

**PRESS FREEDOM INDEX ABOUT ERITREA: A DECADE OF SHAMEFUL RIVALRY
OVER THE 179TH PLACE WITH NORTH KOREA**

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We learn that some of the misled foot soldiers of the ruling gang in Eritrea are busy since last month, working hard to let some naïve and clueless Eritrean citizens believe that the Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders for the year 2017, as well as the previous years, is politically motivated and that Eritrea deserves a better position than that, if there is a fair study. This is what we hear year in and year out, but the amusing thing is that some shamelessly went as far as saying that leaving the last place to North Korea is an achievement. They do that without telling us if the ban of 2001 on private-owned press has been lifted up or the banned press has been reinstated, or the private press journalists have been released from jail to resume their duties. In a nutshell, whether Eritrea ranks the 180th or the 179th on the Press Freedom Index has neither any meaning whatsoever nor any positive implication. It is everybody's guess that the campaign of these hostile forces is an attempt to distract and deflect the people from giving full attention to the realities on the ground. In few words, with respect to Press Freedom, Eritrea of 2017 is exactly the same as Eritrea during the last eight years: one TV station, one radio station, and one newspaper (the Amhara have a good word to describe such a situation: "And-Lenatu" or only the lonely for his mother), all owned by the state and functioning in exactly the same way like a clock. In other words, the oppressive three-in-one state media cheers and barks to the monarch day and night, in a way that would make any citizen of the Gulf, living in Eritrea or is a visitor, comfortably feel at home. This is to say that the difference in this year's ranking in the Press Freedom Index came from the North Korean side, a matter that does not concern our topic, though we condemn any attack on Press Freedom in any part of the world and express our solidarity with any people deprived of that basic right.

In a country like Eritrea that newly emerged into the international arena, as a free state, the most vulnerable institution was naturally the Free Press that had existed at one point immediately after independence, and the most disposed were the journalists who believed in the freedom of print. As the Eritrean journalists in the short-lived private-owned press that existed during the pre-2001 post independence period, started doing their job right, their friends in powerful places got less, finally diminishing to zero. Simply put, when Atse Isias saw that the Free Press was exposing how his administration was working, his top priority became a crusade against critics, including the Free Press. The campaign started as discrediting, harassing, and intimidating journalists, culminating in the total ban of the once-vibrant private-owned press and the imprisonment of the key editors and journalists. Slowly but surely, the crackdown later extended to state-employed journalists.

As we will always hear about Press Freedom Index, even after the collapse of the regime and the culmination of the struggle of our people by successfully bringing the dream of our people to see a democratic Eritrea into reality, it would be appropriate to go to the basics and lay the background, raising the most important issues related. Though these issues are many, we would start with what Press Freedom Index means, the organization involved in assessing the level of interference of the state and what methodology it applies in ranking the countries. The rest will be complementary issues that will help us understand the level of brutality of the attack on freedom of pen and what the annual indexes mean for the country versus others.

Press Freedom Index is the annual ranking of the countries of the world (currently 180 in number) compiled and published by Reporters Without Borders. It should be noted here that small countries like Andorra, also known as the principality of Catalan, are not included in the report. Andorra or the principality of Catalan is a sovereign landlocked microstate, located in the Pyrenees mountains of Southwestern Europe bordered by Spain and France. We would not wonder if we hear the mindless foot soldiers of the brutal regime, who hardly understand the implication of things they say to defend the regime, arguing that Eritrea of Atse

Isias should be exempted from such annual indexes like the microstate of Adorra, thinking that it is the only way that would protect the regime from exposure.

The next question we need to explore is: ***What does the Press Freedom Index do in general?*** It assesses the Press Freedom records of the 180 countries in the previous year. Based on that, it reflects the degree of freedom journalists, news agencies and netizens (a word blending two words: “Internet” and “citizen” to mean cybercitizens or online communities) have in each country and the effort the government showed to respect this freedom.

Before raising the essential details about the Press Freedom Index, we need to cast light on Reporters Without Borders, as the publisher of the index. According to the description of the analyst of the organization, Reporters Without borders is “...an international non-profit, non-governmental organization that promotes and defends freedom of information and freedom of the press.” It has its head office in Paris and is given a consultant status at the United Nations. The compelling question here would be: ***What are its spheres of activity?*** Without going to details, it could be said that it has two primary spheres of activity:

- One focuses on the censorship of the new media (means of mass communication using digital technologies such as the Internet).
- The other focuses on providing material, financial, and psychological assistance to journalists working in dangerous areas.

If the above are the spheres of the activity of Reporters Without Borders: ***How about its missions?*** Its missions could simply be put as follows:

- Continuously monitoring attacks on freedom of information throughout the world, and reporting them in the form of an annual report known as Press Freedom Index.
- Denouncing such attacks in the media through press releases.

- Launching advertising campaigns:
 - to raise public awareness of threats to freedom of information and press.
 - to undermine the image of countries considered enemies of freedom of expression.
 - to discourage political support by the international community for governments hostile towards freedom of information and press.

- Acting in cooperation with governments to fight censorship and regulations that restrict freedom of information. Here the primary means of direct action of the organization are appeals to governments, via letters or petitions, as well as frequent press releases, if there are some ready to listen.

- Morally and financially assisting the following:
 - Persecuted or exiled journalists and their families.
 - Unsupported families of journalists killed.
 - Journalists who are supposed to leave their countries because of the danger surrounding them.
 - Prosecuted journalists for their writings, covering their legal fees.
 - Physically attacked journalists, covering their medical bills.

- Offering material assistance to war correspondents, enhancing their safety (when necessary by providing bullet-proof vests).

Out of the above six missions, the most relevant ones to Eritrea would be: the first, the second, third, and the fifth (according to descending order). As cooperation of the regime with this organization is quite impossible, and allowing foreign journalists to war fronts is equally impossible, the fourth and the sixth missions are totally unthinkable. From the explanations above, it is very clear where the hostility of the ruling gang in Eritrea towards this organization stems from.

The discussion above will lead us to the question: ***How is Press Freedom Index compiled?*** As the thorough investigation of this question will increase our trust in 2017 report and those published during the last ten years, in addition to future reports, this core question would need a detailed discussion.

The annual index is prepared on basis of a questionnaire Reporters Without Borders distributes to its partners. Its partners include 14 freedom of expression groups in five continents (Europe, Asia-Pacific, Middle East and North Africa, and the Americas, and about 150 of its correspondents spread throughout the world, local journalists or media professionals, lawyers, jurists, sociologists, and human rights activists. In addition to its world-wide network, it could also send a team of its own when it finds it necessary to verify working conditions for journalists in a particular country. Here it would be important to ask: ***How do we describe the questionnaire in general terms?*** Accordingly, we need to note the following:

- The questionnaire consists of 87 questions that revolve around direct attacks on journalists and the media (To see a sample, visit: https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/rsf_survey_en.pdf).
- It also consists of some questions about indirect sources of pressure against the Free Press.
- All questions deal with freedom of the press and none of them measures the quality of journalism.
- The questions are translated into 20 languages including English, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Indonesian, and Korean.

If this is what the questionnaire generally looks like, moving from the general to the more specific about how it measures a country's performance, we would ask: ***What are the criteria categories or indicators the questionnaire focuses on?*** Each question in the questionnaire is linked to one of the following indicators, according to the sources related to Reporters Without Borders (<https://rsf.org/en/detailed-methodology>):

- **Pluralism**: This indicator or criteria category measures the extent to which opinions are represented in the media (to see if there is diversity of opinions).
- **Media Independence**: This measures to what extent the media is independent from sources of power and influence, whether political, governmental, business, or religious.
- **Environment and self-censorship**: Reflects the environment under which news and information providers operate.
- **Legislative framework**: This measures the impact of the legislative framework that governs news and information activities.
- **Transparency**: This shows the extent to which the institutions and procedures that affect the production of news and information are transparent.
- **Infrastructure**: This measures the quality of the infrastructure that supports the production of news and information.
- **Abuses**: This is an indicator that measures the level of abuses and violence committed against journalists and media, based on data gathered during the respective year.

This attempt is to show that the annual report or index is not politically motivated, as the foot soldiers of the brutal regime want the people and the world to believe. If these are the indicators or criteria categories taken into consideration when assessing the situation of each country: ***What happens next?***

Once Reporters Without Borders receives the completed questionnaire from its partners, it scores each indicator in the questionnaire. Then a final score is given to each country, as we will see below. Here it is helpful to ask: ***Why does the organization use scores?*** Giving a score to each country makes the Index more informative or it makes it easier to compare each country and each year with another. Here one would ask: ***How is the scoring done?*** The organization calculates the following two scores:

- **ScoA** (Score A): is the sum of the points earned in the first six indicators or criteria categories.
- **ScoB** (Score B): is the sum of the points earned in the first six indicators + the seventh indicator, which is the “Abuses”.

How does the organization justify this scoring method? This is not done without an objective reason. According to the sources related to Reporters Without Borders (<https://rsf.org/en/detailed-methodology>), this method, “... prevents an inappropriately low score (high ranking) being given to a country where few or no acts of violence against journalists take place because the provision of news and information is tightly controlled.” Finally, the 180 countries are ranked according to their final score which ranges from 0 to 100. Here 0 is the best and 100 the worst. Simply put, data for each year is presented as a country’s rank, which gives the position of a country in relation to the rest. This means that a smaller score on the report corresponds to greater Freedom of Press.

There is another compelling question that imposes itself here: ***How does the ruling gang consider independent press?*** To the ruling gang in Eritrea and their foot soldiers, who repeat what they hear from their leaders like parrots, freedom of

expression and other public liberties are not universal rights, but rather, ideas related to the Western ideology. If this is the way they look at things: ***What negative role do they ascribe to the Free Press?*** They say the Free Press is a propaganda tool for foreign interests, elaborating that it introduces alien values, encourages and incites chaos, and actively undermines national security and pride, considering it the fifth column in the Eritrean body politics. If this is the way they see Free Press, killing, kidnapping, jailing, torturing or committing unimaginable brutalities against independent journalists is not strange. But to dig further, we would ask: ***Does the world situation favour the attitude of the Eritrean ruling gang towards Free Press?*** The answer is emphatically “Yes” and sadly enough in a couple of ways:

- First, many observers agree that the press is becoming less free in the world today. Here we need to understand the extent of the invisible global digital surveillance whose use North Korea, China, and Russia have perfected. Eritrea, where the government spends hundreds of millions of dollars on surveillance technology and the training of its security personnel, digital surveillance has made the silencing of press, which the Eritrean gang calls, “censorship”, much easier and more prevalent today than it was decades ago. Highly enlightening on digital surveillance is the book written by Joel Simon (November 2014), the Executive Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists (C.P.J.), entitled [***The New Censorship: Inside the Global Battle for Media Freedom***](#). Simon candidly argues that the digital revolution has concentrated power in the hands of the few “with less organized counter-pressure”.
- Second, it is a common knowledge today that press has been silenced even in countries where there are elected leaders like Putin, Erdoğan, and the leftist leaders of Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia (to mention few), whom we see using their power to intimidate independent journalists, making it almost impossible for them to function. The election of Donald Trump as the leader of the free world, his undisputed hostility towards independent press, and the radical shift he brought about in the US foreign policy, are great victories to forces hostile to independent media in the world, both elected leaders and self-

imposed ones, like Aste Isias. A good read here is the article: *Donald Trump is a gift to Africa's Dictators* (www.theguardian.com). In this connection, we raise two questions: *What is his negative role? How does that affect us in Africa?* Let us see the following examples:

- Imagine the US President frequently attacking news organizations that are critical of him, using the social media to accuse them of “fake news” and declaring a “running war with the media”. Of course, when we see things from the human rights perspective, government leaders have the right of freedom of expression, as protected speech (protected by the constitution) but we should not lose sight that there is a duty on elected leaders to protect that right, even for the media critical of them. This is to say that elected government leaders have to secure the right of the public to information. But: *Are threats, intimidation, retaliation and smear campaign backed up by the power of the President “protected speech”?*
- In addition to attacking journalists on some occasions, the most worrying act was the exclusion of certain news organizations from the White House briefings.
- Again, imagine the implication when the White House receives dictators like the Chinese leader, Abdulfatah Al Cici of Egypt, and very soon the Pilipino butcher, Rodrigo Duterte, and maybe the Turkish President in the near future. *Why not even Atse Isias when the dust settles in the White House or Atse Isias swears allegiance to the new boss even through his Gulf partners?*

Some would distaste reading examples from the US in this article and could even go as far as saying they are irrelevant and leftist in tendency. Knowing that how much influence the US has on the rest of the world, Trump’s attitude towards the mainstream media is very bad for Press Freedom of the world. Further: *Who are the world leaders Trump praises?* The list includes Putin, President Xi in China, Erdogan in Turkey, Al Cici in Egypt, Butcher Bashar Al Assad (whom he once praised), and is getting closer to praise the North Korean leader or has already started praising indirectly (review his last words about him). *What message does his hostility towards independent media, his praise of world dictators, or receiving them at the White House send?* Trump is sending a message that it is fine to jail journalists, it is fine to show hostility towards the media publicly, and it

is fine to dismiss news you do not like as being “fake”. Of course, Trump cannot arrest, kill, or go to the level of these dictators (not because he does not like to but because he knows he would be in trouble), but the rhetoric he uses is very troubling and damaging for Press Freedom. If elected leaders, including the leader of the free world, exploit their mandate to govern as dictators by silencing independent press: ***What are traditional dictators like Atse Isias who have never known elections expected to do?***

We have discussed above what Reporters Without Borders considers as its criteria, in judging the level of Press Freedom around the world. But we ask: ***Are there non-government organizations that use other criteria than those of Reporters Without Borders in order to judge the level of Press Freedom around the world?*** To answer this, we need to see briefly the following non-government organizations that complement the role of the Reporters Without Borders in one way or another:

- **The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ): *What role does it play?***

- It uses the tools of journalism to help journalists. It is doing that by tracking issues related to the Freedom of the Press through independent research, fact-finding missions, and first-hand contacts in the field, including local working journalists in countries around the world.
- It shares information on breaking cases with other agencies of Freedom of Press at world level, through the International Freedom of Expression Exchange, which is a global e-mail network.
- It tracks deaths and detentions of journalists throughout the world, through researchers who independently investigate and verify the circumstances behind each incident of death or detention, applying strict criteria for each case.

- **Freedom House: *What role does it play?***

This organization studies the general political and economic environment of each nation. The purpose of this study is to determine whether relationships of dependence that could limit the level of Press Freedom exist. The idea behind

this is that independence of the press is one closely linked with the concept of Press Freedom.

Before winding up this piece, it would be appropriate to raise the question: *What are the dangerous topics for Eritrean journalists?* There is a similar topic Human Rights Network for Journalists–Uganda has written about, under the title: *The Dangerous Six: Dangerous Topics for Journalists* (<https://hrnjuganda.org/?p=3184>). As I see relevance in some of the points raised, I will try to use some of them in the Eritrean context. These include the following (the topics are reported as they appear in the source):

- **Organized Crime**: To begin with: *What is organized Crime?* It is defined as: “a category of transnational, national, or local groupings of highly centralized enterprises run by **criminals** who intend to engage in illegal activity, most commonly for money and profit.” If this is the definition of organized crime, we cannot say that it does not exist in Eritrea, though the level may not be like those in Central America or South Asia, where drug trafficking is also a contributing factor. Correspondingly: *Are the crimes of Atse Isias’s generals different from organized crime? Doesn’t the absence of the rule of law created by design give birth to the best environment for organized crime?* After all, the only difference between the situation in Eritrea and other parts of the world is that the other governments are weak and their failure is a big factor, whereas in Eritrea the organized crime is committed by the government and the ruling party officials themselves. Like everywhere, when journalists try to investigate these crimes, speak, or write about them, they take their lives in their hands.
- **Corruption**: It is everybody’s knowledge that corruption is rampant in business and government places in Eritrea, and is perceived as normal as anything legal. Reporting or investigating corruption or the tendency to do so (as perceived by the corrupt and criminal authorities) were among the reasons that made more than 20 journalists still languish in prison (if at all they are alive) and many forced to leave their beloved country. Many of the journalists working in the

opposition websites and radio programs in Diaspora are the lucky ones who had managed to escape the violent crackdown on journalists.

- ***Environment and Development:*** Even in Eritrea, investigating the illegally grabbed land by people of power (for plantation, industry, private mining, or housing) or private businesses or projects owned by high government and party officials and their friends or relatives, pose great danger to reporters. Just to remind the reader: ***How many bodies of journalists have been found heavily bruised after they had been abducted by unknown assailants or died from burns allegedly inflicted by the police?***
- ***Religion:*** ***How many Eritrean journalists who had tried to cover religious persecution (targeting Pentecostal, Muslim, Orthodox, Protestant, or Catholic believers) have been retaliated against by the authorities?*** In other countries, we also have religious extremist groups (of all faiths) who retaliate against reporters who expose their persecution of other faiths. But fortunately, as Eritrea is until now free from this cancer, the only forces that exercise religious persecution and retaliate on reporters who expose them are the Eritrean authorities.

The other two dangers to reporters that I have left out are: **Disputed Sovereignty** (related to questions of autonomy and self-determination) and **Lèse-majesté and beyond** (laws against insulting the state or top officials). As the first problem does not exist in Eritrea (Thank God) it would be irrelevant to raise. Since Eritrea is not a country ruled by laws like other countries of the world, nothing is known about such laws. Nevertheless, retaliations and all types of harassment as a result of accusation related to insulting top officials are daily practices and they do not need laws, in a country which is totally governed by gangs and bandits. In Eritrea, a country where a journalist could spend years in jail simply for using the “wrong” word or photo, we can imagine what insulting top officials (real or alleged) would lead to. Just to remind the readers: ***How many journalists are languishing in jail just merely because they had an argument with the Minister of Information?***

As a matter of fact, when we compare the difference between the scores earned by Eritrea and North Korea in the Press Freedom Index of 2017, as countries ranking the 179th and the 180th respectively, is a razor thin margin of 0.75 or less than a point (Eritrea scored 84.24 points whereas North Korea 84.99). Anyone would ask: ***Does overtaking North Korea by this insignificant margin of points undo the shame of the past decades?*** Further, imagine that Namibia has the best score in the whole Africa (ranking 24th and scoring 12.08 points) or better than the USA of Donald Trump that ranked 43rd and earned 23.88 points. ***By how many points is Eritrea behind Namibia with respect to Press Freedom?*** It is 84.24 –12.08 which is: 72.16 points. ***Could Atse Isias have the gut and the moral ground to maintain a proud eye contact with President Hage Geingob of Namibia in case they meet? Could both be treated equally by the international community?***

To show what image the ruling gang has created about Eritrea in the minds of the world community, I would quote below a comment written by a certain Chariot on April 20, 2016, after reading the 2016 Press Freedom Index. I am forced to leave the place of the vulgar word he used, blank, but I will indicate my source so that those interested could find for themselves. No fair-minded person would put the blame squarely on the comment writer for the nasty word he had used, but on the ruling gang that has caused the shameful situation and the dreadful picture about the country. Sadly enough, the comment reads:

“Worse than North Korea? What kind of -----is Eritrea?!”
(<http://www.neogaf.com/forum/showthread.php?t=1209756>)

To sum up, I would say a lot of people around the world are scratching their heads that the US of Donald Trump is not among the top ten in the Press Freedom Index of 2017, while Jamaica is proudly one. Specifically, we express bewilderment asking: ***Is the present US administration leading the world towards the consolidation of the Freedom of Press or its weakening? =====***