Africa Programme Meeting Summary



The Changing Nature of Eritrea's Opposition Politics

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Introduction

This document is a summary of a meeting held at Chatham House on 18 October 2016. The speakers discussed the current state of Eritrea's political opposition and the prospects for dialogue and unity.

The Eritrean political opposition has long been divided by factors such as geography, ethnicity, religion and competition. There have been several attempts to unify opposition parties under an umbrella organization. Yet, efforts to transform and establish a political platform and alternative to the government in Asmara remain fractured.

In recent years, civil society and youth groups from the diaspora have emerged, altering the nature of traditional opposition, with greater online and social media visibility, and organizing campaigns for accountability on issues such as migration. Simultaneously, international actors have increased their engagement with the government, including dialogue over processes of reform.

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Herui Tedla Bairu

There are many sources of dispute among Eritrea's political opposition, including the role of religion in the state and society, the rights and limitations of the demands of nationalities, and whether geographic decentralization should take ethnic or territorial form.

The Eritrean National Assembly, established in 2011, has been the main source of disunity among the country's opposition, due to tensions between Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) affiliated organizations and non-EDA organizations. The EDA has the support of Ethiopia, but has often proven itself as incompetent. Furthermore, the insistence of ethnic and Islamic organizations that a contract should be signed between opposition groups and the government, before the collapse of the current regime, has further paralysed the Eritrean opposition.

The speaker blamed the absence of a common strategy for furthering opposition disunity. The Eritrean opposition forces consider the dictatorial nature of President Afwerki's government to be its Achilles' heel, while the president himself regards his self-built totalitarianism as a source of strength. The speaker posited that in the long run, dictatorial governments are great sources of weakness, and have the potential to enslave entire nations.

There are no clear distinctions between political and civil organizations in the Eritrean opposition. So far, Ethiopia-based opposition groups believe they are the only legitimate political organizations, but very few organizations registered there are formed on the basis of professional or humanitarian interest. There is an incorrect notion that the democratic revolution must be conducted from neighbouring countries. The opposition must establish a headquarters outside of its neighbours in order to gain the trust and confidence of its citizens and the international community.

Boundary issues between Eritrea and Ethiopia exist due to the state of war between the nations. The boundary has not been demarcated in 17 years, and the continued state of emergency remains one of the reasons behind the influx of Eritreans to Ethiopia. The speaker called upon the international community

to help finalise this demarcation, stating that it would result in negotiation between the existing regime and the opposition.

The opposition aspires to democracy and a constitutional government in Eritrea. The speaker made three recommendations to make the current opposition forces more capable of challenging the Eritrean government. First, a grand coalition should be established between socio-economic and identity organizations, with bases where the diaspora community are located. Contradictions between political and civilian organizations should be reconciled. Second, the Eritrean National Assembly, which has legitimized divisions within the country, should strive to be inclusive. Third, there needs to be a common voice and strategy with regards to communicating with the international community.

Jason Mosely

Most, if not all, of the political parties currently in play in Eritrea are peers of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), or are led by contemporaries of the liberation era. This has put major constraints on the prospects of younger generations, as there are few opportunities to advance due to very little shift in the top ranks since Eritrea's liberation.

The belief exists that external opposition lacks legitimacy within Eritrea, and this is held particularly by those experiencing difficult conditions within the country. Further, resentment is often generated by diaspora returnees looking for economic opportunities. While the politicians of the liberation era were faced with an 'in or out' choice in terms of maintaining their political legitimacy, it does not necessarily follow that the next generation will be bound by similar constraints. Global diaspora and recent shifts of youth distribution within that diaspora suggests that the next generation of political leadership will be more transnational in its outlook.

Many young Eritrean's no longer live in the country on a permanent basis and there is an increasing exodus of Eritrean youth to its neighbouring countries. Given the demographic pattern and the widespread nature of the diaspora, young people are sometimes viewed as a valuable resource that should be drawn upon for the development of the country. Moreover, their access to external resources, such as education, has been considered a crucial differentiator for many opportunities in the public service and as an essential component of Eritrean development.

Summary of question and answer session

Question

What are the issues concerning Eritrean youth and politics?

What issues do Eritrea's un-demarcated borders with Ethiopia present?

Herui Tedla Bairu

There is no labour market or public discussion of politics in Eritrea. Typically, upon turning 18, Eritrean youth join the army, or leave the country, fleeing to Libya on a migration route that often results in death or abuse. As such, young people are not politicized to the extent that there is a youth organization ready to take over. Nevertheless, the next generation will succeed the current government regardless, and while they lack formal organization they do not lack political motivation.

There is a need for opposition groups to establish themselves outside of Ethiopia. While located in the region, particularly Ethiopia, such groups will never be able to get into the front line of politics in Eritrea.

Jason Mosley

Whether or not Eritrean youth have been politicized by previous generations, they will one day become the people in charge. They are not politically uneducated, they have political views, whether that is as part of formal organization or not. Eritrea is under strategic threat from Ethiopia and therefore cannot align itself too closely with its government, as such there is a black mark against opposition groups that do.

The two speakers were in agreement that political opposition groups based in Ethiopia are not in a position to take a role in front line politics in Eritrea, due to the perception that they would be vehicles of Ethiopian interests.

Question

Is there a youth section in the speaker's own political party, the Eritrean Congress Party?

Some Eritreans wish for political opposition groups to be in agreement, while others have a different view. What are the main issues dividing the opposition groups?

You mentioned that the political dynamics in Eritrea are changing, what has happened to make you believe this?

You say the government may be willing to negotiate if the opposition miraculously aligns. Assuming unity amongst Eritrea's opposition and recognition of this by the government, would the People's Front for Democracy and Justice accept these groups as legitimate competition?

Herui Tedla Bairu

The Eritrean Congress Party has a youth division, with its intention being to rescue Eritrean youth from the reverence of dictators and political infancy, instead aiming for the middle road. While the youth group is diplomatically related to Addis Ababa, they do not have an office there and receive no funding from the Ethiopian government.

The great debate within the political opposition since 1999 has been whether or not to trust the president. The speaker believed that the opposition was misled when they put their trust in the president during the liberation of Eritrea, and many are wary of this happening again.

The disunity comes from socio-cultural communities competing with political communities. The speaker was not in a position to make predictions regarding this question.

Mary Harper

Eritrea currently has no functioning opposition; however, changes on the ground, such as the migrant crisis, create a greater propensity for international engagement and opportunities for dialogue.

Jason Mosley

The respondent noted that he did not see tectonic shifts in Eritrea's political landscape. Because of the absence of public politics, one cannot be critical of the government and engage in functional debate. However, politics often takes place on the side lines. For example, Eritrean youth are engaging in ways that do not fit into traditional political structures, and as such, these groups that are not currently 'brand-recognized' will be the main drivers of politics in the future.

Question

If a constitution were to be implemented imminently, what would the terms of negotiation be between the opposition and the government?

Why wait until the current government collapses to engage youth?

Herui Tedla Bairu

The opposition is ready to negotiate with its counterparts in Asmara. The speaker stated that he wished for everyone to act as comrades in this process.

The speaker noted that the political opposition of Eritrea is not waiting until the government collapses to engage youth, but urged young people to take up their own fight and not wait for the green light from older generations.

Question

What are the activities of your political party towards helping refugee Eritreans?

Herui Tedla Bairu

Ethiopians, as well as the United Nations, should be praised for their work with Eritrean refugees. Ethiopia has done well to separate politics and humanitarian questions in this area. The speaker said he was not directly involved with refugees and not in a position to answer.