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ERITREA

The rapid advancement in media technology has opened up world media, making it increasingly difficult to conceal what is going on within the borders of a totalitarian state. Eritrea remains one of the few states in the world to successfully isolate its people from global information exchange. Under the slogan “Serving the Truth,” Eritrean media are managed entirely by the Ministry of Information. The ministry simply manufactures and disseminates government propaganda, stifling alternative views while protecting the country’s leadership.

Since it began consolidating power, the Eritrean government has invoked the phrase “We chose silence” whenever confronted with political criticism. The phrase prefaced a systematic and blatant effort to mute free speech across Eritrean society in subsequent years, to the point where independent media have not existed for 12 years. Plain-clothes security personnel prowling society have added to the atmosphere of fear and mistrust among the population, according to a panelist who fled Eritrea in recent months.

The impact of the long silence by the government and dissenters cannot be underestimated. When the two-year border war with Ethiopia ended in 2000 the country settled into self-imposed isolation, ostensibly intended to strengthen sovereignty and national security while investing in infrastructure for the future. Arguably, Eritrea has seen little of either.

Through it all, Eritrea’s state media have maintained a posture of defiance, raising national security concerns while painting glossy narratives about internal developments. They omit discussion of the deaths and disappearance of over a dozen journalists in the past decade, the imprisonment of others under harsh conditions, the flight of tens of thousands of young individuals for economic reasons, human rights violations, support for militias in nearby Somalia, and rampant human trafficking.

In late November 2012, unconfirmed reports began circulating that Ali Abdu, minister of information, had defected and fled the country. He had controlled all Eritrean media for the last 12 years and his former charges remained mum about the rumors. This event in itself depicts the essence of Eritrean media and a recurring pattern—silence on matters of significance, particularly those uncomfortable for the state. The MSI for Eritrea attempts to assess the extent of this silence. The government has imprisoned with impunity journalists that dare speak out against the regime, thus the Eritrean media are best characterized by what they do not say.

Many panelists from Eritrea expressed reluctance to discuss the media—not just for security reasons, but out of exasperation with one of the least sustainable media systems in the world.

*All MSI participants are Eritreans living in exile. The MSI panelists participated remotely by completing the MSI questionnaire and being interviewed by the IREX moderator, also an Eritrean in exile. Given the geographic dispersion of the panelists, an interactive discussion was not held. While not all panelists asked to remain anonymous, because of the political situation in Eritrea, IREX decided not to publish their names.*

# ERITREA AT A GLANCE

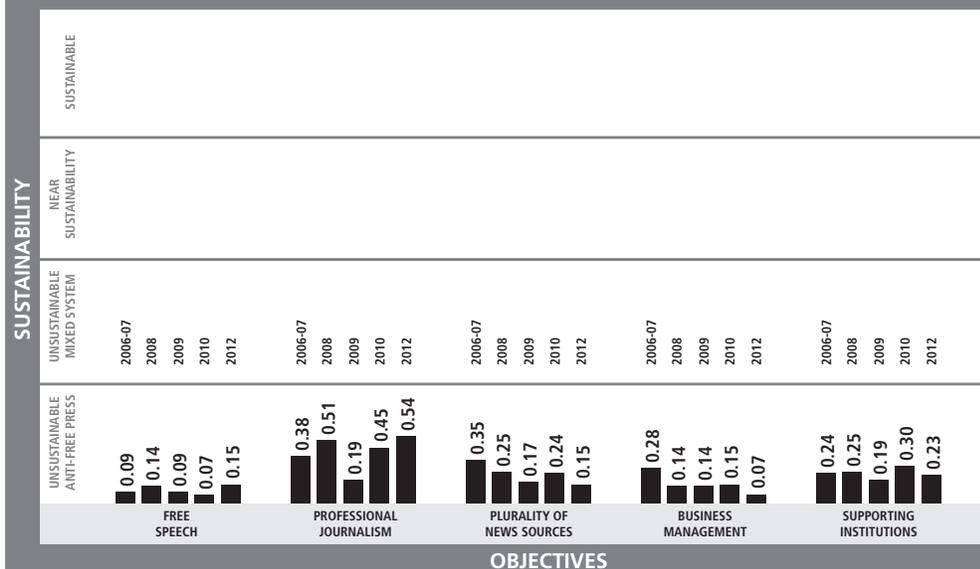
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 6,086,495 (July 2012 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Asmara
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Tigrinya 55%, Tigre 30%, Saho 4%, Kunama 2%, Rashaida 2%, Bilen 2%, other (Afar, Beni Amir, Nera) 5% (2010 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions:** Muslim, Coptic Christian, Roman Catholic, Protestant (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages:** Tigrinya (official), Arabic (official), English (official), Tigre, Kunama, Afar, other Cushitic languages (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2010-Atlas):** \$1.79 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **GNI per capita (2010-PPP):** \$540 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2011)
- > **Literacy rate:** 58.6% (male 69.9%, female 47.6%) (2003 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Isaias Afworki (since June 8, 1993)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Newspaper readership is low; there are a handful of radio and television stations. All are state-owned.
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** N/A
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** None
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 200,000 (2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: ERITREA



**Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):** Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

**Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):** Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

**Near Sustainability (2-3):** Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

**Sustainable (3-4):** Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

### Eritrea Objective Score: 0.15

Each panelist pointed to the absence of speech freedom in Eritrea as underpinning the country's persistently dire MSI performance. Ostensibly for reasons of national security, the legal and social norms that protect and promote free speech and access to public information have been suspended since September 2001. Citizens and the state-owned press community can only report or express opinions that are harmless and uncritical of the government. Those who dare to criticize the government risk imprisonment, torture, or death. Control of media content in the country is all but total.

One panelist said that the current sad state of the media should be put in the context of the country's traumatic and violent history, which has disrupted social norms that embrace free speech. Successive governments have capitalized on each crisis to reduce civic freedoms in all forms. The incumbent government of President Isaias Afworki now enforces a total ban on free speech. Neither legal norms nor social protections are sufficient to protect this right. National elections and redrafting the Eritrean constitution have been delayed indefinitely, with no end in sight for the status quo.

Another panelist was not at all surprised by the country's free speech MSI performance. This panelist was a guerrilla fighter in the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war of 1998-2000. He recalled the media culture of the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front,

#### LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

##### FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

*A former Eritrean journalist, who works abroad to support his family, including conscripted sons back home, summarized his sense of hopelessness when asked for his thoughts during a phone interview. "The Eritrean media are no different from a mask, desperately trying to hide what is going on inside."*

which took power after the 30-year struggle for political independence. "It is no different now from the way it was then... [except] it is on the state level now. The guerrilla movement was intolerant of open communication among the fighters, and used to spread rumors or fabricate information to suit its objectives," he said.

A former Eritrean journalist, who works abroad to support his family, including conscripted sons back home, summarized his sense of hopelessness when asked for his thoughts during a phone interview. "The Eritrean media are no different from a mask, desperately trying to hide what is going on inside. The government is unwilling to take accountability; instead, it is pointing fingers to internal and external enemies. If all was well inside Eritrea, it would have opened up to the outside world... I have nothing more to add." All the panel participants submitted thoughts on freedom of speech in this spirit.

The government has not issued licenses for non-state media outlets since 2001. Market entry is thus impossible. With the constitution on hold, citizens have no recourse under the law.

Rather than serving as the protector for journalists, the government is their primary oppressor. After rescinding press freedom laws in 2001, the government launched a sweep of independent journalists. In 2012, international organizations reported the deaths of three more Eritrean journalists, originally arrested in 2001, due to exposure and neglect in Eritrean prison camps, bringing the death toll from this purge to at least eight.

In an echo of its attack on the independent media, the government turned on a major state outlet in 2009, arresting about 50 journalists from state outlets such as Radio Mana and Eri-TV for alleged collaboration with foreign NGOs and exiled opposition leaders. At least 11 from this sweep remain in labor camps and psychiatric hospitals, according to Reporters Without Borders. They are subject to torture and

*One elderly Eritrean living in exile brought up Eritrean television, unprompted, in a recent chat with the MSI moderator. "There isn't much to watch. It's all about construction, entertainment, and news about what is happening outside Eritrea."*

deprivation.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, according to standing Eritrean law, a prisoner may not be held more than 28 days.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, 28 journalists have remained imprisoned for years.

In the course of this report, Tesfalidet "Topo" Mebrahtu, a popular and respected sports journalist working for state radio and television outlets, was arrested and detained for 10 months. He was released but remains under surveillance.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Eritrea Objective Score: 0.54

Eritrea's remaining journalists are either government employees or conscripts, whose only charge is to produce propaganda. Their training and pay, if they receive any, is based on these principles. Professionalism requires that journalists engaging in their right of free speech take

<sup>1</sup> RSF Press Release, February 8, 2012. <http://en.rsf.org/eritrea-plea-by-paris-lawyer-on-behalf-of-08-02-2012,41821.html>

<sup>2</sup> RSF Press Release, April 6, 2012. <http://en.rsf.org/eritrea-plea-by-paris-lawyer-on-behalf-of-08-02-2012,41821.html>

## JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

### PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

appropriate responsibility and accountability; thus, without this right, there is no exercise of the responsibility.

One panelist maintained that certain topics are covered with slightly more objective viewpoints, including sports, education, and construction—subjects on which the government does not fear criticism.

Journalists and editors cull their own reports for consistency with the government line. The consequences for failing to do so are clear, as evidenced by the purges of 2001 and 2009. Some journalists receive no pay for their output, as most of the lower ranks of state media outlets are filled with national service conscripts pressed into work by the government. Most editorial and higher-level employees do receive meager wages, in line with most state employees.

One elderly Eritrean living in exile brought up Eritrean television, unprompted, in a recent chat with the MSI moderator. "There isn't much to watch. It's all about construction, entertainment, and news about what is happening outside Eritrea... I would have loved to know more about what is really going on," she said.

Exiled and opposition journalists have greater freedom to report on the events happening inside the country, though with only limited ability to reach an audience there. Today, most are in East Africa or Europe as permanent émigrés and report rumor and speculation for web publications and other informal outlets. With little ability to check sources, and low expectations for accuracy as a result, these outlets often end up propagating myths. For example, in November 2012, several opposition media outlets and exile forums reported the defection of Ali Abdu, Minister of Information and effectively the country's top propagandist.<sup>3</sup> The rumor turned out to be true, but it took almost two months to be confirmed.

Niche reporting exists mainly in the grotesque. Despite the disastrous series of events, war, and public health crises, all of which have been reported by outside media, state media are continually coming up with new platitudes to describe progress on construction projects, or creative and vague new foreign conspiracies contrived to bring down the state. One story posted to the state website Shabait.com bizarrely described an investment development meeting in Sweden, where the Eritrean expatriate community took the occasion to decry "external conspiracies."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "Eritrean Minister of Information Sought Asylum in Canada," Assenna.com, November 17, 2012. <http://assenna.com/eritrea-minister-of-information-ali-abdu-sought-political-asylum-in-canada/>

<sup>4</sup> "Eritrean Community in Sweden Voice Staunch Resistance Against External Conspiracies," Shabait.com, December 6, 2012, <http://www.shabait.com/news/local-news/11819-eritrea-community-members-in-sweden-voice-staunch-resistance-against-external-conspiracies>

Even if free speech rights were to be granted tomorrow, a generation of journalism development has been lost.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Eritrea Objective Score: 0.15

As described above, Eritrean media reports are produced exclusively by the Eritrean government and solely to serve its interests. Three newspapers, two television stations, three radio stations, and a handful of online sources, all run by the state, supply official propaganda without meaningful variation in content or tone. The government has created pro-government Internet groups through which to transmit its agenda.<sup>5</sup>

While the population inside Eritrea is severely restricted in its access, influence, or capacity to effect change, a significant number of Eritreans in the diaspora still take the state-owned Eritrean media as a reliable source of news about their homeland. Most domestic Eritreans live in rural areas and earn low incomes. A huge proportion of the adult population is serving in the military, where they have no access to mobile phones or informative media. The small minority of people able to use the Internet face surveillance and repeated power cuts, even in the capital, Asmara.

Although in general the government does not restrict access to foreign websites, exile sites such as Assena.com, Asmarino.com, and Awate.com are largely blocked within the country

<sup>5</sup> Available at <https://www.facebook.com/eritreafirst>

### MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

#### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

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by domestic ISPs, which all purchase Internet bandwidth from the state telecom monopoly. Access to YouTube is blocked as well, though even without the block, Eritrea's notoriously low bandwidth would make streaming video nearly impossible. Language barriers also limit the practical usefulness of such access, as does the general absence of international reporting on Eritrea. Facebook remains available, though only to the tiny minority of Eritreans that use the Internet.

Internet access was cut off within the country during the events leading up to the downfalls of Libya's Muammar Qadhafi and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and state media refrained from covering the events in any of its outlets.<sup>6</sup>

As with most police states, the exiled opposition members that run news sites are constantly bickering and levying false claims. They must tangle with Eritrean government interference as well. In 2011, Jamal Osman Hamad, a writer for Adoulis.com, was detained without charge for three months in Sudan after President Afworki visited the country. Opposition satellite radio station Erena has been blocked within the country by a pirate transmission since September 2012, and its website has been the subject of repeated hacking attempts.<sup>7</sup>

Government broadcasters transmit content in the country's major indigenous languages (Tigrinya and Tigre) as well as in Arabic and English. As a result, smaller minority groups have no access to content in their own languages. But regardless, the quality of the information available is low in all languages.

### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

#### Eritrea Objective Score: 0.07

In the days following the attacks of September 11, 2001, Eritrea took the world's distraction as an opportunity to

<sup>6</sup> Internet Enemies 2011, Reporters Without Borders. March 12, 2012. <http://en.rsf.org/eritrea-eritrea-12-03-2012,42060.html>

<sup>7</sup> "RWB-Backed Satellite Radio Station Sabotaged Again," Reporters Without Borders, September 6, 2012. <http://en.rsf.org/eritrea-rwb-backed-satellite-radio-station-06-09-2012,43344.html>

*However, even if the government were to permit independent media outlets to develop immediately, the absence of a private sector suggests that the road to media sustainability would be a long and arduous one.*

shut down all independent media firms in the country and arrest many of the top journalists. For the last 10 years, Eritrea has had no media business management issues per se, as the media is run as a government operation, like much of the economy. While little can be gleaned on the current internal workings of state media, government ministries are uncreative, and inefficient, so media practices are likely derivative of the regime they serve.

State media outlets operate on government-provided budgets, which are unknown, but presumed to be meager based on the quality of their output. Their staff members, as mentioned above, include conscripted soldiers pressed into producing anodyne pro-government copy for publication. External opposition outlets receive funding from international donor and advocacy organizations, or members of the Eritrean diaspora itself. The outlets rely heavily on these irregular contributions, and have had little success funding their operations through advertising or subscription services.

Advertisements are limited within Eritrea as well, given an economy in which supply is pre-determined by government-run enterprises. Most advertisements are

official announcements, and no advertising agencies exist to improve their output.

As far as the panelists were aware, state media do not use market research to refine and better deliver their products. Inexperience with ratings, circulation, and statistical analysis for media outlets will slow Eritrea's transition to a sustainable media system when the opportunity finally arrives. However, even if the government were to permit independent media outlets to develop immediately, the absence of a private sector suggests that the road to media sustainability would be a long and arduous one.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Eritrea Objective Score: 0.23

Eritrea has no independent unions or trade organizations, nor a genuine civil society sector. As the state dominates labor, business, and civil society, Eritrea has no institutions prepared to advocate for greater openness and press freedom. Members of the diaspora have sought to fill the void but have not had much impact. "The only attempt at creating a journalist's association was in exile, with extremely limited effectiveness," wrote the MSI moderator. Without foreign sponsorship or a reasonable expectation of success, such efforts usually do not last long.

As free speech rights are non-existent, so are the NGOs that would normally advocate for such rights. A handful of exile organizations stage modest protests at the offices of the European Union or United Nations regarding journalist imprisonment or torture, but they have little power to affect events within Eritrea.

### INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

#### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

#### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

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International NGOs try to keep pressure on the government and the international community to end tyranny in all forms, and journalism advocacy organizations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders support jailed individuals and modest exile media projects. Of course, the efforts of international NGOs to support domestic media rights have little hope of impact in a country that considers all foreign involvement to be seditious. These groups have a greater hope for success in pushing for international attention and diplomatic pressure on Eritrea to change its ways, though few results are apparent.

Eritrea has no academic programs to prepare journalists for the profession. The Ministry of Information trains officials for state service in producing and editing propaganda. State enterprises train communications staff to produce press releases, usually regarding construction projects, to the specific tastes of the government officials that will run those messages on state media.

The government controls printing presses through the state-run enterprises that operate them. The regime also controls broadcast transmitters, internet domains, and cellular communications networks. Even if non-governmental cellular providers were to appear, they would be limited in what Internet access they could provide to customers due to the state monopoly's modest bandwidth lease allotments.

Recent Internet penetration figures estimate that fewer than 5 percent of Eritreans use the Internet—well below the regional average of more than 15 percent.<sup>8</sup> Most Internet users are in the capital, and tend to be the educated elite, with greater foreign language facility. Without the ability to read Arabic or English, most of the population would find the Internet of little use, particularly if their interests were to better understand events within their country.

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<sup>8</sup> International Telecommunications Union data via <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm>

## List of Panel Participants

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