

Eritrea - one of the 'Horn of East Africa' countries – was established in 1890, when the region was colonised by Italy. After being occupied by the Italian military in 1890, Eritrea remained an Italian colony for many years before falling under a UK mandate in 1941, and then became a federated state as part of Ethiopia in 1951. After some unsuccessful nonviolent campaigns in the cities and towns in the 1950s and 1960s, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) began the armed struggle for independence in 1961. By the 1970s, there were two rival Eritrean armed movements at war with one another - the ELF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). After the civil war ended in 1981, the EPLF dominated Eritrea both militarily and politically, and achieved independence for Eritrea in 1991.

In 1994, the EPLF was renamed the 'Peoples' Front for Democracy and Justice' (PFDJ). Two decades later, the PFDJ remains the only legal political party, and control the country politically and economically. There is no right to free speech, assembly, protest or free media. Thousands of Eritreans are in detention for their political views, without access to due process.

Since the government introduced 'National Military Service' in 1995, the country has become highly militarised. All grade 12 students attend the 'Sawa Defence Training Centre', where - though the students do not carry weapons - they are treated as members of the national military service, and do marching and military training exercises. Though nominally set at 18 months, no military-fit national service recruit has been released from military service since the Eritrean-Ethiopia war, which ended in 2000. Military service in Eritrea is unpaid, and has forced many young Eritreans to flee the country.

As a result of the PFDJ's harsh treatment of political dissent, opposition to their rule has been almost exclusively based in the diaspora, including a significant presence in Ethiopia. Inside Eritrea, resistance is limited to isolated incidents and occasional acts of defiance that have been easy to isolate and curtail, even if it they have had support from military officials or government ministers.

Arbi Harnet ("Freedom Friday") is a campaign run by members of the Eritrean diaspora living in USA or the EU, which aims to link acts of resistance inside Eritrea with the diaspora community. The diaspora resistance aims to be informed and guided by realities inside Eritrea, and to support resistance groups inside the country. Arbi Harnet seeks to encourage the nascent movement for democracy inside Eritrea, by developing contact with ordinary Eritreans, transmitting messages to them, and encouraging them to take collective action. Because social and traditional media are tightly controlled by the government, mobilisation work has to be carried out utilising methods that allow for creative engagement of ordinary people. To do this, the campaign uses mobile and land line telephones.

Phone call activism

Every month, Arbi Harnet chooses a relevant and pertinent issue, and contacts the Eritrean public, using a 'Robo-call' machine to make hundreds or even thousands of phone calls, directly into Eritrea. The diaspora activists use the calls to encourage opposition to the regime by boycotting government-led commemoration events (such as on 'Independence Day' and 'Martyr's Day'), asking people to stay indoors as an act of protest on Friday's, and to encourage discussions about collective resistance actions.

he first attempts at calling in to Eritrea were in November 2011, and saw 200-250 calls a month. By 2013, 5,000-10,000 were being made each month, using a computer to make automated 'Robo-calls' which delivers pre-recorded messages. The calls specifically request that, on Friday's, people 'silence the streets' by staying at home, an act of resistance that is sensitive to the Eritrean context and allows many people to participate. Activists have also chosen specific days or events to send messages into Eritrea, and tailored their message accordingly.

May 24 is 'Independence Day' in Eritrea. The human rights agenda had taken centre stage for those reflecting on the turn of events in the country since the hopeful post-independence days. The number of prisons and prisoners, and outflow of young refugees is a stark reminder of where Eritrea has ended up after

independence. On Independence Day, Arbi Harnet's calls aims to give ordinary Eritreans an insight into international solidarity, and encourages them to reflect on those who lost their lives in the independence struggle, and on the conditions in Eritrea.

Similarly, calls made on 20 June are designed to coincide with Eritrean Martyr's Day. The calls encourage Eritreans inside the country to reflect on the promise of the revolution and uphold the promise of a 'Free Eritrea' as a tribute to all those who died fighting for it.

In July 2013, the government of Eritrea 'graduated' thousands of 'national service recruits' and sent them home for a brief period before deployment to military service posts or the militarised 'education institutes'. The Arbi Harnet activists saw this as an opportunity to engage with young people in the army or military schools who will not have access to information even in the form of the automated monthly messages. A specific call, encouraging young people to organise amongst fellow recruits and work to uphold justice, was transmitted, mostly to mobile phones.

Impact in Eritrea

Arbi Harnet has been able to build trust between activists in Eritrea and those in the diaspora. Activists have started working together, for example by smuggling posters printed outside the country into Eritrea. As trust has grown, activists in the country have suggested ideas for other work relevant to the situation in Eritrea, such as a poster campaign in support of a disabled war veteran, and a full colour glossy poster campaign themed 'enough is enough!'.

As trust has increased, activists have collaborated on more adventurous projects such as "MeqaleH Forto" ('Echoes of Forto'), an underground newspaper. As activists in the country become more effective and confident, the diaspora 'Arbi Harnet' activists hope to play more of a supportive role and continue to develop the Robo-call project.

Reaction

The project has enjoyed unprecedented international media coverage. Eritrean media outlets in the diaspora have covered the movement's actions on Facebook pages, Twitter and other media outlets. Inside Eritrea, citizens have reacted positively to the messages and the calls have attracted outrage from government officials and their supporters.

When the May calls were announced, the organisers were informed by their contacts inside Eritrea that households in Asmara were required to report to their local administration office - in traditional festive outfits - to join the official 'Friday Evening Carnival'. However, the turnout was low, with only young children and diaspora visitors attending the event. Among other things, the calls have played a great role for the reaction of the government.

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