

With a coastline of 600 miles, Eritrea occupies an important place in the Red Sea. It even takes its name from the Latin term for Red Sea, Mare Erythraeum. After a three decade long war of independence with Ethiopia, Eritrea overwhelmingly voted for independence in April, 1993. After just over 20 years, some analysts fear that Eritrea is on the verge of collapse.

Eritrea is a nation of six million people belonging to nine officially recognized ethnic groups. Roughly half the population is Sunni Muslim and the other half belongs to several Christian denominations. The long struggle for independence gave a sense of national unity and in 1993 there was a strong belief in Eritrea's success. However, today it is one of the largest sources of refugees in Africa. It is reported that around 4,000 people are leaving the country every month. Since many of these refugees are young males, Eritrea is facing a shortage of valuable labor. This adds further strain to the economy which is already in ruins.

One major obstacle for economic development in Eritrea is the military. Eritrea is perhaps one of the most militarized societies in the world. The defense budget of this small country is estimated to be one fifth of its GDP. Its army is now one of the largest on the continent, and has the highest number of military personnel per capita in the world next to North Korea. Eritrea has had a border conflict with Ethiopia from 1998 and has had several conflicts with other neighbors as well. Eritrea had fought briefly with Yemen over the Hanish Islands in 1995 and with Djibouti over a border dispute in 2008. Meanwhile, there are claims that Eritrea supported the religious fanatic rebel groups in Somalia. These clashes and claims have made Eritrea an isolated country even regionally. Its continuously abrasive tone has increased the isolation in the world.

As in most militarized societies, the ruling elite are using the military to hang on to power. Eritrea has known only one president during its entire 20 year history after independence. In 1993, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) leader Isaias Afewerki became the president of the country. The EPLF was renamed as People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994. Elections were planned for 1997 and an unimplemented constitution allowed for multi party politics. Afewerki used the conflict with Ethiopia as a pretext to crush all opposition and postpone elections.

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However an opposition is growing even within the military and in January 2013 there was a military revolt led by a colonel and members of his brigade. They occupied the Information Ministry and forced the director of the national TV station to read their demands for political reform on air. This exposed the emerging cracks within Afewerki's regime.

A much more embarrassing issue has been the case of defections among military and other high ranking officials. These include former Information Minister Ali abdu, once one of the closest allies of president Afewerki. Thousands of soldiers had sought for sanctuary in Ethiopia and Sudan over the past years. The most embarrassing event was the case of two pilots who escaped to Saudi Arabia with the president's official airplane. Rubbing salt into the president's wound, a third pilot who was sent to retrieve the plane also chose to stay in Saudi Arabia.

In some instances, the situation in Eritrea appears to be similar to that of the situation in Somalia during the latter part of the government of the former dictator Mohamed Siad Barre. The Siad Barre regime was also weakened by an ongoing struggle with Ethiopia, and was finally forced out of power by several militant groups who forced him out of Mogadishu in early 1991. However, the militant groups each fought among themselves and anarchy engulfed much of the country. Somalia was one of the largest humanitarian crises in 20th century Africa and is still an ongoing conflict.

The possible collapse of the Eritrean state will have grave consequences to the region and the world. A refugee crisis of much greater proportions than today, resurgence of piracy and fears of rising religious fanaticism in the region are the most likely results of increasing anarchy. Eritrea lies in a vital trade route and if the state falls, the implications would be huge. Meanwhile, Eritrea's poor Muslim communities are increasingly vulnerable to fanaticism even now. While Afewerki, now 67, stays in power, Eritrea will have some control of its internal situation. However, if the cracks widen in the military, there is no insurance against a repeat of what happened in Somalia.

By  **Chamara Sumanapala**

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