

Eritrean opposition parties and civic organisations

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■ Executive summary

This expert analysis explores the roots of the friction among exiled Eritrean opposition parties and civic organisations. It gives a short overview over the recent political history and social composition of Eritrea, which are reflected in the current political fragmentation of the country's diaspora. It describes the split between the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) during the armed struggle due to divided regional and ethnic loyalties, which shaped the political landscape after independence, resulting in the EPLF (renamed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, or PFDJ, in 1994) becoming the only party allowed in the country. A political crisis occurred in the aftermath of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war (1998-2000), when President Isaias Afewerki cracked down on PFDJ reformists and started to militarise Eritrean society. Consequently, new opposition parties and civic organisations emerged in the diaspora – alongside old political fronts – with the aim of replacing the autocratic regime with a democratic system. Among these new organisations are PFDJ dissidents, youth organisations and forums for dialogue. Attempts to bring the various competing parties under one political umbrella have been mostly unsuccessful and no consensus has been reached regarding a roadmap for democratic transition. The Eritrean political opposition is still affected by the historically inherited fault lines causing regional, ethnic and religious differences, which exacerbate the lack of mutual trust among current opposition activists.

Introduction

In the 1940s Eritrea was under British administration and the liberal policies of this administration facilitated the establishment of a number of political parties that were actively engaged in a debate on the country's future. Asmara boasted educated literati, private newspapers and a vibrant business sector. These cornerstones of democracy were crushed by Ethiopia's annexation of the country in 1962. The ensuing 30 years of liberation war, in which the Marxist-Leninist Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) gained the upper hand, created an environment that was not conducive to pluralism and democracy when independence was achieved in 1993.

Ethno-religious diversity

Eritrea's present boundaries are a creation of the Italians, who colonised the territory in 1890. Prior to this the central

highlands had been under the control of the Abyssinian (Ethiopian) Empire, while the Red Sea coastal region with its port city of Massawa and the eastern and western lowlands had been under the control of the Ottoman Empire (1557-1872) and later under the Egyptians (1865-85) (Miran, 2009). Most highlanders belong to the Tigrinya ethnic group and are Orthodox Christians, with a small minority of Jeberti Muslims in urban areas. One Muslim ethnic group, the Saho, lives scattered over the highlands, and the eastern and western lowlands. The eastern and western lowland areas are inhabited by predominantly Muslim ethnic groups (the Tigre, Afar, Beni Amir and Nara) and some groups who are mixed Christian and Muslim (the Bilen and Kunama).

These ethnic and religious divisions found their expression in differing political affiliations that became obvious for the first time after the defeat of the Italians by the British in the course of the Second World War. The British administered

Eritrea from 1941 to 1952, their main task being to oversee the decision-making process to determine the future of the former colony. They encouraged the formation of political parties, which were supposed to articulate the opinion of the Eritrean people in regard to their future. The highland Christians rallied behind the Unionist Party, whose aim was the unconditional unification of Eritrea with the Ethiopian Empire (Abbay, 1998: 37-38), while the Muslim segments of society opposed the Ethiopian claim and founded the Muslim League, which campaigned for the territory's independence (Venosa, 2013). The massive involvement of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and the Orthodox Church exacerbated Muslim-Christian divisions, and accordingly the British suggested the partition of the former Italian colony between Ethiopia and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (Longrigg, 1974: 174-75).

Finally, due to the strategic interests of the U.S. and other western powers who backed the Ethiopian claim to Eritrea, the United Nations decided that Eritrea was to be federated with Ethiopia in 1952, and in 1962 the emperor annexed the country without international protests. He banned the local languages Tigrinya and Arabic and imposed Amharic as the official language. During this era the Ethiopian government specifically targeted the Muslim population due to its resistance to the federation (Araya, 1990: 86-87), and parts of the Muslim intellectual elite fled the country and settled in Sudan, Egypt and Yemen. Most Christians initially welcomed unification with Ethiopia.

The Eritrean liberation war and political fissures

Eritrean resistance against the Ethiopian occupation started in the late 1950s, when Eritrean Muslims residing in Sudan founded the Eritrean Liberation Movement. Prominent Muslim opposition politicians and intellectuals exiled in Cairo founded the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which started an armed struggle in 1961. Initially, the ELF was mainly a Muslim-dominated movement, but was also affected by regionalism and ideological controversies. In 1974 Haile Selassie was overthrown and the Dergue military junta came to power in Ethiopia. The "Red Terror" campaigns that followed this regime change caused large numbers of Christian Eritreans to join the ELF. Following the alleged killings of Christian fighters by some Muslim ELF commanders, a group under the leadership of the current Eritrean president, Isaias Afewerki, split from the ELF and in 1975 formed the EPLF. In a paper entitled "We and our objectives" the group distanced itself from the Muslim part of the liberation movement and its affiliation with the Arab world (Markakis, 1978: 133).

After a period of repeated civil wars between the ELF and EPLF, which coincided with Ethiopian military offensives, the EPLF succeeded, in collaboration with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in ousting the ELF from the field in 1982.

The EPLF was characterised by a strong hierarchy based on Marxist principles of democratic centralism, but

claimed to be inclusive and to embrace and represent all segments of Eritrean society. In 1991 the Derg military junta was overthrown by the joint forces of the EPLF and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, and the Eritrean territory fell under the control of the EPLF. Subsequently, after a referendum in 1993, Eritrea obtained international recognition as an independent state. Since then the EPLF, renamed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994, has retained its organisational structure and has been the only party allowed to operate in Eritrea (Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2014).

The remnants of the ELF split into different factions, most prominently the ELF (Abdalla) under the leadership of Abdalla Idris, an ethnic Beni Amir, and the ELF-RC, led by Ahmed Nasser, an ethnic Saho. Another splinter, the ELF-CC, better known as Sagem, established its base in Tigray. Other splinter groups of the former ELF pursued an Islamic discourse and distanced themselves from the Marxist orientation of the political left wing of the ELF. In 1988 they formed the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement. It was involved in an insurgency against the Eritrean Defence Forces between 1994 and 1997. During the early years of independence, prior to the "border war" with Ethiopia (1998-2000), these groups remained the only exiled groups in opposition to the EPLF/PFDJ. They maintained offices in Sudan, but the ELF and ELF-RC also had a relatively strong political base among the diaspora, including in Europe, the U.S. and Australia. Initially they attempted to open a political dialogue with the EPLF, but the latter refused to accept them as political organisations in Eritrea and prohibited any opposition activities inside the country. Some ELF members who returned as individuals during the early 1990s were either imprisoned or killed.

The emergence of ethnically based opposition

In 1997 relations between the PFDJ and its former brothers in arms, the TPLF, which constituted the core of Ethiopia's government party (the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) deteriorated rapidly. In 1998 Eritrean forces entered Ethiopian-administered territories and an all-out war erupted (Negash & Tronvoll, 2000). At that time the Ethiopian government assisted the establishment of Eritrean ethnically based opposition movements, i.e. the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organisation (RSADO) and the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of the Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK). The Afar and Kunama are minorities in Eritrea and were among those who felt most marginalised by the PFDJ government. Both groups are still operating, with forces of up to 15,000 fighters (RSADO) and 4,000 (DMLEK), respectively. However, they have not been able to challenge the Eritrean regime militarily. Both movements strive for the emancipation of ethnic minorities in Eritrea and the protection of their indigenous rights and cultures. In 1999 ten Eritrean opposition groups, both ideologically and ethnically based, established the Alliance of Eritrean National Forces (AENF) to coordinate their political activities.

In the aftermath of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war a political crisis evolved inside Eritrea. A group of leading PFDJ cadres (the so-called “G15”), together with students and journalists, demanded political reforms and national elections (Plaut, 2002). In September 2001 President Isaias Afewerki cracked down on them and on the free press by arresting 13 top EPLF/PFDJ leaders and hundreds of students, journalists and other activists. These events led to the emergence of the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP), which was founded by PFDJ dissidents in exile. Mesfin Hagos, a top-EPLF leader and government minister who was abroad when the arrests took place, played a prominent role in the establishment of the party. The EDP’s aim is “to move away from the one party dictatorship to a constitutionally anchored multi-party democratic political system” (EDP, 2014a).

Meanwhile, the AENF transformed itself into the Eritrean National Alliance (ENA) in 2002 and renamed itself the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) in 2005. The creation of a national opposition alliance was initially an attempt to pool the efforts of the ELF splinters, the ethnically based organisations and the Islamic opposition movement. According to its website, the EDA currently consists of 13 parties and held its last congress in 2008 (EDA, 2014). These parties can be classified as follows:

- **ethnically based organisations:** the DMLEK and RSADO (both are committed to armed struggle). Another ethnically based movement, which is not a member of the EDA, is the National Democratic Front for the Liberation of Eritrean Saho, which was founded in 2009;
- **Islam-based organisations:** the Eritrean National Salvation Front (Arabic: Islah), the Eritrean Islamic Party for Justice and Development, the Eritrean People’s Congress and the Eritrean Islamic Congress;
- the ELF (which purportedly has an armed wing);
- **PFDJ dissidents** and remnants of the former ELF-RC, i.e. the Eritrean Democratic Party and the Eritrean People’s Democratic Party (formerly the Eritrean People’s Party, or EPP); and
- **others:** the Eritrean People’s Movement (EPM), the Eritrean Nahda Party and the Eritrean Federal Democratic Movement.

The EDP’s relationship with the EDA has been difficult because the latter has its base in Ethiopia, while the EDP remains highly suspicious of the motives of the Ethiopian government, which some of its members still consider an enemy. As is usual with opposition groups, the EDP has also undergone various splits and mergers during the past decade. In 2010 it merged with the EPM, the EPP, and the Eritrean Democratic Resistance – Gash Setit (EDR-GS). The EPP’s mother organisation had been the ELF-RC, and the EDR-GS is a splinter of the former ELF, while the EDP and the Eritrean People’s Democratic Movement can be categorised as EPLF/PFDJ dissidents. Thus, the formation

of the new EDP can be seen as an attempt to overcome rifts between highlanders and lowlanders, as well as Christians and Muslims (EDP, 2014b).

Unifying the opposition?

One of the main weaknesses of the Eritrean opposition in exile has been its fragmentation, lack of a consistent political agenda, frequent splits and mergers, lack of transparency, and highly personalised form of political organisation. In 2011 a new attempt was made to unite the political opposition with the emerging civil society movements. The Eritrean National Congress for Democratic Change (ENCDC, also called “Baito”) held a meeting in Awassa, Ethiopia and elected 127 representatives of diaspora Eritreans from all over the world. Many delegates did not belong to parties that were members of the EDA. However, the ENCDC’s leadership turned out to be highly ineffective and has been unable to produce any significant achievements in pursuing its goal of establishing a strong opposition umbrella based on democratic and transparent procedures.

In February 2014 Ethiopia-based and other opposition groups convened a meeting in Ethiopia in which they tried to form a new “consultative group” with the objective of revitalising the EDA. So far, however, this initiative has also not gained any significant traction in its attempts to transform and unite the Eritrean political opposition landscape into a coherent bloc that can pose an alternative – let alone a challenge – to the regime in Asmara.

The rise of civil society movements and a broader diaspora opposition

Following the transformation of Eritrea into a totalitarian state and the militarisation of society after 2001 (Hirt & Mohammad, 2013; Tronvoll & Mekonnen, 2014), the Eritrean political opposition parties failed to establish a cohesive and efficient movement to resist the PFDJ regime. This has resulted in the emergence of a variety of civil society groups in the diaspora, mainly in the U.S., Europe and Australia. Their main concern has been to document the regime’s human rights violations and to mobilise the diaspora to be engaged in anti-government activities such as demonstrations and boycotts of PFDJ and Young PFDJ¹ seminars and fund-raising parties. Another aim was to familiarise the international community with the deteriorating situation in Eritrea. In recent years they have been engaged in lobbying for the victims of human trafficking in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula and Sudan. They also advocate for the rights of Eritrean refugees in Sudan, Djibouti and Yemen, and for the rights of those who live under precarious conditions in Israel and some European countries.

The organisations that have experienced the strongest

1 An organisation for the pro-government diaspora youth.

growth are the newly formed youth movements. They too, however, remain weakened by factional and personal infighting, political differences, and organisational ineffectiveness. The two main youth movements, Eritrean Youth Solidarity for Change (EYSC) and Eritrean Youth Solidarity for National Salvation (EYSNS or Simret), remain divided on the question of relations with Ethiopia. EYSC, which is mainly based in the European and North American diaspora, is staunchly opposed to Ethiopian intervention in Eritrean affairs. On the other hand, EYSNS, which is primarily based in Ethiopia and recruits Eritrean refugees who cross the border, does not object to Ethiopia's involvement in supporting Eritrean opposition groups. However, it has not been able to operate as planned due to lack of organisational development. During its congress in the spring of 2014 the movement reorganised itself into a party and changed its name to the Eritrean Solidarity Movement for National Salvation. It also decided to establish an armed wing.

The most recent trend in diaspora political activism is the formation of forums aimed at facilitating national dialogue and anti-government campaigns in and outside Eritrea. The Eritrean Forum for National Dialogue (EFND/Medrek, founded in 2013) aims at working as a catalyst to bring together pro-democracy Eritreans, and broadcasts radio programmes in Tigrinya and Arabic. It was established by former top-level EPLF leaders who all reside in exile and who fear a possible political collapse in Eritrea. The EFND portrays itself as a continuation of the 2001 dissent process in the Eritrean government and party, and aims to remove President Isaias from power, but to retain EPLF/PFDJ control of the government. Another new ex-EPLF movement is the Eritrean Movement for Change (EMC), which was also established in 2013. It seems to follow the same agenda as the EFND, the only noticeable difference between the two movements being that EMC initiators appear to be mid-level and junior EPLF fighters, while EFND initiators are senior and more experienced EPLF cadres. The Eritrean Lowlanders' League was founded in 2014 and its main objective is to present a counterweight to the Tigrinya-dominated political opposition; it is dominated by Tigre western lowlanders. It is organising lowlanders residing in a variety of European and Middle Eastern countries and encouraging them to become organised in anticipation of a future transitional period.

One organisation is also trying to take the struggle back to Eritrea. Arbi Harnet ("Freedom Friday") started as a group of diaspora activists trying to mobilise civil disobedience inside Eritrea through robo-call campaigns, an underground newspaper and poster campaigns. Its activities have gradually increased; currently it appears to have managed to establish a cell structure inside the country that encourages the population to use peaceful means of civil disobedience and resistance against the regime.

Some of the most important tools of government opponents are opposition websites and, increasingly, social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The digital age has provided the various opposition groups and civil society movements with the opportunity to stay visible and organise campaigns. In addition, various websites and Pal talk rooms serve as forums to exchange opinions and engage in political dialogue, both of which have proved to be difficult on the ground.²

What role for the opposition in a political transition?

The Eritrean political opposition is characterised by divisions along ethnic, regional and religious fault lines. It is adversely affected by individual competition for power, and lack of transparency and a democratic organisational culture, as well as by a lack of consensus on a comprehensive political roadmap for change. There have been numerous attempts to bring the various opposition parties under one umbrella, starting with the AENF and moving to the ENA and EDA, and the current ENCDC. However, these organisations have suffered from continuous internal squabbles and splits. Moreover, the unstable cooperation of the EDP as an important component of the opposition camp has further weakened them.

The political opposition has been unable to lobby support from international organisations or sympathetic governments (with the exception of Ethiopia) and has failed to adequately inform the international community about human rights violations and the plight of Eritreans inside the country. The establishment of the ENCDC as another umbrella that incorporated the members of the EDA and some representatives of civil society organisations has suffered from the same malaise and the organisation has now become defunct. The various umbrella organisations have neither fulfilled the aspirations of their member parties nor of the population inside Eritrea. Therefore, the reputation of these organisations among Eritreans in general is poor and they have lost hope in them as agents of change. The forums for dialogue that have recently been formed by former EPLF and ELF cadres and some scholars are trying to create a hospitable environment in order to bring the opposition parties to one table. However, they too are affected by regional and ethnic fault lines and are unlikely to change the attitude of the competing opposition leaders.

The civic organisations, although also afflicted by similar frictions, show higher levels of activity in regard to informing the international community about human rights violations and human trafficking issues affecting Eritreans inside the country and those who have recently fled. Contrary to established opposition parties, their members are younger, have grown up in democratic environments in

² Among the most popular opposition websites are awate.com, asmarino.com and assena.com, which provide news and opinion articles. Popular websites in Arabic are awna1.com, adoulis.com, farajat.net and omaal.org. Eritreanow.net [also in Arabic] specialises in news from inside Eritrea.

the diaspora, and therefore show a higher level of tolerance and readiness to engage in dialogue.

To date the Eritrean political opposition has failed to hammer out its differences and establish an all-embracing and consolidated alternative to the regime in Asmara. It seems unlikely that the various opposition parties will play any significant role in instigating a transition in the country from the outside. However, with clandestine work inside the country, the civic movements may manage in due course to mobilise sufficient popular force demanding greater accountability, which – together with other factors – may influence government actors to start a reform process.

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Websites of opposition parties and civic organisations

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- Democratic Movement for the Liberation of the Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK) website: <<http://www.mesel-biherat.com/DMLEK/index.php/about-us>>
- Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP) websites: <<http://selfdemocracy.net>>, <<http://www.mahhta.net/tag/encdc/>>
- Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) website: <http://www.erit-alliance.com/erit/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=129&Itemid=65>
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