

ERITREA

Freedom of Expression and Ethnic Discrimination in the Educational System: Past and Future

During the period of Ethiopian rule in Eritrea (1962-91), a systematic policy of denying educational freedoms to Eritreans was followed. This ranged beyond stifling freedom of thought to a sustained attempt to dismantle the educational system and block the emergence of a university serving Eritreans. These policies were part of the wider political aim of the governments of the Emperor Haile Selassie and Colonel (later President) Mengistu Haile Mariam to suppress any manifestation of Eritrean dissent or nationalism.

The abuses against educational freedom during the last years of Mengistu's rule may appear relatively mild. There were comparatively few detentions of academics and teachers, and no executions solely for the exercise of academic or educational freedom. Asmara University, although transferred to the interior part of Ethiopia when the fighting around the city intensified, remained functional—albeit in a limited way—until only three months before the final demise of the Mengistu government in May 1991. However, during the previous three decades, successive Ethiopian governments had so systematically suppressed educational freedom in Eritrea that all signs of independent thought or action had been totally eliminated. Resting upon this destructive achievement, little additional pressure was needed to ensure that the educational system remained in quiescent conformity with the government's aims.

During the 1970s and '80s the principal opposition movement, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) developed an alternative educational system in the "liberated areas." Schools had to be held under cover for fear of aerial bombardment by the Ethiopian air force. Many schoolchildren and teachers were killed or injured in such attacks.

In May 1991, the EPLF finally defeated the Ethiopian army in Eritrea and succeeded in occupying the entire territory. It now faces the challenge of reconstructing an educational system, almost from scratch. In the field of higher education, the Provisional Government of Eritrea is attempting to fuse the shadow that remained of Asmara University with the Research and Information Center on Eritrea (RICE), a loose association of Eritrean academics throughout the world and in the EPLF-administered areas themselves. Creative approaches are required to tap the skills of Eritrean academics to create a new university that fulfills the government's stated aim of respecting academic

freedom.

The Educational System under Haile Selassie

On emerging from the period of British military administration (1941-52), Eritrea had better educational facilities than Ethiopia, with which it was federated. The educational system was under the Eritrean government, and thus independent of Addis Ababa. It used Arabic and Tigrinya (the language of the highlands, which is written in the indigenous Ge'ez script) up to grade four, and English thereafter. A Publications Committee within the Department of Education, founded in 1953, developed its own Tigrinya textbooks and imported Arabic textbooks from Egypt.

During the period of the federation (1952-62), the Emperor Haile Selassie worked to undermine all Eritrean institutions. This included the educational system. In 1957, the Ethiopian Educational Attaché in Asmara began to import Amharic textbooks and teachers from Ethiopia, under instructions from the Ministry of Education in Addis Ababa. Amharic is the language of government in Ethiopia, though it is not spoken as a first language in Eritrea. Amharic was taught as a foreign language in Eritrean schools, and the Ethiopian teachers received 30% higher pay than their Eritrean counterparts, as a "hardship allowance."

Following Haile Selassie's abrogation of the federation and annexation of Eritrea in 1962, the policy of Ethiopianization intensified. All decisions were now made in Addis Ababa. In 1963, the Publications Committee was abolished, and the Arabic and Tigrinya textbooks it had earlier commissioned or imported were destroyed by burning. Amharic became the medium of instruction throughout the educational system from first grade. The Amharic language also became a compulsory subject for admission to university.

The period from 1957 to 1967 saw teachers and students at the forefront of the Eritrean nationalist movement. The first strike occurred in 1957 at the Haile Selassie Secondary School (now the Red Sea Secondary School). This school, run from the start by the Federal Government, was the first place in which Amharic was made compulsory. In response to the strike, 300 students were detained at Adi Quala prison for one month. No sooner was this strike settled than discontent spread to the Prince Mekonnen Secondary School; frequent strikes occurred for a decade.

In 1963, the teachers went on strike. The ostensible reason was the pay differential between Eritrean and Ethiopian teachers, working under the same conditions—since all teachers were now employed by the same Ministry, in Addis Ababa, no administrative reasons could be adduced for maintaining the discrepancy. The underlying reason was, however, unhappiness at the Ethiopian government's policies, and sympathies for the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which had just started a guerrilla war. The government threatened to dismiss the teachers, and brought replacement trainee teachers to take their place, but backed down when the strike spread to the student population. The pay issue was resolved in 1966, but this was too late.

Throughout this period, many teachers were active in the Mahber Showate ("Committee of Seven") movement, a clandestine nationalist organization, structured around seven-member cells. Many teachers were arrested and detained on account of alleged involvement in this movement; emergency powers assumed by the governor to combat banditry allowed him to detain suspected political opponents for three months without trial. A larger number of teachers were transferred to the interior part of Ethiopia, and replaced by Ethiopian teachers.

In 1967, large-scale military confrontations began between the Ethiopian army and the forces of the ELF. The expression of civil dissent through trade unions and schools effectively ceased. Young nationalists directly joined the guerrillas, and—especially after the declaration of a State of Emergency in 1970—any sign of dissent in the schools was immediately identified with subversion and dealt with accordingly. The new governor, Ras Asrate Kassa, also took a more conciliatory line to teachers and students who showed no overt dissent. Teachers and students thus became more cautious, and the beginning of a long period of 24 years of enforced self-censorship began. In contrast to Addis Ababa, students in Eritrea played little part in the events of the revolution of 1974.

Education In Eritrea after the Revolution

In September and October 1974, there were hopes of a negotiated settlement to the Eritrean war. Following the assassination of General Aman Andoum, and the killing of 60 senior officials from the Emperor's government in November 1974, a committee of 38 respected Eritrean citizens was chosen by elders of the community in the hope of helping the new government settle the problem of Eritrea by negotiation. However, the army also launched a severe crackdown in Eritrea. Many youths were killed by the security services, often by strangling with piano wire. Reprisals were taken against most of the committee of 38, including several prominent educationalists:

- * Sheikh Saleh, headmaster of the private Arabic Community School, Asmara, was detained in June 1975 and executed immediately.
- * *Grazmach* Mesghenna Almedom, director of administration, Department of Education, Eritrea, was detained for five and a half months and then sent to internal exile in Addis Ababa. [Gz Mesghenna was later detained for another year in Addis Ababa, taken by force from his office at the Ministry of Education.] He was accused of organizing the recruitment of students from the schools to the ELF and EPLF—an unlikely charge as his administrative duties prevented him from having regular contact with students.

During the following three years, there was a steadily increasing level of harassment and violence against educated Eritreans. This peaked in the Red Terror of 1977-78. As elsewhere in Ethiopia, teachers and students were a particular target. Thousands were detained and many were executed. Among the teachers and educationalists executed were:

- * Tesfameskel Sebhat-Leab, Asmara;
- * Stefanos Teklai, Asmara;
- * Tzerai Bokratsion, Asmara;
- * Hassen Nur Hussein, Deputy Personnel Administrator, Asmara;
- * Mengistu Sebhatu, Adi Qeyih.

In 1979, twelve teachers were detained on suspicion of collaborating with the EPLF, and some of them were subsequently executed. Among the killed was the leader of the Teachers' Association. According to the EPLF and other sources, the arrests were made on information supplied to the security forces by Hassen Obeid, a half-Yemeni former schoolteacher and reformed alcoholic, who joined the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) and the National Tourist Organization, and also worked as a security informer. Hassen was also a part-time teacher of English at Asmara University. Following a trial *in absentia* by the EPLF, Hassen was assassinated by an EPLF squad for his alleged crimes on January 10, 1991.

At the outbreak of the revolution in 1974, there had been 3,000 Eritrean teachers in Eritrean schools. By the end of the decade, this number had fallen to about 1,200. As well as those killed or forced from the profession, the policy of transferring Eritreans to Ethiopia and vice versa continued. More than 2,000 non-Eritrean teachers were teaching in Eritrea by 1980.

The apparently liberal reforms of the revolutionary government in some areas had little impact on education in Eritrea. The literacy campaign, which used nine languages, including Tigrinya, might appear to have been intended to reverse the dominance of Amharic. However, only adults benefited from the campaign, which was largely confined to the main towns. Amharic remained compulsory in schools. (Incidentally, the literacy campaign neither recognized nor taught literacy in Arabic, one of the major languages used in Eritrea, and indeed in parts of Ethiopia, especially in centers of Moslem learning.)

In the 1970s, private non-mission schools were nationalized throughout Ethiopia. Mission schools remained unaffected—except in Eritrea, where these schools were also nationalized, in 1982. Standards plummeted, as the state did not have the resources to maintain the schools. Class sizes doubled. By 1988, of 832 students in the twelfth grade of the Barka School (formerly the Comboni School), only three reached the required standard to progress to university.

Thus, by the 1980s, the Eritrean educational system was totally under the heel of an Ethiopian administration committed to the forcible Ethiopianization of Eritrea. Relatively little pressure was needed to maintain this state of affairs; those who opposed it fled to the hills to join the EPLF.

Surveillance was constant in the educational system. All teachers were obliged to attend weekly classes in Marxism-Leninism, in which their adherence to the official philosophy could be scrutinized and assessed. Official publications were read and funds were raised for political or military activities. Teachers who wanted promotion, or who wanted civil rights such as easy access to travel permits, were usually obliged to join the WPE, the single state party.

Some instances of detention occurred throughout the 1980s. One case of detention was a teacher and examinations officer named Kubrom Tesfa Selassie. Kubrom was arrested in March 1988, when he was discovered by security officers listening to an EPLF radio broadcast. Though never formally charged, he was told that he had been sentenced to three years' imprisonment for this offense. In March 1991, exactly three years later, he was "pardoned" and released.

EPLF Educational Policy

The EPLF began its own educational programs in the mid 1970s, and expanded them during the 1980s. Inside Eritrea, the physical conditions were extremely difficult. Along with all other aspects of life, the schools had to be concealed from the danger of air attack. Schools were thus held underground or beneath camouflage, and evacuations to air raid shelters were frequent. Basic equipment was also in very short supply, and there was a chronic problem of lack of qualified teachers.

Following on from the policies of the ELF and the British military administration, Tigrinya and Arabic are the two national languages of Eritrea used by the EPLF. These two languages are taught compulsorily. For the most part, however, primary education is in the native language of the community. To date, primary curricula have also been developed in Tigre (Ge'ez script), and Kunama, Saho and Afar (Latin script). Bilen and Nara curricula are under development, only the Hedareb language is not planned to be used as a language of instruction, on the grounds that Hedareb speakers prefer tuition in Tigre or Arabic.

Higher Education in Eritrea under Haile Selassie

The University of Asmara exists. However, this is not a tribute to the generosity or enlightenment of the Ethiopian government (although Haile Selassie was personally supportive). The university was created and maintained in the face of determined opposition from sections of the Ethiopian government, and during the rule of Mengistu Haile Mariam was turned into another instrument to subvert Eritrean nationalist claims.

Asmara University originated from the efforts of the Comboni Sisters in Asmara. During the 1950s, the sisters were running the Santa Familia Secondary School and planned to upgrade it to university status. In 1958, following consultations with the University of Bologna, Italy, they founded the Santa Familia University on a small site adjacent to their school. Italian was the medium of instruction. The university was recognized by the then-government of Eritrea. The university was small and poorly-equipped but the Comboni Sisters—notably two dynamic members of the order, Sister Maria-Nora and Sister Fosca—were determined to build a substantial institution. In 1960, the Superior Council of the Institute of Italian Universities recognized the university.

Following the abrogation of the Federation in 1962, the Comboni Sisters approached the Ministry of Education in Addis Ababa in an attempt to obtain recognition from the Ethiopian government. The then Vice-Minister of Education, Dr. Mengesha Gebrehiwot, who was a Roman Catholic, supported them.¹ Dr. Mengesha proposed that the name be changed to Asmara University, and that Haile Selassie be approached with the request that he be Chancellor. The Sisters agreed to both proposals. Haile Selassie accepted the Chancellorship, but when he was asked to visit Asmara and confer degrees on the graduating students, the Ministry of Education objected. The Minister, Akelework Habte Wold, did not want the university or its degrees to be recognized. He sent a clandestine mission to the university and reported that standards were inadequate. The mission had neither examined students nor interviewed staff. Meeting with the Emperor and officials from the university, Akelework insisted that a second assessment mission be sent before any degrees be conferred by the Emperor. Haile Selassie finally overruled his minister, and visited Asmara to award the degrees.

Akelework still sent his delegation, which recommended that the university be downgraded to a "junior college". After a struggle, in which the university defended its standards by reference to Italian universities, this recommendation was also abandoned.

The university then faced a struggle to expand from its small premises. A large plot of land had been acquired and a four-story building, built around a courtyard, had been designed. The Sisters had obtained the finance. However, it emerged that a conspiracy existed, including the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and members of the Italian community in Asmara², to prevent the building going ahead. The Italian contractor had undertaken to build the full four stories, but had stopped after completing only one, claiming his contract was now fulfilled. Despite intimidation, the university lawyer, *Kenazmach* Gila Mikael Bahta, took the case to court and—after having his initial case rejected by a corrupt judge—won on appeal. The University was awarded Eth\$900,000 for breach of contract, plus expenses, and the building was completed as planned.

However, at the point of victory, internal politics in the Comboni order caused the election of a new Mother-General, a little-educated Sister who was averse to confrontation. She refused to accept the damages, save the small sum of Eth\$30,000, and removed Sister Maria-Nora (sent back to Italy and confined to her home) and Sister Fosca (sent

¹ Dr. Mengesha was imprisoned by the Dergue in 1985 on suspicion of anti-government activities. He was tortured and had his leg amputated, after which he "disappeared" from prison.

² Some members of the Italian community in Asmara have historically been hostile to Eritreans obtaining an education, fearing that Italians would lose their privileged position in the city.

to Bahrain). Thereafter, the Comboni Sisters proved content to pursue far more modest educational aims. The teaching staff was reduced and the curriculum restricted. An ambitious plan for the construction of a nine-story tower was cancelled. Sisters Maria-Nora and Fosca had already obtained the money and building materials, and arranged for students and lecturers from the civil engineering faculty to build the tower as part of their practical education. A crane was erected—which still stands two decades later. The new leadership sold the building materials and abandoned the project. Following the revolution, the Order was happy to hand the university over to the government.

Perhaps the most successful measure by the Haile Selassie government to deny higher education to Eritreans was the introduction of a quota system for access to university. The system was not exactly a quota, but a calibration of examination scores according to province of origin. Students from provinces with poor educational endowment—such as Gemo Gofa and Sidamo—had to achieve lower marks to gain entrance to university compared to those with better schools—such as Eritrea. What made this otherwise-acceptable scheme into a form of discrimination was that the threshold score for Eritrea was set higher than for other Ethiopian provinces, such as Shewa, which were given better educational resources.

Academic Freedom under the Dergue

During the period of the Dergue (1974-91) there were a number of egregious abuses against academic freedom at Asmara University. An early incident was the killing of Dr. Petros Habtemikael, an economist, in 1975. Dr. Petros taught extension courses in the evening, and some of his students were Ethiopian military officers, who objected to his use of Eritrean rather than Ethiopian examples in his coursework, and to the low grades they were given. It is believed that the officers caused Dr. Petros to be detained and executed.

For the most part, the Dergue's policy was to undermine the autonomy of Asmara University and make it an instrument of its rule. After coming under government control in 1977, Asmara University was placed directly under the supervision of the Commission for Higher Education—unlike Addis Ababa University, which retained a degree of autonomy. Amharic became the language of administration. The university was starved of resources, which were preferentially targeted to Addis Ababa University. For example, a grant from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for the Faculty of Science was held up while the Commission for Higher Education tried, ultimately unsuccessfully, to have it diverted to Addis Ababa. In 1982, after the question of the nine-story building for the university had been revived, the government directed that the university should instead take over existing secondary school premises in Asmara. Mission schools were then confiscated. This was an example of ostensibly assisting the university, but denying Eritrean students the opportunity to obtain the necessary education to attend it. (In the event, most of the confiscated schools were merely nationalized and only two became university premises.)

During the 1980s, a consistent policy was followed of preferring non-Eritrean teachers and students. By 1990, 62% of the staff were non-Eritreans, and 91% of the students were from the interior part of Ethiopia. The university was known as "Asmara University for the Northern Regions of Ethiopia."

Asmara University was in effect controlled, not by the Senate and the academic staff, but by the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) and the security. All the restrictions present in Addis Ababa University were amplified in Asmara. The WPE required that a member be present at all discussions, whether they be academic or staff-related; it also demanded a transcript of all proceedings. The Students' Union was part of the Revolutionary Ethiopian Youth Association, and thus a branch of the government/party apparatus. Cadres sat in on all classes and reported on the ideological correctness of both staff and students. An absurd extreme was reported in which a biology student was criticized by a cadre for giving a presentation to her classmates on the subject of photosynthesis in plants, in which she failed to demonstrate the relevance of the dialectical materialist approach to the subject.

This led to a claustrophobic atmosphere that effectively precluded all free debate, and forced all students

and staff to exercise strict self-censorship. It also allowed the university President and other influential people to exercise blatant favoritism and nepotism in the award of scholarships and promotions.

Open dissent was almost unknown at the university. A rare example occurred in 1985, when the staff demanded extra payment for teaching extension classes in the evening—in line with their colleagues in Addis Ababa. Two staff members were briefly detained, and many others given a formal warning.

It was necessary to read Asmara University publications, or listen to lectures and debates with extreme care and attention to hidden meanings and inferences to gather the slightest evidence for any independent thinking. An illustrative case comes from a Tigrinya grammar prepared and circulated by Amanuel Sahle of the Department of Languages, in which the grammatical examples hint at the author's sympathies. Discussing collective nouns, Sahle juxtaposes the two sentences: "the army retreated without fighting" and "the people are wise." Treating nouns derived from verbs, he concludes a list of examples with "liar" and "Ethiopian".

The culmination of the assault on the university occurred in July 1990, when the decision was announced to transfer it to the internal part of Ethiopia. Ostensibly because of the intensification of the war following EPLF advances, there are indications that the decision to relocate the university was in fact taken some months earlier. The Minister of Education and other officials from Addis Ababa flew to Asmara to discuss the proposed move with the staff. The Eritrean staff opposed the move almost unanimously, the Ethiopian staff remained silent. Only two voices were raised in support of the proposal. Nevertheless, the university was moved. All the textbooks, laboratory equipment, computers and office equipment were moved, apart from some items hidden by Eritrean staff members. Social sciences, agriculture and languages were moved to a former peasant training center at Agarfa, in Bale in the far south of Ethiopia. Conditions there, for both living and teaching, were very poor. The other faculties were moved to Addis Ababa, where facilities were shared with Addis Ababa University. Teaching took place in the afternoon and evening. The staff of Addis Ababa University resented the additional burden on their resources and granted little cooperation. This state of affairs lasted for just over one semester, after which the students were required for military service, and the university was closed.

RICE, Higher Education and the EPLF

Unable to practice their profession at home, most Eritrean academics opted for exile. While many worked and published purely as individuals, some contributed their skills to the Research and Information Center on Eritrea (RICE).

RICE was set up in Rome in 1979 and quickly grew to have chapters in five European countries, plus Canada and the USA. Though formally independent, it was closely linked with the aims of the EPLF. It published the journal *Eritrea Information* as well as research bulletins, and held conferences and seminars.

RICE operated as a loose federation of self-governing chapters, held together by a common commitment to the cause of the EPLF. In 1988, the headquarters of RICE, including its principal documentation center, was transferred to the EPLF-held areas of Eritrea. However, the European and American chapters of RICE continued to function in their accustomed heterogenous style. At its re-founding congress, RICE included an article on academic freedom in its constitution.

Following the defeat of the Ethiopian army in May 1991, the Provisional Government of Eritrea, run by the EPLF, for the first time was confronted with the need for a systematic policy on higher education. The results have been

generally encouraging, though some worries persist. Asmara University is to be reestablished as an Eritrean institution. It is to be given a charter which will make it independent and self-governing. Its major problem is lack of resources—not all the resources transferred to Ethiopia in 1990 have been recovered, and even these would be grossly incommensurate with the needs.

The shadow that remained of Asmara University has been reorganized under a new President, Andeberhan Wolde Giorgis. Staff have been brought from the EPLF and from abroad, including Sudan. A social and political distance exists between staff who remained in Asmara during the Dergue's rule and those who were "in the field" or abroad, and this has led to some instances of mutual distrust. While there is no overt manipulation of appointments, still less an attack on Eritrean academics, it is likely that the new academic order will see rewards going to those who served the EPLF loyally during "the struggle," and that academics who are overtly critical of the EPLF's record or its policies will find themselves marginalized.

Asmara University, as the preeminent institution of higher education in Eritrea, has shown a tendency for centralization. RICE has been brought under the Institute for Research and Development Studies, an autonomous institute within the university. No facility has been made for any form of association with the institute, so that the RICE chapters abroad have been disbanded. Whether from over-zealous administrative tidiness or from a desire to establish centralized control over higher education, this move would appear to threaten one of the most important Eritrean academic institutions. Many Eritrean academics will be unable or unwilling to abandon their careers abroad to return home permanently, and this move denies them the opportunity for a looser association with academic pursuits at home. As well as denying Eritrea the services of many of its academics, this move also threatens the academic freedom of the Eritrean diaspora. The internationalism of Eritrean studies is not redundant.³

Africa Watch is a non-governmental organization created in May 1988 to monitor human rights practices in Africa and to promote respect for internationally recognized standards. Its Chair is William Carmichael. Its Vice-Chair is Alice Brown. Janet Fleischman and Karen Sorenson are Research Associates; Bronwen Manby is a Schell Fellow; Ben Penglase, Urmi Shah, and Anthony Levintow are Associates.

Africa Watch is a division of Human Rights Watch, which also includes Americas Watch, Asia Watch, Helsinki Watch, Middle East Watch and the Fund for Free Expression. The Chair of Human Rights Watch is Robert L. Bernstein and the Vice-Chair is Adrian W. DeWind. Aryeh Neier is Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, the Deputy Director is Kenneth Roth; Holly J. Burkhalter is Washington Director, Gara LaMarche is Associate Director, and Susan Osnos is the Press Director.

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³ This newsletter is based upon interviews with *Xenazmach* Gila Mikael Bahta, *Graznach* Mesghenna Ahmedom, Andeberhan Wolde Giorgis, Andoum Eyyob, Paul Highfield, Kidane Yosef, and others.