Mobilizing New African Diasporas
An Eritrean Case Study
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Introduction
The peace settlement signed between Eritrea and Ethiopia in November 2000 appears to be lasting. The Eritro-Ethiopian conflict raged intermittently for two years, has cost both countries tens of thousands of lives, and displaced hundreds of thousands of people (Negash and Tromvoll 2000). It has also placed severe economic strains upon both of these poor countries, exacerbated in Ethiopia by drought and famine, and in Eritrea by the fact that this new country had only just begun to recover from a thirty-year struggle for independence from Ethiopia, which ended just seven years before the resumption of hostilities (Clapham 1998).

Coinciding unintentionally with the period of the recent conflict, the author has been conducting research originally intended to focus on the participation of the Eritrean diaspora in the UK and Germany in the post-conflict reconstruction of their home country. The research planned to explore the range of contributions which overseas nationals can make to development and reconstruction without permanently returning, and to analyse obstacles to their participation. The changing conditions in Eritrea have inevitably changed the emphasis of the research. One particularly significant consequence has been vigorous efforts by the Eritrean Government (and also the Ethiopian Government) to mobilize the diaspora to support and fund the conflict. Drawing on interviews conducted between 1998 and 2000 with Eritrean Government representatives both inside and outside Eritrea, and within the Eritrean diaspora in Germany and the UK, this chapter critically analyses the Eritrean Government’s efforts. First it explains how and why the Government has tried to
mobilize support within the diaspora. Shifting the focus to the perspectives of members of the diaspora, it then asks to what extent this strategy has been a success.

The theme that pervades this chapter is continuity and change. An overview of the relationship between the Eritrean Government and overseas nationals before the recent conflict shows how close links between the two already existed — in this sense the activities of the Government during the conflict have simply built upon existing links. What has changed, however, has been the intensity of the demands made on the diaspora, and a growing resentment among the diaspora of the requests being made. Drawing broader lessons from the Eritrean case study, the conclusion suggests that African states need to be ‘responsible states’ if they are successfully to mobilize diasporas.

**The Eritrean diaspora**

The focus of this chapter is refugees who fled during Eritrea’s struggle for independence, between 1961 and 1991, and sought asylum in Europe. Many refugees were also displaced to neighbouring countries, especially Sudan (Bascom 1998). In contrast, relatively few Eritrean (or Ethiopian) refugees have been generated by the recent conflict with Ethiopia. However, it is estimated that over 60,000 Eritreans have been expelled from Ethiopia since the beginning of the conflict. In addition, some 250,000 Eritreans have been internally displaced from border areas (ERREC 1999).

There are no accurate data on the size of the Eritrean diaspora in Europe or North America. The main reason is that they were registered upon arrival in most host countries as ‘Ethiopians’ (until 1991 the territory of Eritrea was formally a province of Ethiopia), and very few censuses have yet disaggregated Eritrean refugees from Ethiopian refugees. One indicator is the voting figures for the 1993 Referendum for Independence. According to these data, a total of 94,370 votes were cast by Eritreans outside Eritrea (Referendum Commission of Eritrea 1993). They indicate that the most significant host countries for Eritrean refugees are Saudi Arabia (37,785), the USA and Canada (14,941) and Germany (6,994).

Most sources do not dispute assertions by the Eritrean Constitutional Commission that the turn out for the referendum was over 98 per cent (Styrm 1993). Nevertheless, these data almost certainly significantly underestimate the true size of the Eritrean diaspora because they only cover Eritreans eligible to vote, that is over eighteen years of age. In addition, the data are by now some ten years out of date, and the vast majority of Eritrean refugees outside the African continent have remained abroad.

Eritrean community leaders in the UK, for example, suggest that there are between 20,000 and 25,000 Eritreans currently living there.

In Europe there were broadly three main waves of arrivals of Eritrean refugees during the struggle for independence. The first was in the mid-1970s, and coincided with the deposition of Haile Sellassie and the accession of the Derg (military committee) in Ethiopia in 1974. Respondents report that the Derg transformed intermittent harassment of Eritreans into systematic imprisonment and persecution. Many Eritreans fled initially to Sudan, from where resettlement programmes brought them to various countries during the mid-1970s, including the USA, Canada, Germany, the UK and Sweden. The second wave occurred in the year after the so-called ‘Red Star Campaign’, which launched the largest attack by Ethiopia and involved some 90,000 Ethiopian soldiers (Connell 1997). The final major wave arrived at the end of the 1980s, as the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) launched a sustained series of attacks that were to culminate in 1991 with victory. Many Eritreans who arrived at this stage came as ‘unaccompanied minors’ (that is unaccompanied children under the age of eighteen).

**Existing links between the Eritrean diaspora and the Eritrean state**

Recent efforts by the Eritrean Government to mobilize overseas nationals have built upon a long-standing tradition for the Eritrean diaspora to contribute to the state. During the struggle for independence, Eritreans in the diaspora were mobilized by the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) to campaign and increase public awareness in their host countries, and to raise money to pay for the costs of the war and of relief and welfare services in the liberated areas. Mobilization occurred through a tightly administered system of ‘mass organizations’. The EPLF also ran an NGO network — the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) — targeted on raising money among NGOs and other donors in host countries.

After Independence, both of these networks of offices were disbanded and, in their place, local community organizations were established. Consequently, links between the diaspora and the new state have developed in two new ways. The first has been political. The most obvious example of a political link was participation in the 1993 Referendum for Independence, in which, as explained above, the vast majority of Eritreans in the diaspora eligible to vote did so. After the referendum, overseas nationals were also closely involved with the drafting of Eritrea’s Constitution, and its ratification in 1997. The diaspora had formal representation in the Assembly of the Constitutional Committee, amounting
to six out of the total of fifty members. Three separate drafts were circulated to Eritrean communities overseas (as well as within Eritrea), and on each occasion feedback was invited and incorporated into the next draft. According to the President of the Assembly, the contribution of the diaspora was central both to the constitutional process, but also to the final wording of several parts of the Constitution. The Constitution guarantees multi-party elections, although these have not yet been held. If and when they are held, the Constitution also guarantees the right of the diaspora to vote.

The second significant link between the diaspora and the Eritrean state has been economic. Since Independence, every adult Eritrean in the diaspora has been asked to pay 2 per cent of their annual incomes to the Eritrean state. This rate applies across the entire diaspora, and includes the unemployed and all social categories. Even though it is voluntary, every respondent in this research stated that they pay this contribution, and none – not even those in open opposition to the current Government (the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice [PFDJ]) – seemed to resent paying. Most Eritreans view the tax not as a burden, but rather as a duty towards their homeland. When I asked one respondent, Taza in Berlin, if he ever thought of missing a payment, he responded: ‘No, because then I would be declaring that I am not an Eritrean.’

**Mobilizing the diaspora during conflict**

Since the beginning of the recent conflict, the Eritrean Government has made clear efforts to intensify its links with the diaspora. This has been taking place in three main ways, and it remains an ongoing process. First, the Government has moved to re-open political offices, which had been closed upon Independence, in the principal countries for the diaspora – USA, Germany and Saudi Arabia. Senior members of Government were dispatched to – and remain in – these offices. In other host countries the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed embassies and consulates to conduct censuses within the diaspora, to establish a demographic profile and especially a profile of skills and qualifications within the diaspora. Second, the Eritrean Relief Association network, which was again effectively disbanded upon Independence, began to be revitalized, although under a series of new names – the Eritrean Development Fund in the USA, Eritrea Hilfswerk in Germany and Citizens for Peace in Canada. Third, the Government initiated an information campaign within the diaspora. One method has been through visits to host countries by Government representatives – for example to attend the annual Eritrean festival in Frankfurt.

**AN ERITREAN CASE STUDY**

In his analysis of the attempts of the Mexican state to develop links with Mexican immigrants in the USA, Robert C. Smith characterizes the process as one of the ‘institutionalization’ of the diaspora. He suggests three reasons. One reason is simply to tap the wealth of the migrants, a second is to try to establish control over autonomous political linkages which have grown between civil society in Mexico and the migrants, and a third is to 'channel, co-opt and reorganize the disaffected energies of Mexicans in the United States' (Smith 1998: 224). Smith’s analysis provides a useful framework for analysing the way that the Eritrean state intensified its links with the diaspora for the duration of the conflict with Ethiopia.

**Financial contributions**

The diaspora’s financial contribution has been needed not only to help pay for the rising costs of an army engaged in a protracted conflict, but also to provide relief and assistance to those Eritreans who have been expelled from Ethiopia since the conflict began, to the internally displaced in Eritrea, and to as many as 250,000 other families affected in other ways by the war, for example through the absence of productive members of the household (ERREC 1999). Eritrea’s dependence on the diaspora has been exacerbated by the Government’s deep suspicion of foreign aid (McSpadden 1999).

The Government has sought financial contributions from the diaspora in a number of ways. Most directly, the contributions already being asked of the diaspora have been increased. Eritreans in the UK were asked to contribute an additional £1 per day, plus a one-off annual payment of £500 for 1999. In Germany, in December 1998 the rate of 2 per cent was raised for one month to 10 per cent, there was a request for a one-off payment of DM1000, and Eritreans were also asked to contribute an additional DM30 per month.

As another way of raising money, the Government issued bonds for the first time in Eritrea at the beginning of 1999. There were seven types, which ranged in duration from three to ten years, and in cost from US$300 to US$1,000. According to the termination date, interest rates varied from 3.5 to 3.69 per cent. The Economic Advisor to the President estimated in July 1999 that already some US$20 million worth of bonds had been purchased in North America, US$20 million in Europe and US$15 million in the Middle East.

Two other strategies have been even more recently adopted by the state. The first has been to auction housing plots in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea. There is a severe housing shortage in Eritrea, which has
been one of several factors that have precluded larger-scale return by overseas Eritreans. Over the last few years the municipality of Asmara has built several housing estates, and it is houses in these estates that are now being auctioned. It is reported that most of these houses have been purchased by members of the Eritrean diaspora. At the same time, interviews with Eritreans in the UK indicate that these houses will largely be used as holiday homes, rather than providing the basis for a decision to return more permanently. Similarly, the state has also begun to auction land outside Asmara. This is a significant initiative, as one of the first actions of the state after Independence was to nationalize all land. The decision now to sell at least some land into private hands is one indication of the urgency for the state to attract overseas investment.

Controlling autonomous political linkages

While overseas nationals have been involved in formal political processes such as the Referendum and the Constitution, it has not been possible for the state to exert the same political control over these nationals as it does over those living within Eritrea's borders. There is a marked contrast between the lack of public criticism of the Government within Eritrea, and the quite open debate that takes place within communities outside Eritrea.

A recent trend of some concern to the Eritrean state has been the evolution of critical autonomous links between Eritreans in the diaspora and those living at home. These links are based on regular return visits by many in the Eritrean diaspora and by regular telephone calls. But perhaps the most significant development, and one that is particularly hard for the state to regulate, has been the gradual evolution of Internet linkages. The most important link has been established through the e-mail discussion group DEHAI. The group was founded in 1992 by five Eritreans in the USA. By 1998 membership had grown to 4,000, an average of 523 e-mails were being posted each month, and e-mails were being read over 80,000 times per month. Initially DEHAI's membership was focused on the West Coast of the USA, but within a year its members were widely spread throughout the USA, in Canada, and across Europe. While Internet access in Eritrea remains limited, it is expanding rapidly.

The increasing importance of DEHAI, and increasing access to the information from the e-mail discussion group in Eritrea, have challenged the ability of the Government of Eritrea to exert political control over its citizens at home. DEHAI's archives provide two good examples. The first occurred in March 1999, when it is agreed by all international observers, Eritrea suffered a heavy defeat by Ethiopia at the Badme border. The

Government of Eritrea has never formally acknowledged this defeat, however immediately after Badme DEHAI recorded its highest number of e-mails in any single week since its inception, focused on the thread 'Are we losing the war?'

In the second example, criticism from Eritreans overseas actually influenced Government policy. In March 1998, an Eritrean journalist, Ruth Simon, who was at the time a 'stringer' for a French press agency, was imprisoned in Asmara after writing reports critical of the Government. Her imprisonment resulted in an intense period of debate and criticism on DEHAI. A senior official at the Ministry of Justice told me during an interview in 1999 that criticism on DEHAI had been an important factor in the decision to release the journalist.

Just as was found in Smith's Mexican case study, it seems that another reason why the Government in Eritrea has been re-engaging with the diaspora is to attempt to influence – if not control – criticism from within the diaspora which has the potential to influence people in Eritrea too. This is particularly important in the context of the recent conflict, in which propaganda proved to be a crucial weapon for the Eritrean state, especially in uniting Eritreans against what was portrayed as aggression from neighbouring Ethiopia.

Channelling the energies of the diaspora

A third reason for 're-engaging' with the Eritreans in the diaspora has been to mobilize them as a vehicle to represent and further Eritrea's cause during and after the conflict. The main way this has been done is through financial collections. On a formal basis, the ERA network has been revitalized primarily in order to raise money among host country NGOs. In the UK, for example, ERA is currently planning a nation-wide campaign. Less formally, many local Eritrean community organizations have been raising money through hosting events such as concerts and poetry recitals, as well as organizing street collections. On an individual basis several respondents have organized jumble sales and car boot sales in their neighbourhoods or at local schools. Besides sending money directly to Eritrea, there have been several cases where Eritreans have also used the money they have collected to buy medicines to send back to the homeland.

Eritreans in the diaspora have been rather less successful in championing Eritrea's cause either through bringing political pressure to bear on their host governments, or through raising the profile of the conflict and its consequences among host populations and media. On 26 March 1999 a series of 'Demonstrations for Peace' took place in assorted cities in
Europe and North America. In Frankfurt the march attracted only 200 Eritreans (from a local population of some 10,000), and received no media coverage at all. Reports from other cities in Germany indicate that marches there were no more successful. It seems that Eritrean communities in the USA are generally better organized than those in Europe and recently a letter-writing campaign has been launched on an Eritrean website. This site automatically identifies the name and address of the local congressman, and provides for downloading and signature a letter demanding pressure to be placed on Ethiopia to pay compensation for the Eritreans who have been expelled.

**Diaspora-state linkages: continuity and change**

It is clear from the preceding analysis that in the short term – covering the period of the conflict – the Eritrean state has successfully mobilized the diaspora. Now that the conflict is over, however, there is an emerging sense within the diaspora of disillusionment with the Eritrean state. The impression is that the diaspora united to support the defence of its homeland, but that now that immediate goal has been achieved it has an opportunity to express its criticisms and even resentment of the Government’s conduct during the conflict. As Eritrea turns towards the next stage in its cycle of war and peace – post-conflict reconstruction once more – this is potentially very significant, as the state inevitably will need to rely on the continuing support of the diaspora.

**The exacerbation of political differences**

There have always been political differences within Eritrea and the diaspora, which have coalesced around three main bases. First, there remain some supporters of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), the force which began the struggle for independence, but was then effectively replaced by the EPLF (Connell 1987).

Second, there remains a perception among Muslim Eritreans both within and outside the country that Christians dominate the current Government to the detriment of the rights of Muslims. Third, another common perception is that Government is also dominated by ethnic groups of the Eritrean Highlands, and largely excludes others of Eritrea’s nine principal ethnic groups.

Until the beginning of the recent conflict, however, the motivations of such groups actively to oppose the PFDJ Government have been limited. It is striking to observe, for example, that even though several respondents admitted being members of opposition groups, they still paid their 2 per cent contribution to the Eritrean state. As one respondent said: ‘This may not be the right Government, but it’s still right for us to support our country. Our time will come.’ The conflict appears to have provided the catalyst needed to mobilize opposition – although this has only been the case outside Eritrea. For example, the previously splintered opposition groups have now coalesced around a single party – the Alliance of Eritrean National Forces. And their activities, for example in attending community meetings and participating in DEHAI’s discussion groups, seem to have increased.

One reason why PFDJ opponents have become more active has been their impression that many Eritreans – even those who support the Government – have been sceptical about the objectives of the conflict. This impression has largely been confirmed in interviews with respondents who have always been Government sympathizers, but who have been quick to see through the propaganda and regularly describe the conflict as a ‘waste of time’ and a ‘waste of lives’. Perhaps the most concrete example of this growing disillusionment has arisen over the additional payments being asked of the diaspora. At a community meeting in Berlin, a majority of those who attended stated openly that while they were willing to contribute to the costs of rebuilding Eritrea after Independence, they were much less willing to pay for war. The overall impression has been that many in the diaspora have paid additional contributions in order to protect their nation, but that in the aftermath of the conflict their attitudes towards the Government have become more critical.

**Confirming a perception of ‘exploitation’**

Disillusionment among its supporters is arguably a more serious consideration for the Eritrean Government than the mobilization of its opponents. Nevertheless, another way in which the Government’s activities during the conflict have increased this sense of disillusionment has been to confirm for many a notion that they are in effect being ‘exploited’ by the Government.

Despite the evolution of economic and political links with the Eritrean state, many Eritreans in the diaspora feel that the Government of Eritrea has deliberately distanced itself from them since Independence. They feel that the Government has viewed their economic contributions as purely functional, and their participation in the Referendum and Constitution merely as formalities, and they feel that they have been denied the opportunity fully to participate in the development of the new state.
These feelings can best be understood in the context of the very close co-operation between the EPLF and the diaspora during the ‘struggle’.

To a large extent these perceptions are accurate. Government representatives admit that after Independence it became a deliberate policy to encourage the autonomy of the diaspora:

When we won Independence, suddenly there didn’t seem to be any need to mobilize the diaspora. Our attitude was that they should get on with their own lives – if they wanted to contribute they should have come home.

( Spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Asmara)

A number of reasons can be suggested for the Government’s policy. The most benign is that the Government recognized that many Eritreans in the diaspora had made very significant sacrifices – of their free time and money – during the struggle for independence, and that they should now be encouraged to pursue their own lives. It is equally true, however, that the Government was concerned to avoid criticism from within the diaspora. There was also a sense of disappointment – betrayal would be too strong – that most Eritreans had chosen not to return after Independence, and as a result a determination not to involve them too greatly in determining the future of the state.

As a result of the Government’s attitude towards Eritreans in the diaspora, many of them have developed contradictory relationships with the state. On the one hand they have maintained links, primarily through economic contributions and political participation. On the other hand, and particularly when compared to their relationships with the ‘struggle’, they feel they have been cast off by the state to pursue their lives in host countries. This contradictory relationship has been confirmed for many during the conflict. Most have paid the extra contributions which have been asked of them, despite a growing scepticism about the motivations of the Government, and despite having absolutely no say in any decisions about the conflict. In the aftermath of the conflict, there is an impression that many Eritreans are reappraising their relationship with the state.

**Intensifying economic strains**

A more specific way in which the activities of the Eritrean Government have succeeded in alienating even its supporters has been through its substantial requests for money. Particularly for poorer Eritreans – the unemployed, those without secure legal status, single parents – these extra requests have resulted in enormous economic strains. Several respondents have told me that they are torn between wanting to contribute to their homeland, but at the same time having to face up to the economic realities of life in their host countries. They feel upset by the way that the Government has effectively exposed their lack of success in their host countries.

This economic strain has been exacerbated for many respondents from two directions. First, in many cases, their families in Eritrea have also asked them to send additional money. Most respondents reported having sent remittances on a fairly regular basis before the conflict, but many of them have received specific requests from their families for more money. These requests have been in response to the economic strains that the conflict has placed on the population in Eritrea, most obviously through the recruitment of economically active family members.

Besides the desire to contribute to the state and to assist family members in Eritrea, there has also been pressure on many within the diaspora to be seen to contribute. This social pressure has arisen because of the very public way in which money has been collected within the diaspora. A short anecdote from an Eritrean Community Centre in Berlin probably best illustrates this point. On the noticeboard was a list of those within the community who had made extra contributions, along with the amount they had contributed. Every person who had contributed received a certificate issued by the Eritrean embassy acknowledging his or her role in ‘protecting Eritrea’. Interviews with community members whose names did not appear on the notice made it clear that this had become a source of deep embarrassment – and even shame.

**Conclusions**

What lessons can be learned from the Eritrean case study for the mobilization of new African diasporas more generally? One suspects that many states in Africa – and elsewhere – might ‘envy’ the close and fruitful relationship that the Eritrean state has managed to maintain (until very recently at least) with the diaspora. Three factors combine to explain this. One relates to the strength of the Eritrean state. Eritrea has been governed since Independence by one party, the PFDJ, and one President, Isaias Afwerki. There have been no elections since Independence, and there is no independent media within Eritrea. Power is heavily concentrated on the PFDJ, to the extent, for example, that there is no independent media within Eritrea. Arguably popular support for the PFDJ derives from the fact that it is simply a renamed version of the EPLF which, under Isaias Afwerki, liberated Eritrea from Ethiopia.
A second factor has been a remarkable sense of unity within the Eritrean diaspora. Tensions certainly exist – along ethnic lines (there are nine main ethnic groups in Eritrea), religious lines (Eritrea's population is fairly evenly distributed between Muslims and Christians), and political lines (the EPLF itself evolved as a splinter group from the Eritrean Liberation Front [ELF], and Eritreans today continue often to be differently aligned to these two fronts). However, arguably stronger factors have united rather than divided the Eritrean diaspora, and perhaps the most important has been a shared sense of pride in having won an independent homeland.

The third factor has been the conflict. Generally successful propaganda from the Eritrean state has portrayed Eritrea within the diaspora as the victim of a more populous, more powerful and internationally supported neighbour bent on reconcolonization. The diaspora has united to defend its homeland.

These features are quite unusual in the African context, and make direct parallels with the Eritrean case difficult to draw. However, there is a wider lesson to be learned from the 'backlash' that the Eritrean state may be about to face from its diaspora. The crucial lesson relates to state responsibility. At one level, the Eritrean diaspora is critical of the state’s conduct during the conflict. For many it was not clear why Eritrea engaged in conflict rather than more vigorously pursuing diplomacy. Once conflict was entered, the state had no clearly stated aims. And, arguably, Eritrea lost the conflict. Some border areas have been ceded to Ethiopia, tens of thousands have been killed, hundreds of thousands displaced, and post-Independence reconstruction has been dramatically stalled. At another level, the Eritrean state has also been 'irresponsible' in the way that it has conducted its relationship with the diaspora. The diaspora increasingly senses that it has been exploited, and is unwilling to allow this to continue.

Arguably, states need to be more accountable to diasporas than to their home populations. As has been shown in the Eritrean case, dissent within Eritrea has proved far easier to control than dissent from overseas nationals. Compared with the reprisals that those in Eritrea might risk, there are no serious obstacles to the withdrawal of support for the state within the diaspora. Yet at the same time the withdrawal of support from the latter may have a greater impact than from the former. For African states, the corollary of mobilizing the diaspora is increased accountability and responsibility.

References

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