Bare life and the developmental state : implications of the militarisation of higher education in Eritrea

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ABSTRACT

In this article Eritrea is discussed as a developmental state based on biopolitics. Taking the example of higher education, it is shown how the biopolitical project as applied to education policies and human resource development at first succeeded in terms of reinforcing personal nationalism, while at the same time opening up spaces for the fulfilment of personal aspirations. Of late, however, the biopolitical project has turned 'pernicious' and has become a tool of oppression. These developments, if they are to continue, will not only jeopardise the state's developmental agenda but may lead to the Eritrean polity in its present form becoming unviable.

INTRODUCTION

In the immediate post-cold-war era it was widely believed that neoliberalism would triumph. The 'end of history' was proclaimed, based on the notion that economic liberalism and free global markets would lead to prosperity, and at the same time to conflict resolution, democratisation and strong civil societies. Of late, it has been recognised that the neoliberal agenda has failed major parts of the developing world. The importance of the state for achieving wider objectives of 'development' has come to the

fore again (Fukuyama 1992; 2004). In this context, debates on the feasibility of developmental states, a concept that became prominent in relation to East Asia from the 1970s onwards, have resurfaced.[1]

In this paper those issues are looked at in relation to Eritrea. First, Eritrea is discussed as a developmental state based on a particular understanding of biopolitics. Then the example of human resource development policies with a focus on academic tertiary education is used to argue its case. Drawing on different data sets collected at different points in time, potentials and pitfalls of the Eritrean development model are outlined. The paper ends with an outlook for the future.

ERITREA: A DEVELOPMENTAL STATE BASED ON BIOPOLITICS

Eritrea achieved *de facto* independence in 1991 as a 'revolutionary society', independent statehood being the outcome of a 30-year-long liberation war against its occupying power, Ethiopia, combined with a social revolution (Müller 2005). Building on Hermassi's (1976: 221) typology of revolutions, the Eritrean revolution can be described as 'developmental–national'. A 'developmental revolution' is characterised by 'the establishment of political control over social and economic affairs, the obliteration of distinctions between state and society, and the conception of state power as something to be mobilised at will for the purpose of changing societal relations'. Those features characterised the 'quasi-state' created by the main liberation movement, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), in its base area in northern Sahel around the town of Nakfa from the late 1970s onwards – an entity much commented on at the time for notable achievements in terms of human development under the conditions of war and scarcity (see e.g. Connell 1997; Davidson *et al.* 1980; Firebrace & Holland 1985; Papstein 1991; Pateman 1990). Those broadly sympathetic accounts neglected the fact that the EPLF 'was *primarily* established' to create an independent nation state 'through *military* means' (Pool 2001: 16, emphasis added). What emerged in northern Sahel can thus alternatively be described as a tightly knit society based on centralised control in which any dissent was dealt with swiftly.

The advent of independent statehood in 1993 did not mark a break with those dynamics. On the surface, and comparable to other settings where liberation movements have come to power, the 'promise of development' was deployed as 'legitimising strategy for the state' (Makki 1996: 491) by the EPLF, renamed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994. At the same time, PFDJ state capture meant that the internal workings of the post-independence state continued to reflect many of the

structures of control that were put in place during the liberation struggle. To better understand the dynamics that have unfolded in independent Eritrea over time, two concepts are proposed here as useful: development-alism and biopolitics.

Eritrea as a developmental state (1991–1998)

Up to 1998, when renewed war with Ethiopia erupted[2] – the fighting phase of which ended with a number of international agreements in 2000, but the root causes of which are still not resolved – post-independence Eritrea can be described as a developmental state. A developmental state is defined here as having two components: one ideological, one structural. At the structural level, it 'establishes as its principle of legitimacy its ability to promote and sustain development' (Castells 1992: 55). At the ideological level, the governing elite 'must be able to establish an "ideological he-gemony", so that its developmental project becomes, in a Gramscian sense, a "hegemonic" project to which key actors in the nation adhere *voluntarily*' (Mkandawire 2001: 290, emphasis added).

Staying for a moment with the structural level, Eritrea achieved a considerable amount of success in terms of modernising development. The years up to 1998 were characterised by the rehabilitation of the country's physical infrastructure, economic growth rates of up to 7% with yearly inflation rates below 4%, and perhaps most crucially notable improvements in the provision of social services to the wider population, in particular in the areas of basic health and education (Connell 1995; Fengler 2001; Hirt 2000; IMF 2000; Luckham 2002; UNDP 2000; World Bank 2002). Given the fact that Eritrean statehood was partly the product of a social revolution, combined with a lack of resources to function in real terms as a developmental state (see Bernal 2004), those achievements were based partly on mobilisation endeavours demanding personal sacrifices.

Castells (1992: 57) points out the potential similarities between revol-utionary and developmental states: in both cases, the state 'substitutes itself for society in the definition of societal goals'. This implies that for a developmental state not simply to be a development dictatorship requires a political leadership able to provide a legitimate ideological framework for state policies that might otherwise be regarded as demanding un-palatable suffering. And, as Hall (1996: 26–7, emphasis in the original) rightly points out, consent to the project of the state or the governing elite is '*not* maintained through the mechanisms of ideology alone'; dominant

ideas become a 'material force' and play an important part in carrying that project into the future (see also Johnson 1999; Mkandawire 2001).[3]

In the case of Eritrea, 'ideological hegemony' has always been accompanied to different degrees by biopolitical control. Based on Agamben's (1998: 6) assertion that the 'production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power', it has been suggested that the project of development, whether in the North or the South, is rooted in a system of state control ultimately imposed upon the majority of a country's population by an elite group (see Gilroy 2000; Patel & McMichael 2004). In the context of this paper, biopolitics is understood more openly. It is conceived as a form of national governance systematically managing the properties of the population with the ultimate objective of continuous reproduction of life in society – and as such based on what Agamben (1998: 4) calls 'the politicization of bare life as such'.[4] The deployment of regulatory politics at the level of the individual may be disciplinary and oppressive, but can equally promote social welfare and create openings for people in expanding their range of choices.[5] This conceptualisation of biopolitics acknowledges the Janus-faced nature of power, and the fact that elites, however powerful and manipulative they may be, always face resistance, whether expressed openly or clandestinely (Dickinson 2004; Foucault 1980).

Biopolitical transitions in Eritrea

Turning to Eritrea, a developmental entity has emerged where the ruling elite is at the same time driven by the objective to recreate the new state in the image of the 'quasi state' built around Nakfa during the liberation struggle. Legitimacy is thus not only or even mainly based on developmental outcomes, but more importantly on acquiescence in the government's interpretation of the past. In order to establish its sole authority, the EPLF/PFDJ elite has employed selective narratives and invented new sets of traditions based on strong notions of inclusion or exclusion as key factors in shaping national as well as personal identities.[6] For the constitution of the latter what has been called 'personal nationalism' (McCrone 1998: 40), understood as an active process of affirmation of one's national identity, is of prime importance in a nationalist revolutionary culture like Eritrea's.

This affirmation is based on rituals that make the nation and the state appear as one. The PFDJ acts not as a political party, but rather as a socialising organ that mobilises the wider populace for its version of social progress (Luckham 2002). Important mobilisation drives over the years

include the early food for work and later cash for work programmes, the developmental activities in the context of summer work programmes and the national service campaign, and most recently the Warsay-Yekealo Development Campaign (see Hughes 2004; Makki 1996). At the same time, the 'party' deeply mistrusts 'the people's' capacity to make the 'right' decisions; thus, participation and individual engagement are tolerated only if they comply with the blueprint of the political leadership (see Hirt 2000; Luckham 2002). Those dynamics put the mass-conscripted national army as the material form of the oneness of nation and state at the centre of national identity formation. It is here where the synthesis between the citizen and the state is experienced in concrete terms, and any gap between state and civil society disappears. A nationwide national service campaign was thus introduced in 1995 in order to pass what have been called the 'Nakfa principles' (Reid 2005: 479) on to the next generation. This social engineering project requires all women and men between 18 and 40 years of age to undergo 6 months of military training followed by 12 months civilian reconstruction activities as a citizenship obligation.[7] And while ideological underpinnings often stress the latter, at the core of the campaign is the military element, together with values of struggle and sacrifice. Therefore, those who define themselves outside the military collective are ultimately regarded as betraying the nation, and can in the eyes of the state's leadership legitimately be reduced to their bare life. The most prominent examples are members of Jehovah's Witnesses, who made themselves available for national service on the condition that they were not required to undergo any weapon training. Some have by now been detained for ten years for their refusal of armed military service, while more generally no stipulations exist to accommodate conscientious objectors (Bariagaber 2006).

   Observers have rightly argued that until the 1998–2000 Eritrea–Ethiopian war, the PFDJ-led government commanded significant capital of popular legitimacy. In spite of frustrations, most of Eritrea's citizens were prepared to go along with interferences into their lives, as long as it helped the overall development of the country (Hirt 2000; Ottaway 1999). The war and its conduct led to many visible ruptures within the Eritrean state, and resulted in a considerable loss of popular legitimacy of the political leadership (Müller 2006). At the same time it brought the darker side of biopolitical sovereignty into the open, what Agamben (1998: 168–9) calls 'the politics of sovereign exceptions', the ultimate symbol of which is the camp, 'opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule'. In a developmental revolutionary state like Eritrea, the 'blind spot' harboured by all modern sovereignties, 'a zone in which power is above

the law and thus, at least potentially, a terrain of terror' (Buck-Morss 2000: 2–3), was always prone to become reality once the hegemonic project lost popular support. The state in such a scenario can too easily turn 'pernicious' (Agamben 1998).

What can currently be observed in Eritrea is what I will call biopolitical transition. About 44% of the Eritrean population is below 15 years of age (US Census Bureau 2007). This current young generation has no experience of the armed struggle that lies at the foundation of the country's narrative. But its members grew up in what can be described as 'a moral and political zone of indistinction' (Agamben 1998), in a setting where the political and the military are thoroughly embedded into everyday life practices. At the same time, Eritrea has since 1991 moved from being closed off in a remote corner in the Horn of Africa to being exposed to the wider world and the opportunities that this global environment has to offer. This exposure, together with the disappearance of the (liberation) war that formed part of the thread holding the revolutionary project together, was always bound to weaken the ideological hegemony of the political leadership, and formulate questions about the personal versus the communal in a new light (Bernal 2006; Müller 2005).

Indeed, as early as 1991 the first cautious attempts were made by different social actors to redefine the space for individual action. These included for example the brief emergence of the Eritrean Human Rights and Development Centre and of BANA, a quasi-independent women war veterans' organisation; and demands voiced by different groups of former EPLF fighters. The reaction of the political leadership in all those cases followed a similar pattern: different degrees of repression, at times combined with measures to accommodate those demands that were deemed justified (see Amnesty International 2002; Connell 1997; Pool 2001).[8] From 1996 onwards, potentially repressive measures were institutionalised with the establishment of the Special Court. On paper, the Court was to deal with cases of corruption and embezzlement. In practice, it acts as a tribunal with sweeping powers outside the normal juridical system (see Amnesty International 2002; Plaut 2002). In a parallel move, between 1994 and 1997 new structures of regional and local government were put into place that cemented top-down leadership mechanisms (see Bundegaard 2004; Tronvoll 1998).

But it took the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia to produce not only intensive political debate and open dissent within the higher echelons of the PFDJ, but to make an increasing number of ordinary citizens question the hegemonic project more generally (Müller 2006; Plaut

2002). This in turn provoked a government response going beyond 'traditional' measures of repression. On the one hand, and as could have been expected, government critics were arrested; many are held to this day in secret incommunicado detention, without being charged. In addition, independent news media were closed down and independent-minded journalists arrested (Home Office 2006; Jayasekera 2001; Plaut 2002).

At the same time, other spheres of life were put under stricter biopolitical control. Visible control measures included the imposition of new conditions to obtain exit visas or their outright refusal, and an increasingly rigorous nation-wide campaign to identify those who did not fulfil their service obligations.[9] In the long run, however, the control mechanisms exercised through education policy, in particular in the field of tertiary education, will determine the future of the Eritrean polity. How the cohort of young people studying at the University of Asmara (UoA) relate to the hegemonic narrative, and carry out the balancing act of asserting personal and national identities in practice, is crucial for the long-term success of at least the developmental ambitions of the state.

The following draws on data collected between 1998 and 2006 among students at the UoA and the College at Mai Nefhi.[10] It discusses how the biopolitical project as applied to human resource development at first succeeded in terms of reinforcing personal nationalism. Since 2001, however, dynamics have unfolded that are bound to put the state's developmental agenda into jeopardy.

EDUCATION AND HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT IN ERITREA:
THE STORY UP TO 2001

One of the prime roles of any education system is the fulfilment of broader societal development goals. Particularly in the developing world, education plays an important role in achieving wider objectives of the state, resulting in 'education [being] unequivocally linked with both citizen formation and national economic development' (Green 1997: 143). Two factors commonly characterise educational policies in such circumstances: a high degree of centralised planning, accompanied by an integrated approach towards economic development and human capital formation, and considerable emphasis on the social and moral dimension of education (Buchert 1998).

The same is true for education and human resource development policies in Eritrea. The education system that emerged after independence draws heavily on the nationalist 'Revolution School' set up by the

EPLF in northern Sahel. At the same time, one can find many features that resemble the administration of education under the previous Ethiopian regime. This is not the place to discuss in any detail the exact workings and structures of that system, as the focus here is on tertiary higher education (see Hirt & Abdelkhader in preparation; Müller 2007).

The role of tertiary education within the national human re-source development strategy broadly follows the pattern advocated by Thompson and Fogel (1976) for educational development in developing countries. The role of the university is that of a 'developmental university', an institution first and foremost concerned with the '"solution" of the concrete problems of societal development' (Coleman 1994: 334ff.). Such a university sets out to 'ensure that the development plans of the university are integrated with or linked to national development plans' (*ibid.*). At the UoA, this implied that subjects of study were allocated. Students' priorities were given only cursory concern in this process. In addition, summer work programmes and compulsory university service before and recently also after graduation in order to foster social solidarity have always been fixed parts of higher education in post-independence Eritrea. For postgraduate studies the university used to draw up staff development plans, and facilitated and paid for students with good academic performance to be sent abroad for education at Master's or Ph.D. level.[11]

The success of such a strategy depends largely on a vision shared between official policy, embodied by the government and the university administration on the one hand, and the people, the individual students, on the other. Without such a vision 'brain drain' is difficult to avoid. Indeed, the ultimate rejection of the government's notion of social solidarity that can be exercised by university students is a life in the diaspora, depriving Eritrea of the benefits that the investment in a student's education should have brought.

Up to 2001, the government appeared rather successful in fostering that social solidarity. In a survey carried out in spring 2001 among 359 students at the UoA, 176 women and 183 men, only 80 respondents considered a future outside Eritrea.[12] Only one student, answering an open question at the end of the survey, rejected any notion of social solidarity outright and wrote: 'I don't care about Eritrea … because the condition of Eritrea does not allow my dreams.'

The propensity to contribute something to the communal, and the way this contribution was envisaged, was equally obvious in an in-depth study of a sample of 29 women students carried out during the

academic year 2000/01.[13] All had very individualistic, material, career-ist – in short, conventional – ambitions for the future. At the same time, however, 27 women expressed feelings similar to those of 'Almaz' and 'Rahel'.[14] 'Almaz' (2000 int.) said: 'I want to return to Eritrea [after postgraduate studies] … I mean what is the benefit of this university training students [abroad] and no one is returning back … I want to really work here in Eritrea.' Similar ambitions were expressed by 'Rahel' (2000 int.): 'I will come back … other than bringing Indian teachers to this university, you can do it yourself … also if you came here you help your country to develop … both of you [you and your country] are getting advantage.'

Even those with concrete experiences among family or friends, where the government's agenda had interfered with individual am-bitions, were prepared to give the leadership the benefit of the doubt, not least because until then it had seemed possible to reconcile personal ambitions with enforced commitments. The case of 'Hannah' (2000 int.) provides an example here: 'We don't have private life … now I can decide minor things, but for the future … our future is trapped, lim-ited … you have to get permission from the government to do whatever you want.' She continues to narrate the story of her cousin who secured a scholarship from a university in the US and was only allowed to leave after two extra years of national service. Referring to his story she says 'It is frustrating, but it does not discourage me, I have to try and see what happens … even until I do the national service and all of that, things I hope will change a little bit … I'm hoping things will get better.'

At the time, only two of the 29 women saw their future firmly outside Eritrea, 'Azieb' and 'Rihab'. Whereas 'Azieb' cited notions of personal freedom from cultural restrictions as her motivation, freedom for 'Rihab' (2001 int.) was strongly related to the political: 'I don't know if our government is going to give us a chance to participate in actual political activities … they can't rule the country forever, there must be elections, but I don't know, is it going to happen … I don't want to live here for my kids in the future … maybe if some change, or a miracle happens to Eritrea I would like to stay here.'

This last statement points to the fact that while many Eritreans were then prepared to sacrifice parts of their individual fulfilment for the com-mon good, resistance to restrictions of personal freedom was bound to become more important in the future. In the meantime, many youth are frustrated and alienated – a process that gained momentum in the summer of 2001, when the oppressive features of biopolitical Eritrea as a

'hard' state (see Forrest 1988) came into the open very clearly in the domain of tertiary education.

For students at the UoA, events during the summer of 2001 acted as a turning point. Students were quite suddenly required to do an additional round of national service during the summer months, justified by the difficult situation after the end of the fighting phase in the 1998–2000 Eritrea–Ethiopian war. Many of their families experienced financial hardship as a result of this war, and had banked on their sons and daughters earning money during the summer months. Thus only very few students appeared on the announced day to board the buses that were to take them to their stations of duty. In a separate development, the leader of the students' union was arrested and accused of initiating unrest.

All students were then requested to gather at the national stadium and threatened with 'grave consequences' should they fail to do so. Others were rounded up in their dormitories. The whole batch was then driven to Wi'a in the Danakil desert, an inhospitable place at the best of times but more so in the middle of the summer heat. After two students had died from heat-related conditions, they were transferred to Ghela'elo, a place with similar climatic conditions but on the coast and with better facilities. During their stay, students were told that they were there to make their contribution to the nation and that they had to help in road construction activities. In reality, while some students did indeed collect stones for road building at times, it was clear to everybody that this trip was in fact the punishment for not obeying the first order to report for service.

It ended with a measure that brings the 'pernicious' dimension of Eritrean biopolitics into clear focus: to be allowed to return, all students had to sign a letter in which they apologised for their behaviour and failure to willingly serve their people. In sharp contrast to the usual workings of Eritrean policy measures that target the collectivity of the nation or particular groups like youth, here the individual was singled out. Each student had to sign individually, and it was made clear that those who did not comply would not be allowed to return to Asmara in the foreseeable future. Quite literally, the choice was between giving in to the state's agenda or remaining indefinitely in a geographical location that put one's well-being at risk.

Back in Asmara and with the beginning of the new academic year, things appeared normal on the surface. But for those who had been sent to 'the coastal areas', this was a rupture that would not be forgotten easily. The father of one of the students summed up a more general feeling: 'How can you send young people who are only exposed to the highland climate down there at a time when even many people who normally live there leave because of the heat?', he demanded ('A' 2002 int.). But most of all many students felt a deep feeling of hurt. Only a little more than a year earlier, when the war with Ethiopia had resulted in a military confrontation that saw large parts of Eritrea overrun by Ethiopian troops, those same students had refused to continue their studies and demanded to be sent to help defend their country at the frontline. And now they were regarded as traitors, or, following Agamben's terminology, reduced to bare life in what could be called a biopolitical space of exemption.

This is not to suggest that the government meant to cause serious bodily harm, and the unfortunate deaths of two students were more an accident than anything else. Equally, once the students had arrived in the coastal areas there was no systematic machinery of oppression in place. On the contrary, the soldiers whose task it was to guard them reportedly felt sorry for their plight and treated them with affection. But nobody questioned the rationale behind the official interpretation that what was happening was a just punishment for an act of betrayal. A few lecturers at the UoA raised their voices in support of the students. One lecturer who did so passed away shortly afterwards. Even though his death had natural causes, many students believed that 'they', as suddenly the political leadership became referred to, killed him because he spoke on students' behalf.

Looking at the wider picture, the episode narrated above might seem of no great importance. But it exemplifies the dynamics that unfold once the hegemonic project loses its attraction and biopolitics turns, or rather has to turn, 'pernicious' to retain control. The events in the coastal areas can thus be put into the wider Eritrean context.

As argued above, the conduct of the 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia proved to be a transformative event for the Eritrean polity. Not only could the political leadership at times not guarantee the state's territorial integrity, but equally, many of the gains made in terms of development were put into jeopardy. At the same time, a lively debate emerged about the government's hegemony and national configuration. This 'spring' was not to last, but was followed swiftly by a government crackdown (Bariagaber 2006; Müller 2006).

In line with the general observation that education is one of the essential terrains of social reproduction, it was here that many of the consequences were felt most severely. To quell future dissent at its roots, the government imposed structural changes within the education system aimed at enforcing loyalty. These mechanisms were modelled on the military structures that characterised the liberation movement before Eritrean independence. It has rightly been observed that even before 2001 Sawa, the national military training centre in a remote location in the western lowlands, received considerably more attention and investment than the UoA, Eritrea's only institution of higher education (Reid 2005). Sawa's importance grew further with the revival of the 'cadre school', another relict of the struggle for independence, from 2004 onwards; meanwhile and fittingly, 'cadre training' has moved to the School of Social Studies located in Nakfa, where the sixth round of recruits started training in August 2007 (awate.com 2007; shabait.com 2007).

(FURTHER) MILITARISATION OF FORMAL EDUCATION

In the light of these developments, it should come as no surprise that the events during the summer of 2001 proved to be a catalyst for the accelerating militarisation of formal higher education. The academic year 2002/03 saw grade 12 being newly introduced as the last grade of secondary schooling. To complete grade 12, students need to transfer to Sawa. Countrywide matriculation exams are also held in Sawa. Those who pass are no longer transferred to the UoA, but are sent to a newly built campus in Mai Nefhi to complete their freshman year. The Eritrean Institute of Technology at Mai Nefhi, as it is officially known, is located only a few kilometres south of Asmara. But built on an open field site, it feels isolated and remote. Run jointly by an academic vice director and an army colonel, Mai Nefhi resembles more a military camp than a place of higher learning. Students, at least in theory, need permission to leave the campus, and in private conversations it is often referred to as 'the camp'.

In line with the rationale behind those changes, at the time of writing the UoA, at least on paper an institution where academic freedom was respected, is being dissolved. Its faculties are in the process of being relocated to different places all over the country. The official justification for those measures is a move towards greater decentralisation of higher education. In practice, the different faculties are to be governed by branches of the respective ministries, and are thus exposed to direct political control and interference.

With the benefit of hindsight, the dissolution of the UoA follows a long-term plan devised partly as a result of the events in the summer of 2001.[16] In the following year, for the first time, no students were sent to the university for their freshman studies. From then onwards, slowly but steadily the foundations were laid to tighten the screws on the university and dissolve it. This process went hand in hand with ever more power being concentrated in the Office of the President,[17] for whom the university was never an institution that merited much attention, but rather a place where youth were potentially being alienated from core values (see Reid 2005). Following this logic, national service requirements for university students have been tightened in different ways from 2002 onwards. Different batches of students were called to Sawa for additional military training instead of being sent to do their year of expertise-related service, as part of a government drive to reinforce discipline and patriotic commitment among the student community. If they are sent to work in their professions, service hardly ever ends after one year as originally stipulated, but can continue indefinitely.

In this environment of biopolitical control, the only options for resistance are twofold: either inward migration or, as more and more young people admit in private conversations, 'to get out'. The latter has been made almost impossible for people of national service age in general and students in particular, who are commonly denied exit visas to leave the country. But as in any oppressive environment, counter-dynamics do emerge. Many youth find their 'way out', be it via Sudan or even Ethiopia, or for women in getting married to a foreign national, or in asking for asylum abroad in the course of an official visit. Those who stay struggle to create a niche for themselves. Graduates who in the past would have been sent abroad for further studies now work for the few international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) still operating in the country. They earn a – by local standards – high salary, even though they hardly ever work in any position that carries responsibility in line with their education (see also Reid 2005).

Those dynamics are also visible among some of the 29 women students who were part of the study conducted in 2000/01.[18] 'Rahel' and 'Hannah', both mentioned above, were by their own account the only two women among the 29 who completed more than two years of university service as teachers, as required at the time in order to secure official release papers from national service obligations.[19] They did so, 'All our friends were thinking we are crazy', 'Rahel' (2004 int.) says, in the hope 'that things would change and we would after all be sent for further studies.' Those hopes have not been fulfilled, and Rahel's own efforts

to find a scholarship have so far not been successful. She started working for an INGO in a position she enjoyed, but her organisation was asked to leave the country at the end of 2006 in one of the periodic government crackdowns on foreign NGOs. When asked about her long-term future, she is still committed to continue her education 'for myself only', as she does not believe that 'there will be a university again where one can teach soon' ('Rahel' 2006 telephone conversation; email exchange).

Like 'Rahel', in 2000 'Almaz' was hoping to one day become a lecturer at the UoA (see above). She was lucky in that she secured a scholarship after her graduation and was among the few who were allowed to leave at the time.[20] Meanwhile she has completed a Master's degree and continues as a doctoral candidate. When asked about her ambitions in 2006 she said: 'My academic life went very well but it is difficult for me surviving in a Western culture, adjusting myself to that culture … I want to go back to Eritrea but as you can tell from the current situation, I am not sure' ('Almaz' 2006 email).

Taken together government control regulates exit options and career opportunities quite comprehensively. This becomes particularly obvious in the story of 'Esther', who graduated in 2001 and had completed all national service obligations before her graduation. Together with her husband, she set out to successfully establish her own company in a field much in demand in Eritrea. In 2006, the government closed down all private companies in their field on diffuse charges of corruption in the sector that were never substantiated. Many of their professional friends had to undergo spells in prison. Esther and her husband were 'only' prohibited from working. When we met in October 2006, their savings were slowly running out. Esther is still hoping to go abroad for further study, and still has the ambition to eventually return to Eritrea and not only 'help my family but contribute to the reconstruction of my country'. But she says at the same time 'the way our government is going at the moment, at least I have to get more education and experience abroad … then in case the government changes I can come back to achieve my aims' ('Esther' 2006 int.). In her case, if 'Esther' were to secure a scholarship she is likely to be granted an exit visa – but her husband and daughter would probably have to stay behind, leaving control over important aspects of her personal life in the hands of the government.

Those examples and 'Esther's' story in particular show the constant struggle to realise at least part of one's ambitions in a polity that has become characterised by constantly changing biopolitical control mechanisms. Similar dynamics can be observed among the students currently

at Mai Nefhi.[21] In informal conversations with students it becomes clear that the majority reject 'being kept here, of course it would be better to be in Asmara' ('B' 2006 int.). But they have developed strategies of resistance. Some go to Asmara every weekend, which is forbidden officially, but can still be arranged. They are well equipped with – equally forbidden – mobile phones and other gadgets that allow them to keep in touch with their peers and make arrangements to meet their boyfriends. When asked about their future aspirations, the common answer is to do well in their education and then 'get a job in the private sector and have a good life' ('C' 2006 int.). The statement of one student sums up a general feeling: 'Of course we would like to have a choice, what we study, where, but we don't have a choice, we are forced to study here … it should not be like this, but we will make the best of it for our future when we are out of here' ('D' 2006 int.).

Implicit in this statement, and in many other private conversations the author held in Eritrea during her most recent visit in 2006, is a turn towards private and individual fulfilment, combined with strategies to evade official demands. This undermines the very foundation of Eritrea as a developmental state, the propensity towards voluntary social solidarity among the population.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE BIOPOLITICAL PROJECT

When looking more generally at the implications of the developments described above for Eritrean state consolidation, a complex picture emerges. It has been argued that a fundamental task of such consolidation is the control over population movement (Herbst 1990). Judged by this criteria Eritrea can be described as one of the strongest states on the African continent (see Dorman 2006). The control over the movements of Eritrean citizens is remarkable, in terms of control over emigration, the 'exit-option', as well as in terms of internal population movements. This control extends in different ways to the Eritrean diaspora, who for example by and large pay a 2% tax on their income to the Eritrean state (see Newland 2004).

But looking at state consolidation in terms of 'ideological hegemony' and popular legitimacy raises serious questions about the viability of the Eritrean biopolitical project. Eritrea's most valuable asset after liberation has been the dedication of the collective citizenry, inside and outside the country. Achievements in terms of human development in general, and education and human resource development in particular, were grounded in a propensity to serve the common good.

At present, however, the gulf between the ruling elite and the ambitions of younger population groups, in particular those in urban areas, seems to the observer to widen by the day. The modern ambitions created by the Eritrean revolution cannot be suppressed indefinitely by sending people to Sawa or the refusal of exit visas. Sawa was meant to be the place where the defence of the country's sovereignty was passed on militarily and ideologically to a committed future generation. In the Eritrea of today, Sawa first and foremost symbolises state control over the lives of its youth, a control that is increasingly being rejected and evaded (see Reid 2005).

In addition, the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia has resulted in increased economic hardship, and more generally the erosion of developmental achievements within Eritrea. More crucially, any long-term development agenda is bound to fail, because the measures taken in the course of the militarisation of formal education put any human resource development strategy into jeopardy. It is not sustainable for the country's brightest graduates, instead of building capacity within the country, to work in clerical positions for international NGOs or spend their time devising strategies how to best leave the country.

More generally it has been argued that good human resource development practice creates loyalty and commitment (Tessema & Soeters 2006). In Eritrea, not only are civil servant salaries much lower than those in the private sector, but under the government's agenda of absolute control over society, most senior positions are held by individuals loyal to the political project of the ruling elite, who more often than not lack professional expertise. This state of affairs has as a consequence that the official bureaucracy is unable to grasp the opportunities that could connect Eritrea with the global economy.

Taken together, at present the future of Eritrea as a viable developmental state looks bleak. As long as the only avenues for living resistance are inward migration or the route into exile, the political leadership will continue to lose popular legitimacy. This in turn is likely to result in more repressive policies. The Eritrean polity is at present experiencing a lesson that history should have taught its leaders, not least during the time of the Ethiopian occupation: you cannot reduce both the 'exit' option and the option to 'voice' opposition without endangering the balance of the whole political system (see Rokkan 1975).

Ultimately, a renewed war with Ethiopia may draw the population to rally behind the national project again, but such an outcome would be disastrous. This is not to suggest that the Eritrean state is about to collapse. In contrast, the measures of biopolitical control affecting youth

in particular have prevented privatised dissatisfaction from translating into meaningful political alternatives. External opposition movements are weak and largely discredited (see Trivelli 2006). And whether and how growing disillusionment among the economically important Eritrean diaspora will impact on in-country politics is open to question (see Koser 2003).

But in the long run, it is hard to see how viability of the political project in its present form can be sustained. The ruling elite has not only lost much of its legitimacy. At the same time, its ability to promote and sustain development is being diminished by the alienation of the naturally expanding future generation.

NOTES

1. The concept of 'developmental state' was shaped by Johnson (1982) in his discussion of Japanese development after WWII; for a good overview of discussions of the developmental state, see Woo-Cumings 1999.

2. For a discussion of this conflict and its aftermath see Jacquin-Berdal & Plaut 2005; Negash & Tronvoll 2000.

3. For different conceptualisations of the developmental state, ranging from entities primarily concerned with national economic enhancement to facilitators of state–market synergies, see for example Pempel 1999; Wade 1990.

4. Agamben grounds modern sovereignty in the classical Greek distinction between bare life (*zoë*) and the form of living proper to an individual or a group (*bios*), a distinction salient in the modern history of many nations; for an example of the latter see Farquhar & Zhang 2005. In his wider discussion and conceptualisation of bare life, Agamben himself focuses on totalitarian fascist regimes, a focus deemed unnecessarily narrow in the context of this paper.

5. History, it has to be said, provides many examples where social engineering projects guided by a quest for improvement in the human condition have indeed led to terror and oppression (see Scott 1998).

6. Similar dynamics are not confined to Eritrea but have been observed among many post-liberation governments; for a wider discussion see Melber 2003.

7. At the time of its introduction, national service enjoyed considerable popularity. For the second batch of recruitment for example, 30,000 young people registered, but only 20,000 could be accommodated at the time (UNICEF 1996). Since the 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia, people called for national service have not been allowed back after the required 18 months, but are made to stay in service indefinitely, or until the war situation is eventually fully resolved.

8. One could argue that this pattern of dealing with dissent has its roots in the so-called *manqa* crisis within the EPLF in the early 1970s. Its enduring legacy has been a centralist understanding of democracy, relying on a strong framework of control (for a detailed account of that crisis and its resolution, see Pool 2001: 76ff.).

9. Within this campaign, groups of military police are posted at busy street corners and check the identity papers of passers-by of national service age, particularly young men. Increasingly searches have also been conducted in bars, taxis and people's homes. If identity papers do not show that the person in question has fulfilled his obligations, they are usually brought immediately to a holding centre and subsequently sent to Sawa (author's observations in Asmara and Barentu during 2001; see also BBC 2002).

10. I have visited Eritrea on a regular basis since 1996. The academic year 2000/01 I spent at the UoA and during that time conducted in-depths interviews and a wider survey. I have returned for shorter research visits from November 2001 to January 2002, in December 2003, in May 2004 and in October/November 2006.

11. In theory, students who finished their degree with a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 2·8 or above were sent mainly to partner universities in South Africa, but occasionally also to the US or Europe.

In February 2001, for example, in one of the last of such sendings, a group of 300 students left for South Africa.

12. While comparatively low, for Dr Wolde-Ab Yisak, president of the UoA at the time, those figures indicated a higher propensity to aspire to live abroad than anticipated, and were at the time explained by the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia (Yisak 2001 int.).

13. A note on sample composition seems in order here, as populations from some lowland areas have a history of being more critical of the hegemonic project in general (see Naty 2002). Among the student population at the UoA at the time, those from a Tigrinya *kebesa* (highland) background were the majority (official figures were not made available because of their potential political sensitivity). The survey sample thus included only 5·3% of students with a lowland background. The group of 29 in-depth women interviewees included four non-Tigrinya women from lowland areas, and six women who spent their childhood either in Ethiopia or in an Arab country; the remaining 19 were Tigrinya from the *kebesa*.

14. All names were changed for reasons of confidentiality.

15. The following account is based on fieldnotes from conversations and observations from November 2001 to January 2002.

16. As pointed out by one of the anonymous reviewers, plans for the decentralisation of higher education had been harboured some time before. The author had a conversation with Osman Saleh, then minister of education, in March 2001, in which he emphasised the envisaged limited role for academic tertiary education in the future and a move towards technical and vocational training institutes in different parts of the country (Saleh 2001 int.).

17. The Office of the President and the Office for Macro-policy attached to it are at the core of executive power, and can overrule any ministerial decisions (see Christmann 1998; Pool 2001).

18. Altogether, contact could be re-established with eleven of the 29 women in 2004 and/or 2006. Out of those, nine are still in Eritrea and two live and study abroad.

19. In theory, those papers need to be shown at checkpoints conducted regularly by the military police (see also note 9 above). In practice, many female graduates known to the author simply left their university service assignments once they had graduated and started to work in the private sector; they (in contrast to some of their male counterparts) are usually left alone.

20. In February 2003 a moratorium was announced by the then university president Dr. Wolde-Ab Yisak, prohibiting students as well as staff members from going abroad for further studies for the foreseeable future. In reality, however, students known to the author have been allowed to leave while others have been prevented; mechanisms for this decision-making process are not transparent.

21. The following is based on conversations with students in Mai Nefhi in October 2006.

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