



RAFTO FOUNDATION

The Professor Thorolf Rafto Foundation for Human Rights

Presserelease

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The Rafto prize 2003

The Professor Thorolf Rafto Memorial Prize for 2003 is awarded to Paulos Tesfagiorgis, Eritrea. For more than 20 years, Paulos has worked for the empowerment of the people of Eritrea, the creation of opportunities for genuine democratic participation, and the widening of space for human rights. He has maintained that this aim must be pursued peacefully and through popular and constructive dialogue. With this year's prize, the Rafto Foundation wishes to acknowledge and assist the growing number of people in Eritrea who struggle to reverse, through non-violent means, the descent towards a one-man rule and the militarization of society. Demands for democracy and human rights are not tolerated in Eritrea today. Due to surveillance, pressure to maintain unconditional conformity, and absence of the freedom of expression, people in Eritrea are unable to organize and make their voices heard. Still, there is a rising desire and demand for participation. It is the hope of the Rafto Foundation that this prize will contribute towards an international focus on the situation in Eritrea, and the opening of space for political discourse in the country.

One-party state demanding unconditional loyalty

Eritrea is still a one-party state. The political development in the country is marked by increasing repression. President Issaias, who led the resistance against the Ethiopian military regime to victory in 1991, demands the people's blind loyalty and unconditional servitude. No alternative expression of opinion is tolerated and the government controls all news media.

Military conflicts with neighbouring countries, the latest being a bloody war against Ethiopia (1998 – 2000), have allowed the Eritrean regime to suppress all criticism, using national security as a guise. Whoever dares to defy the President's demand for absolute loyalty and submission, risks imprisonment or disappearance.

Forced labour and lack of economic freedom

Centralization and militarization characterise Eritrean society today. Most men and many women between 18 and 40 years are serving mandatory terms in the

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military or in the labour brigades, the “National Service”. This implies that between 40 and 50 per cent of the country’s work force is mobilised. The National Service constitutes a form of forced labour, with deployment of labour brigades to development projects with minimal compensation. Those who seek to escape the mandatory service, for example by fleeing the country, risk imprisonment, torture and, sometime, death. The same is true for religious minorities, of which an example is the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who object to military service on religious grounds. They are practically non-citizens due to their pacifist and non-political stance.

Through a system of economic privileges, the governing party, The People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (the PFDJ, formerly the EPLF), has gradually taken on a dominant role in the Eritrean economy. The result is a country marked by a lack of economic freedom, government control, corruption, “brain drain”, and a decline in foreign investment.

Emergency relief and human rights work

Paulos Tesfagiorgis played a central role in the Eritrean struggle for independence. As leader of the Eritrean Relief Association (1976-1990), he was responsible for securing access to food supplies and health services for the civilian population in the liberated areas. He was the Norwegian Church Aid’s partner when it started to organise relief operations to those parts of the population whom the Ethiopian authorities systematically starved.

After liberation, Paulos finished his law studies, and then went on to co-found a “Regional Centre for Human Rights and Development” in Asmara. The President, however, closed down this organization shortly before the national referendum in 1993.

President Issaias refuses to sign the Constitution into effect

In 1994 Paulos was appointed to the Constitutional Commission, and had a major role in ensuring that the commission travelled extensively within the country to have its draft scrutinised in a thorough public debate. The result was a constitution securing important human rights and a democratic form of government, but which, in order to accommodate President Issaias, allows for strong presidential

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powers and widely-interpretable emergency laws. The Constitutional Assembly ratified the Constitution in 1997, but the President has, thus far, refused to sign it into effect. He maintains that, for the time being, national unity and security must be given priority.

The Berlin Manifesto calling for dialogue

Paulos became critical of the regime's reluctance to democratise early on. When the war with Ethiopia formally stopped, he initiated, with close friends and colleagues, a meeting in Berlin in September 2000. A group of thirteen Eritrean intellectuals, all from the Diaspora except Paulos, wrote what has come to be known as the "Berlin Manifesto". Therein, they challenged President Issaias to enter into a dialogue concerning the implementation of the Constitution, the opening of a broader democratic debate, and respect for human rights. After the meeting, Paulos returned to Eritrea.

The "G15-group" arrested and jailed

The following year, the so-called "G15-group" (the reformers) – a group that included senior ministers, generals and central committee members of the ruling party and members of parliament – presented a similar document to President Issaias asking for an open debate and meetings to enter into a dialogue. They were brusquely rejected and on September 18, 2001, the whole group was arrested, except for three who were abroad and one who had earlier withdrawn his signature. Independent journalists were also arrested and all private newspapers were suspended and have remained closed. The detainees are still imprisoned and held incommunicado at an unidentified location, without any court case or official charge brought against them.

Human rights and democracy in the Horn of Africa

Paulos was abroad at the time of the arrests. He left Eritrea in April 2001 realising that he was no longer safe there. In London, he joined "Justice Africa", an organization he co-founded in 1999 and that works for peace, stability and human rights in Africa. His engagement there has, in particular, been towards human rights and democracy in the Horn of Africa. Concomitantly, he tries to bring together Eritrean people in exile around a non-violent, democratic alternative for Eritrea.

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In the spirit of national reconciliation and power sharing, Paulos believes Issaias should be a part of the democratisation of the country. Inviting Issaias to cooperate in this process would aid in achieving a peaceful transition. He insists influence and sovereignty should be returned to the people, and that by doing so, it would be possible to avoid two dangerous tendencies emerging within the Eritrean opposition groups: the drive towards Islamic radicalisation, and partly overlapping with this, the attempts to organise new armed resistance movements. **“Whoever comes to power through violence and the barrel of the gun, would not be democratic, for he would not be accountable to the people”** says Paulos.

The Rafto Prize award ceremony will be held at Den Nasjonale Scene in Bergen, Sunday November 2nd. It will be hosted by Ole Torp, foreign affairs correspondent for the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK).

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