

Transcript of interview with Tesfalem Yemane

Phoebe Heins: Welcome to our podcast for the European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, based here at Leeds University. I am Phoebe Heins.

Claudia Hawkins: And, I am Claudia Hawkins.

Phoebe Heins: And today we will be interviewing Tesfalem Yemane on both his personal and academic Experiences of Eritrea, a country located in the Horn of Africa.

Claudia Hawkins: This interview is part of a wider student-intern led project which examines volatile situations in countries within Africa. Mr Yemane will highlight his first hand experiences and key issues in Eritrea. So firstly, Mr Yemane, thank you so much for taking the time to speak to us.

Mr. Yemane: Thanks for having me, great to be here.

Claudia Hawkins: *So shall we begin by discussing, what year you left Eritrea and the main reasons for you doing that.*

Mr. Yemane: Yeah, I left Eritrea in April 2010. I crossed the border and went to Sudan. It was what one calls 'illegal border crossing' and from there I went to a refugee camp in East Sudan. I stayed there for a few months before having to move to the capital Khartoum.

Phoebe Heins: *Why did you leave?*

Mr. Yemane: Well, it's a very interesting question. You will have noted that there is no civil war in Eritrea, there is no inter-state war in Eritrea so from the outside it appears that the country is stable. But beneath the façade of peacefulness and the non-existence of war, there is what we call a 'structural violence'. The country has been controlled by a synchronic political party over the past 27-28 years. Where people do not have the right to live their life the way they want: where there is no freedom of expression, where there is no freedom of assembly, where there is no freedom of movement. So it's a political landscape where everything including your personal life and everyday activities are stifled to the maximum. There is some resemblance of a totalitarian system, where the government controls every aspect of your life. You cannot have your own family; you cannot go to school. Unless you make it to university for example, if you're lucky you will make it to the university. Four years after you complete university, you will be signed to go and complete national service so there is an indefinite national service. Forced conscription without any known or definite timeframe, so if someone joins the army it's going to be the end of their formative years in terms of establishing a family, looking after themselves or whether it's working, having their own life. Unfortunately, the political situation in the country is so so dire that that people actually don't have the basic human rights entitlement.

Phoebe Heins: *And do you think this is the main reason people choose to leave or flee Eritrea?*

Mr. Yemane: There is a general violence, it's called a structural violence is sociological terms. There is an underlining structure in the country which hinders an individual's

freedom to life in so many ways. An individual's freedom to seek employment, an individual's freedom to have the kind of life they want, an individual's freedom to establish a family life, an individual's freedom to live with their family, an individual's freedom to move within the confinement of their own country. So, there is this structural element of it, there is a political decision, it is the countries fault, there are economic problems of course, it is a very poor society but the poverty and the economic problems of the country are actually a result of the political systems and the political foundations that we have in the country.

Claudia Hawkins: *So we understand that a very small percentage of the population have access to the internet. Was this the case for you and did that effect your life or your situation when leaving Eritrea in anyway?*

Mr. Yemane: Internet is somehow a luxury, I have to say, in that country. When I was doing my undergraduate studies, there were some internet cafes but it was not for students to go there and do their studies. It was just there for us to check our emails so internet was not very much part of our day-to-day learning processes. Ours was based on printed materials. There is some internet in some cities in the country, but when you see the literacy rate of the country, it's mainly a peasant society. Internet penetration is 1) very limited, just confined to the cities and 2) even if you are in those cities, there are not many people who are computer literate. So it's very, very minimal in terms of information penetrating every aspect of society. Yet, even in the presence of internet, for people who use internet, it's not without its fear and uncertainty. There is always this bogey secretary person who hovers over you. So you will have to always be mindful and consider your environments and what

you write, who you communicate with and the locations of those who you are communicating with. There is always this fear. Personally yes, after completing my studies I worked in one of the higher education institutions in the country where there was free internet, there was no problem with the internet, it was a really good connection. But, it was not what you would need as an individual. As individuals, as humans, we have intrinsic natural desires that we want to achieve in life. Internet was nothing in terms of what we want. We had internet but we were not even using it, I have to say.

Phoebe Heins: *Did you grow up with an awareness of the crises in your country or were there certain events that made you aware of what was and is still going on?*

Mr. Yemane: The regime in general and Eritrea in particular, has unfortunately been a battle ground. I would say I was someone who was born in war, raised up in war and now is in conflict. There were successive colonial powers in the regime, unfortunately Eritrea was under control, there was a war with Ethiopia until 1991. So I would say my generation, the generation is born in war, grows up in war and dies in war unfortunately, as the current situation stands in the country. There was some resemblance of peace between 1991-1997 before the second war with Ethiopia (there was a war with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000). So from the independence, we got our independence in 1991, from independence to the second war with Ethiopia, there was a sense of national enthusiasm, a sense of national hope about the political, economic and social direction of the country. But it was just short lived, when the war with Ethiopia broke out in 1998. So I have to say, the country has unfortunately been a victim of successive wars and post war conflicts with neighbouring countries in the region.

Claudia Hawkins: *What do you hope for the future of Eritrea and how would you tackle the issues of for example –forced conscriptions and things like that?*

Mr. Yemane: I would hope for a constitutional country; I would hope for a country where the people are served by the government. Not the people the serving government, this is what we have in Eritrea now. It is the government which assumes the highest importance in terms of what is important for the country. I would hope for a country where people's dignity and lives are respected. I would hope for a country with a constitution. I would hope for a country at peace with itself, with its own people and with its own neighbors. How would I tackle the issue of the problem of forced conscription? I mean, I can only hope the governments introduce some political reforms – clearly designed for demobilization, integration and rehabilitation processes.

Phoebe Heins: *What do you think of the role of R2P and the international community and do you think this is problematic in anyway?*

Mr. Yemane: Is that in the context of Eritrean case?

Phoebe Heins: Yeah in the Eritrean case.

Claudia Hawkins: Or wider.

Mr. Yemane: Well I think, I'm not an expert in R2P, I can only share my own personal experiences of R2P. As a principal R2P, R2P is a novel yet just principle. How would that apply in the Eritrean case? Difficult because for R2P to be invoked, for the international community to invoke R2P, to adopt the principles of R2P in any country, there has to be a threshold to be have met. One of which is crimes against humanity, genocide, ethnic cleansing for example and where the country, the domestic government is unwilling to tackle deal and address these issues of genocide, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. In 2016 there was a report by the United Nations human rights commission council and it reported that crimes against humanity in Eritrea were concluded. The International Community to me, I'm a bit cynical about the concept of the term of the international community. The international community to me, is not an aggregate number of sovereign and independent states actually, it's a group of states with problematic clout with resources which have ability to mobilize responses but if only it interests itself. International community has been trying to engage with the Eritrean Government but it's always national and regional interests which proceed the interests of the people. So the interests of Eritrean people, the violations of rights in Eritrea in a domestic context have never been the utmost priorities of the international communities, or specifically states and some regions who have tried to address these issues. They always come with a badge of their interests. So it's about balancing the national interests, the interests of those who try to intervene and try to engage and the interests of the people. I am still to see a country or a group of countries who would put the interests of the Eritrean people before their cooperation and their relationship with the regime. Take the EU for example, and how the EU because of the current situation, and migration issues, tries to cooperate with rights violating states, countries with questionable democratic credentials, countries like Eritrea

and Sudan for example. Where you have presidents, like in Sudan, who are under ICC warrant but are being given money so that they can act as the bedrock of Europe, by tackling EU bound migration. So it's about the interests, having said that I am not very pessimistic about the potential of the international community, about the potential of R2P a force for good cause. If R2P is to be invoked, I would say, there has to be a synergy of policies, a synergy of actors, a coordination in the cooperation between different stake holders and the actors involved in a particular political situation. You would want R2P to try to help those forces from a domestic context so that problems would be addressed by internal forces, not try to impose I should say, or draft in alien concepts. People would want democracy, would want elections, people would want change. But change is only sustainable and long-lasting if they are homemade changes. So I would want R2P to consider involving internal stake holders in whatever situation or context they involve. Maybe there, there is also the issue of the aftermath as well. Let's take Libya, yes there wasn't the issue of R2P in Libya but in some cases where there are the issues of R2P, the issue, the decision, the involvement of R2P should not be limited to dealing with the temporary nature of the situation. There has to be an aftermath policy, what happens after R2P is invoked, the international community intervenes and then genocides for example stops, what happens after that? There has to be a post-conflict, aftermath, long-term plans. Whether it's about general national considerations for example where there are ethnic cleansing issues or civil wars, integration and re-integration policies, issues and policies that are long-term as compared to the symptomatic and approximate causes of conflict. I think at the moment my observation of R2P, is that it actually focuses more on the approximate causes of conflict rather than considering the root causes, the history and structural causes

of conflicts in many contexts. I would want R2P to be more proactive and focus more on the root causes.

Phoebe Heins: *Well, in Eritrea how much weight would you put to the legacy of colonialism in the issues that are now arising or have arisen?*

Mr. Yemane: The post colonialism and the state building projects that came after colonialism are still in a way, actually felt in post-colonial societies, independent African states. In the case of Eritrea, it is very difficult to ascribe the current problems in Eritrea to the colonial legacy. It's down to Eritreans and it is down to us and it is down to us how things turned out after independence. Yes, the issue of colonialism and how colonialism created states and artificially divided communities, means its effects are felt across Africa, across the developing world where colonialism happened. But I think it's difficult to ascribe colonial legacies to every and each political problem that are happening in African countries for example. In the case of my country, yes there is this issue of colonialism, but it's not to say that the problems we are facing in Eritrea now are due to colonial legacies. The problems are our problems, our problems are domestic and I think the problems can only be addressed by domestic solutions. So it's down to how the government wants to govern. It was a party which led the Eritrean armed struggle which assumed a civilian government after independence, so we have this militaristic culture which still applies to a civilian government. The thinking, the sometimes being ruthless, with critical political views. There is no political space in the country where people can voice their criticisms of the government, no matter how legitimate those political, social and economic criticisms of the governments are. There has to be a market for competitive ideas, different political views,

that is the problem we have Eritrea now, its 'my way or the highway'. And it has its culture, it has its roots in the nature of how the party, during the armed struggle was organized. It was very well organized, very effective but very brutal. This is what made Eritrean independence possible. So there is this element of a militaristic culture which is still affecting adversely the prospects of a civilian, open, confident and constitutional government in Eritrea.