

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN ERITREA AND THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN TACKLING THE CHALLENGE

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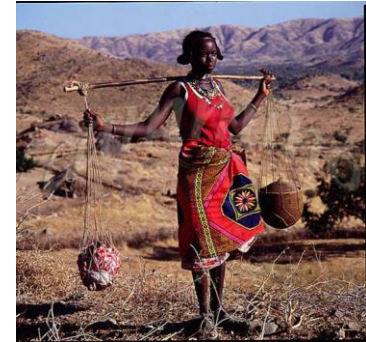
Contextual Background

- ❖ Eritrea: a newly independent nation and the youngest country in Africa
- ❖ 1890-1941: colonised by Italy (creation of Eur. Colon.)
- ❖ 1941-1952: British Protectorate (BMA)
- ❖ 1952-1991 (under Ethiopian annexation)
- ❖ 1991: Independent state (ever since one dominant political party -- EPLF/PFDJ)



Ethno-religious and linguistic composition

- ❖ Nine ethnic groups: Tigrinya (ትግርኛ), Tigre (ትግጊ), Afar (ግፋር), Saho (ሳሆ), Hdarb (ኡዳርብ), Bilen (ቢለን), Nara (ናራ), Kunama (ኩናማ) and Rashaida (ራሻይዳ)
- ❖ Evenly divided between Christian and Muslim communities
- ❖ Very small number: followers of indigenous beliefs including the veneration of ancestral saints



Religious Tolerance

- Eritrea: a hub of religious tolerance for several centuries
- First African country to receive Christianity and Islam (also Ethiopia)
- In recent years: a centre of religious persecution and alarming crisis of human rights
- Also a recipient of significant amount of 'development aid' from the EU (unsound practice undermining the democratic integrity of the EU)
- What is to be done?

Religious Persecution

- Eritrea: multi-lingual and multi-religious country (nine ethnic groups and four religions)
- Population evenly divided between Christianity and Islam with a small minority of indigenous beliefs
- No major history of religious intolerance/persecution before 1991 (a hub of religious tolerance)
- 1991: independence from Ethiopia
- Early years of independence: disturbing trends of religious persecution (after 2002 reaching a crisis level)

Religious Persecution

- Earliest and most cited case of religious persecution: Jehovah's Witnesses – 1993 (p. 3)
- Refusal to take part in national referendum and NMSP (on religious groups)
- Stripped off all citizenship rights (executive decree issued by the stated president), imprisoned and abused harshly
- Some 250 families fled the country; 100 families have dismissed from government employment; at least 36 families evicted from their homes
- All “punishment” not based on the law

Religious Persecution

- Another earlier incident: the persecution of some Muslim Eritreans in 1994
- On 5 December 1994 hundreds of young Muslim teachers arrested in Keren and disappeared
- In 1997 150 Muslim Eritreans summarily killed (extra-judicial execution): on suspicion of having relations with Islamist armed groups
- In 2004 some Eritrean Muslims (Wahhabis) arrested and their whereabouts remains unknown

Religious Persecution

- Most publicized aspect of religious persecution in Eritrea is that of minority Christian groups (Pentecostalist/s movement)
- In the aftermath of the 1998–2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia border conflict Pentecostalism gained wider acceptance
- Pentecostalism: responsive to the predicament of Eritreans; hence accepted widely in a short period of time (Kifleyesus 2006)
- Characteristic feature of the new movement: repudiation of traditional hierarchies and sources of authority
- Followers: young educated men and women, secondary school students and teachers, university students and professors, and health-care professionals (middle class)

Religious Persecution

- Two perceived threats to the government
- 1) Conversion to Pentecostalism takes place in the context of a conscious break away from traditional practices (including the political status quo)
- 2) Wider acceptance of the Pentecostalism by the middle class
- As a result the movement was seen by the government as a threat to its longstanding political hegemony
- Breeding dissent and spreading discontent in the society (incompatible with the political ideology of the ruling elite)
- Consequence: harsh policy against Pentecostalism
- Government's ambivalence to religion: related to a Marxist-Leninist background

Religious Persecution

- One army commander: 'Like in North Korea, this type of religion should never be allowed to spread in our country because this is a religion of the CIA and accordingly no one should be allowed to read and preach the Bible'
- Examples of violations
- Between 2003 and 2005, at least 26 pastors and priests, and over 1750 church members, including children and 175 women, and some dozens of Muslims, were detained because of their religious beliefs. During this period of time, Amnesty International documented 45 separate incidents of religious persecution involving at least the closure of 36 churches

Prominent Examples of Violations

- The dismissal of Abune Antonios
- The torture of Helen Berhane
- The torture of Paulos
- The murder of Nigisti Haile

- ❖ The dismissal of Patriarch Abune Antonios: the leader of the biggest Eritrean church (Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church)
Dismissed in August 2005 after protesting government interference in church affairs; remains under house arrest



Gospel Singer: Helen Berhane

- ❖ Locked for two years in a ***METAL SHIPPING CONTAINER***
- ❖ Tortured severely for refusing to recant her belief in Jesus Christ; sustained serious bodily injury; finally escaped prison in a rare instance of bravery



Other Examples of Violations

- The torture of Paulos: tied up for about 136 hours in the notorious torture method known as 'helicopter' for refusing to recant his belief
- Victim tied with a rope by hands and feet behind the back, lying on the ground face down, outside in the hot sun, rain or freezing cold nights
- Nigisti Haile: tortured to death for refusing 'to renounce her faith in Jesus Christ'
- ***The enigma → Eritrea is a recipient of huge amount of funds from the EU – 'development aid'***

The Role of the EU

- EU: one of the leading global actors in development cooperation
- Eritrea: a major beneficiary
- Development cooperation: imperative for poverty alleviation (article 208 of the Treaty of Lisbon)
- Legitimate concerns: dispersal of money to notorious dictatorship (**€122 million in September 2009**)
- EU obligations: articles 2 and 21(1) of the Treaty of the European Union → development cooperation should be aligned with respect for human rights
- If so, why is the EU acting against its own commitments?
- Eritrea is a country with alarming record of human rights violations and religious persecution → EU should revise its strategy in relation to Eritrea

The Role of the EU

‘The Union’s action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law’ → article 21(1) of the Treaty of the European Union

Conclusion

- Twenty years after independence: Eritrea yet to offer its people the promises of national independence (respect to human rights and fundamental freedoms)
- Became one of the worst places for religious freedom (including other fundamental rights)
- Paradoxically one of the main beneficiaries of EU's 'development aid'
- EU discrediting its democratic credentials
- Development objectives hardly achievable in an environment which is hostile to fundamental rights
- Hence: a need to revise EU development cooperation in Eritrea (in terms of EU treaty obligations)

THANK YOU!

(ἰσχυρὰ εὐχαριστοῦμεν!)