DIASPEACE

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Modes and Potential of Diaspora Engagement in Eritrea

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Content

ABSTRACT: The involvement of Eritrean diaspora communities in conflict and post-conflict reconstruction in Eritrea dates back to the times of the struggle for independence. The transnational ties between the former liberation fronts and the Eritrean state have been very close ever since. This paper describes the modes and potential of diaspora engagement in Eritrea, focussing especially on recent developments in Eritrean diaspora communities worldwide since 2000. It seeks to describe the specific political, social and economic conditions in Eritrea that provide a framework for the engagement of exiled communities as well as Eritrean policies, which target specifically Eritrean communities abroad. It further aims to describe the various patterns of diaspora engagement in Eritrea, differentiating between individual and organised diaspora activities by tentatively taking into account the potential impacts of these activities on Eritrean society and policies.

The focus of the analysis on the last decade is based on the assumption that the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998–2000) has had a major impact not only on civil society in Eritrea but also on organisational patterns among Eritrean diaspora communities. While the right of freedom to association in Eritrea has been further curtailed since 2001, the diaspora communities experienced diversification and the emergence of new civil society organisations following an increase in refugee movements. Further research is required to determine whether these developments in the diaspora communities affect Eritrean civil society and encourage the revitalisation of civil society organisations in Eritrea. The paper draws on the recent pertinent literature on Eritrean exile communities as well as on preliminary findings of the ongoing DIASPEACE research project.

1. Introduction

Eritrean exiles today are approximately one-quarter to one-third of Eritrea's total estimated population of up to 5.6 million people (CIA, 2010; Redeker Hepner, 2008, p. 476). There is, however, no official census and estimates, both of Eritrea's total population and of Eritrean exiles vary considerably, since Eritreans entering the various recipient countries prior to 1993 were registered upon arrival as "Ethiopians" rather than "Eritreans". The government claims that there are 530,000 exiles worldwide, based on the turnout of the 1993 referendum. According to contemporary estimates, recent out-migrants and Eritreans born abroad double that figure (Conrad, 2005, pp. 211-261).[1]

Besides earlier labour migration and intellectual exile movements, migration from Eritrea has taken place in various major waves. Up to one million Eritreans left the country during the 30 year-long struggle for independence (1961-1991) and the civil war between the two liberation movements. The majority took refuge in neighbouring Sudan; other destinations included Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. After Eritrea was granted independence, contrary to expectations within and outside of Eritrea, few Eritreans returned from northern and western countries to Eritrea, while tens of thousands of refugees in Sudan were either awaiting or undertaking return. The Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000) generated a relatively small number of Eritrean refugees (Al-Ali et al., 2001; Redeker Hepner and Conrad, 2005; Koser, 2007) whereas economic decline, forced conscription and the increasingly repressive political climate in the aftermath of the conflict contributed, and still contributes, to larger migration flows. According to UNHCR figures, in 2008, 180,000 refugees originated from Eritrea and in 2008 alone, 62,700 new asylum claims worldwide were filed by individuals originating from Eritrea (UNHCR, 2008, p. 16, p. 65). Today, it appears that large parts of the refugee community, ostensibly awaiting repatriation will not actually return.

The transnational linkages between the Eritrean state and Eritrean communities abroad have traditionally been very strong and Eritrean nationalist movements have strong transnational origins. Likewise, both the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) and the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) were founded abroad, and the Eritrean communities, especially in Sudan and Cairo, played a major role in the organisation of the armed struggle (Redeker Hepner, 2009, p. 20; Kibreab, 2007, p. 98). During the struggle for independence from Ethiopia and in the post-independence phase, the Eritrean diaspora[2] constantly engaged in conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. The liberation fronts as well as the newly established Eritrean state were able to institutionalise and mobilise Eritrean communities abroad through the establishment of mass organisations that were able to efficiently mobilise substantive contributions to war and (re-) construction. Following a short period of 'demobilisation' of the diaspora (Mezzetti 2008, p. 161) after independence, it was efficiently re-mobilised by the government during the Ethio–Eritrean border war.

For decades, the diaspora has been characterised by a common commitment to the project of Eritrean independence, a shared sense of pride in having won an independent homeland, and the revitalisation of nationalistic sentiments during the border war. However, ever since historical cleavages have run deeply not only between ELF and EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) supporters but also among the diaspora

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[1]   The *Migration and Remittances Factbook* counts 848,851 emigrants in 2005 (Ratha and Xu, 2008).
[2]   For an in-depth discussion of the concept of diaspora and transnationalism, see the DIASPEACE Synthesis Report; Anderson, 1983; Safran, 1991; Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 1996; Brubaker, 2005; Basch et al., 1994; Portes et al., 1999.

communities (see Redeker Hepner, 2009, p.108). More recently, these cleavages have become more apparent and intermingle with more recent ones.

Since 2000, an increased fragmentation and polarisation of the diaspora can be observed. The re-emergence of the former ELF and its splinter groups, the establishment of new opposition groups, and the founding of civic movements advocating guarantees of human rights and democracy in Eritrea, as well as the rights of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in the respective recipient country are occurrences indicative of a transformation of the diaspora communities towards such diversification. In addition, the alienation of considerable sections of the diaspora from the Eritrean state is arguably a consequence of unfulfilled expectations with regard to political reforms in Eritrea. These developments can be considered a "structural shift of the Eritrean transnational social field"[3] (Redeker Hepner, 2007, p. 11).

This paper seeks to assess the extent to which conditions and policies in the country of origin shape transnational engagement of diaspora communities. It argues that the overall political, economic and social environment in Eritrea, and Eritrean policies directly targeting the diaspora, affect both the patterns and the potential of diaspora engagement for development and peace in Eritrea. The argument is based on an analysis of the political, social, and economic conditions in Eritrea. Second, it draws on an assessment of state–diaspora relations, which are a function of socio-political developments and diaspora policies in the origin country. Third, the paper describes current patterns of diaspora engagement. Differentiating between individual and organised activities, the paper takes into account the potential impact of each of the activities on the situation in Eritrea.

This paper relies on the recent pertinent literature on Eritrean exile communities as well as on preliminary findings of the ongoing DIASPEACE project. While Eritrean diaspora engagement during the 30-year struggle for independence and the post-independence decade is relatively well documented by, among others, Al-Ali, Black and Koser (2001), Redeker Hepner and Conrad (2005) and Matsuoka and Sorenson (2001), developments among the diaspora communities since 2001 are less well documented. A topic, which has recently gained importance in academic discourse, is the influence of the Internet on mobilisation patterns (Bernal, 2006) and Eritrean transnationalism as well as emergent rights-based initiatives (Redeker Hepner, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008, and Conrad, 2005, 2006, 2009). Much of the existing literature focuses on the "far" diaspora, hardly taking into account the Eritrean diaspora in neighbouring countries, such as Sudan and Ethiopia.[4] Lacking information on and assessment of the impacts of diaspora engagement on local communities and civil society in general in Eritrea makes this topic a prime target for further empirical research.

2. Political, Economic and Social Conditions Shaping Diaspora Engagement in Eritrea

The overall political, economic and social context in the origin country does not only have a direct impact on state–diaspora relations and the ability and willingness of diaspora members to engage with Eritrea, but also determines the extent to which such interaction might affect the situation in Eritrea.

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[3] The term „transnational social field" was coined by Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc (1992). Levitt defined social fields as "a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed" (Levitt 2006: 25).

[4] Important exceptions are Kibreab (2007), Bariagaber (2006) and Bereketeab (2009).

According to Al-Ali et al., the political context within the country of origin is more significant for Eritrean transnational activities than the political context of the country of residence (2001). Kibreab states that whether transnational groupings are able to wield positive or negative influence on politics of their origin country is to a large extent a function of the nature of the government in place (2007, p. 111).[5]

2.1 The political climate

The young Eritrean state is an autocratic regime (Marshall and Jaggers, 2007). Political authority is highly centralised in the hands of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)[6]. There are no national elections, and political participation is heavily restricted. In addition, the situation in Eritrea is characterized by a severe human rights crisis and by the militarization of the economy and society.

The constitution of Eritrea is still not fully implemented and political power remains concentrated in the hands of the president. Since its independence in 1993, there have been no elections at the national level. Although in theory the creation of political parties in Eritrea is not forbidden, in practice, legislation on procedures governing the formation of political parties is absent. Hence, the PFDJ is the only legal political party, and the creation of Eritrean political opposition parties and oppositional activities can take place only in exile. According to Bereketeab (2007), two categories of opposition can be distinguished: the first group consists of remnants of the liberation struggle era, i.e. factions of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) while the second group is composed of recently established ethnically defined organisations, such as the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organisation (RSADO), the Democratic Movement for Liberation of Kunama (DMLK), and the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP). In spite of the government's policy of "unity in diversity", regional and ethnic loyalties still play an important role in the country. Especially the influence of Islamic oppositional movements appears to be on the rise, due to an increasing resentment in the Eritrean lowlands against a perceived dominance of Christian highlanders. Since 2001, factional rifts have also appeared within the ruling PFDJ, and the military and police forces (Hirt, 2008, p. 314).

The war with Ethiopia (1998-2000) marked the inception of a human rights crisis in Eritrea, which became even more obvious with the major crackdown on dissidents in the year 2001 (Redeker Hepner, 2007, p. 28). In September 2001, eleven of the so-called G-15-reformers, a group of fifteen senior members of the EPLF, the government, and the military who had signed an open letter criticizing the policies of President Issayas Afewerki and calling for an open debate about Eritrea's problems and the implementation of the Constitution, were removed from their government posts and arrested. At the same time, other political 'dissidents', including journalists and students, were arrested and independent media outlets closed down. These developments produced widespread discontent within and outside the country. Furthermore, questions about the diplomatic as well as the military handling of the war with Ethiopia established the grounds for political dissent (Conrad, 2006, p. 251, 262). Today, independent journalists are repeatedly arrested and there are thousands of political prisoners in Eritrea. Estimates vary between 10,000 and 30,000 (Tronvoll, 2009; Amnesty International, 2007). Human rights violations and a "widespread, and at times arbitrary, detention policy characterizes the current situation in Eritrea" (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 14).

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[5]   However, research within the DIASPEACE project also reveals the impact of context conditions in the residence countries on patterns and modes of diaspora engagement (see Warnecke, ed., 2010).

[6]   In February 1994, the EPLF renamed itself the People's Front for Democracy and Justice as part of its transformation into Eritrea's ruling political party.

The state media are under government control. Rule of law, freedom of expression and of assembly, as well as movement and academic freedom are nonexistent.[7] Since 2002, religious freedom has been severely restricted for followers of minority churches, such as the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and Muslim minorities—the Wahabi branch of Islam being one example—with the argument that these compromise the state-sanctioned tradition of Orthodox Christianity and Islam (Redeker Hepner, 2007, p. 3). Jehovah's Witnesses are denied citizenship because they are conscientious objectors to military training and service, and refused to participate in the 1993 referendum for independence. In addition, the increasing interference of the government in the accepted religious communities, mainly Islam and Orthodox Christianity, can be observed (see Section 4.2; Redeker Hepner 2010; BTI, 2007, p. 14, 18).

Furthermore, an intensifying militarisation of the Eritrean society via compulsory conscription can be observed. According to the BICC Global Militarization Index (GMI)[8], Eritrea ranks first among the most militarized countries in the world, spending more than twenty percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on the armed forces (von Boemcken, 2009, p. 20) with a regular military personnel of 202,000 (IISS, 2008). The educational system has been militarised since 2003 (see Müller, 2009; Riggan, 2009). The University of Asmara was closed officially in 2006 and has since been substituted with a decentralised system of colleges headed by military commanders. Large segments of society of working age are forced to serve in the national service in the framework of the so-called Warsay Yikealo Campaign[9] with little to no payment. It is estimated that the number of people serving either in the military or through national service exceeds 900,000 (BTI, 2007, p. 9, 15). Eritrea also maintains an aggressive foreign policy including tensions with Yemen, the involvement in the Sudanese civil conflicts, armed clashes with Djibouti as well as the unsettled border dispute with Ethiopia.

The autocratic government and the restrictive political climate in Eritrea not only contributes to new out-migration flows which change the social composition of communities abroad, but it also impacts on patterns of diaspora engagement. It renders diaspora communities the only space within the Eritrean transnational social field that allows for the development and engagement of civic movements opposing the current regime (Redeker Hepner, 2003). Consequently, political debate and the formation of an opposition to the current regime mainly take place in communities abroad. At the same time, discontent and disillusionment with the political situation contribute to an alienation from the Eritrean government of large parts of the diaspora, and its withdrawal from direct engagement.

Not only does the political context in the country of origin shape diaspora engagement, it also has an impact on whether communities abroad can influence the situation 'at home'. With little prospect of participation in the political processes, either through

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[7]   In the Freedom of the World survey for 2009, Eritrea is classified as being "not free". In the "Freedom of the Press" ranking, Eritrea ranks number 190 out of 195 countries (Freedom House, 2009).

[8]   The BICC Global Militarization Index represents the relative weight and importance of the military apparatus of a state in relation to society as a whole. Militarization is defined, in a narrow sense, as resources (expenditure, personnel, and heavy weapons) available to a state's armed forces. The GMI analyses the military spending in relation to GDP and health services, the ratio of (para)military personnel, reserve forces, and physicians in relation to total population, and heavy weapons (armoured vehicles, artillery, combat aircraft and major fighting ships) in relation to population. For further information visit www.bicc.de.

[9]   In Summer 2002, the government introduced the "Warsay-Yikealo Development Campaign" aiming to promote the values of self-sacrifice, hard work and dedication to the Eritrean nation. This dedication has to be practised in the form of an unlimited military and national service. After having passed the military training, the conscripts work in agricultural enterprises run by the military or private enterprises against payment to the military officers in charge, or in infrastructure projects conducted by construction firms belonging to the ruling PFDJ.

posts in the government and administration or democratic elections, chances of political engagement by the diaspora and actual contributions are largely restricted.

2.2 Civil society

Eritrea lacks a civil society in the liberal-democratic sense, as defined for example by the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics, as an "arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values" (LSE, 2009), and differing from the institutional forms of the state, family and market. However, in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex and blurred. In this understanding, civil societies are constituted by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups (ibid).

In contrast, the existence of civil society organisations (CSO) in Eritrea is limited to quasi-governmental labour union, peasant, women, and youth organisations that have developed out of former EPLF mass organisations. Highly centralised and involving broad sections of the Eritrean society, the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS), the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW), and the Eritrean War Disabled Fighters Association (EWDFA) are penetrated by trained and loyal cadres of the PFDJ, and as such constitute part of the state apparatus and implement government programmes (Araya, 1999, p. 155). Apart from these mass organisations, hardly any other independent CSOs or interest groups exist in Eritrea, since no non-governmental organisation (NGO) is allowed to operate outside the direct control of the ruling party. In 2005, the government clamped down on NGOs by withdrawing tax exemptions, instituting requirements for project reports every three months, annual renewals of licences, meeting government-established target levels of financial resources, and by increasing registration requirements. In 2006, international human rights NGOs and the three remaining development NGOs were expelled by the government (Freedom House, 2009).

There is no freedom of assembly and association. Groups of 20 or more persons seeking to form a union require special approval from the Ministry of Labour. The very few local NGOs in existence are strictly limited in their activities to developmental issues. The same holds true for diaspora initiatives in Eritrea. Undermined and restricted by the government, civil society in Eritrea holds hardly any possibilities for social mobilization. Furthermore, the civil society lacks an organized intellectual or political elite that might shape discourses opposing the authorised, dominant nationalist discourse. Political opposition has either been systematically suppressed or militarily defeated. Individual opponents have been co-opted by the ruling party (Araya, 1999, p. 150). At first glance, the unitarist and nationalistic discourse of the Eritrean government appears to be still widely accepted by the Eritrean population. A systematic assessment of the real/wholehearted support among the population of the government doctrine, however, is hardly possible under authoritarian conditions. Indicative of mounting public pressure on the government is the fact that the party line is increasingly faced with challenges originating from the rise of ethnic and armed Islamic fundamentalist movements as well as from the formation of the Eritrean National Forces Alliance in Sudan in 1999 (Hirt, 2008; Tronvoll, 2009; Araya, 1999).

Even though Eritrea has no vibrant and free civil society in the liberal–democratic sense defined above, it has considerable traditions of social organisation. Beyond the

authoritarian government structures, traditional institutions of local self-government and conflict arbitration play an important role in providing a network of social security, conflict mediation and normative orientation. These institutions that are mostly based on ethnic and religious structures guarantee social stability and cohesion, and thus compensate for the deficits left by government structures; a fact that the government is aware of and tolerates, while simultaneously preventing religious leaders and respected elders (*shemagelle*) from political decision-making (BTI, 2007, p. 10, 21).[10]

Besides the policies that hamper the development of a civil society in Eritrea and restrict direct engagement of independent diaspora organisations, the lack of a vibrant and free civil society has an impact on the potential of diaspora engagement in Eritrea. The Eritrean society does not offer a widely organised civil society with which diaspora organisations could interact. Likewise, participation of the Eritrean society in debates and initiatives initiated by communities abroad is limited and the Eritrean transnational social field is mainly confined to state–diaspora relations (see Section 3). However, the Eritrean diaspora offers a space for social mobilisation apart from the PFDJ mass organisations. It increasingly makes use of this opportunity, especially through cyber groups and forums, religious communities and rights-based initiatives. To what extent these relatively new developments are contributing to Eritrean civil society remains to be seen.

2.3 The economic situation

Expectations of improvements in the Eritrean economy following independence and the announcement and of liberal economic reforms in 1994 have failed to materialise.[11] The dire economic situation, exacerbated by the border war with Ethiopia, is further aggravated by the reversion of these economic policies after the war and the emergence of a "*dirigiste* state" (Cameron, 2009, p. 143). (Guided) privatisation mostly benefits former EPLF leaders, high military officials, PFDJ party members and PFDJ mass organisations and Eritrea's state-directed economy is largely controlled by the PFDJ and the military. The investment climate remains negative. These economic conditions in post-war Eritrea adversely affect the capability and willingness of diaspora members to engage in investment or trade activities.

Private business is discouraged by strict controls over money transfers and the hard currency market, and public campaigns against the private business sector, which is blamed for the country's poor economic performance. Furthermore, rules for market participants change arbitrarily and business women and men are occasionally arrested without charge for alleged involvement in illegal currency transfers (BTI, 2007, p. 12). Even basic imported goods and spare parts are charged with high custom duties. Since 2006, private businesses have been banned from importing goods or spare parts without special permission.

Furthermore, the foreign currency market is highly restricted and anyone found in possession of any amount of undeclared foreign currency is subject to a fine and/or prison sentence. On the other hand, party-owned businesses are tax-exempt and do not undergo any form of public audits. The state increasingly interferes in all kinds of private business enterprises and the military is increasingly involved in economic activities (ibid., p. 14). The banking system is underdeveloped, inefficient and

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[10] For an in-depth discussion of local governance institutions and the local government reform introduced by the PFDJ in 1996 see Tronvoll, 2009.

[11] For the paradox and inherent contradictions of the Marxist EPLF economic policies after it seized state power in 1991 see Cameron, 2009).

dominated by state banks and the party-owned Himbol bank. At the same time, a parallel black capital market exists, fuelled by diaspora remittances. Eritrea suffers from a diminished labour force due to the military conscription of large parts of the economically active population and a poor education system. It lacks purchasing power and financial input, and suffers from high inflation and a scarcity of basic consumer goods (ibid., p. 10). There is a growing budget deficit and the balance of payments remains negative.

Due to the factors described above as well as the government's deep suspicion of foreign aid, Eritrea's post-war economy was heavily dependent on remittances by the diaspora.[12] According to World Bank estimates for the year 2002, Eritrea ranked 12th in Africa with US $206 million as to the amount of remittances received, 5th in remittances received *per capita*, and first in the proportion of remittances in relation to its gross domestic product (GDP). In 2002, remittances came up to slightly less than one-third of the country's GDP (Fessehatzion, 2005, p. 168). In recent years, it has increased considerably and reached US $1.37 billion in 2007. However, foreign direct investment decreased from US $20 million in 2002 to US $3 million in 2007 and official development assistance and official aid decreased from US $230 million in 2002 to only US $155 million in 2007 (ibid.; World Bank, 2009).

The economic situation and policies described above discourage foreign direct investment—including that of the diaspora. Therefore their economic potential to contribute to (re-)construction and development is considerably limited, while at the same time direct financial contributions to the state by the diaspora and remittances are an important and welcome source of state income (see Section 4).

3. Interactions Between the State and the Diaspora

Besides the political, social and economic situation in Eritrea, state–diaspora relations and Eritrean policies directly targeting the diaspora shape the structure and patterns of diaspora engagement.

Eritrean transnationalism, based on a very strong commitment of large parts of the diaspora communities and a longstanding tradition of mobilising contributions from Eritrean exiles by the liberation fronts and the Eritrean government, can be traced back to the struggle for independence. Consequently, Eritrean diaspora communities traditionally maintained a close relationship with the liberation fronts and the government. State–diaspora relations, however, have been confined predominantly to government-supportive organisations, excluding those that would voice dissent. This policy as well as ongoing conflicts among ELF and EPLF supporters contributed and still contribute to internal disunity of the diaspora and have weakened the agency of Eritreans abroad.

At the same time, important socio-political changes and developments in Eritrea as well as the extent to which the engagement of the diaspora was requested by the government, i.e. concrete Eritrean diaspora engagement policies, have markedly

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[12] Remittances are often calculated as the sum of workers' remittances, compensation of employees and migrant transfers in the balance of payments. Since data on external and internal resource flows for Eritrea are incomplete, data on recorded remittances are obtained by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) only through extrapolation calculating remittances or net private transfers as the difference between the value of imports minus the value of exports, foreign direct investment and net official aid. It is estimated that three times the official figures for remittances bypass banks and other official channels (Fessehatzion, 2005, p. 166). For a working definition of remittances see Section 4.1.)

shaped state–diaspora relations.[13] Four phases of Eritrean transnational relations can be distinguished:

1. mobilisation during the struggle for independence (1961–91),
2. 'de-mobilisation' of the diaspora in the post-independence phase,
3. 're-mobilisation' and 'institutionalisation' of the diaspora during the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998–2000),
4. diversification and increasing alienation of diaspora communities from the Eritrean state since the beginning of the new millennium.

3.1 Pre-independence

During the struggle for independence, the diaspora was mobilised by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) through a system of mass organisations established in the mid-1970s and EPLF chapters to campaign for the Eritrean cause in their residence countries and to raise money to contribute to the war, relief and welfare efforts in the liberated areas. When the ELF was militarily defeated in 1981 by the EPLF, it maintained its branches and a certain following in the diaspora, although the EPLF became the dominant organisation. The EPLF re-shaped its exile groups into strictly managed mass organisations in residence countries of the Eritrean diaspora, "creating one of the most efficiently-run liberation movements worldwide" (Conrad et al. 2009, p. 34). The strictly hierarchical and all-embracing structure of the mass organisations aimed at implementing the nationalist and Maoist ideology, and provided room for socialising and mutual support, in addition to opportunities for maintaining customs and traditions in the diaspora. Such factors fostered a community that was largely isolated from its host community, characterised as it was by a strong sense of "long-distance nationalism" (Koser, 2003; Conrad, 2005). Beyond the mass organisations and other organisations that were mostly either personally or structurally interlinked with the EPLF, there was very limited room for grassroots initiatives and independent associations in Eritrean communities abroad (Conrad, 2005, p. 229). Groups that resist identification with the EPLF/PFDJ, groups that represent sub- or supranational identities or criticise government policies have been sabotaged by the state and its transnational institutions through de-legitimisation, exclusion and intimidation (Redeker Hepner, 2007, p. 7).

In anticipation of an independent state, in 1989, the EPLF leadership issued a directive dissolving all mass organisations in order to refocus all energies and resources of Eritreans abroad to the EPLF's final push for liberation. Moreover, it is assumed that EPLF wanted to help neutralise the cleavages and conflicts between its own members and affiliates of the ELF and other political organisations in Ethiopia and consolidate national unity (Redeker Hepner, 2009, p. 115), but this decision alienated many EPLF affiliates and members of the mass organisations from the front (ibid., p. 117).

As independence became tangible, conflicting political identities of ELF and EPLF supporters became less important and an increasing number of people identified with the nationalist ideology of the EPLF. But despite the common commitment to national independence and the overall euphoria following the actual achievement of Eritrean independence, former affiliations to either the ELF or the EPLF remain as an important basis for identification in the diaspora communities (ibid., p. 52, 114).

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[13] For a typology of diaspora engagement policies see Gamlen, 2006.

3.2 Following independence

The high degree of political mobilisation among diaspora communities became increasingly apparent when EPLF won the independence struggle in 1991. An estimated 95 percent of the diaspora participated in the 1993 referendum for independence (Koser, 2007, p. 246; Al-Ali et al., 2001, p. 588). An even greater percentage of those who voted supported independence. Diaspora communities were also involved in the drafting and the ratification of the Eritrean constitution in 1997. The Eritrean state held extensive consultations at each stage of the drafting with the diaspora, and the diaspora was formally represented in the Assembly of the Constitutional Committee with six members out of 50 (ibid.). The Citizenship Proclamation of 1992 defined any person born to one Eritrean parent anywhere in the world as a citizen of Eritrea, endowing them with the respective rights and obligations. Accordingly, the Eritrean Constitution grants electoral rights to the diaspora, even though the elections scheduled by the National Assembly for 2001 did not materialise and were delayed indefinitely by the government (Redeker Hepner 2008, p. 483). Moreover, fifteen officials who represented regional diaspora communities where appointed to the National Assembly (ibid., 2009, p. 158).

Following the dissolution of the mass organisations abroad and independence it became a deliberate government policy to encourage the autonomy of loyal diaspora organisations, recognising the sacrifices made by many Eritreans abroad during the struggle for independence (Koser, 2002, p. 145). Instead of mass organisations, local community organisations emerged, which were promoted by the EPLF as being necessary for building unity and maintaining national identity in the diaspora. These community organisations were intended to neutralise fractured political identities. At the same time they were incorporated into the front's transnational sphere of influence (ibid., p. 119, 122).[14] Chapters of the EPLF were transformed into PFDJ chapters and replaced by institutions such as embassies and consulates. In 1999, a Division of Community Affairs was formed within the consular section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to help facilitate economic transactions exiles conducted in Eritrea (ibid., 2009, p. 158). This "bureaucratization" of homeland-diaspora relations (Conrad, 2005, p. 232) also took place at the economic level. Since 1991, all Eritreans in the diaspora are asked to pay two percent of their monthly income directly to the Eritrean government.[15] Although not compulsory, this payment was acknowledged by most Eritreans as a duty. Even ELF supporters have been willing to pay the 'tax' to build up Eritrea (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser, 2001, p. 595). During and in the aftermath of the Ethio-Eritrean war, Eritreans were either asked to pay an additional contribution or the monthly payment rate was increased[16] (Koser, 2007, p. 245).

3.3 The Ethio–Eritrean War (1998-2000)

Upon the outbreak of the Ethio–Eritrean conflict, the Eritrean state again intensified its links with the diaspora and further institutionalised the diaspora. It established PFDJ chapter offices in the principle residence countries. In other host countries, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed embassies and consulates to conduct censuses within the diaspora in order to establish a demographic profile of the diaspora. Furthermore, the network of the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) was revitalised under a new name ('Eritrean Development Fund' in the United States, 'Eritrea Hilfswerk' in Germany and

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[14] For an in-depth assessment of Eritrean community organisations in the United States see Redeker Hepner, 2009, p. 123.

[15] According to interview data in Germany, the 'tax' was primarily an idea that emerged in the diaspora and was picked up by the government later on (interview with diaspora representative, 16 September 2009).

[16] Interview with diaspora representative, 16 September 2009.

'Citizens for Peace' in Canada). *MahberKoms* (community associations) were shaped with the intention of absorbing alienated groups such as former ELF supporters. Furthermore, the government initiated an information campaign within the diaspora through visits by government representatives to diaspora events and festivals (Koser, 2003, p. 114f). It also built up a near-monopoly on information and sought to dominate the political discourse in the diaspora, especially through state-owned TV channels that broadcast around the world (Conrad, 2005, p. 236).

At the economic level, the Eritrean state has launched some initiatives to increase financial contributions made by the diaspora. Besides the 'diaspora tax' and other financial contributions, the government has created incentives for the diaspora to remit and invest in Eritrea. Remittances can be paid in any of the main global currencies; they are not taxed and are exchanged at very favourable rates. Similar economic incentives to attract investment have been established by the Eritrean Investment Centre. Incentives for investments in certain areas include exemption from customs and duties, exemptions from income tax, and special conditions regarding foreign currency exchange (Al-Ali et al., 2001, p. 589; US Department of State, 2009).

In 1999, the government issued government bonds for the first time. Bonds are redeemable in US dollars or in Nakfa. They can be transferred between individuals as long as the transfer is registered with the issuing office. In Eritrea, bonds can be used as credit notes for investment loans at the Central Bank (Koser, 2007, p. 250).

Government web pages constitute another channel for contributions towards reconstruction projects, such as donations to plant trees in the National Martyrs' Park (Koser, 2007, p. 246, 250).

In the Eritrean case, social pressure plays an enormous role in transnational diaspora engagement. First, the sense of financial responsibility towards relatives and friends 'at home' is an important motive to remit money. Furthermore, remittances can raise the social status both within the diaspora community and in their 'home' communities, where members of the local community are required to contribute to local projects. Third, the state and its organisations abroad exert social pressure on its diaspora communities to contribute to war expenses or reconstruction efforts by appealing to the shared national past, the ethos of selfless sacrifice and loyalty, and through the highly systematic and public ways contributions are made (Redeker Hepner, 2007, p. 28). By acknowledging Eritreans who contribute, those who do not pay are exposed in public. Moreover, we find various 'enforced' or even coercive characteristics of transnational engagement: The acquiescence to financial demands made by the government secures essential citizenship rights, including the buying, selling or inheriting of property, voting rights, conducting business or legal transactions. Failure to contribute can create obstacles for participation in the Eritrean local community and lead to restrictions on identity cards, passports, visas and any other official documentation or transaction (Redeker Hepner, 2003, p. 278; ibid., 2007, p. 6). Al-Ali, Black and Koser coined the term of "enforced transnationalism" to describe Eritrean transnational engagement. They argue that "state policy, the context of flight, historical antecedents or the dominance of particular ideological, moral and cultural positions can combine to constrain or push transnational activities" (2001, p. 595).

3.4 Recent changes in the state–diaspora relations
The end of the Ethio–Eritrean border war marks a structural change in Eritrean transnationalism. While options for associating in Eritrea were further curtailed, the

Eritrean communities abroad experienced diversification and the emergence of new civil society organisations that depart from two attributes, which until then had characterised Eritrean transnationalism: the exclusion and marginalisation of transnational actors who challenge the official nationalist discourse as well as insularism, i.e. the absence of linkages with non-Eritrean groups (Redeker Hepner, 2007, p. 11).

The causes of this structural shift are to be found in the deterioration of conditions following the Ethio–Eritrean border war, which led to an increase in new refugees from 2001 on. Many recent refugees belong to younger generations, leaving independent Eritrea mainly due to escalating militarism, restrictive educational and employment environments, economic hardship and the repressive political and cultural climate. Thus the composition of the diaspora community has changed significantly (ibid.).

This development can be traced further to a broad disillusionment of the diaspora including former EPLF supporters with the PFDJ government. Important factors, which contributed to the discontent, both among the diaspora communities and in the Eritrean society, have been the questioning of the diplomatic and military performance in the border war, unfulfilled expectations with regard to political reforms, including the non-implementation of the constitution and national elections, the control of the party over the economy, and the growing influence of the military in society and administration. The human rights crisis manifesting in the harsh suppression of political dissent especially after 2001 also provoked the alienation of the diaspora from the official discourse on unity, egalitarianism and justice (Conrad, 2006, p. 262). What is more, attitudes towards the government have become more critical in the aftermath of the conflict due to a common sense of exploitation, especially with regard to contributions to finance the war (Koser, 2003, p. 119). Ongoing requests for financial contributions place an enormous economic strain on the diaspora and some kind of resistance against the diaspora 'tax' has recently been observed within the diaspora.[17]

Apart from the deep cleavages between EPLF and ELF affiliates that continue to shape Eritrean diaspora communities, for decades, large parts of the Eritrean diaspora have been generally supportive of the nationalist discourse of the Eritrean government. However, recently, political splits in the Eritrean community abroad have become more obvious. Non-fighters feel disadvantaged and marginalised, and Eritrean Muslims claim that Christian Tigrinya hold the majority of powerful positions in Eritrea and also dominate the diaspora community. Among the Tigrinya themselves, rumours circulate that the real power is concentrated in the hands of people hailing from a particular highland region (Koser, 2007, p. 251).

New oppositional groups have emerged and ELF as well as EPLF dissident groups have gained new attention, while on the other hand a growing number of diaspora members, frustrated with both political camps, are withdrawing from direct political engagement.[18] Instead, new rights-based initiatives and religious associations, which until independence had played a secondary role within the highly politicised Eritrean society, and new, independent, non-political community organisations, have gained importance. Besides this there are a number of women's and youth groups, and NGOs engaged in development projects in Eritrea or Sudan, sports, cultural, ethnic and regional associations, as well as an increasing number of virtual groups.

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[17]   Interview data in Germany indicate that in recent years the percentage of Eritreans paying this "tax" has dramatically decreased (interview with diaspora representative, 16 September 2009; 25 April 2010).

[18]   One indicator for the withdrawal from Eritrean politics is the shrinking attendance of diaspora members at the famous diaspora festivals, both of the government-supporters and of the opposition (ibid.).

The extent to which structural changes in the Eritrean transnational social field have a mitigating influence on the hitherto prevailing enforced characteristics of Eritrean transnationalism, and contribute to an emancipation of Eritrean transnationalism, remains to be seen.

4. Patterns of Diaspora Engagement

For the purpose of this study, the author distinguishes between individual and organised initiatives, although distinctions between these two levels are not necessarily clear-cut. Individual engagement refers to financial and social remittances, foreign direct investment, skills transfer through return and individual political engagement whereas financial contributions to the state are often also raised and transferred collectively by diaspora associations. While organised diaspora engagement refers to all social, economic and cultural activities of Eritrean associations, groups and initiatives abroad, this paper's section on organised engagement restricts itself to addressing only those groups that seek to effect change in Eritrea, namely the organised political opposition, organisations supporting the government, rights-based initiatives, religious organisations, and virtual groups and fora. In addition, as field research in several European countries has revealed, there is a broad range of community groups and organisations engaged in self-help and cultural activities (Warnecke, 2009). Since the engagement of diaspora organisations in Eritrea is restricted, there is hardly any data on efficiency, sustainability or the mostly indirect impacts of these activities. Impacts can be intended or unintended; they depend not only on the mode of engagement, but also to a large extent on conditions in the origin country.

4.1. Individual diaspora engagement

Individual diaspora engagement takes place especially at the economic level and is highly favoured by the "culture of contributing" (Al-Ali et al., 2001, p. 586) that can be traced back to the struggle for independence, when the diaspora supported the liberation movements of the ELF and EPLF, funding a substantial amount of the cost of armed conflict (ibid., p. 587; Radtke, 2006, p. 5). But even after independence, Eritreans have continued to contribute and when war broke out in 1998, Eritreans abroad purchased Eritrea bonds to a total of US $35.5 million, and provided outright contributions of US $106.4 million, leading to a total of US $142.9 million for the war period (1998–2000) (Fessehatzion, 2005, p. 173).

The financial contributions by the diaspora that are either transferred individually or raised collectively by diaspora associations often are explained through the concept of the so-called moral economy, defined as "a system of nationalist commitments and obligations consisting of both formal obligations to institutionalised 'mass organizations' and unspoken expectations about personal behaviour" (Matsuoka and Sorenson, 2001, p. 100). In the Eritrean case, the *mieda* culture of the *tegadelti* (EPLF fighters)[19], with its commitment to the nationalist struggle and its ethos of self-reliance, solidarity and selfless sacrifice, formed the basis of a moral economy, which the liberation movement and the Eritrean government build on to mobilise political and financial support (ibid., p. 100).

According to Kibreab (2007), the level of contributions to, and participation in post-conflict (re-)construction efforts is also greatly influenced by the extent to which

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[19]　The *mieda* culture developed among EPLF fighter "in the field." In this culture, differences of class, gender, ethnicity and religion were considered unimportant while equality among all *tegadelti* was stressed.

diaspora members feel included in or excluded from a community. The exclusion of the ELF and its various factions from power-sharing before and especially after independence has certainly discouraged many of their supporters abroad from engaging financially in (re-)construction efforts or returning to help to build up their country. Likewise, alienation of certain parts of the diaspora from the PFDJ after the Ethio–Eritrean war led to the increasing reluctance of a considerable proportion of the Eritrean diaspora to contribute voluntarily (Kibreab, 2007, p. 103, 106).

However, remittances by the diaspora remain an important source of external funding for the Eritrean state (see Section 2). In addition to official remittances, Eritreans abroad send remittances through informal channels, such as friends or family members travelling to Eritrea.[20] This great amount of the remittances sent by Eritreans flows directly to relatives and friends in Eritrea whereas another portion of the remittances is considered to be direct financial contributions of the diaspora to the Eritrean state. These are manifold, ranging from 'taxes', donations, the purchase of land, Eritrea bonds and other economic activities.

Contrary to expectations, remittance flows—especially those that go through formal government channels—did not drop as a consequence of the political crisis in 2001, "but kept pace with the pre-crisis level and in fact surpassed it in 2003" (Fessehatzion, 2005, p. 174). The 'near' Eritrean diaspora in Sudan generates hardly any remittances. By contrast, remittances from the 'far' diaspora in the United States or Europe are often sent to refugees in Sudan, Ethiopia and other African countries.

The following table shows the revenue collection from the diaspora for the year 2003 and the average revenues for the years 1997 to 2003 by source.

Table 1: Revenue collection from diaspora by source (in millions: current US dollars)

Source	2003	Average (1997-2003)
Diaspora tax	10.4	5.9
Contributions	25.6	24.0
Land purchases	47.5	38.4
Eritrea bond	21.3 (1999)	12.2
Segen construction contracts	22.5	22.5
Other contracts	50	40
Total	**156**	

Source: Unpublished government data (in Fessehatzion, 2005, p.174).

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[20] For the purpose of this study and following the working definition of the International Organization for Migration, remittances are defined as "monetary transfers that a migrant makes to the country of origin." According to this broad definition, remittances include all kinds of personal, cash transfers from a migrant to recipients in the country of origin, and "funds invested, deposited or donated by the migrant to the country of origin. The definition could possibly be further broadened to include in-kind personal transfers and donations (IOM, 2006).

4.1.1 'Taxes' and donations

Collections and donations played an important role in supporting the struggle for independence, and later on the Eritrean state and its (re-)construction after the war. Donations are collected in at least three contexts: on the occasion of festivals, through door-to-door collections, and through media appeals.

In all contexts when financial contributions are raised, public acknowledgement of financial contributions of the diaspora community and the face-to-face contact of the members are of major importance, building the basis for the informal sanctioning system of the "moral economy of the diaspora" (Radtke, 2005, p. 20).[21]

The end of the war and the subsequent transformation of the EPLF into a political party had an impact on the type of financial support given by the diaspora. According to Radtke (2005), the end of the war and the 'demobilisation' of the diaspora eroded the moral economy of the diaspora and decreased the willingness of people to donate money to the EPLF. The transformation of EPLF into PFDJ led to a decline of the importance of donations as a form of financing, and the increase in importance of even more institutionalised forms of financing, e.g. the levy of a 'tax'(see Section 3).

The 'diaspora tax' has averaged an annual US $5.9 million and other contributions US $24 million/ year since 1997, according to unpublished government figures (Fessehatzion, 2005, p. 173).

4.1.2 Purchase of real estate

The acquisition of property by the diaspora is another important factor that brings foreign currency to the Eritrean economy. Moreover, it has a considerable impact on the Eritrean real estate market. In 2003, diaspora members invested US $47.5 million in land purchases (ibid., 2005, p. 174). The Eritrean state has implemented a strategy to raise money by auctioning housing plots in and around Asmara. Reportedly, most of the houses auctioned were purchased by members of the Eritrean diaspora, since diaspora Eritreans are given priority in purchasing land for building purposes, as they are supposed to pay in hard currency (BTI, 2007, p.14). Besides, property binds Eritreans in the diaspora to the regime, as critical political engagement abroad towards the government, might result in property in Eritrea being officially confiscated from one day to the other. (Temporary) immigration of the respective diaspora member can also be prevented, or family members residing in these houses might be directly put at risk. Although the severe housing shortage in Asmara is seen as one factor that has prevented larger-scale return by overseas Eritreans, research conducted by Koser (2003) in the United Kingdom revealed that these houses were largely used as holiday homes, rather than providing the basis for the decision to return permanently. The purchase of real estate by diaspora members is certainly a leading factor in the distortion of prices.

4.1.3 Government bonds

In 1999, the government issued government bonds for the first time. In August 1999, the Economic Advisor to the President estimated that expenditure on bonds already amounted to some $US 30 million in the United States, $20 million in Europe and $15–20 million in the Middle East (Koser, 2007, p. 246).

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21 Al Ali et al. report on a black list posted at the embassy in Berlin, showing who had contributed and who had not yet (2001, p. 593).

4.1.4 Construction

Construction contracts are another channel through which the government is able to collect revenues from Eritrean diaspora communities. The construction sector is a *de facto* monopoly of the PFDJ (Kibreab, 2007, p. 108). All land is owned by the state; only firms owned by the ruling party are authorised to import and distribute construction materials, and large parts of the Eritrean population between 18 and 51 years, except former combatants, the disabled, and mothers, work for the government without remuneration by completing national service or participating in the Warsai-Yikaalo Campaign. Private constructors suffer from shortages of currency, labour and materials. In 2006, all non-state contractors, civil engineers and architects lost their licences (ibid.) and many reportedly fled the country.

4.1.5 Financial remittances

Financial remittances have complex and often contradictory effects on the development of the remittance-receiving country. At the household level, they contribute to development by raising living standards. Close to 90 percent of remittances are used for consumption while the rest is typically spent on property, land, durable goods, as well as health, education, and weddings (Edward and Ureta, 2001). Given the lack of public social security systems and widespread poverty, Eritreans abroad play a significant role in supporting family members in need in Eritrea.[22]

At the community level, remittances can improve local infrastructure and generate local employment opportunities, while at the same time aggravating income inequalities.

On a national scale, Eritrean diaspora remittances do not contribute to economic growth. The positive effects of remittances through increased foreign exchange flows and subsequent employment opportunities fail to materialise in Eritrea due to the militarisation of society and economy, labour shortages and excessive military spending.

Instead, remittances often finance further out-migration. In low GDP countries, where the local currency is overvalued, the infusion of remittance-related hard currency can create a parallel foreign exchange market to finance demand for imported goods at the expense of locally produced goods (Fessehatzion, 2005, p. 177). Furthermore, remittances that flow through the parallel market distort property values, further contributing to income inequality. One example of property value distortions are Asmara's real estate prices. It is also argued, that remittances can generate the 'dependency syndrome', discouraging job procurement while encouraging, and sometimes financing, 'brain drain'. In addition, remittances represent short-term income. In the long run, Eritrea cannot count on either the diaspora tax or voluntary contributions to sustain its economy.

The economic effects of remittances highly depend on the context of the receiving country, and can have either unintended stabilising or destabilising effects on the current situation. According to Kibreab, the influence of diaspora communities on post-independent (re-)construction has been virtually non-existent, as most of the financial contributions during the border war were most likely invested in weapons instead of in the (re-)construction of the war-torn social, economic and physical infrastructure (2007, p. 103).

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[22] Eritrea has only got a rudimentary state-run social welfare system, except for the diaspora-funded "Martyrs Fund" supporting families of combatants or soldiers who died either during the struggle for independence or the Ethio–Eritrean war. A state-run pension system introduced under Ethiopian administration has been abolished.

4.1.6 Social remittances

Besides financial remittances, so-called social remittances have the potential to influence minds and perceptions of the Eritrean population and thus to transform everyday lives and the economy of entire regions. "Social remittances are the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country communities" (Levitt, 1998). Via letters, telephone calls, visits, etc. diaspora members remit ideas, values, such as democracy and equality, systems of practice and social capital to their family members and friends. An important example for (collective) social remittances from the diaspora is the famous 2000 Berlin Manifesto, a letter composed by 13 scholars (later on called G-13), nationalist activist, and professionals—all long-time supporters of the EPLF. In this letter, the authors voiced their concerns regarding the border war and the increasingly authoritarian style of governance in Eritrea. Although personally addressed to President Isayas Afwerki, the letter was soon disseminated in Eritrea and Eritrean communities abroad and initiated a transnational debate on democracy and civil society. Moreover, research reveals that the authors of the Berlin Manifesto and the G-15 (see above) maintained relationships and exchanged their opinions and concerns. The G-13 expressed what their like-minded colleagues in Eritrea could not voice and it can be suggested that the G-15 used the momentum created by the Berlin Manifesto for their even more powerful initiative (Redeker Hepner, 2009, p. 196).

However, social remittances as well as their actual impact are extremely difficult to assess. Moreover, their actual reach is decisively determined by the transnational structures and mechanisms of the Eritrean state. Through its transnational institutions, such as NUEW, NUEYS and loyal community organisations as well as through the official discourse of nationalism, the state is able to block certain social remittances via delegitimation and obstruction while enabling or even enforcing others (Redeker Hepner, 2009, p. 176).

4.1.7 Foreign direct investment and trade

Foreign investment in Eritrea has come primarily from contributions of Eritrean exiles (US Department of State, 2009). Especially following the promising economic outlook in 1991 and the investment code issued by the Eritrean government in December 1991 to encourage investment, some individuals decided to invest in Eritrea. However, the deteriorating economic situation that offers no legal certainty, displays signs of frequent interference by the government in the market economy, and is marked by deficits in the protection of property rights, discourages foreign direct investment, including potential investments by diaspora members. Accordingly, foreign direct investment in Eritrea has considerably decreased since the end of the war and amounted to US $-3 million in 2007.

4.1.8 Return

After Eritrea won independence from Ethiopia, only few exiles decided to move back to Eritrea and invest their competence and knowledge in agriculture, infrastructures and services. These people often returned to serve the new state, even without any expectation of remuneration (Kibreab, 2007, p. 108). Nonetheless, the return movement was not as massive and permanent as expected both within and outside of Eritrea and after 1991, many Eritreans consciously decided to remain in Europe and dismissed the idea of return. The only reliable data on return to Eritrea from European countries come from Germany where, in 1993, a formal return programme for Eritreans was initiated. Up

to the end of 1999, 242 individuals had returned under the auspices of the programme. Explanations for the decision not to return often relate to the education of children, housing shortages in Asmara, and overall social conditions in Eritrea (Koser, 2002, p. 143). Many Eritreans residing in European countries returned only for short trips.[23]

Those who returned were largely disillusioned after a short period of time. Often, returnees face animosity and suspicion, exacerbated by the EPLF ex-combatants' fear of competition from diaspora professionals. Returnees have also been largely excluded from government posts and can hardly be found in decision-making positions[24] (BTI, 2003, p. 16), preventing skills transfers and limiting their potential contribution to the state-building process.

4.1.9 Political activities

Eritrean exiles participated in the political process, at least during the struggle for independence and the subsequent state-building process. The high turn-out of the referendum within the diaspora (95%) and the wide consent to independence among diaspora communities showed the strong commitment of the diaspora to the new Eritrean state. As mentioned in Section 2, the young Eritrean state included the diaspora into the process of the drafting and the ratification of the constitution. However, although the Eritrean constitution provides for the voting rights of the diaspora, these have not been applied so far. Due to the fact that elections have not yet taken place and any political engagement of the diaspora is prevented by restrictive government policies, today, diaspora members are unable to participate in the political process.

Consequently, especially since the end of the war in 2000, the diaspora has increasingly distanced itself from the authoritarian Eritrean government. A growing number of diaspora members, frustrated with both political camps and the lingering demands for financial contributions by the state, are withdrawing from direct political engagement, and thus augment the "silent majority" (Conrad, 2005, p. 221; Conrad et al., 2009, p. 36).

4.2. Organized diaspora activities

With regard to organized diaspora engagement that might have the potential to directly or indirectly influence the situation in Eritrea, five major groups can be distinguished, namely oppositional groups, organisations that support the government or accommodate themselves with government policies to be able to pursue their developmental or humanitarian agendas, civic and human rights groups, religious associations, and virtual groups and fora. Both the camp of the government supporters and the exile opposition represent only a small group within Eritrean diaspora communities (Conrad, 2005, p. 220f). Between these two extremes of the spectrum lies a majority who passively support or criticise the government, or who have altogether lost interest in the Eritrean state. The third group of rights-based civil society groups that articulate human rights claims is a relatively new phenomenon with great potential to change the form of Eritrean transnationalism. Also religious groups, but especially the growing number of online forums and cyber groups in the Eritrean transnational field, are increasingly important in this respect.

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[23] It is estimated by the Minister for Tourism in Asmara that some 40,000 Eritreans from North America and Europe visit Eritrea each year (Koser, 2002, p. 143). However, it is likely that this number has declined in recent years due to intensified repression.

[24] Interview with diaspora representative, 16 September 2009.

4.2.1 The political opposition

While the camp of government supporters constitutes a relatively homogenous group within the diaspora, the opposition is very much fragmented and characterised by frequent changes of alliances, splits and re-constitutions as well as deeply-rooted tensions and distrust, especially between successor organisations of the ELF and EPLF dissidents (Conrad 2005, p. 220).

In recent years, three major developments have occurred within the political opposition. According to Conrad (2006), groups affiliated with, or supporting the ELF have gained importance in the diaspora communities. The year 2001 marked not only the 10th anniversary of independence, but also the 20th anniversary of the military defeat of the ELF by the EPLF. The ELF and its supporters who are denounced as traitors in the official nationalist narrative, increasingly challenge the official historical discourse in various online forums and are gaining new self-confidence (see Redeker Hepner, 2009, p. 201).

In addition, besides the 'old' opposition groups surrounding the ELF, which for a long time have dominated the opposition camp in the diaspora, new groups have emerged. From an optimistic point of view, this change could be a step in the direction of pluralism and might in the long run help break up the harsh dichotomy and irreconcilable antagonism between the EPLF and ELF.

As a third trend, the tendency to create umbrella organisations and to re-structure and open organisations, including formerly non-affiliated individuals, suggests a trend towards inclusiveness.

In 1999, previously splintered opposition groups coalesced around the Eritrean Alliance of National Forces (EANF), which was set up in Khartoum and is based in Ethiopia. In October 2002, EANF was re-named into the Eritrean National Alliance (ENA). In 2005, new efforts were underway to unify the opposition under EDA (Eritrean Democratic Alliances).

Furthermore, various opposition groups established by former EPLF leaders rallied round the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP). Like Mesfin Hagos, a founding member of EPLF and member of the G-15, a number of formerly high-ranking officials have sought asylum abroad where some of them engage in exile opposition groups. According to Conrad (2006), these have been joined by disenchanted EPLF supporters in the diaspora, by hitherto unaffiliated exiles, and a growing number of young Eritrean asylum seekers who for the larger part fled the *de facto* open-ended military service.

The Eritrean People's Party (EPP), established in Summer 2008 and which emerged from a former ELF splinter group, also invites former non-affiliated Eritreans to join them. Ongoing negotiations about merging with the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP) might lead to the establishment of a sizeable new party with the potential of appealing to both former ELF and EPLF members (Conrad et al., 2009, p. 37). In July 2009, five opposition parties, namely the Eritrean People's Party (EPP), the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP), the Eritrean Islamic Congress (EIC), the Eritrean People's Movement (EPM) and the Eritrean Nahda Party (ENP) met in Addis Ababa "dialoguing for further co-operation and understanding and to make efforts to narrow down existing differences among them with the overall eventual aim of adopting a common work plan." [25]

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[25] Press Statement on Outcome of Meeting of Eritrean Opposition Organisations, 17 July 2009, available via <http://www.nharnet.com/July_2009/EPP_E_Press%20Statement.5org_July2109.pdf>..

Since the opposition is not allowed to engage in Eritrea, let alone form a political party, and given that it lacks official, sanctioned channels and platforms to convey its message and engage in constructive dialogue, the impact opposition groups have on the situation in Eritrea might be rather weak and at the most indirect. The multitude of ELF splinter groups and other newly formed opposition parties is weakened through internal power struggles and alleged collaboration with 'anti-Eritrean' forces, i.e. especially the Ethiopian government. Furthermore, "their style of discourse, their internal hierarchies, their lack of transparency and participatory practices, hardly diverge from PFDJ behavior" (Conrad, 2005, p. 246). Conrad attests that the opposition has little, if any, positive influence on the situation at home. She states, "the negative interaction of oppositional voice and the regime's "counter voice" strategies have turned the diaspora into a "battlefield" where increasing mutual distrust, polarization, and fragmentation are severely hampering community development" (ibid., p. 256).

On the other hand, the recent developments in the field of the political opposition might provide an alternative of overcoming the deep-rooted cleavages between ELF and EPLF supporters in the diaspora, thus paving the way for a broader support basis and more constructive oppositional work. It is also noticeable that several oppositional groups have recently adopted human rights claims, such as the right for conscientious objection, in their party programmes.[26]

Furthermore, especially the ability to link and engage with actors in the Horn of Africa and in Europe might strengthen the position of the opposition in the long run.

4.2.2. Organisations supporting the government

This category contains diaspora branches of the government party as well as various NGOs engaging in relief and development activities, which often closely co-operate with Eritrean embassies and consulates, national unions such as the National Union of Eritrean Women, the National Union of Youth and Students in Eritrea, and branches of the PFDJ.

Such organisations abroad are permitted to directly support government-led development or humanitarian projects or run projects that have been approved by the government. Eritrea Hilfswerk in Germany (EHD) e. V., for example, closely co-operates with the Asmara-based Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission (ERREC) and various Eritrean ministries and NGOs. Until Eritrean independence, the main focus of EHD's work was on humanitarian aid in Eritrea and the refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Today, the EHD is involved in reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts in Eritrea, for example by supporting educational, agricultural and health-related projects. Spreading information on Eritrea in Germany is an additional part of its work aimed at strengthening relationships between Eritreans and Germans.

It is true that the activities of government-supporting groups can contribute considerably to relief and welfare of certain parts of the Eritrean population. However, they generally are not able to touch on the deep-rooted social and developmental deficits due to errant economic and developmental policies. First and foremost, the activities of diaspora organisations supporting the government have a stabilising effect on the current authoritarian regime, especially in their ability to raise and channel financial contributions and moral support.

Given that it is hardly possible to voice criticism within the camp of the government

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26   Interview with diaspora representative, 19 September 2009.

supporters, there is little evidence of dissent in the public domain. Frequent attacks on those within a pro-governmental organisation who speak out, even in the diaspora, have either precipitated the exit of or silenced the most critical members of the groups (Conrad, 2005, p. 223). This is partly due to the national doctrine that sees criticism directed against PFDJ and the government as affecting the "holistic trinity of people, nation and leadership" (ibid). Accordingly, to criticise the government is to criticise the state, something which is presented as weakening the nation and in turn endangering the people.

4.2.3 Human rights initiatives

The above described changing relation between the Eritrean state and Eritrean diaspora communities around the world as a consequence of the Ethio–Eritrean war and the aggravating human rights crisis has been accompanied by the emergence of new kinds of civil society organisations and human rights initiatives advocating democratisation and human rights protection in Eritrea. They articulate international human rights claims and seek to connect Eritrean exile organisations with global human rights organisations, strategies and norms. At the national level, they advocate for and support the rights of new refugees and asylum seekers in the residence countries. Furthermore, they protest against the non-implementation of the Eritrean constitution and human rights violations of the regime by writing petitions and spreading information about the human rights situation in Eritrea. They thus represent what Keck and Sikkink call "transnational advocacy networks" (1998).

The previously mentioned "patterned, structural changes" (Redeker Hepner, 2007, p. 9), which characterise recent developments in the Eritrean transnational social field are significantly influenced by the emergence of these new rights-based initiatives that break with traditional characteristics of exclusion and insularism of Eritrean transnationalism. Whereas in the past Eritrean transnationalism was limited to the party-state and its relation to citizens who actively support its policies, the new civil society groups challenge this exclusionism. They resist the influence of the party-state and its nationalism and have the potential to break up the monopolistic domination of the diaspora communities by the state (Redeker Hepner, 2007, pp. 5, 9–10).

By seeking organisational and discursive links with different organisational and non-Eritrean bodies and by articulating broader ideological positions based on internationalist or universalist discourses, such as those based on human rights, these new initiatives also break with the insularism of Eritrean transnationalism and its deeply rooted suspicion of foreign influences. Furthermore, by linking up with non-Eritrean groups and international discourses, they have the potential to challenge the antagonism between pro-regime and anti-regime camps by constituting a 'third force' in a hitherto bipolar transnational political scenario.

Important examples for these new civil society organisations include the Eritrea Anti-Militarism Initiative, EAI, based in Frankfurt; the Eritrean Movement for Democratic and Human Rights, EMDHR, based in Pretoria, South Africa, the Eritrean Human Rights Advocacy Group, EHRAG, based in California, USA and Human Rights Concern - Eritrea (HRCE), based in the United Kingdom. All these groups were formed within the last few years and are committed to furthering human rights agendas in Eritrea by raising awareness of what constitutes universal rights and rights-based activism. EAI, for instance, advocates for the right to conscientious objection. At the same time, they assist new refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea in their respective residence countries. Many of these rights-based groups have begun to establish relationships with

non-Eritrean organisations, including national and international human rights organisations and local agencies that provide legal aid to refugees and asylum seekers. A notable example of this is the regional agenda of EAI and its support of and close co-operation with the Ethiopian War Resisters' Initiative (EWRI).

Various transnational networks campaigning for human rights and democracy have also been set up by diaspora members around the globe. The Eritrean Global Solidarity (formerly Eritrean Anti-Tyranny Network) was formed in December 2007 in the United States and is committed to the fight for justice, human rights and democracy. It also aims to establish a strong working relationship with Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters without Borders and Eritrean organisations around the world in order to bring about a global umbrella organisation.[27]

In Europe, the Network of Eritrean Civil Society in Europe (NECS-Europe), which was founded in 2002 and comprises 11 Eritrean organisations based in seven European countries, lobbies for human and democratic rights in Eritrea, e.g. by claiming the release of political prisoners in Eritrea, informing about human rights violations in Eritrea and campaigning for a free press in Eritrea, as well as by promoting and protecting the legal rights of Eritrean asylum seekers in Europe. It also addresses well-organised lobbying activities to the European Union, having already established contacts to EU and other relevant institutions (i.e. the UN Human Rights Commission) informing them on the current human rights situation in Eritrea (Mezzetti, 2008, p. 168).

Since organisations with an explicitly peace-related agenda, such as campaigning for democratisation or a more participatory political culture, are banned from working in Eritrea, the potential impact of these new human rights initiatives on the situation in Eritrea is mainly indirect. Most of these proliferating groups exist only in the Internet's public sphere, rarely holding meetings or pursuing concrete projects (Redeker Hepner, 2007, p. 10).

Arguably, their influence lies in the dissemination of the human rights discourse within Eritrea via shortwave radio, the Internet, word of mouth, and the sharing of linkages with exiled political organisations that advocate for political change in Eritrea (ibid., p. 5). Many of the various opposition groups in the diaspora have already included claims of these groups, e.g. the claim for the right of conscientious objection into their party programme.[28] But rather than directly influencing the situation and power relations on the ground, their impact might consist of broadening the understanding of universal rights, providing an alternative discourse based on international human rights and standing beyond the dominant nationalist discourses determined along entrenched party-political lines. However, especially in the course of escalating rights abuses in Eritrea, the autonomy of these groups and their ability to position themselves beyond the predominant political fault lines is threatened (Redeker Hepner, 2007, p. 9, 32).

Besides the establishment of contacts with international rights regimes, advocacy for granting asylum to Eritrean conscientious objectors, calls to implement the Eritrean constitution and efforts to incite non-violent change through public actions abroad serve to bring attention to the crisis of human rights in Eritrea and to raise awareness among policymakers in the residence countries and at the EU level.

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[27] For more information on its agenda, please refer to <http://maitemenay.com/me/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=49&Itemid=9>, accessed 27 July 2009.

[28] Interview with diaspora representative, 16 September 2009

4.2.4 Religious organisations

Another important section of organised diaspora activities are religious communities and churches which prior to independence only played a minor role in the highly politicised diaspora communities. For example, a mapping of Eritrean diaspora organisations in Germany revealed that more than half of all Eritrean organisations are either church- or community-based. Although the field of religious communities abroad is very diverse and divided along political lines[29], it is stated that religious identity and gatherings help mitigate fractured political identities that have weakened secular diaspora associations (Redeker Hepner, 2003, p. 269). Furthermore, she states that practising Eritrean identity through religion challenged the hegemonic power of the Eritrean state to transnationally control diaspora communities and dictate a national identity. Specifically, the relative autonomy of churches and their extra-territorial and cross-border linkages contributes to the construction of "an emergent transnational civil society" (ibid.). Based on common religious identities and traditions, churches often also function as important bridge-builders between different communities, as is the case in Germany where there are regular common worship ceremonies of Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Christians in some cities (see Warnecke and Schmitz-Pranghe, 2010).

However, the space for projects and activities of church-related diaspora organisations in Eritrea is increasingly restricted by repressive government policies. While religious institutions and identities until 2001 maintained some autonomy relative to the state both in Eritrea and the diaspora, since 2001, the Eritrean government heavily interferes in religious bodies in Eritrea and transnationally (Redeker Hepner, 2010, p. 23). Especially the Penecostal churches, Jehova´s Witnesses, suspected Islamic fundamentalists and other "foreign-inspired" religious beliefs suffer from harsh repressive measures as they are perceived by the Eritrean government as "conduits for neoliberal intervention" (ibid., p. 31). The Catholic Church is under pressure and was silenced in 2001 for a pastoral letter criticising government policies. More recently, the Orthodox Church has been fractured transnationally by the government by deposing and replacing the Eritrean Patriarch. This split within Orthodox diaspora Churches, one faction being loyal to the former Patriarch Abune Antonius and the other recognizing the new government-installed Bishop Dioscoros severely challenges the political authority of the state (Redeker Hepner, 2003; Redeker Hepner, 2010, p. 27).

Another important transnational component of religious activism among Eritrean diaspora members are the efforts of religious institutions in the diaspora to advance rights-based critique and the interconnections between religious communities in the diaspora and transnational advocacy organisations, such as Amnesty International who are monitoring and advocating for religious freedom in Eritrea. These efforts contribute to a further expansion of transnational human rights discourses (Redeker Hepner, 2010, p. 24).

4.2.5 Virtual groups and forums

Increasingly, the Internet also builds the basis for close linkages amongst the diaspora and between the diaspora and those 'at home'.

The Internet was used to discuss the draft of the constitution between the diaspora communities scattered around the globe and the PFDJ already after independence. It was further used to mobilise protesters and to amass funds. Both the state and the newly formed civic groups, political parties and individuals, use various online media, including

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[29]   Interview with diaspora representative, 16 September 2009.

virtual forums such as the popular websites asmarino.com; awate.com, which provide platforms to articulate, promote, and discuss their claims. Accordingly, today Eritrean online communities serve a variety of tasks, ranging from the lobbying of respective foreign governments, the dissemination of Tigrinya language-learning tools, the selling of Eritrea-related books, music, etc., the publication of academic or religious papers to the posting of news and the organisation of gatherings. They thus contribute to "a new transnational public sphere" (Bernal in Redeker Hepner, 2009, p. 171).

The actual impact of online discussion groups in Eritrea is contested. While, for example, Koser (2002) states that their influence on Eritrean society and government is increasing, especially due to improving Internet access in Eritrea, others question the role of the new media in facilitating the participation of the Eritrean society and affecting domestic Eritrean policy.

According to Koser, the increasing access, for instance, to the DEHAI discussion forum[30] in Eritrea challenges the ability of the government to exert political control over its citizens and, at the same time, directly influences policy decisions. Likewise, Bernal states that the financial support given by Eritreans abroad to some extent might ensure that their views expressed in online forums, etc. will not be totally ignored (2006, p. 174). Furthermore, government interference in cyberspace is considered. It is believed that, while they may refrain from participating officially in online discussions, government leaders contribute to debates and even frame certain topics of discussion under assumed names (Bernal, 2006, p. 173). In an initiative aimed at 'opening' the government to the diaspora, the Ministry of Information posts information and responds to questions (Koser, 2002, p. 147). By contrast, Conrad states that in most cases the government shows indifference and ignores diaspora debates in the different online forums and hardly engages with anybody who questions the official doctrine. If the existence of different views is acknowledged at all, official reactions are limited to denouncing them (2006, p. 267).

Certainly, the government media still reach more people than independent media that are restricted to the new information technologies. Besides, the legacy of an oral culture in Eritrea gives much more credibility to the spoken word than to newspapers or online information (Conrad, 2005, p. 237).[31] Conrad questions the ability of the diaspora to create a transnational public space reaching beyond the worldwide diaspora communities, since Eritreans are still excluded from any public discourse and the diaspora itself uses the platforms mainly for monologues, instead of using it for exchange and discussions between different political camps (ibid., 2006, p. 267). Only in 2000 did access to the Internet become available in Eritrea (with the exception of government officials). The first Eritrean activities in cyberspace were largely confined to the diaspora, and content production has largely continued to be so after 2000 (Bernal, 2006, p. 170), although the number of Internet users in 2007 amounted to 120,000 in Eritrea (CIA, 2007). The cyber forum DEHAI does have readers in Eritrea, but the lack of participation of Eritreans in Eritrea makes it a "de facto diasporic cyberspace" (Bernal, 2006, p. 174) with some links to the Eritrean leadership.

Online forums have the potential to create communities among the displaced, to

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[30] The e-mail discussion group DEHAI (http://www.dehai.org/), founded in 1992 by Eritreans in the United States and at first exclusively connecting EPLF supporters, is now a transnational forum expanding throughout the United States, Canada and Germany and increasingly also in Eritrea. It has, however, lost some of its former importance since 2001.

[31] This oral culture might also be reinforced by the repression of free media under dictatorial rule and be considered a reaction to government propaganda and deliberate misinformation during the Derg regime and today.

construct a shared history and starting point for civic engagement and dissent, as well as for entertainment and status production (ibid.). The contribution of diasporic online activities to a discussion of the common past is especially noteworthy. Diaspora and academic discourses on the past, both virtual and real, challenge the Eritrean regime's narrative of the national history by deconstructing the official and reconstructing alternative history (Conrad, 2006, p. 266). For example, political websites of the ELF and its splinter parties publicise their own counter-narratives to the official version of history aiming to delegitimize the current regime.

Likewise, the *Jiberti,* a Muslim Tigrinya-speaking group residing in the Eritrean highlands, and members of ethnic minorities like the *Kunama* and the *Bilen* maintain websites and discussion forums to promote their particularist memories. Furthermore, websites with a clear human rights agenda have emerged. These publicise testimonials and eyewitness reports of present human rights violations in Eritrea and online memorials for victims of the regime (ibid., p. 264).

It is undisputed that the use of the Internet has fostered debates and critical discussions, which are otherwise not possible in Eritrea. It has widened the group of participants by linking people who are geographically dispersed and have different regional, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, the organisation of many activities via Internet platforms including famine and drought relief or the organisation of funding conferences of political opposition movements attests these media a high mobilisation potential. Although the direct impact of the new media on the Eritrean population might still be limited, it certainly gives form to the ideas of the diaspora and thus might have an indirect impact through their contacts to family and friends (Koser, 2007, p. 247).

5. Conclusion

This paper has traced the highly dynamic interplay between the Eritrean leadership and Eritrean communities abroad.

First, it has shown that dominant political actors in the country of origin are able to influence diaspora organisations and their modes of transnational engagement as well as to determine transnational structures and activities. The liberation movements as well as the Eritrean government and its extraterritorial modes of governance play a determining role in shaping Eritrean transnationalism. Through their respective mass organisations and a nationalist ideology, Eritrean diaspora communities have been institutionalised and highly mobilised. 'De-mobilisation' processes of the diaspora have also been induced by the government. For a long time, the government relied on a diaspora community that—despite internal cleavages—generally supported Eritrean independence and the subsequent political regime. Through the above-described enforced measures, such as 'tax' levies, it raises substantial financial contributions by diaspora members. Moreover, the Eritrean leadership was able to largely confine Eritrean transnational relations to government-supportive organisations excluding all those who would voice dissent, and preventing the participation of Eritrean grassroots organisations in Eritrea.

Recent socio-political developments in Eritrea, however, also indirectly affect the structure of Eritrean transnationalism and its actors. Especially since the end of the Ethio–Eritrean war and as a consequence of the non-implementation of political reforms and the deteriorating socio-political situation, changes in the relation of the diaspora to the state and in the structure of the diaspora itself can be observed. Conditions in Eritrea considerably contributed to an increasing alienation of the diaspora from the government as well as the diversification and fragmentation of diaspora communities. New patterns of diaspora engagement have emerged and opposition groups have gained in importance, creating new patterns and channels for diaspora engagement that may allow for alternative ways to engage transnationally.

Second, the case of the Eritrean diaspora shows that the government in place, its policies as well as the overall political, social and economic conditions in the country of origin impact to a large extent on whether diaspora members are willing and able to engage transnationally, if indeed such influence on the politics and development of Eritrea is possible at all.

During the struggle for independence, Eritrean diaspora members played a significant role by supporting the liberation movements financially. After the conflict, large parts of the diaspora participated in the referendum of independence and the following debate of the draft constitution and continued to generously contribute to the (re-) construction process by regular contributions, donations, the purchase of Eritrea bonds, etc. Especially, in the context of the Ethio–Eritrean war, it was possible to re-mobilise large parts of the diaspora willing to substantially support the Eritrean state, both financially and through lobbying activities.

Financial contributions to the state and remittances sent by diaspora members to family members and 'home' communities in the post-independence phase represent the largest source of foreign exchange. Despite these substantial financial contributions to warfare and (re-)construction, the diaspora is hardly involved in the state-building and political process. Since the constitution is yet to be implemented and elections have not yet taken place, it has neither influenced the political regime itself nor its policies via

democratic channels or open dialogue. Returnees have mostly been excluded from government or administrative structures. As Kibreab puts it, "notwithstanding the fact that the Eritrean diaspora played a key role during the struggle for independence and in the post-war situation, the government has effectively reduced the diaspora to a 'toothless cash cow' " (2007, p. 112).

The autocratic Eritrean regime leaves hardly any room for the exertion of political influence by the diaspora or for the development of autonomous debates beyond the nationalistic doctrine. Under the assumption that large diaspora communities might influence policies in their countries of origin, the lack of influence of the Eritrean diaspora on the emergence and consolidation of the authoritarian Eritrean regime can be traced down to the policies of the ruling party which curtailed any room for political participation including voicing dissent and opposition, and to the general support of large parts of the diaspora of the current system.

Besides the regime characteristics and government policies which impede political influence of the diaspora, the general political and economic conditions in Eritrea contravene a potentially constructive impact of diaspora engagement. The repressive political climate, the non-implementation of the constitution and political reforms, human rights violations in addition to the militarisation of the state, the society and the national economy, favour constant out-migration, rather than being an incentive for diaspora members to return and help to build up the country or enabling any kind of skills transfer. In addition, they lead to the withdrawal of large parts of the diaspora communities from political engagement and to decreasing diaspora support of the current regime. Besides, the disastrous economic situation and economic policies hardly offer an enabling environment for investments, thus making direct financial contributions to the state and remittances by diaspora members an important source of external funding.

Third, it has been shown that the government and its policies widely determine whether the influence of diaspora organisations can be considered beneficial and constructive, or rather negative, for example by determining how financial contributions of the diaspora are invested. With regard to developmental influences of diaspora revenues, remittances sent to family members and friends are likely to be of far more importance than financial contributions to the state, since it seems to be very likely that a large part of financial contributions is used to cover the enormous military expenditures.

Should future activities of diaspora communities affect change in Eritrea, it will most likely be those of the organised diaspora rather than of individuals. However, so far, the regime does not allow any independent diaspora engagement in the country.

Diaspora engagement in Eritrea, if allowed at all, takes place in close co-operation with the government. Dissent within the organisations supporting the regime can not be voiced. Accordingly, the influence of the diaspora organisations supportive of the government and the "silent majority" (Conrad, 2005) is largely limited to financial contributions to the state, which are likely to have a stabilizing effect on the current system and individual 'indirect' activities, such as sending remittances and financing the escape of young relatives.

Oppositional forces in the diaspora are highly fragmented and weak and suffer from internal disputes. Political dialogue even within the diaspora continues to be hindered by the sharp EPLF–ELF antagonism. However, more recently, new (umbrella) opposition parties have emerged; this might indicate an increasing readiness to enter into dialogue with each other. Whilst this holds true, as long as the Eritrean regime does not allow

political opposition within the country and ignores any dissent within and outside the country, their influence remains to be mainly indirect, shaping perceptions and ideas of the diaspora.

A development that might well have a greater impact on the Eritrean transnational social field is the increasing importance of cyber groups and religious communities as well as the emergence of new human rights initiatives that are based on international human rights discourses and engage with non-Eritrean actors at the national and international level and thus offer a 'third way' in the transnational field that has been dominated by exclusionism and nationalism for decades. Due to their human rights agendas they are prevented from directly operating in Eritrea. However, they have the potential to extend the human rights discourse, even within the country, and to exert pressure on the regime through the linkages with non-Eritrean and international organisations and transnational lobbying activities.

The recent developments in the Eritrean diaspora communities have led to a diversification and emergence of new kinds of diaspora engagement and alternative discourses. The extent to which these developments mitigate the enforced characteristics of Eritrean transnationalism, or even contribute to an emancipation of the Eritrean diaspora, awaits further analysis. Likewise, there is a need for further empirical research into whether these changes in Eritrean transnationalism that have been described as a 'structural shift' have an impact on Eritrean civil society and encourage the vitalisation of grassroots society in Eritrea.

The increasing alienation between the Eritrean state and its diaspora and the tendency of Eritreans abroad towards disengagement as a consequence of disillusionment with Eritrean politics jeopardises the readiness and capacity of the diaspora to contribute positively to economic, social and political development and to a constructive relationship with Eritrean society and state.

This tendency is also reinforced by the shift of the diaspora structure as a result of new refugee flows, in addition to the maturation of the second generation whose members are presumably less willing to extend unconditional support and loyalty to the current government. It is important that these developments and their impact on Eritrean transnational engagement be subject to further empirical research.

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