



TWENTY WINTERS
IN SILENCE

Life on Hold

Mesfin Hagos Tewolde

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VOLUME I

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ISBN: 9798252056500

Cover design and layout: **Mesfin Hagos Tewolde**

First edition

CHAPTER ONE: Life Between Worlds



When the outer path narrows, the inner path widens.

Exile, Identity, and the Quiet Work of Becoming

Before turning to the central questions of this book, it is necessary to explain how this journey began—how I came to seek refuge in Switzerland, and what followed thereafter.

I begin with my own story — who I am, and the formative experiences that shaped me. From there, the narrative gradually widens: first to Eritrea and Ethiopia, the landscapes of my upbringing; then to the political realities of the Horn of Africa, whose currents have carried many into displacement. Understanding this broader context is not optional. It illuminates not only individual journeys, but the structural forces that quietly give rise to refugees across East Africa.

From this foundation, the focus shifts to Switzerland and to the meaning of a residence permit — what it promises in principle, how it unfolds in practice, and how legal status subtly shapes the texture of daily life. Particular attention will be given to the Eritrean political system and its long-term consequences, before the narrative returns inward, to personal testimony drawn from two decades of lived experience in exile.

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Through concrete examples, I reflect on what it means for a life to be placed “on hold”—not as an abstraction, but as an everyday condition.

This account is offered in good faith: to present experiences as they were lived, to clarify misunderstandings, and to give voice to reflections that often remain unspoken yet endure quietly within the conscience.

I was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to Eritrean parents. Like many Eritreans who grew up in Ethiopia during a period of political tension and shifting national boundaries, I inherited Eritrean citizenship through ancestral heritage. My childhood and education unfolded in Ethiopia, where I demonstrated a strong aptitude for learning from an early age.

I earned a degree in Civil Engineering, specializing in Irrigation Engineering, at Arbaminch University (formerly called Arbaminch Water Technology Institute). From the outset, my education demanded both analytical discipline and direct engagement with water systems—a field that would remain central to my professional identity.

My pursuit of knowledge extended across continents and academic traditions. I completed a master’s degree in Hydrological

Engineering at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, where my research required rigorous quantitative analysis and sustained scholarly commitment. That work led to peer-reviewed publications and academic books that were translated into seven of the world's most widely spoken languages and are held in university collections internationally.

I subsequently undertook doctoral studies on two separate occasions — first in South Africa and later in Switzerland. Both paths were interrupted not by academic limitation, but by financial and administrative constraints — a distinction noted here for the sake of clarity and factual accuracy.

While academic titles do not replace knowledge itself, they serve as formal recognition of structured training and scholarly competence. The interruption of doctoral studies did not mark an intellectual end, but rather a redirection under constraint.

Undeterred, I continued to broaden and deepen my expertise. I pursued advanced studies in Urban Planning at the University of Geneva and at EPFL (École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne). In parallel, I completed professional training in AutoCAD and Revit 3D modeling, earning certification from Autodesk (USA), along with further technical training at institutions in Geneva. These experiences strengthened the applied dimension of my

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engineering background and expanded my interdisciplinary capacity.

My professional experience includes involvement in dam construction projects in Eritrea and irrigation infrastructure development in Ethiopia. I conducted multiple hydrological studies for prospective dam sites and participated in technical investigations and feasibility assessments. During my years of service in Eritrea, I also supervised the construction of dams and a hospital in Assab as part of the National Service program.

My fieldwork required extensive use of surveying instruments, including theodolites, total stations, and GPS equipment. I developed strong proficiency in hydrological and engineering software such as HEC-RAS, HEC-HMS, Google Earth Engine for hydrological analysis, ArcGIS and QGIS for spatial and watershed modeling, and the SWAT hydrological model, which remains central to my technical specialization.

Alongside my technical training, I pursued extensive French-language studies at several institutions, including the University of Geneva (Faculty of Arts, School of French Language and Civilization), the University of Fribourg (Cours d'Introduction aux Études Universitaires en Suisse), and IFAGE (Institut de formation des adultes de Genève). This preparation enabled me to engage

fully in academic and professional environments conducted in multiple languages.

Parallel to my scientific work, I cultivated sustained inquiry into questions of consciousness, awareness, and the underlying principles of human existence. This reflective engagement informed my worldview and later shaped the tone of my written work, integrating technical precision with philosophical depth.

Professionally, I was awarded the EUR ING title by FEANI (European Federation of National Engineering Associations), recognizing my qualifications at the European level. I was also a member of the Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects (SIA) and was listed in the official engineering register of the Canton of Geneva. In addition, I was a member of the Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET) in the United Kingdom.

I later chose to discontinue these memberships—not due to any lack of qualification, but because prolonged structural constraints within the refugee framework limited meaningful professional engagement. Maintaining formal affiliations without corresponding access to fair opportunity no longer justified the financial and practical commitments involved. This decision was pragmatic rather than symbolic, reflecting an assessment of

institutional realities rather than any retreat from professional standards or competence.

A Turning Point: Arriving in Switzerland

In January 2007, I traveled to Switzerland for a job interview with an international organization in Geneva. When circumstances took an unexpected turn, I made the difficult decision to seek asylum—a choice driven not by economic hardship, but by a genuine need for safety, moral standing, and the freedom to live without fear.

Prior to my arrival in Switzerland, I had already encountered the harsh realities faced by many Eritreans. The political climate in Eritrea is widely documented for its arbitrary detentions, lack of due process, and severe restrictions on civil liberties. My personal experiences reflect this broader pattern:

My uncle died under circumstances many considered suspicious, reportedly after being subjected to scrutiny related to his educational background and political opinion in Asmara. At the time, he served in the engineering department of the President's Office.

My elder brother, an air force ground technician with more than thirty years of experience as an aircraft technician, was imprisoned for three years in a detention facility in Asmara known for its harsh

conditions. He was held without formal charges or due legal process, effectively detained without recourse.

I, too, was subjected to intimidation. An engineer by training, I found myself reduced to daily manual labor under severe and often brutal conditions — presented as national service to the country. Repeated harassment, detention, and threats became part of my lived reality.

I was forcibly conscripted into military training in Eritrea and, even after relocating to South Africa, continued to experience pressure and coercive measures from representatives of the Eritrean state operating informally.

These events made return impossible. Exile became an act of survival rather than a choice.

As I describe it: *“I chose to start over rather than live a life shaped by fear and torture.”*

A Life on Hold

After applying for asylum, I was granted permission to remain in Switzerland under a form of temporary protection. I was recognized as a refugee, yet not granted permanent residence or full civic participation. The decision acknowledged the risks

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associated with return, but stopped short of offering long-term stability. It provided safety — while leaving the distant horizon undefined.

Therein lies a quiet paradox: the existence of danger was formally recognized, and the reality of my situation affirmed; yet the protection extended remained provisional. From a rational perspective, this tension between acknowledgment and hesitation invites reflection.

At first glance, such protection appears transitional — a bridge between crisis and stability. In practice, however, temporariness can acquire an unexpected permanence. It begins quietly. One adjusts. One waits. One assumes that movement will follow in due course.

Over time, I came to understand that what is described as provisional can shape the architecture of daily life in subtle yet far-reaching ways. Legal status does not merely determine rights; it influences rhythm, access, expectation, and the invisible margins within which decisions are made. It shapes movement and, at times, quietly constrains the will — a condition that sits uneasily with the deeper current of life, which tends towards growth, motion, and unfolding.

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It means the doors are neither fully closed nor fully open — only held slightly ajar.

Despite my qualifications and willingness to contribute in engineering, hydrology, and research, progress did not unfold as anticipated. Efforts towards professional integration met delays. Applications moved forward, then quietly stopped. Independent initiatives encountered regulatory complexities difficult to navigate from within a temporary framework.

In some cases, responses arrived without detailed explanation; in others, silence replaced response altogether. Over time, this pattern suggested that limitation does not always declare itself through formal prohibition. It can emerge instead through hesitation, interpretation, or administrative prudence.

Gradually, I came to understand that life may be shaped not only by written law, but also by the space between law and its implementation.

Yet I did not withdraw. I chose instead to adapt—to continue learning, to deepen my knowledge, and to seek meaningful engagement wherever possible, preserving direction even when movement seemed deferred.

Transforming Pain into Purpose

I authored works in hydrology, spiritual reflection, and memoir — documenting a life lived between continents, disciplines, and systems. Alongside formal education, I continued to deepen my scientific understanding independently: working through hydrological problems, conducting analytical exercises, developing models, and steadily expanding my expertise beyond the minimum requirements of academic programs.

These efforts unfolded within the constraints of a professional landscape that did not always allow full expression of my training. Opportunities to apply specialized knowledge in ways that might have contributed more directly to public infrastructure, future generations, and broader societal development remained limited.

Yet rather than allowing restriction to define the outcome, I chose to redirect energy inward — refining thought, strengthening discipline, and cultivating insight. What might have been perceived as limitation became, instead, a space for intellectual consolidation and purposeful creation.

I also devoted time to exploring the Swiss countryside in depth, traveling through villages, mountains, lakes, and historical sites. Through photography, video, and attentive observation, I

immersed myself in the landscape and cultural fabric of the country. These journeys later inspired a book celebrating the natural environments that offered solace, continuity, and quiet strength during years marked by uncertainty.

As I often reflect:

“It is not external forces alone that shape a person, but the flexibility of perception—the capacity of the inner self to meet circumstances with awareness and understanding.”

A Call for Understanding and Fairness

I continue to place my trust in the Swiss legal and judicial system, confident that its principles of fairness and proportionality are designed to safeguard both protection and participation. My aspiration is simple: to work, to contribute constructively, to build a family life, and to participate in society on equal footing — rather than to remain indefinitely within a provisional condition.

In choosing refuge, I did not abandon responsibility. On the contrary, I refused to allow my knowledge, conscience, or future to be reduced to instruments of coercion. I sought protection from violence and reclaimed the fundamental liberty to live beyond the reach of authoritarian control. This decision was not an escape, but

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an affirmation of principle — a commitment to preserve both personal integrity and respect for life.

Within me remains a testimony — of conflict, of compulsory service, of interrupted paths, and of choices constrained by circumstance. These reflections are shared not in bitterness, but in acknowledgment of stories rarely heard, and in recognition that remaining true to one's conscience is not betrayal, but a form of inner steadiness.

For this reason, this account invites reflection on how societies receive those who seek protection — not merely as beneficiaries of assistance, but as individuals endowed with education, skills, and a sincere desire to contribute meaningfully.

Should this testimony reach those entrusted with legal, administrative, or humanitarian responsibility, it is offered in the hope that understanding may deepen and perspective may broaden. My aim remains constructive: to participate fully within the framework of the law, to assume responsibility, and to live with dignity in alignment with the values that democratic societies strive to uphold.

Beyond the personal dimension, however, there is a deeper reflection beneath these experiences.

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Every human being enters a world that existed long before their arrival. No child is born as the owner of land, nor as a claimant of territory. We arrive in landscapes already shaped by history, culture, and the quiet labor of generations. These arrangements precede us, and they will continue long after we are gone.

Perhaps it is therefore wiser not to speak of ownership, but of guardianship. Those who live upon a land are not its masters; they are its temporary stewards, entrusted with its care. The soil beneath our feet, the rivers that cross it, and the life they sustain do not belong to individuals but to the wider continuity of life itself.

Seen in this light, a newcomer need not be viewed as an intruder, but as another potential guardian—someone who may learn to respect, protect, and contribute to the same land that others have long cared for. The story of land is therefore not one of possession, but of continuity. Each generation receives it for a moment, protects it as best it can, and then passes it forward.

The human body itself quietly reflects this relationship. Over time, it nourishes itself from what the land provides—its water, its fruits, its grains, and the life it sustains. Our cells are constantly dying and renewing; day after day the body rebuilds itself from what the earth offers.

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When a person lives long in one place, the body gradually becomes composed of that very landscape. The soil that nourishes the fields, the water that flows through the region, and the food it produces slowly become part of the body's own substance. In this sense, belonging emerges not from declaration, but from quiet transformation.

Through this slow renewal, a person does not merely live on the land—the land begins to live within them. And in that moment, almost naturally, they become not an owner, but a guardian of the place that has sustained them.

The deeper question, then, is not who owns the land, but who is willing to care for it with responsibility, humility, and love.

In this light, what we often call “my land” or “your land” may be understood as an administrative and cultural construct — necessary for order, coordination, and collective life. Yet from a broader human perspective, the earth itself is not partitioned by birth. It is a shared inheritance, entrusted to humanity as a whole.

From this vantage point, belonging becomes less a matter of proprietorship and more a matter of coexistence. The earth offers space for learning, for growth, and for experience. Human systems organize that space — sometimes wisely, sometimes imperfectly

— yet they do not alter the deeper truth that all who are born share the same planetary home.

Recognizing this perspective may soften the impulse to see one another as intruders rather than fellow travelers. Caution and prudence are necessary in governance; yet so too is an awareness that those who dwell upon a land for many years become woven into its fabric — contributing, adapting, and sharing in its life. Over time, presence itself creates relationship. In this sense, belonging is not solely a matter of origin, but also of participation and shared existence.

Why I Chose to Write

I decided to write this book because, over time, many people—family members, professionals, acquaintances, and even well-intentioned friends—repeatedly asked me the same question:

“Why are you living in Switzerland? Why did you choose refugee life when you could have worked and lived more comfortably somewhere else?”

Some asked out of genuine concern. Others asked with confusion. A few carried assumptions shaped by incomplete information.

Gradually, I realized that silence no longer served clarity. Writing became the most honest way to explain my situation—not to justify myself, but to illuminate realities of refugeehood that are often misunderstood.

At various moments, I was told—sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly—that my professional path in Switzerland would likely remain limited and that it might be preferable to consider leaving. In some conversations, references were made to previous cases, suggesting that certain outcomes were “obvious.” Statements such as, *“You may not be able to work here as you expect,”* or *“Perhaps you should consider alternatives elsewhere,”* were repeated often enough to leave a lasting impression.

I understand that, in the absence of full context, some may assume that refugees relocate primarily for economic reasons. My situation, however, was different. I left behind professional stability and material comfort because I chose safety, conscience, and peace over coercion. The decision was not motivated by advantage, but by necessity.

It also became clear that highly educated refugees often encounter particular difficulties in accessing meaningful professional opportunities. This observation was not always stated formally, but it emerged through experience.

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Whether such limitations arise from formal policy, institutional caution, personal interpretation, or broader structural dynamics, the result can feel similar: progress slows, opportunities narrow, and uncertainty extends beyond expectation.

Yet I chose not to respond with bitterness. Instead, I sought a deeper way to understand the path before me.

I do not experience life as a pursuit of comfort, but as a place of formation. Challenges, though unwelcome, may refine discernment, patience, and inner strength. What first appears as obstruction can, over time, reveal a different kind of movement—one that strengthens character rather than weakens it.

This perspective does not deny that human systems reflect human limitations—fear, insecurity, incomplete awareness, or self-interest. I am not naïve. Imperfection exists. But responding to difficulty with resentment only multiplies what one hopes to overcome.

I have chosen a different path — one guided less by reaction than by reflection, less by opposition than by measured restraint. This choice does not dismiss injustice or overlook responsibility. It simply recognizes that while circumstances may lie beyond my control, the manner in which I respond does not.

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Adversity, viewed in this light, becomes not an attack but a mirror. It invites reflection. It asks what can be strengthened, clarified, or adjusted within oneself.

Gratitude, in such a context, is discernment—the recognition that not every delay is destruction, and not every closed door is permanent. Some situations require reaction; others require patience.

This approach is not passivity. It is responsibility—the refusal to extend suffering by responding with further harm. Others act according to their understanding; I remain accountable for mine.

Life does not always oppose us. Often, it instructs us. What we encounter may not be hostility, but invitation: to refine perception, correct direction, and mature inwardly.

This book is therefore written in a spirit of reflection.

To clarify further, this book is not merely a personal narrative; it is also written from a sense of responsibility towards my fellow Eritreans. The decision to leave what we commonly call “my country” is rarely casual, and seldom without profound cause. The phrase itself reflects human convention — for, in a deeper sense, no land is inherently owned; it is administered, named, and governed within historical frameworks.

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Eritrea has experienced one of the highest rates of refugee outflow relative to its population — a reality shaped by longstanding structural conditions. Prolonged and often indefinite national service, the absence of constitutional rule of law, arbitrary detention, and restrictions on fundamental freedoms have compelled many to seek life elsewhere.

These circumstances have been documented by international human rights organizations and widely reported in global forums. Yet statistics and reports, necessary as they are, cannot fully capture the lived reality behind them. Too often, Eritreans are spoken about rather than heard in their own voices. Put simply, others speak of Eritreans without allowing them to speak for themselves. Policies are debated, numbers are cited, and legal categories are assigned, while the human stories beneath them remain remote.

Behind the statistics are lives constrained and, in many cases, profoundly disrupted. Families are separated. Young people grow up with limited choice over their future. For many, departure is no longer ambition—it is survival.

For this reason, the experience of Eritreans must be articulated by those who have lived it. External analysis is valuable, but it cannot fully substitute for lived experience. When silence persists,

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misunderstanding can harden into assumption, and distance can reduce human suffering to abstraction.

This work therefore seeks to clarify and contextualize both my own journey and the broader realities surrounding refugee status. It is written in a spirit of responsibility, with the aim of illuminating what too often remains unseen.

I write especially for those who may not fully understand what refugee status entails. Becoming a refugee is not a casual decision, nor a search for comfort. It is a step taken when alternatives disappear or when remaining becomes unsafe. Misunderstandings rarely arise from hostility; more often, they stem from limited perspective. What appears reasonable from one vantage point may look very different from another.

It is here that the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity becomes significant. Our judgments are shaped by culture, history, personal experience, and prior knowledge. These influences affect how information is processed, how testimony is interpreted, and how credibility is assessed.

I became fully aware of this during a public debate in Switzerland concerning Eritrean refugees. Official delegations, invited by the government, visited Eritrea and were presented with an image of a

peaceful and functioning country. Based on their observations, some concluded that migration was primarily driven by economic reasons rather than by a need for protection. From their perspective, such conclusions appeared logical. We tend to trust what we are shown, especially when it comes from official sources. Yet observation without independent verification or alternative testimony can remain incomplete.

It can be difficult, particularly for those accustomed to democratic systems, to imagine a government operating without genuine public oversight or institutional checks and balances. In many Western contexts, governments are expected to function within constitutional frameworks, supported by transparent institutions and civic participation. These expectations shape perception. When visitors observe official structures, visible order, and displays of public support, they may reasonably assume that similar safeguards are in place.

However, in some contexts, power may be highly centralized. Public displays of unity or support do not necessarily reflect voluntary political expression. When authority is consolidated and dissent is suppressed, appearances can be carefully managed. What is shown to outside observers may represent only a partial view of daily realities.

In such situations, staged visibility does not always correspond to lived experience. Certain dimensions—detention practices, restrictions on freedoms, prolonged national service, or daily hardships—may remain outside the official narrative.

It is precisely at this point that testimony becomes necessary: not to replace one narrative with another, but to broaden understanding and enable informed comparison.

What follows moves from interpretation to lived reality, illustrating how these dynamics persist beyond borders, long after exile has begun.

Living Beyond Borders: Fear Without End

During my years in South Africa, I heard many testimonies from Eritreans in exile who expressed that fear did not necessarily end upon departure. These experiences were rarely discussed publicly. They were shared discreetly, often only after trust had been established.

A recurring pattern was described: some individuals felt that forms of pressure associated with Eritrean state structures extended beyond national borders, particularly towards those perceived as independent, outspoken, or insufficiently aligned.

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The methods reported were neither formal nor officially documented, nor did they resemble conventional intelligence operations. Rather, they were described as indirect and socially mediated — involving the circulation of rumors, reputational damage, subtle intimidation, social exclusion, or attempts to influence professional and community relationships. For those who experienced them, the cumulative effect was often a persistent sense of vulnerability and constraint.

In some instances, interference was alleged to extend into personal matters, including family and marriage relationships, accompanied by statements implying authority or influence beyond what might reasonably be expected.

Some accounts also suggested that intermediaries outside the immediate Eritrean community might at times become involved, although the nature and extent of such involvement often remained unclear and difficult to verify.

In certain contexts, individuals or groups in neighboring countries — particularly where diplomatic or political relations with Eritrea were viewed positively — may have interpreted their actions as expressions of loyalty or regional solidarity. Yet such alignment, when shaped by limited awareness of the internal realities faced by

refugees, could inadvertently contribute to the pressures experienced by members of the Eritrean diaspora.

In these situations, support extended in good faith may not always have fully accounted for the vulnerabilities of those who had sought protection abroad. The result, for some, was a continued sense of exposure, even beyond the borders of their country of origin.

It is important to acknowledge that tensions sometimes arise within diaspora communities around issues such as the so-called “2 percent tax,” a levy associated with Eritrean nationals living abroad. Although it is often described in official communication as voluntary, many Eritreans experience it in practice as a prerequisite for accessing certain consular services.

For example, when seeking assistance at an Eritrean embassy, individuals may be asked whether they have paid the 2 percent tax, and proof of payment can be requested before services are rendered. Regardless of the nature of the request, the question of compliance frequently precedes engagement.

For some, this creates an atmosphere in which expressions of patriotism and civic belonging appear intertwined with financial contribution. While the policy may be framed as support for

national development, its implementation is experienced by many less as a voluntary gesture and more as an expectation.

In practical terms, non-compliance can lead to the withholding of certain administrative services, including documentation and other official procedures. As a result, many perceive the levy not as optional, but as functionally obligatory.

Divergent views on compliance have, at times, contributed to social tension and division within diaspora communities, where differing interpretations of duty, identity, and civic responsibility intersect.

In some accounts, individuals who are seen as financially able but unwilling to comply have reported experiencing social or professional difficulties, which they believe are linked to political pressure. Although the exact mechanisms behind such experiences are often difficult to verify, the feeling of vulnerability can be strong within closely connected diaspora communities.

In regions where political relationships are constantly changing, diaspora communities often have to navigate complex and sometimes uncertain situations. Governments in the Horn of Africa and parts of the Middle East form and reform partnerships based on security, economic, and strategic interests.

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In such environments, questions of loyalty, influence, and political alignment can become sensitive. For individuals living abroad, this can create additional uncertainty, as broader political dynamics may indirectly affect their daily lives.

It is important to state clearly that these accounts reflect perceptions and experiences shared within diaspora communities. They do not imply uniform coordination across states or communities. Rather, they highlight how individuals may experience vulnerability within transnational political environments where lines of responsibility are difficult to trace.

This type of pressure, when it exists, operates less through direct command and more through the shaping of perception. When influence is indirect and accountability diffuse, responsibility becomes difficult to establish. Evidence can be hard to obtain—not necessarily because harm is absent, but because actions remain below the threshold of formal proof.

It is not always possible to independently verify each individual account. What remains observable, however, is the psychological climate described by many: a persistent sense of caution that shapes behavior even outside the country of origin. A system need not act everywhere to be effective; it need only create the perception that it can.

In this context, a troubling dynamic emerges. An Eritrean who becomes economically independent abroad—who works, supports himself, and thinks freely—may be viewed not as a contributor, but as a potential risk. Autonomy can be interpreted as disloyalty. Prosperity may invite suspicion. Such logic does not strengthen a nation; it weakens it by replacing trust with coercion.

Among the cases frequently referenced within diaspora discussions is that of **Mohammed Saleh Mohammed Hagos**, a chemical engineer and entrepreneur who spent many years in the United Kingdom. Information about his life and death is drawn primarily from a publicly available family testimony authored by his sister, **Seidi Mohammed Hagos**, and published in July 2008.

According to the account, Mohammed returned to Eritrea after independence with the intention of contributing to national development. He reportedly invested significant resources in modernizing the Red Sea Soap Factory in Asmara, continued paying employees during periods of economic strain, and participated actively in national economic dialogue, later serving as president of the Eritrean Employers Federation.

Shortly before his death, he appeared on state television and was publicly commended for his role in economic development. The contrast between this recognition and the events that followed

raised questions and deepened uncertainty among many observers.

Over time, I came to notice that such sequences were not isolated. Public narratives and official presentations often preceded significant developments, shaping how events were first understood. Whether intentional or not, this pattern influenced public perception and framed subsequent realities in ways that were not always immediately clear.

On 2 July 2008, he was found deceased along the Asmara–Massawa road. Although it was reported that an autopsy was conducted, no publicly accessible post-mortem findings or judicial conclusions have been released.

This book does not attempt to determine the legal circumstances of his death. Rather, it reflects on the broader impact that unresolved cases of this nature can have on public trust. When prominent figures die under unclear circumstances and transparency is limited, uncertainty deepens. For members of the diaspora, such events can reinforce caution and contribute to a lingering sense of vulnerability.

Similar patterns have been described in other situations as well. When events are not clearly explained or openly addressed, people

tend to become cautious about what they say and do. Such uncertainty can gradually foster mistrust and encourage silence.

Whether every detail of such testimonies can be independently verified is a separate matter. What is significant for many Eritreans, however, is the broader pattern such accounts suggest: the possibility of lethal outcomes without transparent judicial process, the uncertainty created by limited public clarification, and the fear experienced by individuals who may feel pressured to remain silent.

When events of this nature circulate without transparent investigation or publicly accessible clarification, uncertainty deepens. In such environments, fear does not rely on constant visible enforcement. It persists because accountability remains unclear.

For those who leave, the memory of such cases does not disappear at the border. It becomes part of a shared psychological landscape in which silence is often associated with safety, and caution gradually becomes habitual.

It may be worth reflecting – especially for those entrusted with governance, and for those who offer it their support – that genuine love for one’s country cannot be sustained through fear. It grows

from trust, mutual respect, and the freedom to live without intimidation – whether at home or abroad.

Freedom begins where fear ends. It begins when individuals can speak honestly, calmly, and without fear – when thoughts can be expressed without consequence. In such an environment, attachment to place emerges naturally, rooted not in compulsion, but in dignity and shared coexistence.

Note:

The discussion concerning the death of Mohammed Saleh Mohammed Hagos referenced in this chapter is based on a contemporaneous family testimony authored by his sister, Seidi Mohammed Hagos, and published on Awate.com on 25 July 2008. Awate.com is a long-established Eritrean civic and intellectual platform that publishes commentary, testimony, and analysis from Eritreans both inside and outside the country. As of the time of writing, the author has not identified any publicly accessible official police report or post-mortem findings that materially contradict this account.

This case is presented to clarify source and context. It is included to illustrate how unresolved deaths, limited transparency, and

competing narratives can contribute to a climate of uncertainty that shapes the lived experiences described in this work.

It is not offered as an exhaustive example, but as a representative instance drawn from a documented public account that has influenced public perception among Eritreans at home and abroad.

Eritrea: Silencing its Future

On Power, Exile, and the Erosion of Human Capital

For many Eritreans, speaking or writing freely about their country has itself become a form of exile. Within Eritrea, silence is not simply encouraged—it is enforced. Over time, the space for open expression has narrowed so significantly that even cautious thoughts can feel restricted. This situation is not accidental; it reflects a deeply rooted system.

Eritrea is often described through statistics: a large refugee population, prolonged national service, and a generation dispersed across continents. Yet numbers alone fail to capture the deeper loss. Beyond physical displacement lies a gradual weakening of social cohesion, cultural continuity, mutual trust, and freedom of expression—along with the erosion of a shared sense of belonging.

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Since independence, authority has remained highly centralized, with limited institutional oversight. The absence of an implemented constitution, an independent judiciary, a functioning parliament, and a free press has contributed to an environment where legal certainty is fragile. In such conditions, caution becomes habitual, and fear quietly shapes behavior.

Many educated and public figures have learned that speaking openly can lead to consequences. When laws are not applied clearly or fairly, people cannot tell where safety ends and danger begins. Instead of creating stability, this situation creates fear, hesitation, and social stagnation.

This environment has contributed to one of the highest refugee rates relative to population size. Departure is rarely an act of rejection; more often, it reflects limited legal and professional space within which to build a meaningful life. Education does not reliably translate into opportunity. National service extends without clear limits. Professional competence does not always ensure participation.

Advancement within institutions is widely perceived as influenced more by loyalty and personal networks than by merit alone. When this perception takes hold, merit-based structures weaken and public confidence declines.

Paradoxically, members of the diaspora are at times invited to return and contribute to national reconstruction. Such appeals are framed in terms of patriotism and reconciliation. Yet without institutional reform, legal safeguards, and reliable guarantees of personal security, trust remains fragile. Confidence cannot be restored through rhetoric alone.

A recurring feature noted by many critics of Eritrean governance has been a pronounced emphasis on presentation and rhetoric. Official speeches frequently outline detailed plans for infrastructure, agriculture, energy, and national development. Technical terminology is employed fluently, and expertise is described at length. Yet over the decades, observers have pointed to a persistent gap between declared intentions and visible implementation, with tangible outcomes often appearing more limited than the scope of the announcements might suggest.

This tension becomes clearer when considering the scale at which development is presented. Imagine a nation showcasing a modest cattle farm — the kind a single prosperous citizen might establish — as a symbol of national achievement. Or a small dam repeatedly presented to visitors as evidence of transformative progress. Such projects are not without value; every constructive effort matters. Yet their elevation as emblematic achievements invites a deeper question: how is development being defined?

True national development requires more than isolated projects displayed for symbolic effect. It demands coordinated planning, institutional continuity, and the engagement of skilled professionals capable of envisioning scale, sustainability, and systemic impact. Development, in its fuller meaning, is measured not by what can be shown briefly, but by what endures, expands, and strengthens collective capacity over time.

Leadership, therefore, is not primarily about personally conceiving or presenting individual initiatives. Its deeper responsibility lies in cultivating institutional strength — opening space for engineers, planners, economists, and agricultural specialists to design and implement projects proportionate to a country's long-term potential. When institutions function independently and professionally, development becomes structural rather than symbolic.

The contrast becomes more evident when examining large-scale projects elsewhere in the region. When Ethiopia undertakes an initiative such as **the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam**, it reflects a particular scale of ambition supported by institutional preparation and resource mobilization. Large infrastructure, when carefully planned and executed, can reshape economic prospects and generate national momentum.

Yet development cannot be reduced to comparison. Declaring parallel ambition without equivalent preparation risks confusing aspiration with implementation. Each country must assess its own institutional capacity, technical expertise, economic foundation, and societal priorities before embarking on projects of national significance. Development is not a contest of visibility; it is a disciplined process of problem-solving.

Infrastructure should not be conceived as spectacle or as performance for external audiences. Its purpose is practical: to reduce scarcity, alleviate poverty, stabilize livelihoods, and improve everyday conditions. The measure of a project lies not in its presentation, but in its reliability and long-term function.

Sound planning requires rational assessment rather than emotional comparison. It demands collaboration among professionals, realistic budgeting, and transparent accountability. Leadership at its strongest builds patiently according to context and capacity, focusing on sustainability rather than symbolic parity.

In this sense, development is less about rivalry and more about stewardship — not about proving capability, but about strengthening the foundations upon which society depends.

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When institutional mechanisms remain weak, even well-articulated plans struggle to translate into measurable progress. The issue is often not the absence of ideas, but the absence of transparent systems that convert intention into accountable action. Repeated assertions of competence without corresponding institutional follow-through may signal structural fragility rather than strength.

Knowledge is not demonstrated through repetition of technical vocabulary, but through systems that function consistently beyond the authority of any single individual.

Within such an environment, a subtle shift can occur. Conformity may feel safer than initiative. Loyalty may appear more secure than innovation. Gradually, silence can seem protective. Governance rooted primarily in centralized caution struggles to cultivate participation grounded in trust, shared responsibility, and professional confidence.

The tragedy is not that Eritrea lacks capable citizens or natural resources. On the contrary, it possesses resilience, discipline, and talent. What remains limited is the institutional space in which these qualities can be fully expressed. Societies struggle to progress when intellectual capital departs, when professional

initiative is constrained, or when uncertainty discourages long-term commitment.

This reality does not require force to be recognized; it requires discernment.

A country that restricts open discussion limits its ability to correct itself. A system without accountability cannot renew itself. Power that is not periodically reviewed risks becoming detached from public need.

The consequences extend beyond political leadership; they shape entire generations.

As long as authority remains concentrated rather than institutionally distributed, as long as legal protection does not operate independently of power, and as long as leadership is not structurally renewable, cycles of departure and distrust are likely to persist. Calls for return will continue, yet confidence will remain fragile.

Eritrea does not lack citizens willing to rebuild. It lacks the institutional conditions that make rebuilding sustainable.

Lasting recovery begins not with appeals for return, but with the creation of structures in which return is both safe and meaningful.

❖ **Durban, 2002 — Leadership, Expectation, and Disillusionment**

In 2002, while studying in South Africa under a government-administered scholarship program, an event occurred that left a lasting impression on many Eritrean students abroad.

At that time, several hundred Eritrean students were studying in South Africa, reportedly sent in 2001 and 2002 under state-sponsored arrangements. The funding was widely understood to originate from international development assistance. Students signed formal documents confirming their participation in an educational initiative presented as an investment in national capacity-building.

During the United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Durban in 2002, the Eritrean president, Isaias Afwerki, was present in South Africa. Eritrean students were instructed to gather in Durban for a meeting with him. As I recall, the venue was at Howard College, part of what is now the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The meeting was framed as an opportunity for dialogue. After delivering a speech, the president invited questions from students. Some of these questions addressed sensitive matters, including the

detention of family members inside Eritrea. In at least one instance, a student asked about the imprisonment of his father. The response given was that he had no knowledge of the specific case. The exchange revealed the tension between the aspirations of students abroad and the political realities at home.

During the discussion, the president addressed the broader issue of national development and the role of educated youth studying abroad. He stated that students were free to remain overseas if they chose to do so, suggesting that return was not primarily a legal obligation but a personal decision. In the same context, he remarked that in an increasingly globalized labor market, skilled professionals could be recruited internationally at relatively low cost, citing examples such as hiring engineers from countries like the Philippines for modest salaries.

Whether intended as pragmatic realism or rhetorical provocation, the message was received by many students as distancing. Those who had understood their studies as part of a coordinated national development strategy found the implication unsettling. A scholarship implies investment; investment implies expectation; expectation implies partnership. When the language shifts towards replaceability, the psychological contract changes.

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At the same time, accounts from students suggested a more complex reality. While public statements emphasized choice, some reported experiencing administrative pressure to return, particularly when compliance did not occur voluntarily. Allegations of coercive measures circulated, though such claims were often difficult to verify formally. This divergence between official discourse and reported experience contributed to confusion. When freedom of choice is declared publicly but perceived differently in practice, trust becomes fragile.

This perception unfolded within an already delicate institutional environment. Many students were aware of structural challenges at home, including limited transparency and uncertainty regarding merit-based professional integration. In that context, the speech felt discouraging rather than mobilizing.

Soon after, disruptions in stipends began affecting a number of students. Whether these interruptions were directly connected to the meeting or resulted from broader administrative constraints is difficult to determine with certainty. Nonetheless, financial support became inconsistent — delayed, reduced, or in some cases suspended altogether.

Around the same period, students were encouraged or instructed to return to Eritrea before completing their degrees, with

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assurances that studies could continue domestically. In practice, however, such transfers were rarely feasible without institutional coordination and compatibility between academic systems. Several students who returned found themselves unable to complete their programs as originally planned.

In my own case, my stipend was interrupted before I completed my studies. Ultimately, I was supported directly by the host university in South Africa, which enabled me to continue and conclude my academic program.

From my perspective, a widening gap emerged between the stated purpose of the scholarship program and the lived experience of many students. Officially, it was presented as an investment in national capacity. In practice, interrupted funding, administrative uncertainty, and pressure regarding return created instability.

For some, returning home was not merely an academic adjustment; it carried personal and political implications. Over time, what began as an opportunity for education evolved into a period marked by doubt, insecurity, and difficult decisions.

Retention, Responsibility, and the Conditions for Credible Return

In a public interview, the President of Eritrea addressed the departure of educated citizens. When asked whether Western countries were “stealing” skilled professionals, he avoided directly accusing other nations. Yet the framing suggested that developed countries benefit from the migration of talent from less developed states.

This raises a fundamental question: are professionals truly being “stolen,” or are they leaving because conditions at home no longer allow them to remain?

Language matters. When migration is described as external theft, responsibility shifts outward. The narrative emphasizes attraction abroad while minimizing internal conditions. Yet migration is rarely driven by opportunity alone. People are not only pulled — they are often pushed.

Educated individuals do not leave lightly. Years of study are undertaken with the intention of contributing meaningfully to national development. Professionals seek dignity in their work, intellectual growth, and the freedom to apply their expertise responsibly. When those conditions narrow or disappear,

departure ceases to be an act of disloyalty and becomes an effort to preserve life, integrity, and future.

Retention, therefore, requires more than patriotic appeal. It requires an environment in which professional life is supported by stable institutions, predictable legal safeguards, and merit-based advancement. Respect must be embedded in systems, not expressed rhetorically.

When professional independence is constrained, or when advancement depends more on loyalty than competence, consequences gradually accumulate. Talent becomes underutilized. Frustration grows. Intellectual vitality diminishes. In such circumstances, migration reflects structural conditions rather than foreign attraction.

Blaming external actors may provide rhetorical comfort, but it does not address root causes. Few abandon their homeland willingly if they are able to live freely, work with dignity, and build a stable future. Brain drain is not simply a geopolitical phenomenon; it is often a mirror of internal governance.

If departure is shaped by domestic conditions, then any call for return must address those same conditions.

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In a later address, the president encouraged professionals in the diaspora to return and contribute to reconstruction. At first glance, such appeals appear forward-looking. Yet credibility depends not on invitation alone, but on environment. Can return succeed if the structural realities that prompted departure remain unchanged?

Return is not merely logistical. It is psychological and ethical. Where doubts persist regarding legal safeguards, institutional transparency, or procedural fairness, hesitation is natural. Reports of prolonged detention without publicly visible judicial process — whether isolated or widespread — shape perception. Stability is measured not by assertion, but by demonstrable protection.

Leadership requires coherence between promise and institutional reality. Professional training represents years of disciplined study and collective investment. When engineers, doctors, teachers, or researchers cannot practice their professions in safety and independence, the loss extends beyond the individual. It affects institutional continuity and long-term development.

History consistently shows that societies prosper when intellectual communities are protected and encouraged. Where professionals operate within reliable systems, innovation follows. Where uncertainty prevails, progress slows and institutional depth erodes.

Human capital is among a nation's most valuable resources. Its preservation is not a matter of privilege but of strategic necessity.

A productive professional environment depends on enforceable law, transparent administration, reliable infrastructure, and open exchange of ideas. Freedom of movement — the ability to leave and return without fear — fosters long-term confidence. So too does the freedom to write, publish, and contribute openly to public discourse.

Judicial clarity strengthens trust. Consistent procedures reduce uncertainty. Social protections ensure that dignity, not fear, shapes civic life. Workers must be able to change employment without intimidation. Citizens who have contributed throughout their lives should not face insecurity in old age.

Institutional renewal requires accountability, generational transition, and distributed responsibility. Durable systems do not concentrate authority indefinitely; they create mechanisms for orderly change. Where oversight is absent, structural weaknesses accumulate gradually.

National reflection should not be mistaken for hostility. It is a condition of renewal. Words cannot substitute for reform, and repetition cannot replace measurable improvement.

Eritrea possesses resilience, intelligence, and human potential. For these qualities to flourish, governance must align with principles of legal protection, transparency, accountability, and respect for human dignity.

Comparative experience from other regions demonstrates that transformation accelerates where institutions are strengthened, professionals are empowered, and reform is embraced as a sign of confidence rather than weakness.

Sustainable independence rests not only on borders, but on reliable systems. Stability emerges from constitutional clarity, accountable governance, and predictable protections under law.

Only under such conditions can professionals return freely — not as symbolic gestures, but as citizens prepared to build, innovate, and contribute to a stable and forward-looking society.

When Protection Becomes Harm: National Service, Abandoned Livelihoods, and the Cost of Inertia

During my national service in Eritrea, I witnessed situations that continue to raise serious questions about fairness in the use of authority, accountability, and respect for human dignity within

state institutions. These experiences did not appear to be isolated incidents, but recurring patterns whose consequences reached far beyond individual suffering.

At the Assab National Service Center, I served alongside men who were clearly much older than the age typically associated with compulsory service. Some appeared to be in their sixties, others approaching seventy. One elderly man died during the night and was found in his bed the following morning, having taken his own life. The circumstances surrounding the incident were never publicly clarified, nor was there any visible independent review. The matter was treated as an unfortunate occurrence and soon faded from discussion.

Another elderly man worked as a carpenter on the construction site of the Assab Military Referral Hospital, where I was assigned as a site engineer. He confided in me that his children had also been drafted into national service. The only child remaining at home was a young boy who assisted his mother by transporting water by donkey to the city of Dekemhare and selling it to families who could afford it. This was their family's primary means of survival.

These experiences were not merely personal tragedies. They raise broader questions about the state's responsibility towards families, older citizens, and individuals facing vulnerability. A

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system designed to mobilize national contribution inevitably encounters ethical tension when individuals are conscripted without sufficient consideration of age, health, or family dependency.

At the Sawa military training center, I encountered a man who had returned from Germany with the intention of investing in Eritrea. He was beyond the commonly expected age for service and suffered from diabetes, yet he was nevertheless required to fulfill national service obligations. To manage his condition, he had brought specialized sugar-free foods that were medically necessary for his health.

One day, instructors confiscated his food and required him to consume only the standard rations provided — primarily dry bread. The stated justification was uniformity: all trainees were to eat the same meals without exception. The reasoning suggested that shared hardship produces equality and resilience. Yet this approach disregarded medical necessity and basic health considerations. Uniformity was enforced at the expense of essential care.

Later, he confided in me that this experience had convinced him never again to consider investing in the region. He had brought specialized well-drilling equipment with the intention of

contributing economically. Instead of being allowed to work, he found himself forcibly integrated into military service.

During that same period in Assab, I observed another troubling pattern. Minibuses and private taxis — imported by Eritreans from abroad with the intention of working or investing — were increasingly abandoned. Their owners had been conscripted and were no longer able to sustain their livelihoods. In the harsh coastal environment of Assab, characterized by extreme heat and high salinity, these vehicles deteriorated rapidly. What had once represented initiative and economic potential gradually became unusable. The investment was not simply delayed; it was effectively erased by circumstance.

The environmental conditions in Assab accelerate such decline. Even building foundations often require sulfate-resistant cement rather than ordinary Portland cement due to the salinity of the soil. In such an environment, vehicles left unattended corrode quickly. Abandonment is not neutral there — it results in irreversible material loss.

While detained at Sawa prison — commonly referred to as the Six Brigade detention facility (*Shadshay Brigade*, ሻድሻይ ብርጌድ መከታተያ) — I encountered two men who appeared to be suffering from severe psychological distress. One of them repeatedly insisted that he had

come to Eritrea only as a visitor. Although his ancestry was Eritrean, he had been born and raised in Saudi Arabia. During his visit, he was reportedly rounded up in Asmara and later transferred to Sawa, despite explaining that he had been born and had lived his entire life in Saudi Arabia. His family had not been informed of his whereabouts.

Over time, his condition visibly deteriorated. His speech became fragmented, his thoughts increasingly disorganized, and he appeared profoundly affected by the uncertainty surrounding his detention.

Such cases illustrate the human cost that can arise in the absence of due process, transparent communication, and timely legal review — particularly when questions of nationality and identity remain unresolved. Where institutional safeguards are unclear or inconsistently applied, psychological harm may compound the physical reality of confinement.

The issue is not merely detention itself, but the lack of structured legal clarity. A society functions best when rights, responsibilities, and procedures are defined, accessible, and consistently upheld. Without such foundations, uncertainty can become as damaging as punishment.

These lived realities stand in sharp contrast to public appeals encouraging members of the diaspora to return, invest, and contribute to national development. When invitations coexist with unresolved detentions and institutional opacity, trust inevitably weakens. Statements suggesting that the country does not depend on the return of its educated citizens — whether rhetorical or strategic — further diminish confidence among those who might otherwise offer skills, capital, and experience.

Leadership requires more than authority. It requires discernment, accountability, and an accurate understanding of how policies affect human lives. When governance becomes disconnected from lived realities, structures designed to strengthen the nation risk undermining dignity, confidence, and long-term development.

These reflections arise not from abstraction, but from direct observation. Nations are strengthened not through coercion or enforced uniform hardship, but through proportionate responsibility, ethical governance, and respect for human limits. When these principles are neglected, the consequences extend beyond individuals — they shape confidence, investment, and the long-term vitality of the nation itself.

Yet what puzzled me most was not only the policy itself.

It was the contrast.

For while such realities unfolded quietly within national service centers and detention facilities, another image of the nation was simultaneously projected — rhythmic, triumphant, celebratory.

To understand that contrast is to understand how endurance is sustained — how the human spirit continues to move forward even when circumstances appear unchanged.

And so the story moves from lived hardship to public spectacle.

The Theatre of Permanence

Ceremony after ceremony, song after song — the atmosphere becomes immersive. Wherever one turns, music rises in his name. He is portrayed as liberator, iron-willed leader, and architect of national endurance. During Liberation Day and Fenkil commemorations, the rhythm is powerful and triumphant, at times almost hypnotic.

Each year, new songs are composed and performed in grand ceremonies. The repetition creates a concentrated narrative in which national history, sacrifice, and identity appear increasingly centered around a single figure. Over time, the symbolism can feel

so dominant that other voices and contributions recede into the background.

The melodies do more than entertain; they shape a narrative — one of strength, intelligence, sacrifice, and destiny. The crowd gathers not merely to remember history, but to relive it emotionally. In such moments, politics dissolves into spectacle. The leader becomes symbol; the symbol becomes myth.

Over decades — from the years of guerrilla struggle to prolonged governance — continuity is framed as necessity. Longevity is presented as stability. In a continent where leadership transitions often redefine eras, the endurance of a single figure for more than half a century appears exceptional. At over eighty years of age, he remains at the helm, still steering the ship.

Yet alongside celebration exists another reality — quieter, less choreographed.

Questions about imprisonment, freedom of expression, institutional development, and constitutional governance rarely enter the choreography of national festivals. The stage lights shine on unity and pride; the shadows remain unlit.

Music has power.

Dance has power.

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Collective emotion has power.

When repeated year after year, they create a psychological atmosphere in which permanence feels natural, even inevitable. Some participate out of conviction. Others out of habit. Some out of obligation. Many simply for community — to see relatives, to share culture, to introduce their children to heritage. For families abroad, such events become rare moments of belonging.

In this sense, celebration serves multiple purposes. It preserves culture. It strengthens networks. It fosters emotional continuity. And it projects an image — one of harmony, loyalty, unanimity.

I, too, once moved within that current of emotion. The fervor was contagious. The symbolism compelling. It is difficult to remain untouched when an entire crowd moves in rhythm.

But time alters perception. Proximity alters understanding.

National military service changed my perspective. What had appeared unified from afar felt different from within. The discipline, the rigidity, the absence of a personal horizon — these experiences did not appear on ceremonial stages. They were not part of the music.

The contrast became striking.

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In one sphere, elderly men labored in extended national service.
In another, unity was celebrated through choreography and sound.

Two realities — rarely intersecting publicly.

Understanding does not arrive instantly. It unfolds gradually. At first, there is unease. Later, reflection. And once clarity emerges, silence becomes heavy. The dissonance between celebration and lived experience becomes difficult to ignore.

It is not spectacle alone that sustains power.

It is repetition.

Repetition of narrative. Repetition of imagery. Repetition of sound.

Over time, repetition shapes perception. Perception shapes acceptance. Acceptance reinforces continuity.

Yet even within repetition, individuals think. They observe. They compare. And sometimes, quietly, they begin to step back.

Theatre, however, is not sustained by music alone.

It requires reinforcement.

It requires affirmation.

It requires visible validation — especially before external witnesses.

And this leads to the next layer of permanence.



The Performance of Legitimacy

The theatre does not end with national holidays.

It extends beyond commemorations and anniversary celebrations into carefully orchestrated public appearances. When visiting heads of state arrive, streets are prepared, security structures discreetly arranged, and crowds assembled in advance. Pre-arranged enthusiasm is expressed visibly. Names are chanted with intensity. Emotion is amplified for public view.

To an external observer, the scene suggests overwhelming popular affection. Visitors may interpret it as spontaneous admiration — a leader walking freely among his people, greeted with warmth in the streets of Asmara. The imagery conveys confidence and closeness. It suggests organic devotion.

Such imagery carries symbolic weight.

In the absence of visible parliamentary debate, constitutional rhythm, or institutional pluralism, visual affirmation becomes a

substitute language. Applause communicates legitimacy. Chants communicate consent. Public enthusiasm communicates stability.

In this setting, perception becomes a political instrument.

Whether every participant is convinced, cautious, hopeful, indifferent, or simply present out of necessity is less visible than the collective image projected outward. What remains — for cameras, diplomats, and external observers — is the spectacle itself. And spectacle, when repeated consistently, acquires persuasive force.

Beyond the ceremonial stage, however, daily life follows a quieter and more complex rhythm. Infrastructure in many areas remains fragile. Electricity supply can be intermittent. Public services are limited. Economic opportunity is constrained.

At the same time, reports from human rights organizations and testimonies from former detainees describe prolonged imprisonment without transparent judicial process, restricted communication, surveillance of telecommunications, and harsh detention conditions, including allegations of mistreatment and deprivation. Much of this remains difficult to verify publicly due to limited independent access.

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The contrast between official celebration and everyday uncertainty forms part of the lived experience that many citizens quietly navigate.

These realities coexist with moments of public celebration, yet the two narratives rarely meet in open discourse. One is visible and amplified; the other is endured quietly and internalized.

Power sustained over decades depends not only on formal authority, but on perception. When the image of collective affection is consistently maintained, it can function as a form of implicit validation. Applause may be interpreted by leadership as confirmation of legitimacy, while observers may come to view that same applause as evidence of inevitability. In this way, perception and power gradually reinforce one another.

Through repetition, performance can gradually solidify into established patterns. What begins as display may evolve into normalized expectation.

In such circumstances, spectacle can begin to resemble structure — a setting in which image compensates for institutional depth and choreography risks substituting for constitutional process. Public display may come to function as a mechanism through which continuity appears natural and permanence seems self-evident.

To live within such a structure is to inhabit parallel realities:

One visible, amplified, rhythmic.

The other quiet, constrained, reflective.

For a time, the visible narrative may dominate. It provides coherence. It offers emotional reassurance. It simplifies complexity.

But reflection is persistent.

When lived experience repeatedly contradicts projected imagery, a quiet recalibration begins. Not necessarily protest. Not necessarily confrontation.

But distance.

And when reflection deepens, departure often follows.

Why Returning After Independence Was Not Feasible

Independence is usually associated with renewal. When a nation achieves sovereignty after a long struggle, one expects citizens to return, rebuild, and participate in a new beginning. The natural assumption is that once a country is liberated, exile should end.

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In the Eritrean case, however, the opposite pattern emerged. After independence, many Eritreans continued to leave. This paradox puzzled me for years.

I remember an encounter in Arbaminch, Ethiopia. At a post office, I presented my Eritrean identification card when asked for ID. I carried it with pride. A woman nearby noticed and approached me warmly. She, too, was Eritrean. She told me she had married a local man and settled there. Her husband had once been stationed in Eritrea as a soldier. Life in Arbaminch was modest. Income was limited. Yet she had chosen to remain.

At the time, I struggled to understand. Why would someone leave a newly independent country and settle in a place she had never previously imagined? Why build a life in unfamiliar surroundings with few economic advantages?

Years later, I began to understand that such decisions were rarely about preference alone. They were often shaped by structural realities.

Following independence, national service became indefinite in practice. What had initially been framed as a limited civic duty extended without clear end. Young men and women were absorbed into military or state service for years. Families were separated.

Economic productivity within households was reduced. The future became difficult to plan.

At the same time, opportunities for independent economic activity were narrow. Access to land, business licensing, fishing, and trade was often regulated through centralized systems. Infrastructure was limited. Electricity shortages were common. In rural areas, alternatives were few. Even where natural resources existed — such as along the Red Sea — access for private livelihood was constrained by security and regulatory controls.

The paradox became visible: a country rich in potential, yet restricted in practical opportunity for ordinary citizens.

This was not necessarily a question of national identity or culture. Eritrean society is resilient and communal. The issue lay more in governance structures and policy design. When participation in civilian life is delayed indefinitely, when economic pathways are tightly controlled, and when decision-making is centralized, migration begins to appear less like abandonment and more like preservation.

I once spoke with a young Eritrean man soon after my arrival in the country. He told me he intended to leave. I responded with optimism, arguing that independence meant new beginnings. He

quietly replied that I would understand in time. Later, through my own experience of national service, I began to see what he meant. The rigidity, the absence of clear timelines, and the psychological strain made long-term civilian life feel uncertain.

Leaving one's country is rarely an act of rejection. It is usually an act of survival. When individuals cannot foresee a stable civilian future, when economic independence is delayed, and when family life is repeatedly disrupted, departure becomes rational.

This explains why independence did not automatically result in return. Sovereignty removed external control, but internal governance challenges created new constraints. Freedom existed at the level of national status, yet daily life remained heavily structured.

Understanding this context is essential when asking why return was not feasible. The question is not whether independence occurred. It did. The question is whether the conditions that followed allowed for sustainable civilian life. For many, the answer was uncertain.

In that uncertainty, departure continued.

Guarding the Future Without Sacrificing the Present

When a government speaks about protecting resources for future generations, it is not necessarily wrong. Long-term thinking matters. Any serious society must preserve land, water, forests, fisheries, and national wealth so that tomorrow is not poorer than today.

But future planning becomes distorted when it is built on the deliberate suffering of the present population.

The future is not guaranteed. No leader can plan with absolute certainty that the next fifty years will unfold exactly as imagined. Economies shift. Climate changes. Regional alliances evolve. New conflicts appear. Technology transforms work. Even borders and political realities can change. Because the future is never fully predictable, a development strategy that destroys the well-being of today's citizens in order to "build heaven" for tomorrow is not balanced. It is ethically and strategically unstable.

A sound approach begins with the present.

Improving the living conditions of current residents—while also thinking ahead—is not a contradiction. It is the foundation of long-term national strength. A society cannot prepare for tomorrow by

weakening the people who must carry the nation into that tomorrow.

This is where a central principle of development becomes visible: **the future is built through the consciousness, health, and stability of those who live now.** When present citizens are treated with dignity and given real access to livelihood—work, food security, predictable rules, and room for initiative—they become more resilient, more responsible, and more invested in protecting what belongs to the nation.

But when people are pressed into prolonged hardship in the name of “the future,” predictable consequences follow. The population does not become noble and disciplined; it becomes exhausted and disillusioned. Where basic needs are blocked or constantly uncertain, many people adapt through survival strategies: informal economies, bribery, silence, opportunism, or simply leaving. In that environment, corruption does not appear because the people are inherently corrupt; it appears because the system trains them to survive in distorted ways.

And here is the deeper irony: a government that says it is protecting the future by making the present suffer may actually damage the future. Because tomorrow’s society will inherit the habits of today’s society. If today is shaped by fear, restricted

initiative, and forced dependence, those patterns tend to reproduce themselves across generations. A cycle forms: hardship produces survival behavior; survival behavior undermines institutions; weakened institutions produce more hardship.

To build a better future, therefore, you must begin now—by strengthening present life.

This is not sophisticated economics. It is simple logic.

Switzerland offers a useful contrast—not as a claim that Switzerland is perfect, but as an example of balanced thinking. The country plans long-term through infrastructure, environmental policy, public transport, education, and institutional continuity. Yet it does not attempt to achieve this by intentionally degrading the daily dignity of current residents. The goal is not to make people suffer so that the future will be safe; the goal is to build systems where people can live responsibly today, so stability becomes normal tomorrow.

In the Eritrean context, many citizens describe the opposite experience: the present is constrained in the name of discipline, security, or future national interest. Yet when access to livelihood is restricted—when economic life is tightly controlled, when initiative is treated as suspicion, and when ordinary survival is

made unnecessarily difficult—people do not become guardians of the nation. They become people trying to escape a life that feels permanently blocked.

Even where natural resources exist, the essential question is access. A resource that cannot be used by the population does not strengthen national life; it becomes symbolic. A development policy is not measured only by what exists in the land, but by whether citizens can convert that existence into stable livelihood through lawful, ordinary means.

This is the strategic truth: **a nation is defended not only by borders or policies, but by the strength and commitment of its people.** When you raise the well-being of the present population, you increase resilience and attachment. When you force prolonged suffering, you weaken attachment and reduce the motivation to protect what is national.

For that reason, the strongest form of future protection is not austerity imposed on ordinary life. It is a development ethic that treats the present as sacred—because the future is formed through it.

❖ Anchored by Memory: Belonging to a Place

What does it mean to live in one place for decades, to grow within its language, history, and social fabric — yet remain denied full recognition or permanence? What does long presence imply? What does memory signify? And what becomes of law when it appears blind to the lived connection between a person and the land that has shaped them?

Some experiences mark a person so profoundly that they become inseparable from identity itself. They are not learned from documents or conferred by decree; they are absorbed through living. Memory, shared hardship, contribution, and continuity form a deeper layer of belonging. When law does not fully recognize this connection, the limitation may not lie in the individual, but in the inherent boundaries of legal categories themselves.

One of my earliest formative memories was the famine that struck Wollo, Ethiopia, in the early 1970s—specifically between 1970 and 1974. I was a young schoolboy at the time. I remember our school asking students to bring clothing for those affected. I offered my only pair of shorts. It was a small and imperfect gesture, yet it left a lasting imprint on my understanding of solidarity and shared vulnerability.

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Later, I often wondered how such suffering could occur in a land so vast and fertile. Was it drought? Climatic disruption, such as El Niño? Or failures in governance and distribution? That question never fully left me. Formative events do not simply disappear; they shape our conscience and our perspective.

Other defining moments followed. The war between Ethiopia and Somalia in the Ogaden (13 July 1977 – 15 March 1978), a conflict that lasted about eight months, left deep scars despite the shared histories and cultural ties between the two societies.

The Red Terror (**Qey Shibir** – ቀይ ሽብር), which began in September 1977, brought mass arrests, executions, and urban violence. Its most intense phase occurred during 1977–1978, and the campaign gradually subsided between 1978 and 1979.

These were not abstract historical episodes. They were lived realities that shaped an entire generation and continue to echo in collective memory.

Such experiences anchor a person to a place. They create bonds that are historical, emotional, and moral. In their deepest sense, they form the substance of belonging — what citizenship ideally recognizes rather than erases.

Yet political transitions and legal structures sometimes reduce these lived realities to administrative classifications. When years of presence, contribution, and shared history are disregarded, a tension emerges. It is not that the individual lacks belonging; rather, the legal framework may struggle to account for continuity of life.

The expulsion of Ethiopians of Eritrean descent — many born and raised in Ethiopia, some with deep historical ties to the country — illustrates this tension. Such acts do more than disrupt individual lives; they expose the fragility of legal categories when confronted with complex histories.

At the same time, there are examples of citizenship being granted in recognition of meaningful contribution. The British historian **Richard Pankhurst** was awarded Ethiopian citizenship in acknowledgment of his scholarly dedication — a gesture reflecting generosity and historical appreciation. Yet this contrast raises a difficult question: how can individuals deeply shaped by a country's lived history be excluded from full membership while others are included on the basis of contribution alone?

Ideally, law exists to guide and protect life, not to obstruct it. When legal frameworks detach from lived reality, they risk becoming

When Belonging Becomes Natural

In a lively restaurant in Geneva, a dark-skinned woman sits alone at her table, surrounded by unfamiliar faces. No one questions her presence. No one measures her worth. She simply belongs in that space.

Her calm expression reveals something subtle yet profound: she feels naturally included. Her place there requires no explanation.

Civilization rarely reveals itself through speeches or monuments. It appears instead in quieter moments — in who can sit without explanation, in who can remain without negotiation.

This book explores the slow evolution of consciousness: how law reshapes perception, how history lingers in habits and reflexes, and how dignity — once disputed — can, over time, become ordinary.

Between exclusion and recognition lies more than political reform. It requires a transformation in the way human beings see one another.

Real progress is often quiet.

Sometimes, it is nothing more than a chair at a table — and the quiet certainty that one belongs there.

