

## **Sovereignty and Solidarity: Towards a Consistent Human Rights Ethic in Eritrea**

**Tricia Redeker Hepner, Ph.D.**  
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I want to extend my sincerest thanks to the Chicago-based organizers of this event for inviting me to share some thoughts with all of you today.

As a foreign researcher, and as someone committed to the principles of equality and social justice, my relationship with Eritrea has inevitably changed over the years. In 1995, when I first went to Eritrea to participate in one of the first rounds of the *keremtawi ma'etot*, the student summer reconstruction campaign, I was enormously inspired by the strength, hope, resourcefulness, and resilience of the people I met and of the reconstruction effort itself. The progressive elements at work in the Eritrean nationalist movement seemed obvious, even to a naïve American college student like myself at the time. Eritreans both old and young, civilian and fighter alike, were determined in their efforts to confront and overcome the historical legacies of oppression, occupation, and war which characterized not only Eritrea's experience but so many other countries around the world. It was a first step in my developing solidarity with Eritreans that I decided then, at 21 years old, that my life and career would be forever entwined with Eritrea's future. In 1998, I was again in Asmara when the border war exploded – literally, when the bombs dropped on the city – and I recall feeling at the time that something very fateful was happening, something that would dramatically alter the path of the post-independence experience. When I came to live and work in this community in 2000, the richer understanding I

gained of the 30-year struggle helped me make sense of many things when I returned to Eritrea in 2001 – a changed Eritrea from the one I first met in 1995, so it seemed to me.

It sort of goes without saying that over the past 12 years I have become intimately familiar with many things, both positive and negative, about Eritrea's past and present. I continue to believe that much about the Eritrean independence struggle and revolution was genuinely progressive. And I continue to admire the strength and courage of all Eritreans to speak frankly to one another as individuals, and as a nation, to the rest of the world. But I also know that the Eritrean struggle, which continues in a different way today, has been extraordinarily painful in ways that are not easily seen, and that go beyond the obvious impacts of war. There are wounds within the national community that have not yet healed – and new ones that have been created – despite the sharing of so many common goals and dreams. I am also aware of the very high stakes all Eritreans hold in the fate and future of their country.

I do not take my intimate knowledge of Eritrean politics, history, or culture lightly. In fact, I feel a great sense of responsibility that is often more difficult to manage than I ever expected. I also do not pretend to share the same stakes as Eritreans. Because I am an outsider, as well as an internationalist who adheres to principles of social justice – and not to a sense of national duty – my knowledge, for better or worse, has led me to form independent conclusions. In thinking critically about Eritrea I have taken positions that are often at odds with the dominant nationalist discourse that defines Eritrea's current power structure. In my writing and my analysis of Eritrean issues, I often make arguments or point out issues which can make people uncomfortable. Who is this privileged, white American woman to say these things? What right does she have to hold an opinion on our history, our experiences? How can she possibly understand what it is like to be in our position? These are certainly valid questions for anyone to

ask, and I have even asked them of myself. And the answer I would give is also underpinned by my commitment to social justice, as well as my vocation as a social scientist.

In anthropology, which includes the study of cultures and social organization, we recognize that nothing that is human is truly foreign or unintelligible to any of us. We all have the capacity to learn one another's ways of thinking and of seeing the world, even if we lack the same firsthand experiences. And as human beings, and as citizens who share an international community (again, for better or worse), we all have the right to form and express our opinions on any matter. When those opinions are informed by genuine knowledge and come from a spirit of solidarity, so much the better. So today I speak to you in all these capacities: as an anthropologist, as a fellow human being, as an activist for social justice, and as a friend who stands in solidarity with Eritrea.

I suppose it is a cliché to say that sometimes your friends say things that are difficult to hear. Some might say – and have said to me, in not so polite words – that to speak critically about Eritrea amounts to betrayal. In a recent email posting about an event on human rights I organized at the University of Tennessee this past April, in part to commemorate the life and untimely death in prison of my friend Fessehayle Joshua Yohannes, a person who claimed to have known me from this very town of Chicago wrote that I should keep quiet and leave Eritrea alone. I strongly disagree. I would consider it a betrayal of all the trust Eritreans have shown in me, and a betrayal of my own most deeply held convictions, to not speak plainly about what I see and what I think. I would also consider it intellectually dishonest and morally reprehensible to bear witness to injustice, as I have done in Eritrea and among Eritreans here, many of them recent refugees and asylum seekers, and to not raise my voice in protest. As the Reverend Martin

Luther King, Jr. once said, “In the end, it is not the words of our enemies we remember, but the silence of our friends.”

And so, I will not be silent. And I will say honestly that I think Eritreans today are facing a situation of such gravity, such magnitude, that addressing it openly, critically, and seriously is a matter of life and death. I am referring to a crisis of human rights, which, among other things, has resulted in the unlawful detention of thousands of people and the exodus of many others who are seeking relief abroad, only to find themselves abused and discriminated against as refugees and asylum seekers in prisons and detention centers, including here in the United States.

Some of you may be aware that in recent years I have become very active in the area of human rights, both in terms of my research and teaching in anthropology, as well as in terms of my role as Eritrea country coordinator for Amnesty International USA, one of the oldest and largest independent, non-profit human rights organization in the world and a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. My activism in human rights comes directly from my experiences in Eritrea in 2001, when I was living in Asmara and finishing my doctoral research. At that time I observed firsthand some of the impacts of both the border war with Ethiopia as well as some of the policies adopted by the current government. Underpinning these policies was the privileging of national security concerns within the country, and the related need to protect Eritrea’s sovereignty as an independent nation-state, both from Ethiopia as well as from other external forces that might compromise the government’s control over the country’s political or economic environment.

Neither of those two concerns is unusual for a government to espouse. Preserving national security and sovereignty is of paramount importance to virtually every government in the world today. And the crisis of human rights we see today is by no means limited to Eritrea –

today and in the past it has regional and global dimensions. However, the manner in which national security and sovereignty are pursued varies across contexts, and human rights abuses also vary in form and severity. But all have major impacts on the lives of human beings, who are, after all, what really matters most when we talk about nation-states and security. In Eritrea in 2001 I observed firsthand some of the objective measures taken by the government to protect national security and sovereignty. Among these were the closure of the independent media, the punishing of student activism and independent organizing, the detention without charge of dozens of journalists and members of the government who voiced critical perspectives, and the expansion of conscription into the military. Later, of course, these measures grew to include the closure of religious institutions and arrest of thousands of leaders and laypeople, the punishment of conscripts within the military for their political or religious beliefs, the punishing of parents and relatives of people who resisted authority in various ways, and the house arrest and replacement (in contravention to Church canons) of the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church for speaking out on behalf of several priests who were detained by the government.

I recall vividly the days and weeks in 2001 when this situation first unfolded – when the G-15 released their Open Letter, when the students demonstrated, when the fire of debate in the independent newspapers blazed and was then stamped out. I spoke with many, many people – including members of the PFDJ party and government – about their fears and hopes at a time when Eritrea’s well-being and future seemed to hang in the balance. Incidentally, this was also at a time when America’s well-being and future seemed to hang in the balance. It was shortly after 9-11, and the US had just invaded Afghanistan in an ill-fated hunt for Osama bin Laden. And although the American government had not yet resorted to the blatant abuses of human rights and the violations of both international law and the Constitution that today so unfortunately

characterize this administration, as an American living in Eritrea I was genuinely shocked by the similarity between many issues. Oftentimes, I would find myself a participant in conversations with Eritreans about national security, sovereignty, war, and democracy, where one could almost replace the name Eritrea with America and carry on the debate without interruption. Even more so today, I look at what the American government has justified in terms of national security and sovereignty since September 2001 – the detention without charge of suspected terrorists; the use of torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment; the outsourcing of torture to other countries; the stifling of dissent through corporate co-optation of the media and the positioning of ‘patriots’ against ‘traitors’; the unending service required by soldiers; the steady, cynical erosion of established democratic institutions and the civil liberties guaranteed in our Constitution; the fanning of local and global religious tensions and the growing hostility towards immigrants and foreigners – the list goes on -- and I am nothing short of horrified. In a similar way, I look at how the Eritrean government has justified its own abuses of human and civil rights in terms of national security, sovereignty, unity, freedom, and justice, and I am equally horrified.

Clearly, there are enormous differences between Eritrea and America, and I do not wish to overstate the parallels. But there is also a common denominator which allows us to voice a similar critique of two governments as different as these. That common denominator is a commitment to inalienable and internationally guaranteed human rights and dignity for all people, regardless of their nationality, gender, political orientation, religion, ethnicity, age, or economic status. Such a commitment to human rights means that we as citizens of both specific nations and of the global community have a responsibility to hold *all* governments accountable for their treatment of their own people, as well as their behavior and policies towards other countries and the citizens of other countries.

This leads me to the main issue I want to focus on today, and that is, the importance of developing what I call a consistent human rights ethic in Eritrea, one that addresses Eritrea's *collective right* as a nation to sovereignty, security, dignity, and development, as well as the rights of *individual* Eritreans to hold and express their opinions and beliefs without fear of persecution or violence. And I want to start by suggesting to you that we recall some of the values of the Eritrean struggle for independence, because I think it provides an important historical blueprint for thinking about human rights in the present. Although the independence struggle was not framed in the language of human rights but rather in the language of anti-colonialism and nationalism, in many ways, it was still a struggle for human rights. It was a struggle for the *collective right* of self-determination, the right of a population sharing a common history and territory to author their own political and economic destiny. It was a struggle for the *individual right* not to be imprisoned, not to be tortured, not to be executed for one's political opinions, religious beliefs, nationality, or membership in a social group (in this case, by Ethiopia). It was a struggle for the right not to be forcibly conscripted into the Ethiopian army to fight one's brothers and sisters. And it was a struggle for justice and equality as an emergent nation-state, before national and international law. Many of the values of the independence struggle, the reasons why it was waged in the first place, are identical to the internationalist values expressed in the human rights movement that took shape after 1948.

So, hang onto that thought for a moment: the struggle for independence was a struggle for human rights.

Many people and governments, especially in formerly colonized countries, have viewed the concept of human rights as a western invention. While it is true that human rights concepts emerged first in western nations, so did the concept of nationalism and the independent nation-

state. Both human rights and nationalism have since been adapted by virtually every society and culture on the planet; they have become universal. Many people and governments have also viewed human rights as requiring an either-or choice. Either we prioritize the collective rights of a whole society, especially one which is struggling with the legacies of war and colonialism and external interference, OR we prioritize the rights of individual people within that society and endanger the interests of the whole. Certainly the government of Eritrea has argued that in order to protect sovereignty and national security, and to insure the development of Eritrean society, it is necessary to sacrifice the rights and freedoms of individuals – rights and freedoms which are not only guaranteed in Eritrea’s Constitution, but in the legally-binding human rights treaties the government has signed.

I want to be clear here, because this is important to what I am trying to communicate to you today. There is no question that Eritrea’s collective survival, and its ability to control its own political and economic destiny, is a legitimate human rights issue. The final resolution of the border issue with Ethiopia and relief for internally displaced persons and refugees should be at the top of an international human rights agenda for Eritrea. But it is unacceptable, and unnecessary, to pursue collective rights at the expense of individual rights. A consistent ethic of human rights would begin by recognizing and putting into practice the fact that national sovereignty, national security, development, and peace – the collective right of Eritrean society to not just survive but to thrive – is absolutely interdependent with the rights of individual Eritrean citizens to participate freely in the national development of their society, and to hold and to express their diverse opinions and beliefs without fear of persecution by their government.

The bottom line on human rights is this: all people, at all places and times, no matter what government they live under or to what national or customary laws they are subject, possess

inherent rights simply by virtue of their humanity. Governments at all times and all places are required to protect and guarantee these rights as specified in their own national laws and the international treaties they have signed. The international community is responsible for holding all governments accountable and reminding them of their obligations under international and national law. And if governments are unwilling to uphold and protect the rights of their citizens, then those citizens have the right to bypass national laws and appeal to international ones on the basis of their human rights.

Many of you may not be aware that the Eritrean government has signed and ratified no less than five of the six existing international human rights treaties, as well as the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights. Together, these treaties should wrap all Eritreans in a blanket of comprehensive rights and provide mechanisms for national and international accountability of the government. The treaties the government has signed include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, or ICCPR, which guarantees that people should be free of persecution on the basis of religion, ethnicity, gender, race, political opinion, or membership in a social group, and should not suffer arbitrary arrest, detention without charge, torture, or extrajudicial execution. The ICCPR also guarantees things like the freedom of expression and information, freedom of association and assembly, and it provides avenues for individuals to bring grievances against their own governments. The Eritrean government has also signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which guarantees the collective rights of groups to make equal claims on resources like water, land, health care, education, and employment, and to express their cultural characteristics without persecution or harassment. In signing such treaties, the government has agreed to its legal obligation to observe and protect the human rights of its citizens, whose individual civil and political rights are

indivisible from Eritrea's collective right of survival and dignity as a nation. Those individual rights cannot and should not be sacrificed in the name of national security, sovereignty, or economic development. Recognizing this would be a major step in developing a consistent human rights ethic in Eritrea.

Human rights concepts and even the legal treaties designed to insure them are by no means perfect, and they are always being negotiated by countries and peoples around the world. Eritreans themselves must become educated and knowledgeable about what human rights means, and must find ways to apply human rights concepts and legal instruments in ways which are most meaningful to Eritrea's circumstances. However, human rights are often captured and used for specific political purposes. That is, politics often intervenes when rights are concerned, leading to inconsistency in what governments or political parties say, versus what they do. Human rights are also used by some countries to gain power and authority over others, or as a condition for withholding or providing economic or political support. Certainly we have examples of this from the United States. The Eritrean government itself has correctly pointed out the hypocrisy involved when the US State Department criticizes Eritrea's human rights record while the US itself detains without charge, and tortures, prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, or when the US fails to adequately critique Ethiopia's abysmal record of human rights because Ethiopia is an ally in the so-called War on Terror. We also have countless examples from many parts of the world wherein rebel or opposition movements use concepts of human rights to legitimize their own use of violence or their own intolerance.

While legitimate claims may be at the heart of some forms of violence, these politicized uses do far more to damage the power of human rights than to advance specific causes. The strength of universal human rights lies precisely in their impartiality, their cultural flexibility,

and their applicability to different circumstances -- not their short-term usefulness in achieving a specific political end. Pursuing a consistent human rights ethic in Eritrea would therefore require us to be vigilant and critical at all turns, asking questions about how pushing for human rights in one way may risk violating them in other ways. A consistent human rights ethic is genuinely, radically democratic for democracy's sake. It establishes a firm baseline of rights and dignity for all people regardless of whether their views or beliefs are mainstream or extreme. This is because it is the principle of equal, unalienable rights that we must defend, not the particular beliefs in question.

Today, one of the major critiques of human rights being advanced by the Eritrean government, and by many other governments around the world (usually those who are being critiqued for their violations) is that it provides cover for particular political agendas. That might be true if a particular persecuted group – say evangelical Christians, or members of the pro-democracy movement – only favor human rights for themselves but are intolerant and abusive of others. But if we embrace a genuine and consistent ethic of human rights we find that we can address peacefully and progressively all aspects of human inequality, suffering, and the search of dignity and justice, from global economic inequality to issues of self-determination and the plight of refugees and displaced people. It is itself politically self-serving to claim that human rights are inherently captive to particular political agendas, and it reveals a grave misunderstanding of what constitutes human rights. Because at the end of the day, a human rights platform is not about what particular agenda, identity, or political perspective we are defending, but rather the right to have and to express our agendas, our identities, and our perspectives. From a human rights platform, this is what democracy means.

At the same time, it is not unusual for those of us who advocate for human rights to be referred to as dissidents, traitors, or worse. This is because we are engaged not only in a critique of the powers that be, but also because we agitate for the rights of all people, including those that we don't like or that we disagree with. No one can underestimate the threat this kind of tolerance represents to many governments, who are the real purveyors of specific political and economic agendas designed to exclude some, reward others, and above all, maintain power. In recent years, the Bush administration has referred to Amnesty International (and I paraphrase) as a left-wing political movement attempting to damage the US government's reputation around the world. Similarly, the PFDJ has described Amnesty International and other human rights organizations (again, I paraphrase) as agents of imperialism who single out Eritrea in order to smear its reputation and damage its development. The irony, of course, is that none but these governments themselves are responsible for their own reputations around the world. And the indignance they show towards human rights criticisms seems to be in direct proportion to the indignity they inflict on everyday men and women in the name of goals like national security, sovereignty, freedom, democracy and justice.

Finally, (at the risk of seeming ridiculous) let me close by invoking the words of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, the Argentinian medical doctor and internationalist guerrilla fighter who was executed by the CIA-backed Bolivian military in 1967 for his unceasing advocacy for the poor and disenfranchised of Latin America. He said, "Let me say, at the risk of seeming ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love." These words inspire me because it is with great love, and with solidarity, that I offer my perspectives on Eritrea to you today. And these words also remind me that while the Eritrean revolution for independence may be over, the struggle for freedom – in all its forms – continues.

Thank you.