



Seedling for Peace and Democracy in Eritrea
United Kingdom Branch

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Regime Change in Eritrea

Why Regime Change Is Needed in Eritrea *Now*

Seedling for Peace and Democracy in Eritrea, arguably the largest opposition group among Diaspora Eritreans, insists that regime change in Eritrea is needed *now*.

And here is why:

Eritrea happens to be one of the two nations in the world that could justifiably be called totalitarian; no wonder it has often been referred as “[the North Korea of Africa](#).”¹ It remains sealed off from the rest of the world, with a “self-reliant economy” meant to guarantee that hermetic seclusion—two hallmarks of any totalitarian state—all at a tremendous cost to its people. The regime feels that self-isolation, and the total control over its subjects it seeks, can only be maintained not only by perpetually destabilizing its own people, but also the entire neighborhood; the latter, a task it has taken with urgency in the last two years—reason enough for the civilized world to seek regime change in Eritrea now.

Since its independence in 1993, the nation has witnessed no election whatsoever. The 1997 constitution has never been implemented on the ground. Ever since 2001, just after the border war, when the nation took a totalitarian turn, all kinds of [rights](#)²—freedom of speech, association, assembly, movement, religion, etc.—were suspended. Yet, to frame Eritrea’s fundamental problem as lack of democracy is to understate it. The nation’s problem can be better described as the deliberate denial of all things normal in life; things that are taken for granted even in dictatorships, such as raising a family, building your own house, earning a living, traveling within your country, attending worshipping places, etc. The regime feels that unless it constantly interferes in all aspects of the lives of its citizens, it would lose the total control it seeks to govern.

One way of grasping the abnormal nature of the Eritrean regime is by looking at [the social experimentation](#)³ it has been conducting on its own people, especially the young population group, for the last three decades. This Orwellian experimentation starts with the entire high school population of the nation (in their tens of thousands) attending their last year of school in a *single* desert camp known as Sawa, after which the overwhelming majority of whom are



condemned to an indefinite servitude (under the name of [National Service](#)⁴), wandering soldiers doubling as slave laborers, many serving for more than a decade with little or no pay.

Maintaining this social experimentation requires draconian punishment. Eritrea has often been called “the largest [open-air prison](#)⁵ in the world.” In this layered prison system, a citizen’s demise is measured by how deep he finds himself in it. Would it be in the innermost layer made up of more than 360 “hardcore” prisons—walled, underground, concentration camps, shipping containers, make-shift, etc.—that are often populated by tens of thousands of army deserters, conscription evaders and their parents; adherents of minority religions; and anyone who demanded to live a normal life? Would it be in the middle layer, in the indefinite National Service, where hundreds of thousands of youths have been trapped in the Eritrean wilderness for years on end, before they give up on the system and decide to leave the country for good? Or would it be in the outermost layer, in “civilian” Eritrea, forever at the mercy of authorities for lodging, work, food, travel, etc.—that is, for just living—with the deliberate intent of denying predictability and control over their lives.

The result of this Khmer Rouge-like experimentation has been a mass exodus of epic proportion, with more than [a million](#)⁶(both UNHCR registered and non-registered) fleeing the country—that is, in a country of about 3.5 million! Before Syrian and, now, Ukrainian refugees flocked to Europe, Eritrea used to be the largest contributor to the migration problem in Europe. Generations of young men and women have been systematically driven out of their country simply because the regime felt keeping them inside would come at a huge cost to its totalitarian system—hence the need to call it by its appropriate name, [generational genocide](#)³. The regime believes that evicting young men and women in their tens of thousands every year, first, from the urban areas and, second, from the country, is the *safety valve* that it needs in order to stay potent in its power.

Given its totalitarian grip over the population, that the regime also ventured to take total control over all the religions in Eritrea is only understandable; especially since it believed these religions were out there to compete against it for the loyalty of the young generation—a generation that it wanted to mold in the image of the former guerrilla fighters; or rather, of itself. Consequently, all Evangelical Churches, Jehovah Witnesses and the Bahai faith were officially outlawed, their worshipping places closed; and ever since, thousands of their followers have been in and out of [prison](#)⁷ for years. The Coptic Church has been gutted out of “dissident priests,” with its beloved [Patriarch Antonios](#)⁸having recently died in captivity after 15 years of house arrest. With a government-sponsored Mufti at its head, Islam too has been thoroughly infiltrated by the regime. Even the powerful Catholic Church is not spared, much of its property taken over by the regime, and some of its senior clergy put in detention. No wonder that Eritrea happens to be the only African nation that makes it consistently to the State Department [list](#)⁹ of “countries of particular concern”; a list of the worst offenders in religious oppression.



So has it been with other non-religious dissidents. Senior officials—otherwise known as G-15—who have been critical of how the border war of 1998-2000 was conducted and demanded political change ended up in the dungeons of Eritrea, never to reappear again. The journalists of free media were met with the same fate; and ever since, in the Reporters Without Borders [press index](#)¹⁰, Eritrea has always been ranked among the bottom 3 (out of 180 nations), sometimes even beating North Korea to come out dead last. Eritrea also remains among the least internet connected countries in the world, and this is by design; for even those connected self-censure for fear of being monitored. Thus, the news blackout from the outside world is almost total, buttressing the self-isolation of the nation essential to the success of the regime’s indoctrination.

As noted above, at the center of the regime’s survival strategy is the perpetual displacement of its subjects, without which it feels it would lose its totalitarian control. For the regime, young men and women have to be plucked out of their social ecosystem—their families, villages, towns, cities, schools, workplaces, culture, religion, etc.—before they are rendered amenable to its social experimentation. What is surprising is that it equally feels this destabilization policy is also essential in dealing with neighboring countries, albeit in a different form. It uses terrorism and war, and now genocide, to destabilize the whole region. As a terror-sponsoring nation, it has supported most the armed groups in Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti and Yemen at one time or another. In the case of Sudan alone, it has armed and trained insurgents in the South (the SPLA), West (Darfur) and East (Beja tribes) of the country. Since independence, it has also waged war against all its neighbors—Ethiopia, Sudan, Yemen, Djibouti, and now Tigray. Its most recent adventure also happens to be its most brutal, a total genocidal war waged against the people of Tigray—its external destabilizing policy at its most potent form.

The Tigray war showed the world the true nature of the Eritrean regime. While the world has been ignoring the genocide that the regime has been conducting against its own people, no such excuse can be invoked in the case of Tigray genocide. The two years long [siege of Tigray](#)¹¹, with more than a million soldiers from Eritrea, Amhara, Afar and Ethiopia encircling it 360 degrees, has so far killed more than [600 thousand](#)¹² civilians. Eritrean troops have been at the forefront of this genocidal war, with tens of thousands of [women raped](#)¹³, tens of thousands massacred, entire areas [ethnically cleansed](#)¹⁴ and millions displaced. The destruction of infrastructure (factories, hospitals, schools, churches, etc.); the looting of food, cattle, money and property; and the burning of harvests and homesteads, have been described as “medieval” in the scope of their barbarity.

Even though Ethiopians, especially the Amharas, have wholeheartedly joined in this slaughter, let us not forget that the main architect of this genocide is the Pol Pot of Africa, President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea. And now, with the Pretoria agreement of cessation of hostilities, he is doing his best [to derail it](#)¹⁵, not only by refusing to withdraw his troops from Tigray, but also by continuing to do all kinds of atrocities the Eritrean troops are known for. This paranoid leader is afraid that if peace returns to the region, his relevance as a partner with the Ethiopian leader will



come to an ignominious end. Hence, he is determined to continue destabilizing the whole neighborhood.

And the world is letting him get away with it. The Tigray genocide that has been unfolding for the past two years happen to fall on the United Kingdom Government's watch. In this genocidal acts, the Government of the United Kingdom has not responded in the way we have been expecting it to do.

Enough! For all the reasons mentioned above, and more, it is time that this totalitarian regime comes to an end. For obvious reasons, the entire neighborhood wants him to go. The Eritrean Opposition outside wants him to go. The world, especially the West, should work with these forces to usher regime change, long before he conducts another irreparable damage to the region.

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Regards,

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