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**Spies and Silence: The Eritrean Government’s Use of Informant Networks to Shutdown Diaspora Dissent**

The Mediterranean Sea is not unfamiliar with Eritrean tragedy. On October 3rd, 2013 over 366 Eritrean men, women, and children drowned off the coast of Italy only a kilometer away from the Italian island of Lampedusa. The shipwreck was one of the worst migrant sea disasters in the entire European Refugee Crisis - a crisis that only two years later in 2015 saw over 220,000 migrants reach Europe through the Mediterranean Sea in just one month (BBC, 2020). Yet for the few Eritrean survivors of the Lampedusa shipwreck, reaching Italian soil did not mean that they had made it out of harm’s way. As many of them looked around the Palermo central police station in Sicily, they noticed Eritrean government representatives working as translators and identifiers of the dead. Coming from a country like Eritrea, where the fear of being spied on by neighbors or even family members is common, experiences like these are troubling. Siid Negash, a spokesman for the Coordinamento Eritrea Democratica NGO explained that the Eritrean refugees who had gone to the police station were essentially being forced to tell their entire story to members of the same government that they had risked their lives to flee. Sharing their experiences to these government-allied translators runs them the risk of having their family and friends back in Eritrea face retribution on their behalf (Allaby, 2018). Sadly, situations like this are not rare. Even beyond interactions with immigration services, Eritreans continually have to deal with the Eritrean
government’s large network of foreign informants. These informants exist in all substantial
diaspora Eritrean communities and are tasked with identifying and reporting on diaspora Eritreans
who are critical of the government and its policies (Reid, 2009). It comes as no surprise then that
many Eritreans in the diaspora are hesitant to share their personal stories about life in Eritrea or
about their political opinions regarding the country.

In this paper, I will begin by exploring key aspects and organizations within Eritrean history
that contribute to the cultivation of a “posture of silence” within the diaspora. This will include a
breakdown of the structure of the country’s various popular revolutionary movements as well as an
examination of how the same “informant” systems that were helpful during the country’s revolution
have now come to plague the growing Eritrean diaspora. I will then analyze the various ways that
spying and distrust are embedded in the current organizational structure of the People’s Front for
Democracy and Justice (the sole political group in the country) and how the PFDJ has increased
distrust both within the Eritrean community as well as between Eritreans and outsiders. Finally, I
will conclude by drawing parallels between the modern Eritrean state and that of the Cold War
German Democratic Republic to examine what the long-term impacts of systematic distrust are on
an individual’s mental health and a community's fragmentation. Throughout this paper, I will be
weaving in Trudy Govier’s *Distrust as a Practical Problem* to give a foundational framework of
what distrust is and what the various forms of its manifestation look like. By the end, I hope to have
given a general overview of how both Eritrea’s revolutionary history in combination with the
current Eritrean government’s practices have created a strong culture of institutionalized distrust
that threatens the mental health of fleeing refugees as well as directly infringes upon the human
rights of Eritreans both within the country and abroad.
I. The Role of Distrust During the Eritrean War of Independence

The Eritrean War of Independence began in September 1961 and was first led by The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). After a short intra-Eritrean civil war, the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) rose up to become the dominant Eritrean organization throughout the rest of the revolution’s course. The EPLF was an armed Marxist-Leninist organization that sought to bring about the independence of Eritrea from its southern more powerful neighbor Ethiopia. The organization was born in secrecy. Reflecting on the formation of the ELF, one of its central leaders Haile Wold’ensai explained that during one of the first meetings he had with current President (then revolutionary) Isaias Afwerki to discuss forming the EPLF, he was told to “shut his mouth, make no comments, no proposals” and that Afwerki would only tell him everything when they had the opportunity to talk privately (Connell, 2001). The three central leaders within the EPLF (Haile Wold’ensai, Isaias Afwerki, and Mussie Tesfamikael) from the beginning understood how instrumental secrecy and loyalty would be to the success of the organization. Furthermore, this secrecy was not only integral to the organization’s top-level leadership but was also intentionally dispersed throughout the EPLF ranks and mandated of all insurgents in the ‘meda’ – or the battlefields.

For the EPLF to succeed, it was key that it systematized distrust. Trust within the EPLF’s revolutionary context was both organizationally and individually dangerous. Since “trusting others entails having open-minded expectations about what they will do in aspects that can harm or benefit us” (Govier, 1992), situations of armed conflict where there were multiple different armed groups and where undercover enemy agents were common, make trust extremely costly. Even within the
EPLF ranks, Christian fighters such as Tsegai Gebremedhin would often flee to Sudan as a result of fear of their Muslim comrades. Haile Wold’ensai explains that especially in the early days of the EPLF “no Christian had any guarantee of safety” and that even in battles, Christians like Wold’ensai were guarding themselves both against enemy fire as well as “against bullets that came from behind” (Connell, 2001). In this way, distrust was not only encouraged by the EPLF’s leadership but was also learned through individual experiences in the field.

This culture of distrust during the Eritrean Revolution was paramount to its survival. Coupled with a culture of deep loyalty to the organization, it would also become integral to its success. Loyalty to the mission and leadership of the EPLF was present from the start of the organization. Wold’ensai again mentions how at the start of the EPLF’s planning, along with Afwerki and Tesfamikael, he took an oath that they all signed in blood by carving out the letter ‘E’ on their upper arm. All of this to signify their lifelong commitment to each other and to the EPLF - a commitment that they swore would last beyond the revolution’s course (Connell, 2001). In this way, similar to how distrust was cultivated among Eritrean troops on the battlefield, loyalty to the EPLF and its leadership were also forged during the 30-year duration of the Independence War.

When the revolution ended in May of 1991 with Eritrean victory, the EPLF was hard-pressed to translate the loyalty that it had from the Eritrean populace as well as the massive amounts of distrust that existed within the country into a solid and meaningful foundation for the organization’s future. In 1991, shortly after achieving independence, the EPLF transformed itself into the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). In its National Charter as a new organization, the PFDJ highlighted that it was committed to building an Eritrea that had a “democratic constitutional system based on the sovereignty of the people, on democratic principles
and procedures, on accountability, transparency, pluralism and tolerance” (PFDJ, 1994). However, the Eritrea of today is a long way from this goal. Instead of accountability, transparency, and tolerance, the country is instead marred with secrecy, authoritarianism, and fear.

**II. Systematized Distrust in Modern Eritrea**

In 2001, after the unofficial end of the Ethio-Eritrean Border War, the first test to whether the EPLF’s culture of secrecy was a thing of the past was made. A group of senior party members publicly wrote a letter to President Isaias Afwerki and questioned the path that he was taking the country on. They demanded that the ongoing human rights violations within the country be addressed and that the electoral process be unhindered. In response to this, not only were the senior party members who wrote the letter (the G-11) rounded up and imprisoned but so were journalists and university students who were seen as possibly harboring anti-Afwerki sentiments. The PFDJ had failed the test. Eritrea in its independence was not moving towards transparency and open dialogue but instead was stuck in the same culture of secrecy that had dominated its revolutionary era.

There is another aspect of the PFDJ’s National Charter that hints that the culture of secrecy that was cultivated during the revolution would live on. Close to the end of the document, under the heading of “cultural objectives”, it has listed out the organizations plans to “develop a new Eritrean culture which builds upon the culture developed during the liberation struggle” and that the PFDJ would “ensure that the commemoration of our martyrs, as a manifestation of our nationalism and heritage, is passed onto future generations with a sense of pride and respect” (PFDJ, 1994). The culture that was developed during the revolution was a militant and highly secretive one - a culture
that was forged through struggle, fear, and secrecy. The call for continued “pride and respect”
towards revolutionary martyrs points back to the loyalty soldiers were mandated to have to the
EPLF. In the PFDJ, this ‘loyalty’ would translate to mandated unwavering support for the Afwerki
regime as well as an unofficial/official ban on any criticism of the government.

This culture of loyalty and dissent was described by foreign academic Richard Reid as an
“eerie silence” that “descended on Eritrea, a silence on the part of both governed and governing”
(Reid, 2009). This silence is again a manifestation of distrust. The government of Eritrea – and
specifically the office of President Isaias Afwerki – is itself deeply mistrustful of all Eritreans both
within and outside the country. From students at Asmara University, journalists at the national ERI-
TV headquarters, to even the refugees who escape the country to build a new life elsewhere, any
form of criticism no matter how mild it may be is met with retribution and rebuke.

Take, for example, the former patriarch Abune Antonios of the Eritrean Orthodox
Tewahedo Church. Abune Antonios had been a critic of the Afwerki government and challenged
the use of Church leaders as informants for the regime. In 2006, Abune Antonios was deposed and
put under house arrest. However, even less directly critical members of the Orthodox Tewahedo
Church have been imprisoned because the government mistrusted their motives. In 2004, two years
before patriarch Abune Antonios’ house arrest, three Orthodox priests who were foundational
members of the Medhane Alem Bible Study group in Asmara were detained and “sentenced by a
secret administrative procedure to five years each” and are all now “reportedly serving their
sentences at the Sembel civilian prison in Asmara”. All of this because their group seemed to be
growing beyond the four sanctioned religions in the country and thus posed a threat to the PFDJ’s
rigid grip on control (IRBC, 2015). Furthermore, even those who were not leaders within the bible
study were imprisoned. In 2005, more than 15 women who belonged to the bible study were detained for simply “holding a home prayer meeting in Keren” (Amnesty International, 2005). Instances like these decrease levels of trust even within intimate communities like the Orthodox Tewahedo Church. If only the smallest infractions (such as holding a home prayer meeting) can land you in prison, then the possibility that neighbors and even family members could falsely accuse you over any small dispute makes trust that much more costly.

III. The Direct Impact of Systematized Distrust on Human Rights

The fact that anyone can be imprisoned for sharing information that simply appears to be critical of the government instills the fear that you can be accused of being a dissident at any time and for anything. This of course presents a host of alarming problems. As Govier explains, “If one person does not trust another, he or she has no real problem if it is possible simply to avoid all interaction and interdependence” (Govier, 1992). However, this is a very difficult thing to do in any healthy community and is almost impossible to do for the Eritreans who find themselves depending on the immigration systems and diaspora communities in the countries that they flee to.

All of this culminates in shocking and mentally taxing experiences like the one Eritrean survivors of the Lampedusa shipwreck faced at the Palermo Central Police Station in Sicily. To realize that the veil of secrecy and mistrust that they experienced under the Afwerki regime extends beyond Eritrea’s borders and into the diaspora through informant networks makes distrust the default position wherever Eritreans go. This impedes Eritreans from being honest about the torture and abuse that they faced in Eritrea as well as hesitant to discuss the gross human rights violations that occur within the country. This in and of itself is a human rights violation. Informant networks
are a powerful way by which the Eritrean Government can intimidate refugees from turning into
dissidents and human rights advocates. To outsiders, the widespread intimidation that exists within
Eritrean communities often translates to a seeming ambivalence and quietness about politics back in
Eritrea (Belloni, 2018) as well as a lack of willingness to share personal stories about life under the
regime.

The Eritrean Government is intimately aware of the crucial role silence plays in the regime’s
continued stability. Afwerki, now 30 years after the Independence of Eritrea, understands that
silence is critical in maintaining the current status quo. If people feel wary of sharing their true
sentiments about Eritrea with others, then a viable opposition to the government cannot be
cultivated. In this way, distrust is a political weapon that has been very effectively wielded by the
PFDJ. For example, since the imprisonment of the G-15 in 2001, there has been no private or
independent media in the country. Additionally, as of 2021, at least 11 journalists are still held in
Eritrea’s prisons with no access being granted to family members or lawyers. Furthermore, even in
a country where the internet penetration is less than 2%, Eritrean’s visiting the country’s Internet
cafés are forced to provide their personal information and ID details before they are allowed to
access the internet (RSF, 2019). What was during the revolution a useful culture of silence has now
under the PFDJ become a pseudo-guarantee that the human rights violations committed by the
Eritrean Regime will not be publicly discussed by the thousands of Eritreans who flee the country
each month.

All Eritreans are directly affected by the actions of the government – from those still within
Eritrea to the refugees who flee and even to members of the growing Eritrean diaspora who have
begun calling other countries their home. This system of distrust has spread beyond the borders of
the Eritrean state to reach almost all locations that Eritrean migrants find themselves living in. For example, for those attempting to leave the country, one method of escaping from Eritrea is to be transported by luxury SUV vehicle from Asmara to Kassala. This trip is arranged by the PFDJ (van Reisen and Mawere, 2017). All the while, the PFDJ employs a brutal “shoot-to-kill” policy against all Eritreans attempting to flee without unofficial permission from the government (Plaut, 2017). As seen in this hypocritical policy of the Eritrean government, loyalty and obedience to the regime are beneficial while trust of anyone else (such as traffickers or other countries) can be deadly. All of this further reinforcing to Eritreans that distrust must be their default.

IV. The Impact of Distrust on Refugee Mental Health

This posture of distrust in combination with all the difficulties and challenges that come with being a refugee has a direct impact on the mental health problems and rising suicide rates within the Eritrean diaspora community. Out of the 5,000 migrants who flee the country each month, one out of three Eritrean report symptoms of PTSD (Chernet, 2016). Robel Araya, a former MSF Mental Health Supervisor in Hitsats Refugee Camp in northern Ethiopia thinks the number is far higher – at least with the Eritreans in the camps. Araya explains that most people he sees have been through traumatizing experiences and that many develop depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder primarily as a consequence of the torture, violence, and abuse they faced in Eritrea (MSF, 2018). These challenges are further exacerbated by the culture of silence that continues to exist around trauma incurred in Eritrea.

Community supervisors and mental health Workers explain that one of the main challenges they face is convincing people to seek support and to vulnerably share their stories (MSF, 2018).
Amid severe mental health challenges, the posture of mistrust that Eritreans hold acts as a significant barrier to mental health access. In Hitsats Camp alone, around 40 percent of the Eritreans there are under 18 (MSF, 2018), and in this already extremely vulnerable population, clinical research shows that PTSD within the under-18 population is extremely common and persistent (Farwell, 2004). The climate of distrust that these children have grown up in further hinders them from getting the help that they need.

In Eritrea, the PFDJ’s systematization of distrust has created a dire situation. In many ways, there are significant parallels between the modern Eritrean state and the trust/distrust dynamic that was prevalent within East Germany between 1949 and 1990. The Ministry for State Security (Stasi) was a secretive intelligence police agency closely modeled after its Soviet counterpart, the KGB. Similar to the current Eritrean state, the Stasi relied on a large network of citizen informants as well as spies living undercover in West Germany to keep track of dissidents and to manufacture loyalty from its population. Additionally, similar to modern Eritrea, within East Germany, social and community networks which relied on personal trust had significant limitations and barriers (Welter and Kautonenen, 2005). Here too, as research shows, a prevalent national culture of mistrust constricts the ability of individuals to grow in dynamic social communities and consequently detrimentally affects the mental health of the citizenry at large.

V. Conclusion

The systematized and widespread culture of distrust within Eritrea has direct negative consequences on the outlook and perspective of Eritreans – both those still within the country and those abroad. Govier explains that distrust can even go so far as to *corrode understandings of*
reality and creates a feeling that no one can be trusted and that the enemy is everywhere (Govier, 1992). This applies to how Eritrean migrants feel when they see Eritrean government officials in places like Italian police stations. The wide-reaching scope of the Eritrean Government’s informant networks helps make permanent their feelings of distrust. For Eritreans, this means that a posture of distrust is not one they should only have in Eritrea but one they must carry with them wherever they go.

Distrust within Eritrea is potent and when wielded by the government acts as a form of intimidation. It hinders Eritreans from trusting human rights and immigration organizations that could be of great help to them. Distrust - and its offspring silence - are powerful ways to mandate obedience and to squash dissent. From the East German Stasi to the East African PFDJ, distrust has allowed regimes without popular mandates to continue implementing unpopular policies and remain in power.

This is why refugee advocates and human rights organizations must investigate the unspoken forms of intimidation that Eritrean refugees endure. In a country where the press is banned and outside reporters have limited access, the refugees leaving the country have the most insight into the continual human rights violations committed by the Afwerki regime. Yet, as long as the Eritrean government’s global informant networks continue to go unchallenged, the human rights violations within the country will remain under-discussed and un-investigated. This means that for Eritrean refugees, while they might be able to flee the country, as long as the culture of silence persists, they cannot truly flee the Eritrean government.
Bibliography


