



## Eritrea: Cracks in “Africa’s North Korea”

**OE Watch Commentary:** Eritrea hears very little from the outside world, and the outside world hears very little from Eritrea, and only from Eritrean refugees. That is by design: The government of Isaias Afwerki, who has been in power for over two decades, severely restricts media and internet access. It also severely restricts the rights of its citizens, brutally suppressing any sort of opposition against the regime. This is why, as the accompanying article describes, a protest that recently occurred in the capital city of Asmara is rather surprising. Not surprising is that the event was harshly put down by the special forces. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the teenagers who took to the streets that day (to oppose the nationalization of an Islamic school) probably knew they would be met with violence. According to the article, this suggests that young people are “saying enough is enough.” This could signal a new willingness of at least some citizens to stand up against a government whose cruel oppression of its own citizens coupled with its deliberate isolation from the outside world has earned it the sobriquet of “Africa’s North Korea.”

The report discusses that it is perhaps the youth of Eritrea who are particularly unhappy with the government. They face long military conscriptions and a marked lack of jobs in the civilian sector. Many flee only to be stranded in neighboring countries, while others attempt a risky journey to cross the Mediterranean. It is not just the poor who flee. Sons and daughters of the country’s ruling elite also search for a better life elsewhere. Even President Afwerki’s youngest son, Berhane, tried to get out, making an attempt in 2015, but was intercepted by border patrols. As the article states, these children would rather cut ties with their parents and risk living destitute than stay in Eritrea.

If leaving is difficult, it is also not easy to stay behind and protest the conditions. Previous acts of resistance to the government have been dealt with severely. The article discusses one instance where 12,000 students were forced to travel on foot for over three weeks – two died crossing a river, two from snake bites, and then 34 more when they arrived at their destination and were not properly sheltered.

So far incidents against the regime appear isolated, with no coordination around a large collective movement. However, even if totally spontaneous, the fact that a protest occurred in Asmara is quite notable. Also notable is that the police sent to disperse them instead told the young people that they shared their grievances, and did not open fire. Unfortunately the country’s special forces did not share the same sentiment as the police, for when the students got near the Presidential palace, they opened fire. Because it happened in “Africa’s North Korea,” it is unknown if there were casualties, and if so, how many. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**

*“But in the face of clear threats and repression by the regime, and in the absence of an organized opposition, groups of youth may be beginning to take matters into their own hands.”*



Isaias Afwerki, President of Eritrea.

Source: Freedom4E/Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President\\_Isaias\\_Afewerk.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President_Isaias_Afewerk.jpg), CC BY-SA 4.0

**Source:** Abraham Zere, “Fight not flight: Eritrea’s youth taking matters into their own hands,” *African Arguments*, 29 November 2017. <http://africanarguments.org/2017/11/29/eritrea-youth-are-taking-matters-into-their-own-hands/>

*On the 31 October, Eritrea experienced a rare protest as hundreds of people took the streets in opposition against the nationalisation of an Islamic school. Government forces reacted in characteristically brutal fashion and dispersed protesters with gun-shots in the capital Asmara.*

*For over 16 years, there has been virtually no space to challenge the government of Eritrea. There is no independent press or right to free association and movement. Internet penetration is almost non-existent. And extreme militarization and surveillance pervade society.*

*These acts of insubordination suggest that many young people are now saying enough is enough. There does not seem to be coordination around a collective movement. But in the face of clear threats and repression by the regime, and in the absence of an organized opposition, groups of youth may be beginning to take matters into their own hands. Knowing no-one will instigate change for them, frustrated young people may be feeling a greater sense of ownership over their own affairs and future.*