

Eritrea, Human Rights, and Neocolonial Propaganda

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The East African country of Eritrea is once again being demonized internationally as a systematic violator of human rights. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has issued an allegedly damning [report](#) detailing what it claims are “systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations” taking place in Eritrea. [Media coverage](#) has similarly echoed those claims, presenting Eritrea to a western audience as a backward and “brutal dictatorship,” playing on the traditional stereotypes of totalitarianism from East Germany to Stalin’s Soviet Union.

However, a closer and more critical analysis of both the report, and the true agendas of the western institutions promoting its narrative, reveals a vastly different motivation to this report and the continued anti-Eritrean narrative. It could be called politically motivated propaganda, and that would be correct. It could be called a distorted and biased perspective rooted in fundamental misunderstandings of both politics and history, and that would also be correct. It could, quite simply, be called abject neo-colonialism of the worst sort, and that too would also be correct.

For while the UN and western media portray Eritrea – a country most westerners know nothing about, if they’ve ever even heard of the country at all – as little more than a “Third World dictatorship” because of its alleged violations of human rights, they conveniently ignore the actual human rights issues that Eritrea champions, making it a leader on the African continent, and a country that in many ways should be held up as a model of human development and adherence to true human rights.

Eritrea leads the way in Africa on issues ranging from the prevention and treatment of malaria, HIV/AIDS and other preventable diseases, to access to clean drinking water, literacy promotion, and countless other issues. But none of this is deemed worthy by the UN for inclusion in a report about “human rights.”

This is of course not to suggest that Eritrea, like every other country in the so called “developing” and “developed” worlds, is without problems, as that would be simply false. Rather, it is to note that a truly objective report that actually sought a substantive analysis of human rights in Eritrea, rather than a politically motivated propaganda campaign, would have revealed a country busy transforming itself and its people, leaving behind the decades of colonial oppression and subjugation, beating an independent path for itself.

But of course, this is the gravest sin of all in the eyes of the western ruling class and the institutions it controls. Abject poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, death from preventable diseases, and many other hallmarks of African underdevelopment – these are all fine in the eyes of the West, so long as you follow their IMF, World Bank, UN rules of the game; so long as you “respect opposition,” “respect democracy,” and act “inclusively.” But, when a

country chooses to create its own system, and pursue its own national development (white neocolonial opinions be damned), it is immediately cast as the great villain. So too with Eritrea.

But don't take my word for it. Let's look at the facts.

The UN Report: A Critical Look

The UN OHCHR report presents a vision of Eritrea that is, in many ways, at odds with reality. While forms of political repression and non-conformity to western conceptions of democracy are highlighted and repeated ad nauseam, other critical aspects of human rights are entirely ignored. Moreover, the UN report was limited in its scope because of lack of access to the country, thereby forcing the report to rely exclusively on the testimony of expatriate Eritreans and those with an obvious political bias and grudge against the government of Isaias Afewerki. So, far from being objective, the report is, by its very nature, a one-sided portrayal of the situation in the country. The report notes:

The commission finds that systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed by the Government of Eritrea and that there is no accountability for them...The enjoyment of rights and freedoms are severely curtailed in an overall context of a total lack of rule of law. The commission also finds that the violations in the areas of extrajudicial executions, torture (including sexual torture), national service and forced labour may constitute crimes against humanity. The commission emphasizes that its present findings should not be interpreted as a conclusion that international crimes have not been committed in other areas.

While of course there is a shock value associated with phrases like "extrajudicial killings," "torture," and "crimes against humanity," these claims need to be interrogated carefully. It is impossible to say the extent to which these claims are either wholly true, complete fabrications, or partially true embellishments concocted by expatriates with an anti-government personal and political agenda; it is not unreasonable to assume that it is a combination of all three.

However, it is useful here to ask whether countries like the United States, for instance, would also be guilty of "extrajudicial killings" and "torture" were a similar investigation conducted into the seemingly endless, dare I say systematic, police murders of American citizens, especially people of color? Or what about the now universally accepted fact - [publicly acknowledged](#) even by President Obama who blithely declared "We tortured some folks" - that the United States systematically tortured prisoners throughout the so called "War on Terror"? Or that the US continues to hold countless inmates, again disproportionately people of color, in long term solitary confinement, a common US practice decried as [torture](#) by the UN Special Rapporteur on torture Juan E Méndez of the very same OHCHR?

But of course none of these uncomfortable truths are good for the narrative of "backwards African dictatorship," and therefore, they are not part of the story. Nor does the report define exactly what it means by "national service." However, those with knowledge of Eritrea's domestic policies, which is almost no one in the West, understands that "national service" especially includes national military service, a practice used by many countries, including the US darling Israel, among many others.

Of course, it would be wise to here make the distinction that, unlike the apartheid state of Israel which uses its military for the purposes of oppression and occupation, Eritrea fought a protracted and bloody war against the former colonial masters in Ethiopia, having had ongoing military conflicts with their neighbor for nearly the entire, short existence of Eritrea as an independent nation. With a relatively small population and, proportionately speaking, a long and porous border with a hostile nation with a history of subjugation of Eritreans, it is not at all unreasonable to have a robust military apparatus fueled by mandatory military service.

One should also recall the way in which such reports, and brazen distortions, have been used by the UN and the OHCHR in the recent past. In perhaps its most shameful moment in recent history, the former High Commissioner Navi Pillay was instrumental in building the justification for the disastrous, illegal, and blatantly neocolonial, imperialist war against Libya. Pillay actually took the lead in disseminating anti-Gaddafi propaganda in the first weeks of the destabilization campaign, making her the leading edge of the propaganda assault, lending her reputation and position with the UN in order to bolster the anti-Gaddafi narrative. In late February 2011, Pillay [stated](#):

More needs to be done. I encourage all international actors to take necessary measures to stop the bloodshed...thousands may have been killed or injured over the past week...Although reports are still patchy and hard to verify, one thing is painfully clear: in brazen and continuing breach of international law, the crackdown in Libya of peaceful demonstrations is escalating alarmingly with reported mass killings, arbitrary arrests, detention and torture of protestors...Tanks, helicopters and military aircraft have reportedly been used indiscriminately to attack the protestors...The Libyan leader must stop the violence now... Libyan forces are firing at protestors and bystanders, sealing off neighbourhoods and shooting from rooftops. They also block ambulances so that the injured and dead are left on the streets.

The facts that have been gathered since the illegal aggression against Libya have all contradicted every assertion that Pillay and the OHCHR made in early 2011. As Dr. Alan Kuperman wrote in his report [Lessons from Libya: How Not to Intervene](#), published by the prestigious Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University:

Contrary to Western media reports, Qaddafi did not initiate Libya's violence by targeting peaceful protesters. The United Nations and Amnesty International have documented that in all four Libyan cities initially consumed by civil conflict in mid-February 2011—Benghazi, Al Bayda, Tripoli, and Misurata—violence was actually initiated by the protesters. The government responded to the rebels militarily but never intentionally targeted civilians or resorted to "indiscriminate" force, as Western media claimed. Early press accounts exaggerated the death toll by a factor of ten, citing "more than 2,000 deaths" in Benghazi during the initial days of the uprising, whereas Human Rights Watch (HRW) later documented only 233 deaths across all of Libya in that period.

Needless to say, the credibility of the OHCHR took a major hit in 2011 with that ghastly episode of outright lying, propaganda, and service to the foreign policy agenda of the West. So too should one be skeptical of their similar distortions on issues such as Eritrea, which in many ways are similar to Libya.

In fact, it is no coincidence that Eritrea's closest ally in the world was Libya and Gaddafi. As the US Government-funded [Center for Naval Analyses](#) wrote in a 2010 report, *"In the 1990s, Qadhafi made numerous attempts to mediate the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict, but Ethiopian leader Meles Zenawi was uninterested in separate negotiations...Qadhafi even went so far as to propose a Sahelian-Saharan peacekeeping force, to which Eritrea agreed and Ethiopia did not. Qaddafi subsequently helped finance Eritrea's military campaign against Ethiopia."* It seems then that, far from being a coincidence, Eritrea is, in effect, getting the Libya treatment in terms of the propaganda and distortions.

But the real question is why? Why is Eritrea so reviled by the vaunted so called "international community"?

Eritrea's Real Sins: Independence and Human Rights

✘ All countries demonized by the West, attacked economically and politically, have done something to earn them the ire of the so called "liberal democracies" of the developed world. Of course, it is never the seemingly innocuous pretexts that institutions such as the UN OHCHR invoke.

First and foremost among Eritrea's grave sins is its stubborn insistence on maintaining full independence and sovereignty in both political and economic spheres. This fact is perhaps best illustrated by Eritrean President Afewerki's bold [rejection of foreign aid](#) of various sorts, stating repeatedly that Eritrea needs to "stand on its own two feet." Afewerki's pronouncements are in line with what pan-Africanist radicals, Marxists such as Walter Rodney, and many others have argued for decades, namely that, as Afewerki put it in 2007 after rejecting a \$200 million dollar "aid" package from the World Bank, *"Fifty years and billions of dollars in post-colonial international aid have done little to lift Africa from chronic poverty... [African societies] are crippled societies...You can't keep these people living on handouts because that doesn't change their lives."*

Naturally, such a radical departure from the tried and true cycle of financial aid and debt servitude, corruption and endemic poverty, is seen as a threat by the neocolonial establishment as manifested in the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and other financial institutions. But the real danger is not simply the ideology, but its success. As the LA Times noted in its profile of Eritrea in 2007:

The self-reliance program began a decade ago but accelerated sharply in 2005. Relying on its meager budget and the conscription of about 800,000 of the country's citizens, the program so far has shown promising results. Measured on a variety of U.N. health indicators, including life expectancy, immunizations and malaria prevention, Eritrea scores as high, and often higher, than its neighbors, including Ethiopia and Kenya...It might be one of the most ambitious social and economic experiments underway in Africa.

In the eight years since 2007, Eritrea has made even greater strides, becoming the only African nation to reach its Millennium Development Goals in 2015. Eritrea now boasts a roughly 98% immunization rate, incredible reductions in malaria, diarrhea, HIV/AIDS, and other preventable diseases. Eritrea has reduced infant mortality by two thirds and maternal mortality by nearly 80% since independence. Literacy rates have increased dramatically, access to basic health care, clean drinking water, and many other essential human rights have all been greatly expanded, all while accepting no foreign aid.

Christine Umutoni, the UN Resident Coordinator in Eritrea, [explained](#) that “*What we see as development partners, what is responsible for this success is community participation, the enabling environment, leadership, strong mechanisms for prevention, value for money and coordinated inter-sectoral approaches.*” Umutomi also added that Eritrea has put a tremendous amount of energy into developing innovative alternatives to tackling difficult health and human issues including temporary maternal clinics and mobile medical units, as well as knowledge of migration patterns and remote areas.

In other words, Eritrea has managed to rapidly, and in earnest, embark on a process of economic and social transformation that the West is constantly advocating for African nations. However, Eritrea has done it on its own terms, without being enslaved by the financial institutions of global capitalism, and that is what makes it a target for demonization rather than praise. Why, one might ask, are the human rights of the rural poor, the unborn and infants, those living in grinding poverty, not taken into consideration in the so called OHCHR report? Are human rights only restricted to a small minority of political discontents whose grievances, even if justified, are relegated to the realm of politics and speech? This is not to diminish the importance of such issues, but rather to illustrate the sheer hypocrisy of the selective use of the term.

Of course, there are also other critical political and economic reasons for Eritrea’s pariah status in the eyes of the so called “developed world,” and especially the US. Perhaps the most obvious, and most unforgiveable from the perspective of Washington, is Eritrea’s stubborn refusal to have any cooperation, formal or informal, with AFRICOM or any other US military. While every other country in Africa with the exception of the equally demonized, and equally victimized, Zimbabwe has some military connections to US imperialism, Eritrea remains stubbornly defiant. I suppose Eritrea takes the notion of post-colonial independence seriously.

Eritrea also rejects the neocolonial notion that it, and Africa broadly speaking, should be little more than a cash cow of natural resources, especially mineral resources, for the developed world to exploit. Eritrea’s President Afewerki said in a [recent interview](#):

Your location could be a comparative advantage. If you have a long coastline, then you develop fisheries, develop your services industry – shipping, transportation – air, land. Provide industry and manufacturing...Africa can produce its own food and grow more. Why aren’t we able to do that? You have to produce something. Emphasize sustainable sectors. Agriculture is a sustainable sector. You need to put in place agriculture infrastructure. It’s a strategy commodity for communities...You need to think least on mineral resources (for economic development)... Gold glitters but it blinds people...If you forgo agriculture because you have gold, you go into a trap. If you forgo comparative advantage that you have because you have gold, then you make a big mistake...Food sovereignty and local production, local manufacturing and development are more critical than depending on resource exploitation. You must have a balance, comprehensive program that takes stock of your comparative advantages in different sectors and local needs first...Local markets are everything.

Is it any wonder that Afewerki and his government are demonized by the West? What is the history of US and European behavior towards independent African leaders who advocated self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist ideology? The answer is self-evident. Such ideas as Afewerki expressed in the interview are seen by Washington,

London, and Brussels as not only defiant, but dangerous; dangerous not only because of what they say, but dangerous because they're actually working.

You do not see Eritrea depending on US and European NGOs, nor do you see the major western financial institutions enslaving the country with the unsustainable feedback loop of debt and aid. Instead, you see a country steadily emerging from decades of war and oppression, building a society from the ground up. Certainly there are problems, and changes of various kinds will need to be made as with all systems as they mature and evolve. But this is not what the US and its allies want: they need Eritrea to be brought to heel. And this simply cannot and will not be accepted by Eritrea, no matter the sanctions, no matter the demonization, no matter the demagoguery.

Neocolonialism comes in many forms: political, economic, social, cultural, philosophical, psychological, etc. It is undeniably true that Africa, and indeed most of the Global South, continues to be enslaved by the neocolonialism of the former colonial masters. It is also true that the neocolonial status quo is not to be challenged. Eritrea is one of the few countries doing precisely that. And it is for this reason, that it is demonized and vilified.

And it is for precisely this reason, that it must be defended.

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