

The North Korea of Africa: A Myth or Reality?

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Eritrea is a country in the horn of Africa, bordered to the east by the Red Sea, to the north and south by Sudan and Ethiopia respectively, and Djibouti borders it to the southeast (NSO and Fafo AIS, 2013). The country has a unique and checkered history in its journey towards sovereignty and statehood. Its strategic location in the horn particularly along the Red Sea, and potential natural resources makes it susceptible to external invasion, occupation, and domination. For several years, between late 19th century to the last decade of the 20th century, Eritrea was under colonial control of the Italians and later by the British. It then engaged in 30 years of armed liberation struggle after 1961 for sovereignty and independence in 1991 and in recent times the Ethiopia/Eritrea border conflict from 1998 to 2018 (Ibid). The historical trajectory of Eritrean existence as a country reveal a rather tortuous transition from colonial subjugation, violent conflict, relatively short peace, and revert to conflict. The country has had, arguably, 7 years of peace and many years of arms struggle for self-determination. The geography of the country and the resilience of its people had and continue to withstand the external and internal challenges posed to the country. Eritrea therefore presents a unique context for studying the dynamics of conflict, peace and development.

The paucity of research on Eritrea generally, and on post conflict development in particular, reinforce the relevance of this study abroad program. In spite of the isolation and sanctions on the country by the International community, the one-sided western media denigration, Eritrea seem to be making some progress in its developmental efforts. For example, Eritrea is one of the first African country to achieve some of the millennium development goals (MDG's) especially in child mortality and maternal health (Eritrea Ministry of Health, 2018). This presents an interesting setting and context of post conflict reconstruction and development in Africa worth exploring. Notwithstanding, the dominant narrative from the Western media has been negative. Against this backdrop, I reflect on the narratives on Eritrea from within and outside in other to gauge the reality or otherwise of the dominant narrative.

Existing Dominant Narrative on Eritrea

The narratives on Eritrea to a very large extent emanate from outside Eritrea and given life through the western media. The stories on Post conflict Eritrea has largely been negative and

derogatory. The Western countries and international bodies have led the narrative charge on Eritrea. Notable among these are the United States and the United Nations. The United States through President Obama labeled Eritrea as the ‘North Korea of Africa’ in a 2012 speech at the Clinton Global Initiative, accusing the former of injustices and engaging in human trafficking or modern-day slavery. The United States further accused Eritrea of sending weapons to rebel groups. The Western media described the Eritrean government as a terrible dictatorship and bloody regime engaged in arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of opponents. These stories depict the country as a caricature of hell on earth, not worthy of human existence with all manner of abuses, a militarized state worth the streets a washed with weapons. Without evaluating the fairness and factual basis of these dominant narratives or their underlying motives, its negative impact on the post conflict reconstruction efforts of Eritrea cannot be overemphasized.

The Counter Narratives on Eritrea

In recent times the Western narrative on Eritrea has come under scrutiny, raising questions about the validity of the stories told and the fairness of the policy prescriptions flowing out of it. This scrutiny is gaining momentum as some Eritreans in the diaspora and in Eritrea are beginning to find their voices and some members of the international media and researchers have visited and observed happenings in Eritrea. Their observations and experiences are producing narratives that run counter to that of the West.

In an OP-ED to the New York Times, Burton (2016), a researcher who visited Eritrea and spoke to government officials and people, refuted the labelling of Eritrea as North Korea of Africa. He questioned the credibility and fairness of the UN commission of inquiry on human right report that made scathing attacks on the Eritrean government. Even though he did not give a clean bill of health on some human rights issues in Eritrea, he observed however that the report of the UN commission inquiry was flawed and skewed to reinforce the Western media narrative. He raised fundamental issues of bias with the methodology employed by the commission tainting their story on Eritrea. The commission’s report failed to acknowledge the efforts and progress made, though modest, in education, health and agriculture.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Eritrea commended the efforts of the Eritrean government in promoting equitable, accessible and affordable health to its populace. Eritrea’s resolve in achieving the millennium development goals (MDGs) in health and reducing

infant and child mortality rates was acknowledged by the UNDP (UNDP Report, 2014). In the face of limited resources and international sanctions, Eritrea has been innovative in their health service delivery to enhance access and economic empowerment of the treated patients. In Mendefera (sub-soba or region in Eritrea), Pediatric services have been decentralized to the community level to improve access and reduce pressure on the referral hospital. Through a community-based approach, they have further designed the Fistula rehabilitation program that provides skill training to treated Fistula patients. These patients receive not only their health needs addressed but are also empowered economically. Unfortunately, these positive stories have failed to break through the media wall of the West.

Against the backdrop of the protracted arms struggle, the isolation and crippling sanctions, Eritrea has made modest gains in education. As part of its guiding principle of social justice, education is free up to the tertiary level because of the premium the Eritrean government places on education as a means of empowerment in both war and peace time for sovereignty and national development. Access and growth in the literacy rate have increased significantly. Eritrea is unique in how education was integrated into its war effort.

Eritreans are making good strides in Agriculture, the main occupation for majority of the populace. Like education, agriculture was vigorously pursued even during the liberation struggle. Captured agricultural equipment from Ethiopia were repatriated and deployed to support farming activities. Addressing the unreliable rain pattern, water conservation methods including furrow and pressurizing irrigation, micro dams, and terracing have been designed to ensure all year round farming to enhance the livelihood of the farmers. Also, the flagship program, Minimum Integrated Household Agriculture Package (MIHAP) is a locally developed initiative to address the nutritional needs, ensure food security and empower the farmers economically. The stories of these post conflict development initiatives brewed from the African pot sadly have received very little to no attention in the Western media.

The government have been accused of controlling the media space thereby stifling decent. While the media landscape in Eritrea is largely state owned, the population have access to some foreign channels operating outside the country. Satellite dishes can be found in most household all over the country. This is a unique feature that distinguishes it from other African countries despite the low internet connectivity. The government social justice policy of providing critical

infrastructure such as electricity to all parts of the country has provided the opportunity for Eritreans to access other media besides that of the state such as BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera among a few. Also, individual freedom of speech in Eritrea is apparently not curtailed and there are no restrictions on foreigners' interactions with the citizenry.

The Western narrative of religious discrimination and gender inequality in Eritrea seem contrary to what is observed on the ground. The predominant religions, Christianity and Islam co-exist peacefully. These groups have pulled together during the liberation struggle and working communally now to reconstruct and develop their communities and country. A cross section of religious leaders observed that their individual strength rest on collective unity and their march to development rest on keeping the peace. Arguably, Eritrea is among the very few countries in Africa, and probably globally making great strides in gender parity. The women fought alongside the men for liberation and independence and currently partnering the men in shaping the future of the country.

Besides its rich culture, the country is unique in its zero tolerance for corruption which has been the bane of Africa's efforts at development. Community participation in decisions that affect them has been given real meaning in Eritrea. The bottom-up approach to governance is central to the government's ethos and manifested in the various innovative developmental programs in the country. The self-reliance character of the Eritreans is infections to watch. Although some African countries has advocated for self-reliance during the early years of their independence, it is Eritrea that has provided meaning to this rhetoric. Self-reliance was not only the guiding principle in the war effort during its liberation struggle, but also foundational to the current socio-political economic and cultural development agenda of the country. Eritrea is a shining example of a country committed to ensuring social and economic equity, despite its challenges, through its social justice policy. The policy aims at equitable distribution of social services such as education and health to all parts of the country and help bridge the inequality gap between the rural and urban economies. These few examples of stories from Eritrea runs counter to the dominant narrative of the international media and do not reflect the label of 'North Korea of Africa'.

References

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