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Human Resource Development and the State:
Dynamics of the Militarisation of Education in Eritrea

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Abstract

This contribution discusses the dynamics behind the militarisation of the education system in Eritrea. Based on interview data collected between 1998 and 2006 it interrogates a state-building project underpinned by a developmental philosophy combined with mobilisation politics. Taking the example of higher education it is shown how the state project as applied to education policies and human resource development at first succeeded in terms of reinforcing personal nationalism, while at the same time opening up spaces for the fulfilment of personal aspirations. Of late, however, mobilisation politics have become a tool of oppression exercised through different forms of military control. These developments, if they are to continue, will not only jeopardise the state's developmental agenda but may lead to the Eritrean polity in its present form becoming unviable.

A. Introduction

Education policy commonly has objectives beyond the area of education, comprising a combination of political, social, economic and pedagogic concerns.[1] Within post-revolution states such as Eritrea, education is regarded as an important instrument to promote social change. The rationale behind education as a tool for societal transformation is twofold: the formation of conscious citizens motivated by collective goals, coupled with the transmission of skills necessary to overcome underdevelopment and achieve self-sustaining growth.[2]

One focus of formal education systems in post-revolution settings thus centres on creating a more just social order.[3] At the same time, and in line with developments in other developing and transitional countries, education policy centres on the fulfil-

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1   Green: *Education* (1997); Psacharopoulos: *Why Educational Policies Can Fail* (1993).
2   Arnove: *Education as Contested Terrain* (1994); Müller: 'Now I am Free' (2004), pp. 215–229; Pham Minh Hac: *Vietnam's Education* (1998).
3   Collins: Education in Nicaragua (1987), pp. 47–53; Müller: *The Making of Elite Women* (2005).

ment of human resource needs, often stipulated by a national development plan.[4] The prototypical example for the success of a strategy to achieve the latter is Singapore, regarded as a model by the Eritrean leadership.[5] Other examples include South Korea and Taiwan, and on the African continent with varying degrees of success Mauritius, Botswana, Tanzania and Uganda among others.[6] Most of the latter can, like Eritrea, be to varying degrees described as developmental states.[7] Castells points out the often-overlooked similarities between revolutionary states and developmental states: in both cases, the state "substitutes itself for society in the definition of societal goals."[8] He then argues that in cases where the societal project remains confined to a transformation of the economic order, a developmental state is the outcome; whereas if a fundamental transformation of the social order is also envisaged, one can speak of a revolutionary state.

This distinction is here regarded as rather artificial as the legitimacy of any developmental state arises from the commitment of its population to the transformation of the social, political or economic order, a societal project that is not short of being revolutionary. Thus, for a developmental state not simply to be a dictatorship of development requires a political leadership quite comparable to the leadership of revolutionary mass movements, able to provide a widely-accepted ideological framework for state policies that might otherwise demand unpalatable sacrifices. And while, as Hall rightly points out, consent to the project of the state or the governing elite is not maintained only through ideology, dominant ideas become a 'material force' and play an important part in carrying that project into the future.[9]

In the context of this paper, a developmental state is thus defined as having two components: one ideological and one structural. At the structural level, it "establish-

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[4]   Buchert (ed.): *Education Reform* (1998).

[5]   Castells: Four Asian Tigers (1992); Müller: Out of Ethiopia's Shadow (1998), p. 19.

[6]   Asayehgn: *The Role of Women in Tanzania* (1979); Hoogvelt: *Globalization and the Postcolonial World* (1997); Kwesiga: *Women's Access to Higher Education* (2002); Mkandawire: Thinking about Developmental States in Africa (2011), pp. 289–313.

[7]   Mbabazi/Taylor: *The Potentiality of 'Developmental States'* (2005); Mkandawire: Thinking about Developmental States in Africa (2011), pp. 289–313. While it has been argued that Eritrea lacked the resources to function in real terms as a developmental state, it had the aspirations to do so. And indeed, Eritrea did achieve a considerable amount of success in terms of 'modernizing development'. For further discussion see Bernal: Eritrea Goes Global (2004), pp. 3–25; Fengler: *Politische Reformhemmnisse* (2001); Luckham: Radical Soldiers (2002), pp. 238–269.

[8]   Castells: Four Asian Tigers (1992), p. 57.

[9]   Hall: The Problem of Ideology (1996), pp. 25–46. For different conceptualizations of the developmental state, ranging from entities primarily concerned with national economic enhancement to facilitators of state-market synergies see for example Pempel: The Development Regime (1999), pp. 137–181; Wade: *Governing the Market* (1990).

es as its principle of legitimacy its ability to promote and sustain development".[10] At the ideological level, the governing elite "must be able to establish an 'ideological hegemony', so that its developmental project becomes, in a Gramscian sense a 'hegemonic' project to which key actors in the nation adhere *voluntarily*".[11]

The focus here is on the ideological component of the Eritrean developmental project. When looking at post-independence Eritrea, one finds a state whose legitimacy is firmly based on the past and on a ruling elite. The latter, in line with liberation movements in other parts of the globe, employs selective narratives and invents new sets of traditions in order to establish not only an exclusive post-independence legitimacy but equally "the sole authority of one particular agency of social forces"[12]. In this case the authority is the former liberation movement, the EPLF, Eritrean People's Liberation Front (**ህዝባዊ ፡ ግንባር ፡ ሓርነት ፡ ኤርትራ**, *Ḥəzbawi Gənbar Ḥarənnät Erətra /* لجبهة الشعبية لتحرير إريتريا, *al-Ǧabha aš-Šaʿbiya li-taḥrīr Irītriyā*), renamed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, PFDJ (**ህዝባዊ ግንባር ንደሞክራስን ፍትሕን**, *Ḥəzbawi Gənbar nə-Dämokrasən Fətḥən /* الجبهة الشعبية للديمقراطية والعدالة, *al-Ǧabha aš-Šaʿbīya li-l-Dīmuqrāṭīya wa-l-ʿAdāla*).

In addition, strong notions of inclusion or exclusion have been developed as key factors in shaping national as well as personal identities. What has been called "personal nationalism" understood as an active process of affirmation of one's national identity, is of prime importance in a nationalist revolutionary culture like Eritrea's.[13]

This affirmation is often based on militaristic rituals, as more generally within the hegemonic Eritrean narrative the nation and the state appear as one. The material form of this oneness is the mass-conscripted national army. It is here where the synthesis between the citizen and the state is experienced concretely and any distinction between state and civil society disappears. Most visible in this agenda is the mobilization of youth within the nationwide national service campaign that was introduced in 1995. The campaign then consisted of six months military training plus one-year civilian reconstruction activities, and enjoyed great popularity at the time. And while the ideological underpinnings stressed predominately the service aspects, the military element always remained a crucial part.[14]

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[10]   Castells: Four Asian Tigers (1992), p. 57.

[11]   Mkandawire: Thinking about Developmental States in Africa (2011), p. 290; my emphasis.

[12]   Melber: *Limits to Liberation in Southern Africa* (2003), pp. xiv–xv. See also Müller: State Making in the Horn of Africa (2006), pp. 503–530.

[13]   McCrone: *The Sociology of Nationalism* (1998), p. 40.

[14]   According to Minister of Defense General Səbḥat Efrem speaking in various public appearances, National Service "means nurturing youths to be active and morally sound citizens". The National Service Proclamation came into force in 1994 and stipulates that all citizens and permanent residents of the State of Eritrea between the age of 18 and 40 are required to perform six months of military training and one year in other (reconstruction) activities. Usually, youth are required to go to

Therefore, those who define themselves outside the military collective are ultimately regarded as betraying the nation.[15] It should not be forgotten, as Buck-Morss argues, that the nation state and revolutionary classes can trace their origin to the same historical event: the French revolution, which invented on the one hand the utopian discourse of equality and of the 'people' as sovereign, but also produced arguably the two most catastrophic forms of modern political life: revolutionary terror and mass-conscripted, nationalist war.[16] In a country like Eritrea, where 54 % of the population is below 20 years of age,[17] those contradictions are bound to come into particularly sharp focus. The majority of the current young generation has no experience of the armed struggle that lies at the foundation of the country's narrative. But they grew up in what can be described as 'a moral and political zone of indistinction' where the political is thoroughly embedded into everyday life practices.[18] At the same time, Eritrea has since 1991 moved from being closed off in a remote corner in the Horn of Africa to being exposed to the wider world and the opportunities this global environment has to offer. This global exposure, together with the disappearance of the (liberation) war that formed part of the thread which held the revolutionary project together, was always bound to weaken the ideological hegemony of the political leadership, and questions about the personal versus the communal are bound to be formulated in a new light.[19]

How, then, does the young generation relate to the hegemonic narrative of the ruling elite, and how is the balancing act of asserting personal and national identities played out in practice among them? To discuss those issues in more detail, the focus here is on young people in higher education, those who are groomed to one day become the new elite and thus carry the torch of the Eritrean revolution into the future. This is also a crucial stage in the process of social reproduction in terms of the imposition of the dominant culture as legitimate. At the same time, whether envisaged as such or not, education opens up avenues for new forms of agency on an

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Sawwa, the training camp, after they have sat for the matriculation exam or quit schooling. The first batch of national service recruits in July 1994 comprised 10,000 youth mainly from Asmära; accounts of their service were widely broadcast on radio and TV and made many young people register for the second batch. Eventually, 30,000 youth had registered, while Sawwa could only accommodate a maximum number of 20,000 at any one time. See also Müller: *The Making of Elite Women* (2005).

[15] Bariagaber: Eritrea: Challenges and Crises of a New State. (2006); Bundegaard: *The Battalion State* (2004).

[16] Buck-Morss: *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (2000). See also Arendt: *On Revolution* (1963).

[17] International Institute for Strategic Studies: *The Military Balance 2010* (2010).

[18] Agamben: *Homo Sacer* (1998); Müller: Bare Life and the Developmental State (2008), pp. 1–21.

[19] Bernal: Diaspora, Cyberspace and Political Imagination (2006), pp. 161–179; Müller: *The Making of Elite Women* (2005).

individual level and thus acts as what Bourdieu calls a 'strategy-generating institution' for personal liberation.[20]

The following draws on data collected between 1998 and 2006 among students at Asmara University and the College at May-Näfḥi.[21] Of particular concern is how the state project as applied to education policies and human resource development initially succeeded at both reinforcing personal nationalism and opening up spaces for personal liberation, but of late has become a tool of oppression exercised through military control. These dynamics, if they are to continue, will not only jeopardize the state's developmental agenda but may lead to the Eritrean polity in its present form becoming unviable.

B. Education and Human Resource Development until 2001

Similar to other settings where education plays a particularly important role in achieving wider objectives of the state, two factors characterized human resource development policies in Eritrea in the first decade after independence: a high degree of centralized educational planning accompanied by an integrated approach towards economic development and human capital formation, and considerable emphasis on the social and moral dimension of education.

The education system that emerged drew heavily on the nationalist Revolution School set up in the 1970s by the EPLF in the early liberated areas of the country. At the same time one could find many features that resembled the administration of education under the previous Ethiopian regime. This is not the place to discuss in any detail the exact workings and structures of that system, as the focus here is mainly on tertiary higher education.[22]

Concerning the latter, the role of higher education within the national human resource development strategy broadly followed the pattern advocated by Thompson and Fogel for educational development in developing countries, in which higher education is strongly embedded in the national community as a whole instead of being an elitist institution removed from the realities of the majority of the population.[23] The role of the university herein is that of a "developmental university", an

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[20]   Bourdieu/Passeron: *Reproduction in Education* (1977).

[21]   The author has visited Eritrea on a regular basis since 1996. The academic year 2000–2001 she spent at the University of Asmära and during that time conducted in-depths interviews and a wider survey. She has returned for shorter research visits from November 2001 to January 2002, in December 2003, in May 2004 and in October/November 2006.

[22]   But see Müller: Education for Social Change (2006), pp. 353–373, Müller: State Making in the Horn of Africa (2006), pp. 503–530.

[23]   Thompson/Fogel: *Higher Education and Social Change* (1976).

institution first and foremost concerned with the "'solution' of the concrete problems of societal development".[24] Such a university sets out to "ensure that the development plans of the university are integrated with or linked to national development plans".[25] This is exactly how Dr. Wäldä-Ab Isak, former president of the University of Asmara (UoA), used to cite the mission of the university: "We [the university] should play a leading role in the process of nation-building and social transformation".[26]

Within the centralized human resource development planning in Eritrea, this had certain implications for the workings of the university. After having passed the matriculation exam, subjects of study were allocated, and students' personal priorities were given only cursory concern in this process. Dr. Wäldä-Ab Isak, together with all the ministries, drew up a list in which areas human resources were most urgently needed. Accordingly, it was then decided how many students should be admitted to which departments.[27] For postgraduate studies the university drew up staff development plans and facilitated sending students abroad for education at Master's or PhD level. In that way it was expected that the country's human resources would be used in the most efficient way. In addition, summer work programmes and compulsory university service before graduation, both intended to foster social solidarity, were part of the process of higher education.

The success of such a strategy depended largely on a shared vision between the goals of the official policy side, embodied by the government and the university administration on the one hand, and the people, the individual students, on the other. Without such a shared vision the problem of 'brain drain' plaguing many African countries whose university graduates leave for the industrialized world where salaries are considerably higher, is difficult to avoid.

The Eritrean government claims as one of its major assets that "the culture of governance in Eritrea is the close relationship between the people and the leadership",[28] implying a popular propensity to follow government policy without resistance. And indeed, when looking in concrete at the lives of university students in 2001, a majority appeared to be willing to use their educational qualifications not only for individual fulfilment but at least partly to comply with the government's plan for them. The following will discuss possible contradictions that might emerge

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24   Coleman: The Idea of the Developmental University (1994), p. 334.
25   Coleman: The Idea of the Developmental University (1994), p. 343.
26   Dr Wäldä-Ab Isak, interview 13 June 2001 in Asmära.
27   At the time the UoA offered Bachelor degrees in the following areas: Agriculture and Aquatic Sciences, Arts and Social Sciences, Business and Economics, Science, Health Science, and Education.
28   MoE: *Education for All* (1999).

in the lives of individuals using narrative data collected in multiple in-depth interviews among a group of 29 women students during the academic year 2000–2001[29].

I. Human Resource Development versus Personal Aspirations

Sitting in the tea-room of the University of Asmara in 2000 one topic surfaced regularly in students' conversations: how to avoid becoming a teacher. Often, when students were denied their first choice of subject, they were put into the *Secondary School Teachers* (SST) department. Equally, many students who studied applied sciences were sent for teaching. The latter was due to the university requiring that most degree programmes include four years of academic study and one subsequent year of national service where students were allocated to a relevant Ministry and worked for a symbolic salary. Only after students had completed this service year did they graduate.

Students resisted in all sorts of ways becoming teachers. That is for example why Sultan chose plant science. "When I joined the university, I really wanted to study medicine, but in freshman my marks were low", she explained. She could have gone for biology and continued in the medical field from there, "but at the college of science they will make you to become a teacher". She hated the idea of teaching, so she chose plant science (a subject for which her *Grade Point Average* (GPA) was enough) "and also some medicine is made of plants, so there is some connection".[30] In general, when students knew their freshman GPA was too low to join their department of choice, they compromised their aspirations in order to resist becoming teachers.[31]

This overregulation of educational opportunities not only implied a lack of personal choices, but equally a lack of decision-making power over one's future, as Ḥanna explained:

> We don't have private life ... whenever you decided something there are a lot of things you have to consider ... even if I get a scholarship [...] my going out is not sure [...] now I can decide minor things, but for the future ... our future is trapped, limited ... you have to get permission from the government to do whatever you want [...] I mean, sometimes you get scholarship from

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[29]   The data presented here was collected as part of a wider research project on Eritrean elite women published in Müller: *The Making of Elite Women* (2005). All names were changed for reasons of confidentiality.

[30]   Sulṭān, Interview 11 October 2000 in Asmära.

[31]   The latter was deeply unpopular for a combination of reasons, the most important being low salaries and continued direct interference by the government into their future professional lives. As we shall see in more detail later, a majority of university graduates at the time aspired to work in the private sector.

abroad and the government does not send you there, it is frustrating, but it does not discourage me, I have to try and see what happens ... I'm hoping things will get better.[32]

This is the other side of a policy that centred strictly on perceived human resource needs of the country. The university in general did not encourage people to get their own scholarships, but wanted them to be sent through university channels. In cases where students secured scholarships independently, some were allowed to leave, others not, while no clear rules existed that determined those decisions.

The attitude expressed by Ḥanna, in which certain drawbacks in one's individual life – such as potentially being denied to take up a scholarship – were accepted as part of what being Eritrean means, an attitude which has been described as an outcome of the successful endeavour in forging an Eritrean nation,[33] surfaced in different ways in the lives of different people.

The story of Märəd, who grew up in the Revolution School and was thus socialized within its culture, demonstrates particularly well the trade-offs potentially faced by young Eritreans when the University of Asmara (UoA) still existed, and how individuals grew to accept them.

II. Märəd – Child of the Revolution

Märəd was one year old when her parents decided to join the liberation struggle. Her mother took her to the liberated areas, where she grew up first in a children's home and later in the Revolution School. She finished schooling after grade seven and was assigned to teach children in grades one and two. It was only after liberation that Märəd could continue her education while still working as a teacher. She completed secondary schooling successfully in 1995, determined to join the university. After a year of pleading her release from teaching duties with the Ministry of Education – accepting the legitimacy of the Ministry's claim on her service – she was finally allowed to join the UoA.

That in itself did not end all the frustrations for Märəd, but it did change her attitude on how to deal with them:

> When I completed my freshman studies I wished to join geology, and I had the grade to join, but I was told I must join this educational faculty [*Mehret studied to become a biology teacher*], I was not happy [...] at that time, the students in the faculty of education had a meeting with Dr Wäldä-Ab, there were many who didn't like this faculty and they were asking him questions [...] in one of his speeches he said "you know you are intending to study something and you are finding obstacles, at this time what we are doing is we are preparing for the needs of the country, not for the needs of you, so if you are [...] brilliant enough and if you are strong, you don't become successful through finding all your needs but it's how do you become successful even if

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32   Ḥanna, Interview 06 November 2000 in Asmära.
33   Ottaway: *Africa's New Leaders* (1999); Schamanek: *FrauenEmanzipation* (1999).

there are obstacles, that's what makes you strong people" [...] and that influenced me, I can say [...] most of the time I was rigid, I am going to do this, this and this, if not, I become frustrated, but from then onward I want to say 'I'm going to do my best and work as hard as I can in the area which I am exposed to, then I am going to try as successful as I can to continue with the chances I can get' [...] so that's the way which I prefer to go[34].

Märəd, while accepting the institutional plan for her life, developed an approach to overcome her own powerlessness and used it to find individual fulfilment. This approach still guided her life in later years. Märəd had for a long time dreamt of continuing her studies in biology, preferably genetics. But while preparing to go abroad for further study, she explained why she thought differently about it later:

> I have to complete my Master's, and hopefully also PhD some day ... but I want to come back and live and work here in my country, do something useful, so there is no point for me going to study genetics, as I can do my research abroad, that's fine, but when I am back here, there are no facilities for this kind of research, I can only read things from books and search the internet, that is a bit pointless and boring ... so I had to change my focus, I will have to do something where I can carry out research activities here, so I will try to do my Master's in something related to educational biology or early-childhood development, as this is a problem in Eritrea.[35]

How Märəd and her fellow students came to accept the obstacles put into their way at the time seemed on the face of it to vindicate the government's claim about the 'closeness between the leadership and the people'. But even pre-2001 this did not mean that the student generation would simply follow the script written by the political leadership for their future live, as the following section will reveal.

III. "I want a good job" [...] Ambitions for an Uncertain Future

When asked about the long-term future, the interviewees in this study all came up with very personal visions of what they were trying to achieve. Three issues featured prominently in these visions: the well-being of one's (extended) family; the continuation of further studies or alternatively starting a business; and, eventually, marriage and having a family of one's own.

A majority of participants mentioned as one of their first priorities after graduation to help their families financially. Sara put it like this: "When I finish my BA degree, I will work for at least two years and help my parents [...] after that, maybe I will decide for myself".[36] The same is true for Esther: "I always feel so [responsible for my family], even it forced me to have good results in my [studies] [...] because

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[34]   Məḥrät, interview 13 October 2000 in Asmära.
[35]   Məḥrät, interview 26 May 2001 in Asmära.
[36]   Sara, interview 18 October 2000 in Asmära.

that is the only way to join a good job then help my parents, after that I then go to my own life".[37]

Together with supporting one's family financially, being able to continue their education or start their own business was the prime ambition for the majority of participants. Səmrät was a law graduate. Her father was a successful consultant in this field, and she wanted to follow in his footsteps: "I don't want anything, also not marriage, to interfere into my career life [...] I like to work and besides, I do not want to be dependent on anyone, I like to be dependent on myself only".[38] Samira, a graduate in accounting and management, was equally determined to have her own business. She said "I do not mind doing [university] service for free for one or two years, I feel I want to give my country something" indicating her acceptance of the obligation to contribute to the communal good. But after that, "I want to continue with my business plans, probably start some import-export business".[39] This strong vision of an individual professional career was otherwise rare to find. The majority of participants had a rather vague notion of the 'good job' they wished to have in the future, which was regarded very much as being related to the possibility of continuing their education.

Raḥel described the need to continue one's education: "Everyone is getting the BA degree [...] so you have to be different, that's Master's degree or PhD degree".[40] Similar concerns were voiced by Esther, who says "because nowadays, everybody is trying to have MA, then I will be the lower one [...] and therefore, I have to have MA as well".[41] Even with all the restrictions that could lie ahead, all women said they only wanted to go abroad for education but not to live there, "especially when you are educated, you have a very good life here".[42]

In that sense, the Eritrean human resource development strategy in 2000 seemed to have been successful in building up human capital in Eritrea. Even though many of the students interviewed were likely in the future not to work in the particular field in which they were educated, and thus in certain areas shortages in human capital were to persist, and despite their very individualist, material, careerist and conventional ambitions for the future, what united the participants was the fact that they saw their future connected to their country. They accepted their social obligation to serve the state and wider community.

Very few participants took their individual career ambitions or advancement as far as openly considering leaving for the Diaspora. In contrast, many felt they wanted to

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[37] Esther, interview 08 November 2000 in Asmära.
[38] Səmrät, interview 04 December 2000 in Asmära.
[39] Samira, interview 31 October 2000 in Asmära.
[40] Raḥel, interview 24 October 2000 in Asmära.
[41] Esther, interview 08 November 2000 in Asmära.
[42] Ḥanna, interview 06 November 2000 in Asmära.

contribute something to the development of Eritrea, as the examples of Almaz and Raḥel show. Almaz stated "I want to return to Eritrea ... there are no [people in my field] in Eritrea, I mean what is the benefit of this university training students and no one is returning back [...] so I want to really work here in Eritrea".[43] In a similar spirit, Raḥel wanted to return after having completed her postgraduate education abroad:

> I will come back [...] other than bringing Indian teachers to this university, you can do it your-self, and if you get educated and you came here you [...] are getting some kind of growth and development in your life, also if you came here you help your country to develop [...] both of you [you and your country] are getting advantage.[44]

Among those interviewed in 2000, only two felt they would eventually like to leave Eritrea: Azeb and Rihab. Whereas Azeb cited notions of personal freedom from cultural restrictions as her motivation to leave, freedom for Rihab was strongly related to the political:

> I don't know if our government is going to give us a chance to participate in actual political ac-tivities ... they have to realize ... they can't rule the country forever, there must be elections, but I don't know, is it going to happen [...] I don't want to live here for my kids in the future, I want them to grow up more easy [...] maybe Eritrea is going to be good, it's a matter of time [...] maybe if some change, or a miracle happens to Eritrea I would like to stay here.[45]

This last statement points to the fact that while in terms of human capital development the centralized development strategy of the Eritrean government in the area of formal education could have been regarded as successful, the implications might be different for social solidarity within Eritrean society. Personal freedom has been the main issue in these minority statements. Resistance to restrictions of that freedom, moreover, were bound to become more important in the future, if the Eritrean government failed to offer its people the opportunities they desired. The ultimate resistance for a university student to the government's plan and with it a rejection of nationalist social solidarity is shown by leaving the country and depriving it of the benefits the investment in a student's education should have brought. The results of a survey carried out among 357 students of both sexes in spring 2001 revealed a slow-ly growing propensity towards precisely this dynamic.

Among the respondents of the 2001 survey, 80 out of a total of 357 aspired to work and live abroad. While this was still a relatively low number, it was cause for concern. Dr Wäldä-Ab Isak, the then university president, felt at the time that while on the one hand graduates leaving the country had not yet been a problem, it might

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[43]   Almaz, interview 22 November 2000 in Asmära.
[44]   Raḥel, interview 24 October 2000 in Asmära.
[45]   Rihab, interview 26 April 2001 in Asmära.

soon become one: "I think before the conflict with the Ethiopians [*referring to the 1998–2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian border war*], the return rate was more than 85 % [...] now after the conflict [started], lots of people have tried to find excuses, so our return rate has been lower than fifty [per cent]".[46]

When the survey was conducted, only one student answered an open question at the end by writing: "I don't care about Eritrea, but I can only dream about myself, because the condition of Eritrea does not allow my dreams; I have a vision, we will be winners at last and the constitution of Eritrea will permit participation and citizenship [...] and the dictatorial government of Eritrea is not to stay for ever; death for and PFDJ." Although probably few students would formulate their opinion in such harsh words, many are meanwhile frustrated and alienated, and Eritrea has become one of the largest producers of refugees in the world[47] – a process that started in the summer of 2001, when the potentially oppressive features of Eritrea as a 'hard' state came into the open.[48]

IV. The Trip to 'the Coastal Areas'

I had left Eritrea on the day after the university graduation ceremony in July 2001 and returned in November of the same year. On the campus of the University of Asmara, one could sense a sublime change in the atmosphere among students. What had happened during the summer?[49]

Not many students were willing to talk, apart from one sentence that seemingly summed it all up: "I have been to the coastal areas." It referred to an event that proved to be a turning point. Students were quite suddenly required to do an additional round of national service during the summer months, justified by the still difficult situation after the end of the fighting phase in the 1998–2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian war.

Many of their families experienced financial hardship as a result of the latest war, and had banked on their sons and daughters earning some money during the summer months. Thus only very few students appeared on the announced day to board the buses that would take them to their station of duty. In a separate development, the leader of the students' union that had been formed independently from the offi-

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[46]   Dr Wäldä-Ab Isak, interview 13 June 2001 in Asmära. It should be noted that Dr Wäldä-Ab Isak has since left the country as a consequence of his own difficulties in working with the political leadership.

[47]   By the end of 2009 the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) put the number of Eritrean refugees, asylum seekers and others of concern to the UNHCR at a combined 223,570 worldwide, while more than 2000 Eritreans are said to leave the country each month. UNHCR: *2009 Global Trends* (2010).

[48]   On state-'hardness' see Forrest: The Quest for State 'Hardness' in Africa (1988), pp. 423–442.

[49]   The following account is based on field notes from conversations and observations from November 2001 to January 2002.

cial, government-sanctioned body dealing with youth-issues was arrested and accused of initiating unrest.

All students were then requested to gather at the national stadium and threatened with 'grave consequences' should they fail to do so. Others were rounded up in their dormitories. The whole batch was then driven to Wiʿa (also known as Waʿa) in the Danakil desert, an inhospitable place at the best of times but more so in the middle of the summer heat. After two students had died from heat-related conditions, they were transferred to Gälaʿlo (also known as Galaʿlu), a place of similar climatic conditions but on the coast and with better facilities. During their stay students were told that they were here to make their contribution to the nation and that they had to help in road construction activities. In reality, while some students did indeed help to collect stones for road building at times, it was clear to everybody that this trip was in fact the punishment for not obeying the first order to report for service.

The incident ended with a measure that brings the oppressive dimension of the Eritrean polity into clear focus: to be allowed to return, all students had to sign a letter in which they apologized for their behaviour and stated that they had been arrogant and failed to willingly serve their people. In sharp contrast to the usual workings of Eritrean policy measures that target the collectivity of the nation or particular groups like youth, here the individual was singled out. Each student had to sign individually and it was made clear that those who did not comply would not be allowed to return to Asmara in the foreseeable future. Quite literally, the choice was between giving in to the state's agenda or risk one's well-being in remaining indefinitely in a geographical location that puts one's health at risk.

Back in Asmära and with the beginning of the new academic year, things appeared normal on the surface. But for those who had been sent to 'the coastal areas' this was a rupture that would not be forgotten easily. The father of one of the students summed up a more general feeling: "How can you send young people who are only exposed to the highland climate down there at a time when even many people who normally live there leave because of the heat?" he demanded. But most of all many students were deeply hurt. Just over a year before, when the war with Ethiopia had resulted in a military confrontation that saw large parts of Eritrea overrun by Ethiopian troops, those same students had refused to continue their studies and demanded to be sent to help defend their country at the frontline. And now they were regarded as dissidents at best and traitors to the nation at worst.

This is not to suggest that the government meant to cause serious bodily harm, and the unfortunate death of two students was more an accident than anything else. Equally, there was no systematic machinery of oppression in place. To the contrary, the soldiers whose task was to guard and cater for the students reportedly rather felt sorry for their plight and treated them well. But nobody questioned the rationale

behind the official interpretation that what was happening was a just punishment for an action of betrayal.

Tellingly, only very few of their lecturers at university raised their voices in support of the students. One lecturer who did so passed away shortly afterwards. Even though his death had natural causes many students believed 'they', as suddenly the political leadership became referred to almost everywhere, killed him because he spoke on students' behalf.

Looking at the wider picture the episode narrated above might seem of no great importance. But it exemplifies the dynamics that unfold once a hegemonic project loses its attraction and developmental politics turn pernicious in order to retain control. The events in the coastal areas must also be put into the wider context of continuing war and disquiet.

Until 1998, when the border war with Ethiopia erupted – the fighting phase of which ended with a number of international agreements in 2000 – people gave the government the benefit of the doubt. The predominant sentiment was expressed in sentences like 'they have been fighting for 30 years [*the war for national liberation went on for 30 years*], give them a chance to run the country now.' The PFDJ-led government thus commanded significant social and political capital, and in spite of frustrations most of Eritrea's citizens were prepared to go along with interferences into their lives as long as it helped the overall development of the country.[50]

The war and its conduct, however, have proved to be transformative events, a 'rupture' for the post-independence polity. Not only could the political leadership at times not guarantee the state's territorial integrity, but equally, many of the gains made in terms of development were put into jeopardy. At the same time a lively debate emerged, including within the ruling party, about the government's hegemony and national configuration. This was not to last, however, and was followed swiftly by a government crackdown. The private press was closed, journalists were arrested, and a group of eleven members of the Central Committee of the party, all veterans, were put into incommunicado detention where they remain to this day. The oppressive features of Eritrea as a 'hard' state were there for all to see.[51]

In line with the general observation that education is one of the essential terrains of social reproduction, it was here that many of the consequences were felt most severely. To quell future dissent at its roots, the government imposed structural changes within the education system aimed at enforcing loyalty. Mechanisms to ensure the latter have been modelled on the military structures that characterized the

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[50]   Hirt: *Eritrea zwischen Krieg und Frieden*. (2000); Ottaway: *Africa's New Leaders* (1999).

[51]   Bariagaber: Eritrea: Challenges and Crises of a New State. (2006); United Kingdom, Home Office: *Country of Origin Information Report – Eritrea*. (2010); Human Rights Watch: *Service for Life*. (2009); Müller: State Making in the Horn of Africa (2006), pp. 503–530.

liberation movement prior to Eritrean independence. At the same time, however, the hidden dimension of any oppressive project had begun to emerge: the generative challenge from within.[52]

C. (Further) Militarisation of Formal Education

The events during the summer of 2001 proved to be a catalyst for the militarisation of formal education, especially at its higher levels. Starting with the academic year 2002-2003, all students in the last grade of secondary schooling, newly-introduced as grade twelve, were required to transfer to Sawwa,[53] a remote location in the western lowlands of the country, which doubles as the military training camp for national service. Countrywide matriculation exams were also held in. Those who passed those exams were no longer transferred to Asmara University, but sent to a newly built campus in May-Näfḥi to complete their freshman year. The Eritrean Institute of Technology at May-Näfḥi, as it is officially known, is located only a few kilometres south of Asmära. But built on an open field site, it feels isolated and remote. Run jointly by an academic vice director and an army colonel, May-Näfḥi in many ways resembles more a military camp than a place of higher learning. Students, at least in theory, need permission to leave the campus, and in private conversations it is often referred to as 'the camp'.

In line with the rationale behind those changes, the University of Asmara, at least on paper an institution where academic freedom was respected, has been dissolved. Its faculties have been relocated to different locations all over the country. The official justification for those measures was a move towards greater decentralization of higher education. In practice, the different faculties are governed by different branches of the respective ministries and are thus exposed to direct political control and interference.

Indeed, with hindsight the dissolution of the University of Asmara follows a long-term plan devised even before the events in the summer of 2001, but those events have considerably speeded up its implementation. It was in the following year that no students were sent to the university for their freshman studies for the first

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[52]   It should be pointed out here that as early as 1991 the first cautious attempts were made by different social actors to redefine the space for individual action. The reaction of the political leadership in all those cases followed a similar pattern: different degrees of repression, at times combined with measures to accommodate those demands that were deemed justified. But it took the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia to produce not only intensive political debate and open dissent within the higher echelons of the PFDJ, but to make an increasing number of ordinary citizens question the hegemonic project more generally.

[53]   Elliesie: Dezentralisierung des Hochschulwesens in Eritrea (2008), pp. 116f.

time. From then onwards, slowly but steadily the foundations were laid to tighten the screw around the university and dissolve it. This process went hand in hand with ever more power being concentrated in the Office of the President, for whom the university was never an institution that merited much attention, but rather a place where youth were potentially being alienated from core nationalist and political values.[54] Following this logic national service requirements for university students have been tightened in different ways from 2002 onwards. Different batches of students have been called to Sawwa for additional military training instead of being sent to do their year of expertise-related service as part of a general government drive to reinforce discipline and patriotic commitment among the student community.

Even when sent to work in their professions as part of their service, this obligation rarely ends after one year as originally stipulated. The so-called Warsay-Yəkkäʾalo Development Campaign[55] inaugurated in 2002 makes national service conscripts liable to stay in service indefinitely (or until the stand-off with Ethiopia will be fully resolved one day), and while they might be given civilian labour tasks officially they remain under military command.[56] This makes Eritrea the world's second most militarised country, with over 200,000 people in active military service, another 200,000 in militarised work service and a 120,000 strong reserve army in a population of 5.5 million[57].

In this overall environment of state control, the only options for resistance seem twofold: either inward migration or, as more and more young people aspire to in private conversations, 'to get out', to leave the country for a life in the Diaspora.

The latter has been made almost impossible for many people of national service age in general and students in particular, who are commonly denied exit visas to leave the country. But as in any oppressive environment, counter-dynamics do emerge. On the one hand, many youth find their 'way out', be it via Sudan or even Ethiopia, or for women by marrying a foreign national, or in asking for asylum abroad in the course of an official visit. But also those who stay have found ways to create a niche for themselves. Students who in the past would have been sent abroad for further studies now work for the few international non-governmental organizations still operating in the country. They earn by local standards a high salary, even though

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[54] Müller: Bare Life and the Developmental State (2008), pp. 1–21; Reid: Caught in the Headlights of history (2005), pp. 467–488.

[55] The name of the campaign points to its main objective: create a continuity in the propensity for sacrifice between different generations of soldiers: *warsay* refers to 'young soldier' mostly understood as national service recruit, while *yəkkäʾalo* refers to a fighter in Eritrea's war for national liberation. See also: Elliesie/Nikolajew, Review (2007), p. 293.

[56] Hughes: Eine Volksarmee besonderer Art (2004).

[57] Healy: *Eritrea's Economic Survival.* (2007); International Institute for Strategic Studies: *The Military Balance 2010* (2010).

they hardly ever work in any position that carries responsibility in line with their education. Not all of those have fulfilled their service requirements and are thus living under threat of being picked up by the military police. But then, many have also developed strategies of their own to evade being caught.[58]

Similar dynamics were observed in 2006 among the students at May-Näfḥi.[59] In informal talks with different groups of students it became clear that the majority rejected "being kept here, of course it would be better to be in Asmara", but developed their own way of dealing with it. Some went home to Asmära every weekend, which was forbidden officially, but could still be arranged. They were well equipped with mobile phones and other gadgets that allowed them to keep in touch with their peers and make arrangements to meet their friends. When asked about their future aspirations, the common answer was to do as well as they could in their education and then get "a job in the private sector and have a good life". The statement of one student summed up a general feeling: "Of course we would like to have a choice, what we study, where, but we don't have a choice, we are forced to study here ... it should not be like this, but we will make the best of it for our future when we are out of here".[60]

Implicit in this statement, and in many other private conversations the author held in Eritrea during her visit in 2006, is a turn towards the private and individual fulfilment. This undermines one of the very foundations of Eritrea as a developmental state, the propensity towards social solidarity.

D. Concluding Remarks

On the surface, one could make the case that the consolidation process of Eritrea as a developmental state has been a success. It has been argued that one fundamental task of such consolidation is control over population movements.[61] If judged by this criterion, the control by the Eritrean government over the movements of its citizens is indeed remarkable, in terms of control over emigration, the 'exit-option' as well as in terms of internal population movements. This control extends in different ways to

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[58] Reid: Caught in the Headlights of History (2005), pp. 467–488. Author's observations in 2006.
[59] The following is based on informal conversations with students in May-Näfḥi in October 2006.
[60] The author had planned to re-administer parts of the questionnaire on future aspirations she used in 2001 to the current students at May-Näfḥi in 2006. She could not obtain permission to do so, as doing any kind of academic research in Eritrea was very difficult at the time. Having said that, however, in contrast to experiences during previous visits in 2004 and 2005, when many people were afraid to talk openly, people voiced their criticism of government policy openly and many did not care whether that might have consequences for their future. The level of frustration was simply too great.
[61] Herbst: Migration (1990), pp. 183–203.

the Eritrean Diaspora, who for example by and large pay a two percent tax of their income to the Eritrean state. Most remarkable, however, is that this control has not much weakened despite increasing economic hardship, which has exposed the failure of the 'promise of development' that commonly serves to legitimize any post-revolutionary leadership.[62]

But looking into the future, questions need to be raised about the viability of the Eritrean developmental project. The gulf between those running the Eritrean polity, mostly members of the generation of ex-fighters, and the ambitions of younger population groups, especially those with some degree of higher education, seem to the observer to widen by the day. The modern ambitions that have been created by the Eritrean revolution can, in today's globalized world, not be suppressed indefinitely by sending people to Sawwa or denying them exit visas. Sawwa used to be the place where the torch of the armed struggle and the defence of the country's sovereignty were passed on militarily and ideologically to a next generation willing to carry that torch. In the Eritrea of today, Sawwa first and foremost symbolizes state control over the lives of its youth, a control that is increasingly being rejected and evaded. The Eritrean political elite has been described as frozen by its own image of the past, the key parameters of which are sacrifice, struggle and hardship[63]. An informant put it to the author like this in 2002: "Sacrifice, that is what those ex-fighters always stress, not the positive, that we reached our freedom, or future goals, what determines their mindset is sacrifice".[64]

Indeed, the primary objective of the present leadership seems to be to mould the next generation in its own image through hardship and sacrifice. That goes as far as the belief that the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia was not so much a disaster that should and could have been avoided, but a more superior way to teach the coming generation the ethos of the armed struggle than any school curriculum. The Eritrean case thus serves as another example for the forceful repetition of past structures of domination inherent in every revolution.[65]

But the Eritrean political entity, in spite of having shown its oppressive features of late, depends on the propensity of its members to willingly serve the common good to succeed. Eritrea's most valuable asset after liberation has been the degree of social solidarity within the nation that has led to impressive achievements in terms of human development in general and education and human resource development in particular. This developmental agenda is bound to fail in the future as the measures taken in the course of the militarisation of formal education not only damage nation-

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[62]   Makki: Nationalism (1996), pp. 475–497.
[63]   Reid: Caught in the Headlights of History (2005), pp. 467–488.
[64]   Male professional, 38 years of age, working in the education sector, field notes January 2002.
[65]   Erdheim: Revolution, Totem und Tabu (1991), pp. 153–166.

al development, but perhaps more crucially erode the country's human resource development strategy.

It is simply not sustainable in the long term that the country's brightest graduates, instead of helping build capacity within the country, work in clerical positions for international non-governmental organizations or spend their time devising 'exit' strategies in terms of how to best leave the country. As has been pointed out elsewhere, good human resource development creates loyalty and commitment. In Eritrea, not only are civil servant salaries much lower than those in the private sector. But following the political leadership's agenda of absolute control over society, the majority of senior positions are held by individuals loyal to the political project of the government who more often than not lack professional expertise.[66]

While until quite recently many youth have been willing to work for the state for a comparatively low salary and would have been proud to do so, it now seems that the official bureaucracy will become even less able to grasp the opportunities that would connect Eritrea with the global economy.[67] But frustration cannot only be felt on the part of young people. As a very committed member of the teaching staff at the University of Asmara said in a private conversation: "Why are we teaching here if there is no perspective for the future?"[68]

Ultimately, it could be a renewed war with Ethiopia that draws the population to rally behind the national project again, but such an outcome would be disastrous.

For the moment, the future of the Eritrean developmental project that started out so brightly looks bleak. As long as the only avenues for living resistance are inward migration or the increasingly sought route into exile, the political leadership will lose more and more of its legitimacy, leading in turn to more oppressive politics. Thus far Eritrea remains a strong state in terms of what Rokkan regards as a crucial dimension of state power, the control of interactions across state boundaries.[69] At the same time, the Eritrean polity is at present experiencing a lesson history should have taught its leaders not least during the time of the Ethiopian occupation: You cannot reduce both, the 'exit' option and the option to 'voice' opposition without endangering the balance of the whole political system.

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[67] Tessema: Causes, Challenges and Prospects of Brain Drain (2010), pp. 131–157.
[68] Interview January 2002 in Asmära.
[69] Rokkan: Dimensions of State Formation and Nation Building (1975), pp. 562–600.

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