

The Indigenous World 2021: Eritrea

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Eritrea is home to a culturally, ethnically, linguistically and religiously heterogeneous society. In spite of this, it has a highly centralised and unitary state. Its government wields complete control and monopoly of the state apparatus, and all national and natural resources belonging to the Eritrean people. With no available legal remedies, the rights of Indigenous Peoples and minorities remain severely curtailed. Eritrea has neither a national legislative nor institutional framework that protects the rights of minorities or other societal groups that lay claim to indigeneity.

In an Eritrean context, reference to Indigenous Peoples is primarily based on the claim of indigeneity made by some Eritrean ethnic groups such as the Afar, Kunama, Saho and Nara. ^[1] Lately, a newly-formed political movement known as Agazian is also making radical claims of indigeneity. Due to the extremely closed political situation in Eritrea itself, such claims are made outside Eritrea (in diaspora circles) by organisations or advocates representing said ethnic groups. The country does not have either an operative constitution or a functioning parliament. It has never held free and fair national elections. Rights to freedom of association and expression are severely curtailed. The rights of Indigenous Peoples are not formally acknowledged, nor are there any representative organisations advocating for them.

Since 2001, in particular, the country has continued to suffer from an aggravated political crisis that has given rise to widespread and systematic human rights violations, described by a United Nations Commission of Inquiry as amounting to crimes against humanity.^[2] Reliable data on the exact numbers of ethnic and linguistic groups in Eritrea, including disaggregated data on the socio-economic situation of Indigenous groups, is rarely available. Eritrea is a State party to the CERD, CEDAW and CRC but not to ILO Convention 169 or the UNDRIP. There is a huge gap between the commitments made in the treaties Eritrea has signed and the government's actual practice.

A continued problem of gross human rights violations

Overall, Eritrea remains a very difficult country not only for Indigenous Peoples' rights but also for enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms by its population generally. This is due to the widespread problem of human rights violations in the country, which is clearly documented in the two major reports of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COIE).^[3] Since publication of the first chapter/article on Eritrea in this annual report (in 2017), the overall situation of human rights, including the situation of Indigenous Peoples' rights in Eritrea, has not shown any meaningful improvement.

In this context, and for the period under review (January to December 2020), this chapter focuses on three major developments that have a direct bearing on Indigenous Peoples' enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms in Eritrea. These are developments related to: 1) COVID-19; 2) a newly-erupted armed conflict in the northern province of Ethiopia (the Regional State of Tigray), with far-fetching implications for the Indigenous peoples of Eritrea living along the common border between Eritrea and Ethiopia; and 3) a new claim of indigeneity made by a newly-formed and radical political movement known as Agazian.

The impact of COVID-19

According to official figures from the Eritrean government, Eritrea has one of the lowest numbers of reported cases of COVID-19 in Africa. As of 14 January 2021, it is reported that there had been a total of 1,805 coronavirus cases, from which 1,014 people had recovered and only six people had died. There are 785 patients receiving treatment in hospital.^[4] Since March 2020, the country has been in near complete lockdown with far-reaching implications for food security and other vital elements of survival. COVID-19 restrictions include the total lockdown of public transport nationally since March 2020, making people's life difficult. Due to the prevailing lack of transparency and a deep-seated political crisis in the country, the impact of the pandemic on Indigenous Peoples is difficult to gauge accurately. Moreover, in spite of the sustained lockdown, the government continues to conscript citizens into an indefinite military conscription programme, as noted on 20 September 2020 by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea.^[5]

The implications of an elusive peace with Ethiopia

In July 2018, Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a new peace agreement aimed at resolving a prolonged two-decade-long political stalemate dating back to a 1998-2000 border conflict. There were high expectations for the enduring potential of this new peace agreement. However, the new peace process has been strained due to a deteriorating political crisis in the northern part of Ethiopia (the Regional State of Tigray), with which Eritrea shares its longest border of more than 1,000 kilometres.

Since early November 2020, there has been ongoing armed conflict in the Regional State of Tigray in Ethiopia in which the active involvement of Eritrean troops has been reported by various credible sources, including by a high-ranking Ethiopian army commander (although the Eritrean government has never officially admitted such claims).^[6] Armed groups have attacked major refugee camps in Tigray and, as a result, Eritrean refugees in those camps (including those who claim indigeneity) have reportedly been exposed to various levels of danger, such as abduction, killing and forcible return to Eritrea.^[7] In a matter of one month, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) issued two official statements expressing deep concern about the plight of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. In an official statement of 14 January 2021, the head of the UN refugee agency said:

I am very worried for the safety and well-being of Eritrean refugees in those camps. They have been without any aid for many weeks. Furthermore, and of utmost concern, I continue to receive many reliable reports and first-hand accounts of ongoing insecurity and allegations of grave and distressing human rights abuses, including killings, targeted abductions and forced return of refugees to Eritrea. Reports of additional military incursions over the last 10 days are consistent with open-source satellite imagery showing new fires burning and other fresh signs of destruction at the two camps. These are concrete indications of major violations of international law.^[8]

In relation to this matter, on 27 January 2021 the US government issued its strongest statement since the start of the conflict in which it demanded the immediate withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray and expressed great concern at the forcible return of Eritrean refugees from Tigray to Eritrea by Eritrean soldiers.^[9] As far as the plight of Eritrean refugees in the four major refugees camps^[10] in Ethiopia is concerned, there is a need for an immediate cessation of hostilities in the area and re-establishment of full protection services by UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies. Since the beginning of the armed conflict in Tigray (in early November 2020), a UN-wide call for full and unimpeded access to the refugee camps has been largely ignored by the Ethiopian authorities, even after the authorities claimed that the “rebellious group” in Tigray had been defeated by the end of November 2020.

New and competing claims of indigeneity

Over the past few years, the Eritrean political scene has seen the emergence of a new and radical political movement, commonly known as Agazian or the Agazian Brotherhood. The term Agazian literally refers to speakers of the ancient language of Geez, which is presently found only in liturgical services, mainly in the Eritrean and Ethiopian Orthodox churches.

In a relatively short period of time, Agazian has attracted a widespread support base in various Eritrean diaspora places. The movement openly avows to establish a Tigrinya Orthodox Christian state in what is now Eritrea and the northern part of Ethiopia (the Regional State Tigray). In so doing, it propagates its political objective by using anti-Muslim and openly militant rhetoric, giving itself the semblance of an extremist and far-right nationalist political organisation, with far-fetching consequences for a deepening of the divisions within the already fractious political landscape of the Eritrean diaspora. One particular element of direct relevance to the discourse on Indigenous Peoples' rights is the movement's claim that goes as follows:

According to Agazians, Eritrea's (and northern Ethiopia's) Indigenous population are the Tigrinya speakers, who are Orthodox Christians, and as such virtually all others are considered to be foreign migrants. Agazians define their political ideology "not only by the shared identity they claim, but also by a shared enemy – anyone who is not Tigrinyan and Orthodox Christian, and particularly all Muslims".^[11] The movement, which also portrays high level of propensity towards Zionism,^[12] has started to challenge traditional conceptions of indigeneity articulated by other smaller Eritrean ethnic groups, such as the Afar, Kunama, Nara and Saho. With the exception of the Kunama, the other three ethnic groups are believed to be entirely Muslim communities.

As a new form of political and/or ethnic identity, there is a need for a thorough investigation of Agazian's claim to indigeneity. This movement is, in part, a continuation of the long history of a dichotomous discourse on identity, framed as Christian Tigrinya and Islamic-Arabic.^[13] The movement introduces a new constellation in the Eritrean discourse of Indigenous Peoples' rights. Furthermore, now and in the future, this new development will pose critical challenges to Eritrea's long-awaited transition to democracy, where all issues related to the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, including all claims of indigeneity, will need to be addressed in a democratic way. The emergence of a radical political movement, of the Agazian ilk, is expected to make the country's forthcoming post-dictatorship era fraught with uncertainty – because it is only in that post-dictatorship era that all outstanding issues and claims to indigeneity can be resolved meaningfully.^[14]

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Notes and references

[1] According to the 2020 IWGIA chapter on Eritrea, the total population of Eritrea is estimated at between 4.4 and 5.9 million. From this, the following figures can be deduced: Afar (between 4 and 12% of total population), Kunama (2%), Saho (4%) and Nara (>1%).

[2] United Nations Human Rights Council. “First Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea”. A/HRC/29/42, 4 June 2015.; United Nations Human Rights Council. “Second Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea.” A/HRC/32/47, 8 June 2016.

[3] Ibid. See also, Tronvoll, Kjetil, and Daniel R. Mekonnen. The African Garrison State: Human Rights and Political Development in Eritrea. James Currey, 2014.

[4] ሚኒስቴር ዜና፡ “ሓገራታ ካብ ሚኒስቴር ጥዕና” (Ministry of Information, “Information from the Ministry of Health”). 14 January 2021.
<https://shabait.com/2021/01/14/%e1%88%93%e1%89%a0%e1%88%ac%e1%89%b3-%e1%8a%ab%e1%89%a5-%e1%88%9a%e1%8a%92%e1%88%b5%e1%89%b5%e1%88%aa-%e1%8c%a5%e1%8b%95%e1%8a%93-46/>.

[5] OHCHR. “Statement of Ms Daniela Kravetz, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea.” 75th Summit of the General Assembly, Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Issues (Third Committee, 26 October 2020).
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26439&LangID=E>.

[6] Reuters. “Ethiopian general says Eritrean troops entered Tigray: Video clip.” 7 January 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-idUKKBN29C2L4>.

[7] UNCHR. “Statement attributable to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi on the situation in Ethiopia’s Tigray region.” 11 December 2020.
<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/12/5fd3ab2d4/statement-attributable-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-situation.html>.

[8] UNHRC. “Statement on the situation of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia’s Tigray region.” 14 January 2021. <https://www.unhcr.org/admin/hcspeeches/600052064/statement-situation-eritrean-refugees-ethiopias-tigray-region.html>.

[9] AP News. “US says Eritrean forces should leave Tigray immediately.” 27 January 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/eritrea-coronavirus-pandemic-africa-ethiopia-kenya-83b90a145d271eb39d664726bd5acbe5>.

[10] The major refugee camps under attack, with over 100 000 Eritrean refugees, are: Mai Aini, Adi Harush, Shimelba and Hitsats. See note 7 above.

[11] Ben Yehuda, Inbal. “The far-right nationalist movement roiling Eritreans in Israel.” +972 Magazine, 7 May 2018. <https://www.972mag.com/the-far-right-nationalist-movement-roiling-eritreans-in-israel/>.

[12] In one article, posted on an Israeli website, the founder of Agazian, the controversial Tesfazion Gerhelase, is described as follows: “Tesfazion Gerhelase is a British-Eritrean citizen, a Tigrigna nationalist and Zionist. He is the founder of Agaiazian Media and Education Centre (AMEC), which is dedicated to fighting anti-Semitism and BDS delegitimization of Israel.” See Gerhelase, Tesfazion. “Without Israel, the Middle East is lost.” Jewish News Syndicate, 19 August 2019. <https://www.jns.org/opinion/without-israel-the-middle-east-is-lost/>. The movement’s website is: <https://agaiazian.org/>.

[13] “Bereketeab, Redie. “The politics of language in Eritrea: Equality of languages vs. bilingual official language policy.” *African and Asian Studies* 9 (2010): 168.

[14] See also on similar pressing issues, Mekonnen, Daniel. “The right to cross-border identity of individuals with Eritrean and Ethiopian ancestry: International and comparative law perspectives.” *Ethiopian Yearbook of International Law* (2019): 49-79.