

Eritrea's False Hope: Why a Government-in-Exile Cannot Deliver Democratic Transition in Eritrea

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In recent public seminars¹, delivered in Tigrigna to foster widespread understanding within the Eritrean diaspora, I have consistently highlighted the critical non-viability of a "government-in-exile" as a pathway to democratic transition in Eritrea. These discussions, aimed at demystifying the concept and cautioning against its uncritical adoption by opposition factions, underscore the complex realities that render such an approach both impractical and largely ineffective. Drawing upon these efforts to create awareness and understanding of the misuse of this approach, this article aims to further elaborate on why a government-in-exile is neither possible nor feasible for effecting genuine democratic transition in Eritrea.

The aspiration for a democratic Eritrea is a shared sentiment among many, both within the diaspora and, undoubtedly, among those silently yearning for change inside the country. However, the path to achieving this transition is complex and fraught with challenges. While proposals for establishing a "government-in-exile" may surface from well-intentioned opposition factions², a critical examination of the concept, particularly in light of Eritrea's unique circumstances and drawing upon historical precedents of governments-in-exile, reveals that such an approach is neither possible nor feasible for effecting genuine democratic transition.

In "*Governments-in-Exile and the Effect of Their Expropriatory Decrees*" by Samuel Anatole Lourie and Max Meyer, and "*Stateless Contenders and The Global Mythology*" by Yossi Shain, invaluable insights are provided into the historical realities, legal complexities, and political machinations surrounding exiled governments. These scholarly works underscore that the success or failure of such entities is inextricably linked to their ability to mobilize national support, secure unwavering international recognition, and navigate the intricate landscape of international law and power politics. When these crucial elements are applied to the Eritrean context, the limitations of a government-in-exile become starkly evident.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICiWSEqB260&list=PLo6tmVVjj8P6k4X7MUR4Yr-mmxog1pmws>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ux7Joge8zXM&list=PLo6tmVVjj8P4zuSiUTiXRdDJUnj38LCEB>

² *Building Tomorrow's Democratic Eritrea Today*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMto0d4Hz0>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lBvB1BkB3sA>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDSmockojCg>

The Impossibility of Genuine International Recognition

A primary hurdle for any Eritrean government-in-exile would be achieving meaningful international recognition. As Yossi Shain's "Stateless Contenders and The Global Mythology" highlights, diplomatic recognition is rarely an act of philosophical approval, but rather a "political mechanism exploited by governments to further their selfish domestic and international agendas."³ The Eritrean government, despite its authoritarian nature, currently holds the internationally recognized seat at the United Nations and maintains diplomatic relations with numerous states.

For an Eritrean government-in-exile to gain *de jure* recognition, it would require a significant shift in the international community's stance, akin to the Allied powers recognizing deposed governments during World War II. However, Eritrea is not currently under foreign occupation in the traditional sense that justified the recognition of the Allied governments-in-exile. The regime, while repressive, is indigenous. The current global political climate, characterized by a reluctance to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states without overwhelming humanitarian crises or direct threats to international peace and security, makes the wholesale derecognition of the existing Eritrean government and subsequent recognition of an exiled entity highly improbable.

Furthermore, any attempt to establish an Eritrean government-in-exile would likely be perceived by the current regime as an act of foreign-backed aggression, potentially leading to further entrenchment and repression, and closing off any existing, albeit limited, channels of communication or humanitarian access.

The Feasibility Gap: Mobilizing National Support and Operational Control

Beyond external recognition, the internal dynamics for a successful government-in-exile are equally challenging. The academic papers mentioned above emphasize the critical need for exiled contenders to "command the allegiance of the people they claim to represent."⁴ In Eritrea, decades of tight state control, suppression of dissent, and a pervasive surveillance apparatus have severely curtailed the ability of any internal opposition to organize openly. The information vacuum and the fear instilled

³ Yossi Shain, "Stateless Contenders and The Global Mythology," *Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 1 (1990): 10.

⁴ Shain, "Stateless Contenders and The Global Mythology," 24.

by the regime make it extraordinarily difficult for an exiled entity to genuinely mobilize and sustain popular support from within the country.

Moreover, the geographical dispersal of the Eritrean diaspora, while a source of potential financial and intellectual capital, also presents a logistical nightmare for a unified government-in-exile. Factionalism, a common ailment among exiled groups as noted in the "Stateless Contenders" article, would likely plague any Eritrean attempt, further eroding credibility and hindering a cohesive strategy. Without a clear and undeniable mandate from the people inside Eritrea, and without the ability to exert any form of operational control or influence within the national territory, a government-in-exile would remain a symbolic gesture, detached from the lived realities of those it purports to represent.

The experiences of other "stateless contenders" reveal that without a credible ground presence or the ability to challenge the existing regime militarily or politically from within, an exiled government struggles to be more than a "fictional entity."⁵ The Eritrean regime's iron grip on power and its formidable security apparatus make a conventional struggle from exile an insurmountable task.

Legal and Practical Limitations

The notion of a government-in-exile exercising legislative power or expropriatory decrees, as discussed in "Governments-in-Exile and the Effect of Their Expropriatory Decrees," assumes a level of international legitimacy and enforcement mechanisms that would be absent in the Eritrean context. Such decrees require either legal recognition by a host state's courts or, more critically, the ability to control assets within a given jurisdiction. Without formal recognition and without a direct nexus to Eritrean territory or its assets abroad, any "decrees" issued by an exiled government would be devoid of practical effect.

Furthermore, the legal framework of many host countries, including the United States, typically defers to the recognized sovereign. Even if a host country were to offer limited diplomatic courtesies, these would fall far short of enabling an exiled government to truly function as a governing body capable of effecting national transition. The "double liability" problem for obligors, as highlighted in the legal article, underscores the practical difficulties when competing claims to assets arise, a situation an unrecognized Eritrean government-in-exile would face constantly.⁶⁴

⁵ Shain, "Stateless Contenders and The Global Mythology," 24.

⁶ Samuel Anatole Lourie and Max Meyer, "Governments-in-Exile and the Effect of Their Expropriatory Decrees," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 11, no. 1 (1943): 45-46.

A More Pragmatic Path to Democratic Transition

Given these insurmountable obstacles, the focus for Eritrean opposition should shift away from the unfeasible model of a government-in-exile and towards more pragmatic and actionable strategies for democratic transition. This counter-proposal advocates for a multi-pronged approach that acknowledges the realities of both international politics and Eritrea's internal conditions:

1. **Strengthening a Unified Front for Dialogue and Advocacy:** Instead of vying for the symbolic title of "government-in-exile," Eritrean opposition factions should prioritize the formation of a genuinely unified and representative front. This front would focus on:
 - ❖ **Consensus Building:** Developing a broad-based, inclusive platform for democratic principles, human rights, and a future vision for Eritrea that transcends factional interests.
 - ❖ **International Advocacy:** Engaging in persistent, evidence-based advocacy with international bodies, governments, and civil society organizations to highlight human rights abuses, advocate for accountability, and push for diplomatic engagement that supports a peaceful transition. This involves providing accurate information and building strong alliances based on shared values.
 - ❖ **Diaspora Mobilization:** Organizing and empowering the diaspora to be a powerful voice for change, focusing on humanitarian aid, legal challenges to the regime's illicit activities, and fostering a culture of democratic discourse and civic engagement.
2. **Building Capacity for Future Governance:** Even without the label of "government-in-exile," the opposition can proactively prepare for a democratic future. This includes:
 - ❖ **Policy Development:** Drafting comprehensive policy proposals for various sectors (economy, health, education, justice) that would be implemented in a democratic Eritrea. This demonstrates readiness and provides a concrete vision for change.
 - ❖ **Leadership Development:** Nurturing a new generation of Eritrean leaders, both within the diaspora and discreetly, who possess the skills, integrity, and commitment to democratic governance. This includes training in public administration, human rights, and conflict resolution.

- ❖ Legal Preparedness: Researching and preparing legal frameworks for a post-transition period, including constitutional reform, transitional justice mechanisms, and institutional strengthening.
3. Facilitating Dialogue, Not Dictating Outcomes: The ultimate democratic transition in Eritrea must be driven by the Eritrean people themselves. External actors can facilitate, but not impose. The unified opposition front should position itself as a facilitator and advocate for a peaceful, inclusive, and nationally-led dialogue, rather than an alternative governing body. This involves:
- ❖ Confidence Building: Demonstrating a genuine commitment to inclusivity and reconciliation, reassuring all segments of Eritrean society that a democratic future will protect their rights and interests.
 - ❖ Leveraging External Pressure: Collaborating with international partners to apply targeted pressure on the current regime to open political space, release political prisoners, and engage in meaningful dialogue with a legitimate, unified opposition.

In a nutshell, while the desire for a democratic Eritrea is strong and legitimate, the historical and political realities of governments-in-exile demonstrate that this model is ill-suited to the Eritrean context. A more effective approach involves a unified, pragmatic, and strategically focused opposition that prioritizes international advocacy, diaspora mobilization, and proactive capacity building for a future democratic Eritrea, all while steadfastly advocating for a nationally-driven transition process. This approach, grounded in realism and a deep understanding of the challenges, offers a more viable and feasible path towards the democratic future that Eritreans so desperately deserve.

References

Lourie, Samuel Anatole, and Max Meyer. "Governments-in-Exile and the Effect of Their Expropriatory Decrees." *The University of Chicago Law Review* 11, no. 1 (1943): 26–48.

Shain, Yossi. "Stateless Contenders and The Global Mythology." *Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 1 (1990): Article 9. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/voll8/iss1/9>