this task", explained a girl that failed to return to the campus after holidays.

Students bunk classes very often, and do not report after vacation. They pay little attention in the classroom as their minds are preoccupied with issues. There were cases where students died due to cruel punishments. "One should stay obedient to once (sic) leader at dormitories and

training places in order to avoid hostility. Leaders are very powerful figures. They are nothing but our senior students,” explained several informants.

With few exceptions, faculty members may not be able to detect the dreadful happenings in the campus due to language constraints and strong surveillance mechanisms. “Have you ever heard of a punishment called ‘Helicóptero?’” asked a student (24) of EIT:

It is nothing but making a person lie down in reverse and pulling (sic) his/her legs and hands together, tying and hanging them to a hook. The victim would be suspended rotating on the air for few minutes. Under the (sic) ideal conditions the victim should be freed from this posture within 10 minutes. Recently, (in the year 2004) an 18th round NSP student was held in this position for more than 10 hours. His leader punished him and failed to set him free at the stipulated time mentioned. The victim's hands and legs were paralyzed and today he is handicapped, as doctors had to amputate his hands and feet. His old mother and family had lost a potential breadwinner.

Religious heads are not available for any comments as well. A student (25) at EIT observed: Jehovah witnesses have no business opportunities, no driver licenses. They are denied the national identity card to move within Eritrea as they did not participate in referendum, national service. So anything may happen here. Pentecostals followers are constantly targeted.

As a result of complete communication vacuum, rumors prevail on a large scale on various key issues. For example, if the President is not seen in public for several months, rumors are widespread that he is ailing from serious health issues. Wide spread rumors are part of their daily life due to lack of transparency in public life. The sudden disappearance of even elite leaders and ministers is left to such speculations. A local leader living in Asmara mentioned:

Political dissent is often handled in secret courts where military leaders act as judges. These are parallel, unofficial judiciary systems and the sudden disappearance of a particular political figure can be taken as suppression of any political dissent.

Journalists are barely open for any discussion as they apprehend arrests. When asked to comment on arbitrary arrests of the journalist, the person working at the Ministry of Information said, "It is after all his government and he is our boss. We are forced to do whatever is assigned". A veteran playwright reacted violently to my question and asked me not to contact him again as he feared the presence of spies. Eritreans particularly feel insecure to react even to simple queries when fellow Eritreans are around as there is a traditional practice of spying against each other right from the Ethiopian times, and the fear continues even today. A local girl later briefed me about the veteran writer's behaviour saying, "He had already spent several years in jail and does not wish to invite risk."

IX. Discussion

Journalist safety as an issue cannot be studied in isolation given the peculiar conditions prevailing in Eritrea. The country has never witnessed any public, political debate, and there were no elections in independent Eritrea. The emergence of a multi-party system is ruled out as political parties are prohibited from functioning, and the draft Constitution could not see the light of the day to date. There is no independent Judiciary in the country, and administrative units are strictly controlled by the government. Eritrea is the only nation in the entire continent without a private press.

Arbitrary detention of political opponents and journalists, closure of private media, denial of religious freedom, lack of freedom to pursue an academic course, and inability to follow a

passionate profession are serious concerns for the people of Eritrea though it is free from colonial rule.

The omnipotent and omnipresent government suppresses political debate and political pluralism in the country. The government deliberately diluted independent agencies like the national parliament, the media, NGOs, civil societies, churches and the other places of worship by unleashing terror through brutal punishments, killings, compulsory military service and intentional suppression of information. People are expected to produce national ID cards across hundreds of military check posts in each city, and freedom of mobility within and outside the country is restricted. According to the UNHRC 2015 report, 9% of the 4.5 million population have fled the country to the neighboring Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti, and to European nations as refugees risking their lives in the wild sub-Saharan deserts.

Journalists' safety as a phenomenon does not exist in Eritrea as they are constantly hunted ever since the 1998-2000 border conflict. Barring few journalists of *Radio Bana* who were arrested in the year 2009, detained journalists have remained incommunicado to date. Eritrean journalists are working under constant surveillance, and they are forced to reflect the highly censored information that the government allows, legitimizing its acts as nation building. Journalists cannot risk their lives by digging any information as the entire system is highly hierarchical and information passes from top down. It is neither possible nor desirable to conduct surveys, interviews and information gathering in any form as the society is apprehensive of spying against each other. The existing information about Eritrea, including its demographics, is distorted and fabricated figures of the government.

Although the warring front, EPLF, encouraged people's participation during the struggle period, the EPLF as a body was built on Marxist ideology. The top layers of EPLF, including

President Isias, received ideological training and the intricacies of warfare in China, and the EPLF never tolerated disobedience (Connell, 2009). On attaining independence, the former war leaders assumed offices on the higher levels and they are wielding power to date. Dissent in any form would be suppressed in fringes. Although the warring front promised a free and independent Eritrea, Eritrea's dreams were shattered within few years of independence as the totalitarian regime suppressed the debate, discussion and aspirations of the people in every respect.

X. Conclusion

Eritrea is the deadliest nation for journalists. The international community labeled Eritrea as North Korea of Africa as censorship is tighter in Eritrea than in Pyongyang (CPJ, 2015). It is the only nation in the entire Africa without private press, and it is extremely difficult to know anything about Eritrea as its people, in general, and journalists, in particular, are hunted in every aspect. Apart from the arrests of senior journalist who owned private newspapers in the year 2001, journalists arrests have continued with the passage of time, and those who worked for government news agencies were also detained in huge numbers. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) releases detainees' census year after year, posting the latest updates. It has been reporting the deaths of journalists in detention due to torture, poor health conditions, lack of medical facilities, extreme weather conditions and lack of basic facilities in the Eritrean prisons. International agencies are able to assess the exact position of journalists, including their whereabouts, with the help of refugees and those who flee from Eritrea, as the government denies any such attributes including the detention of journalists. Detained journalists remain incommunicado as they are denied access to legal services. No case would ever be filed against them, and they would not be produced in courts as there are no trials. The government denies

their existence as human beings and does not confirm their arrests. It would never admit the fact that they are alive, subjecting journalists' families to an indefinite tragedy as a result of this ambiguity.

Eritrea remains the world's largest prison for journalists on earth. Despite the series of measures like economic and military sanctions against Eritrea from the international community, Eritrea remains isolated. The government interprets this condition differently by projecting Eritrea as a nation rejecting international aid as it relies on the policies of self-reliance. The government is paying a deaf ear to the unending humanitarian crisis as tens and thousands are fleeing the nation due to political repression and military conscription. Eritrea is considered as a 'Country of Particular Concern'(CPC) for the international community due to its poor respect to human rights. With no freedom of press and expression, Eritrean journalists are at great risk.

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