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BRIEFING

Representing Eritrea: geopolitics and narratives of oppression

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Introduction

Two seemingly unrelated events occurred in mid 2015 that in different ways relate to the public representation of Eritrea and its function within the wider geopolitical context of the Horn of Africa. The first was the publication of the *Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea* in June 2015 by the UN Human Rights Council (HRC 2015) that in its summary suggests human rights violations in Eritrea *may* constitute crimes against humanity (the *may* has disappeared in most media coverage where those alleged crimes are taken as facts). The second was the visit of US President Barack Obama to Ethiopia in July 2015. During this visit he applauded Ethiopia's democratically elected government, ignoring the fact that elections in May 2015 in which the ruling party had won every seat were condemned by many outside observers (Baker and Fortin 2015). President Obama's most critical comments were not aimed at the Ethiopian government but came in a speech at the African Union (AU), in which he strongly critiqued those leaders who stayed in power indefinitely. Ethiopia is on safe territory here, even if its rebel movement leader Meles Zenawi did not step down but died prematurely of cancer at the age of 57 in 2012 – and it is indeed hard to imagine that Zenawi would have stepped aside voluntarily.[1]

Both events demonstrate how the Horn of Africa has become a site of strategic importance in the Global War on Terror (now Overseas Contingency Operations). This importance was not to be expected after the end of Cold War rivalries in the Horn that saw the overthrow of the Derg regime in Ethiopia and the emergence of Eritrea as an independent state, when Africa as a whole received little US attention (Ploch 2011; Wiley 2012). But attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, combined with the 11 September 2001 attacks in the USA and the more general threat posed by al-Qaeda and subsequently its more localised affiliates, focused the minds of the US and its Western allies on the Horn again (Plaut 2013; Ploch 2011). It did so in a way that reverted to historic foreign policy patterns in the Horn that saw Ethiopia as the hegemonic power and natural Western ally. Ethiopia had traditionally been the 'most attractive' US ally owing to not only its large population, economic potential and strategic location on the Red Sea, but also because of its Christian heritage and African leadership role as seat of the headquarters of the former Organisation of African Unity and subsequently the AU (Schraeder 1992, 578).[2] It should thus come as no surprise that Ethiopian interests dominate and often determine wider geopolitical approaches by the US and its allies, including relationships with other

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countries in the Horn, not least Eritrea. In many ways this represents a return to patterns of US engagement during the Eritrean liberation struggle, during which US policy was dominated by the quest for Ethiopia's territorial integrity. Support for the referendum that led to Eritrean independence came only after facts on the ground made this unavoidable and after being backed by the new Ethiopian leadership (Müller 2007; Schraeder 1992). In this scenario it is fitting from a US point of view to downplay the shortfalls in human rights in Ethiopia. At the same time, the quite grave accusation of potential crimes against humanity may be used as a first step for more active (military) engagement against Eritrea if deemed beneficial. This state of affairs calls for an interrogation of the narratives of oppression in relation to Eritrea and how those feed into a wider conceptualisation that regards Eritrea as the main source of instability in the Horn.

The crimes-against-humanity narrative and its discontents

When Eritrea appears in the media, in NGO publications and in dominant sections of academic discourse, it is represented as a closed-off dictatorship that seriously violates human rights, a place where normal life is impossible and people have no other option than to escape (prominent examples include Amnesty International 2013; Giorgis 2014; Human Rights Watch 2009; Kibreab 2009; Tronvoll and Mekonnen 2014). Eritrea thus comes into public view mainly when Eritrean refugees or 'economic migrants' drown in large numbers in the Mediterranean, as happened for example in April 2015, a fact that in itself is presented as self-evident 'proof' for 'crushing oppression' (Connell 2015).

In this popular representation Eritrea is a place about which we only have knowledge through various forms of remote access, including satellite images of 'suspected detention centres' and the stories of those who have fled, stories that are too easily taken as the 'truth' that need little further interrogation (Müller 2015a; on remote methodologies see Duffield 2014).[3]

This one-dimensional representation that almost co-opts any independent scholarship, as Reid (2014) has argued, engrains Eritrea in the public imaginary as another African disaster zone, referred to indiscriminately as characterised by war, hunger, famine, slave labour and torture. It is enforced by a vocal human rights lobby whose activists often refer to each other's documents in circular fashion, which are uncritically repeated in much of the media (see for example Amnesty International 2013; Einashe 2015; Human Rights Watch 2009).

The alleged crimes-against-humanity narrative is a logical conclusion of this representation. A closer look at the HRC (2015) report, however, based largely on accounts obtained from Eritreans in 550 confidential interviews in some of the main countries where Eritrean refugees and other members of the diaspora reside, provides not only a comprehensive picture of alleged human rights violations. It also reveals the problematic nature of the generalisations of its findings.[4] Leaving aside the fact that the HRC report relies on the same remote methodologies as the various publications by human rights advocacy organisations, I want to focus here on how it contributes to the 'remarkably presentist approach' (Reid 2014, 85) that not only denies Eritrean politics a temporal character and historical trajectory, but also focuses exclusively on the issue of human rights as the single overarching reality.[5] It is not my intention here to question the validity of the testimonies collected by the HRC, and those who committed human rights abuses under

international law should eventually be prosecuted (how realistic this may be in practice, not only in Eritrea but also in other settings in the Horn and beyond, is a different question). In fact, I have encountered similar dynamics to those documented by the HRC during research among Eritrean refugees in Israel (see Müller forthcoming). But those narratives are not the whole story, they need to be situated not only in time but also analysed within the context in which they were produced. A temporal or contextual dimension is largely absent in the HRC report, painting the picture of an overwhelmingly repressive present ranging from the immediate post-independence period to today. What is presented as clear-cut evidence is thus a rather incomplete picture too easily accepted as general truth. An example from my own research may serve to illustrate this point. The HRC report refers in various sections to the college in Mai Nefhi, one of the colleges that replaced the University of Asmara after its closure in 2006 (HRC 2015, 240, 392, 393). Mai Nefhi is described there as an extension of the Sawa military training camp in the way it is run and administered, and that was certainly the case in its first years of existence. But dynamics did change quite considerably from 2009 onwards, in terms of administration but also available resources and freedoms, as I have discussed in detail elsewhere based on actual visits to the college and ongoing interactions with some of its members (Müller 2012b). More generally, not only is reality on the ground in Eritrea far more complex than the human rights lobby suggests, the same is true for the multiple motivations of those who leave, which has made Eritrea one of the principal sources of refugees/migrants in relation to its overall population size (International Crisis Group [ICG] 2014; Müller 2012a). My research among Eritrean refugees in Israel has shown that while many Eritreans have indeed fled different types of oppression, others seek economic opportunities or aspire to join the considerable diaspora that has for decades sustained the economic and political survival of Eritrea (Müller 2015a, Müller forthcoming; see also Hepner and Tecle 2013). In that, they are often not different from other African refugees and migrants and the current 'exodus' from Eritrea is more usefully analysed within wider frameworks of globalisation and the 'aspiration to belong' (Ferguson 2006) that drives movements out of Africa.[6]

This complexity is reflected in some of the contemporary scholarship and debate (examples include Bariagaber 2013; Poole 2013; Riggan 2013; Treiber 2009, 2012) but largely ignored not least in the HRC report in favour of accepting one segment of a complex reality as morally correct 'truth'.

Duffield (2014, S77) observes in his discussion on Sudan – in many ways a not dissimilar geographical space in terms of difficulties of research access and overbearing portrayals of human rights abuses – that we see the creation of new cartographic white spaces combined with ethnographic voids. The case of Eritrea suggests almost the opposite, the creation of spaces of a particular colour that override any alternative, multicoloured representation.

The proverbial Eritrea as Africa's North Korea (Myers 2010) is, however, not only a useful tool for human rights advocates. It at the same time discredits the justified grievances voiced by the Eritrean government against an international community that has more often than not sided with Ethiopia and refused to uphold Eritrean rights as mere propaganda by a rogue state. This in turn serves the geopolitical agenda of Ethiopia and its allies in laying the blame for political instability in the Horn and Islamist violence in particular firmly on Eritrea.

Eritrea as the main cause of instability in the Horn?

Eritrea was always regarded as somehow prickly and difficult to deal with by the international community. This perception was not helped by the fact that Eritrea entered into violent conflicts with all its neighbours, even when it subsequently agreed to and abided by international mediation (Müller 2007). What was often overlooked here was the fact that Eritrea as an independent state had simply become a new actor in the patterns of foreign policy-making in the Horn. These patterns have over decades been characterised by contested borders between and within states, and dominated by mutual interference and proxy wars threatening not only governments but the survival of states themselves (Abbink 2003; Cliffe 1999; Müller 2006).

The 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia brought an additional dimension in the politics of the Horn to the fore, the (ill-conceived) challenge by Eritrea to Ethiopian hegemony in the region. The verdict of the Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission (2002) that awarded the symbolic town of Badme to Eritrea but that Ethiopia to this day refuses to implement has led to the 'no war no peace' situation that Eritrea uses to justify its indeterminate military mobilisation that in different forms is behind most human rights violations.[7] It came at a time when Ethiopia's importance as a key US and Western ally in the Global War on Terror had already come to the fore. It also came in the aftermath of the Eritrean crackdown on internal opposition and the media in September 2001, a few days after the 9/11 attacks in the USA. Initially, Eritrean hopes that the internal crackdown might be ignored by an international community now focused on this new 'terrorist' threat seemed to have at least partly come true. In 2002 Eritrea offered the US help in its Global War on Terror and access to its military bases. Eritrea even hired a Washington lobbying firm to push for being made the location of the permanent base of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) ('Tiny desert nation bids to host troops.' 2002). Once the decision to base CJTF-HOA at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti (which subsequently became the only permanent US military facility on the African continent) was made, the process that resulted in Eritrea's progressive isolation took its course.

In parallel it became obvious that while Eritrea might have international law on its side in relation to the border ruling with Ethiopia, its guarantors – namely the UN, the European Union, the AU and the US – would not force Ethiopia's compliance. And Eritrea's diplomacy in relation to the issue, resting on the refusal to consider alternative scenarios to a ruling that was meant to be final and binding, proved to be rather inept and counter-productive. As a consequence, Eritrea initially reverted to what Mosley (2014, 3) calls the Horn's 'tried and trusted methods' to undermine Ethiopia in providing support to Ethiopian opposition groups (as did Ethiopia to Eritrea's), and both countries stepped up their efforts to counter each other's influence in the wider region.

One of the major regional clashes between both countries took place in Somalia, where US-backed Ethiopian military intervention in support of the Transitional Federal Government against the Union of Islamic Courts left Eritrea on the wrong side from Western powers. Keeping some ties with Somali Islamist insurgents – some of whom turned into Al-Shabaab – even if a purely tactical move against Ethiopia and not because Eritrea shared their political agenda, subsequently resulted in sanctions against Eritrea following extraordinarily detailed reports by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea (ICG 2013; UN Security Council [UNSC] 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). As there is

no counterpart UN body that equally investigates Ethiopian activities in regional destabilisation, Eritrea can easily be painted as the major force behind instability in the Horn, a fact Ethiopia's diplomacy has aptly promoted and capitalised upon – not least in providing 'evidence' for Eritrea's misdeeds to the UN Monitoring Group (ICG 2013; Plaut 2013). This in turn reinforced the Eritrean leadership's long-held belief, not least founded upon concrete experiences in the war for national independence and the role played by the UN and the US then (Wrong 2005), that Eritreans can only rely on themselves and outsiders can not be trusted.

At the same time and away from the limelight, Eritrea did make various attempts to normalise relations with the US after President Obama came to power in January 2009. Documents released by WikiLeaks, including US embassy cables as well as protocols from meetings with US officials, show the futility of such efforts. Eritrea's president is described in those communications as an 'unhinged dictator' who is partly psychologically insane, Eritrean interlocutors as arrogant, and above all the prevailing view is that Eritrea has crossed a red line in Somalia in supporting extremists and 'will pay for it' (wikileaks. org 2006, 2009, copies on file). These documents also confirm that Ethiopian actions in Somalia and the wider region had firm US backing from the start. If anything, the US–Ethiopian partnership has grown closer during the Obama presidency, with Ethiopia clearly the most strategically important regional partner and of late also a base for US drone operations (Plaut 2013; Wiley 2012).

In addition, after the ruling party lost important votes in the 2005 legislative elections, Ethiopia has embarked on a developmentalist strategy that has resulted in high rates of economic growth, a fact that makes it easier to overlook major shortfalls in its own human rights record. The opposite is the case for Eritrea, which, in spite of the start of potentially lucrative mining operations in 2011, faces multiple economic problems, visible of late in the daily electricity shortages that have become the norm.[8]

Taken together, few incentives exist for a shift from painting Eritrea as a 'bad neighbour' towards a focus on the dynamics of a 'bad neighbourhood', even if this seems a prerequisite to address the multiple economic, security and human rights issues that continue to haunt the Horn as a whole.

What for the future?

This brings us back to the beginning of this briefing and the link between the HRC report and Eritrea's wider geopolitical position in the Horn, tied in multiple ways to its relationship with Ethiopia. On the one hand, 'no war, no peace' is not a status recognised under international law and has been used too easily by the Eritrean government to justify the abusive practice that national service has become as well as denials of political, religious and personal freedoms. At the same time, it is hard to envisage how Eritrea can become a viable economy if the current stalemate continues, a stalemate that Ethiopia has little incentive to alter. Without economic prospects in addition to political rights and other freedoms, it is hard to imagine that the movement of those who now leave Eritrea in large numbers will be diminished, not least because those who leave follow well-trodden paths of Eritrean migration movements, pre- and post-independence (see also ICG 2014). Even Eritreans with exit visas – at the moment almost impossible to obtain for most – will not be able to freely travel to Europe and will find it near impossible

to obtain entry visas for most desired destination countries. They will remain at the mercy of people smugglers, and thus new engagement by the EU, even if motivated by the general refugee/migration crisis, should be welcomed rather than condemned. It will require a pragmatic approach to not only engage afresh with Eritrea but with the 'bad neighbour-hood' of the Horn, and in particular with Eritrean–Ethiopian relations. With US interests too closely aligned with Ethiopia and those, like former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen (2013), who advocate bringing Eritrea in from the cold in a minority, the EU could be an important interlocutor. Eritrea has also actively engaged in the Khartoum process, a regional initiative aimed at curbing human trafficking, in itself a significant shift in Asmara's foreign policy stance ('Let my people stay.' 2015).

Whether these initiatives will result in more sustained EU engagement, the prospect of deeper (development) cooperation and ultimately some form of opening, or whether those within the EU who propagate a hard line of unspecified intervention against Eritrea gain the upper hand, remains to be seen.

In the near future, Eritrea is singled out for more HRC scrutiny and faces the prospect of being referred to the International Criminal Court. Upon the request of Somalia and backed by Djibouti, the HRC's mandate of investigation has been extended for another year in order to decide whether crimes against humanity have indeed been committed. Those dynamics are a potent example of prevailing patterns of foreign policy-making in the Horn, as both countries are Eritrean adversaries and in particular Djibouti has gained considerably not only in its international standing but also economically from Eritrea's isolation (Styan 2013).

It can only be hoped that any future approach towards Eritrea follows the more pragmatic approach that is prevalent in engagement with Ethiopia and moves beyond the almost exclusive focus on a narrowly defined human rights agenda. After all, Ethiopia has in the past been accused of crimes against humanity in its Somali region without much international censorship. While this might not always be easy to fathom, there is no justification to treat Eritrea differently and ignore the country's valid fears for its own security. Seen from this angle, President Obama's visit to Ethiopia was a missed opportunity, even if in line with a wider US policy approach that excluded Eritrea from the US–Africa Leaders Summit in Washington in August 2014. The latter may come to be regarded as a Pyrrhic victory for the human rights lobby (Abraha 2014), as continued isolation of Eritrea does little to help those who suffer inside the country or on their journeys towards a better future. It also adds to a growing sense of frustration among those who have made a conscious decision to remain in Eritrea and foster change from within, as well as making it harder for those who have left but aspire to eventually return, to do so (Müller 2012b, Müller forthcoming).

Taking a more regional view, for something akin to a more stable Horn of Africa, the pattern of mutual interference in each other's internal affairs needs to be broken. It was so briefly in the early 1990s, when the Intergovernmental Authority on Development was strengthened to include a role in peace-making and the coordination of regional security policies – with the then new leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia as key protagonists in pushing an agenda for peace and development (Müller 2006). Those pledges were abandoned in late 1993 but, without a more regional approach that aims to deliver benefits to all countries of the Horn, the future looks rather grim – even if the key obsession of human rights advocates and many of its followers, an overthrow of the current Eritrean leadership, should come about.

Notes

1. The evaluation of Meles Zenawi's leadership and its legacy ranges from authoritarian ruler to visionary politician, see Keita (2012) for the former and de Waal (2012) for the latter.
2. Even during the years of Ethiopia's 'communist' Soviet-backed government from 1974 to 1991, different parts of the US administration continued engagement with this 'lost ally' (Schraeder 1992).
3. Amnesty International now routinely books commercial satellite time to document human rights abuses in places not regarded conducive for monitors on the ground (see Duffield 2014, S87). In relation to Eritrea, based on such images a map entitled 'Eritrea: Suspected Detention Centres' was published and accompanied by a video that says, rather more firmly, 'Eritrea's Forgotten Prisons Exposed' (see https://aiusa.maps.arcgis.com/apps/OnePane/basicviewer/index.html?appid=11f3f838f42144b39ddabe125ec82846, accessed July 29, 2015). This representation prototypically shows the problems around simulation that Duffield raises in his recent article; in relation to ground truth and Eritrea see also Müller (2015b).
4. In addition, the Commission called for submissions by affected parties through its website from the time of Eritrean independence to the present and received 160 submissions relating to 254 individual cases (see HRC 2015, 15), thus in effect asking for self-nomination of informants to provide evidence. The Commission also asked to travel to Eritrea but did not receive an answer to its request and did not ask for additional information from, for example, UN institutions present in Eritrea.
5. An additional problem with the HRC report is the way anonymity is being interpreted. We learn next to nothing about how interviewees were selected nor when they left Eritrea (the latter is only sometimes mentioned within interviews). Nor are narratives being interrogated in relation to the purpose for which they might have been produced, or account taken of the fact that Eritreans have a distinct 'competitive advantage' within the restricted international asylum system owing to the blank narrative of omnipresent oppression (see also ICG 2014).
6. In addition, a number of refugees who claim to be Eritrean are in fact from Ethiopia. In Israel this is an estimated 25% (personal communication with staff from Physicians for Human Rights, Tel Aviv, March 2012).
7. The dynamics behind the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea are much broader than the demarcation of the actual border and have been analysed elsewhere (for example in Negash and Tronvoll 2000). Having said that, the border has remained a main focus of symbolic contestation and been used by both governments to foster their interests (see also Mosley 2014).
8. While to be taken with much caution as data are hard to come by in particular for Eritrea, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) puts real GDP growth in Ethiopia at around 10% for almost each year between 2004 and 2014 and projects a growth rate of 8.6% for 2015. Eritrea's performance has been rather volatile, ranging from a −1.1% rate from 2004–2008 to 8.7% in 2011 when mining revenues started to come in, to a meagre 1.7% in 2014 and a forecast of only 0.2% for 2015 (IMF 2015). The only mine currently operational is run by Canadian company Nevsun, mining gold, silver, copper and zinc. Changes in mining revenues are linked to the way deposits are being structured (see http://www.nevsun.com/projects/bisha-main/#reserves, accessed November 4, 2015).

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