



Open-Ended Conscription in Eritrea's National Military Service: Here is How to Improve the Policy

Background

When Eritrea achieved independence from Ethiopia in 1991, it enacted proclamation No.11/1991, creating the Eritrean National Service (ENS). The ENS is a national military conscription, an embodiment of the national security service. It effectively requires any Eritrean national who graduated from high school into compulsory national/military service. Originally, people were meant to be in service for a maximum of two years. However, the ENS has been open-ended since the late 1990s, effectively keeping conscripts in the service indefinitely. In 2016, the UN characterized the system as "enslavement". This system has had a calamitous impact on Eritrean conscripts, their families, and the social fabric of the country (Kibreab, 2017). Additionally, Eritrean refugees in the diaspora mention open-ended conscription as their main reason of fleeing the country.

There are two schools of thought in the field of conscription. One sees national military service as a civic duty and as an expression of political and civic rights, which create and reproduce values that are amenable to greater cross-cultural understanding, mutual respect, national unity, and greater commitment to the common good. Additionally, proponents mention the high costs of manning professional armies compared to conscripted armies (Poutvaara & Wagener, 2007). The other school perceives compulsory national/military service as

antithetic to a free society because individuals are forced against their will to undertake service at the cost of their interests and future careers. Exponents of this school argue that compulsory service is a gross violation of liberty and freedom.

Exactly why countries choose to adopt conscription is based on several factors, including cultural or ideological concerns, estimates of threat or security needs, legal origin, cost, and the nature of the labour market (Asch & Warner, 2001; Burk, 1992; Cohn & Toronto, 2017; Flynn, 1998; Kier, 1997; Levi, 1996). In the case of Eritrea, Kibreab (2017) cited the ENS' aims as outlined by its architects as: the creation of a strong defence force able to fend off existential threats to Eritrea's sovereignty, the use of national service as a substitute for war in order to regenerate, preserve, and to transmit national core values, and to serve as a vehicle for national unity.

Key Findings

Asal et al. (2017) analyzed 100 countries over a period of 200 years and argued that the decision to use conscription is largely dependent on historical factors. They find that democracies are less likely to implement the military draft, while states involved in interstate war or intrastate rivalry are more likely to do so.



Cohn and Toronto (2017) found that states experiencing greater external threat are more likely to employ conscripts. Additionally, states with more highly regulated labour markets are more likely to employ conscripts.

Putnam (2000) and Kibreab (2008) argued that when people of ethnic, geographic, religious and occupational backgrounds interact repeatedly with each other, over time, they can know and trust one another, to interconnect with each other and share experiences, values and norms that encourage cooperation, openness and compromise on an individual level.

In addition, Etzioni (1980) and Waltzer (1983) maintained that participation in national service integrates citizens from different racial ethnic, class, and religious groups into one nation with a sense of common citizenship or nationhood.

Eberly (1988) supported this argument, and stated that one of the most important results of national service is that participants gain common experience that enhances social cohesion and national unity.

Poutvaara and Wagener (2007) found that arguments on the benefits of military draft (unlikelihood of war, social cohesion, and civic duty) are superficial. First, abolition of conscription would result in economic

gains and pay a big peace dividend. Second, the evidence that military conscription serves as a melting pot of cultures is far from clear. Parts of society will always be overrepresented in conscription. Finally, military draft is a burden not shared equally but rather is highly discriminatory to youth, raising serious distributional concerns.

Kibreab (2017) concluded that the ENS has a calamitous impact on Eritrea. Widespread rape and sexual violence against female conscripts, mistreatment of refugees and deserters, and especially the open-ended nature of the ENS have resulted in a weak and divided Eritrea Defence Force unable to protect and Eritrea's territory, prevent deserters, foster national unity, and transmit national values. Additionally, he also concludes that the ENS did integrate citizens, fostering a common identity. "Conscripts interviewed for this study cite these experiences as the most memorable and enduring, and those that cemented their relationships in spite of their disparate backgrounds" (Kibreab, 2017, p. 28).

The Economist (2014) stated that one in 20 Eritreans live in barracks across the country for an average of six and a half years, earning less than USD 30 a month, not being able to go to university or get a formal job, and being mistreated by camp

commanders. "Some respondents described 'cruel and corrupt' camp commanders who 'demand sexual favours' and threaten to kill conscripts who do not follow orders" (*The Economist*, 2014).

Smith (1976) used the argument of comparative advantage – not everybody is a soldier, or a nurse, or a heart surgeon. Forcing conscription is an inefficient match between people and jobs and will result in a loss of expertise, negatively impacting the economy. Smith (1976) found an irresistible superiority of a well-established volunteer army versus a conscripted army.

Poutvaara and Wagener (2009) argued that a conscripted army is seemingly cheaper to run than a professional army, but that "accounting costs do not reflect the real opportunity costs of a conscript army; the use of compulsion in itself suggests that real costs are higher" (p. 6). For example, Kerstens and Meyermans (1993) found that the social cost of the Belgian draft system was twice the budgetary cost.

Finally, at the macroeconomic level, the disruption of human capital investments by military conscription translates into lower stocks of human capital, reduced labour productivity, and substantial losses in GDP (Lau et al., 2004).

Conclusion

The school of thought – that conscription is a gross violation of liberty and freedom, and that it is detrimental to the development of a country and its citizens – has been increasingly accepted. Eritrea adopted the policy of forced national service to create a strong defence force against existential threats, foster national unity, and preserve and transmit national core values. However, the open-ended nature of conscription and the mistreatment of conscripts has a negative impact on Eritrean economy and national unity, forcing thousands to flee the country. Eritrea has been dubbed a pariah state due to its conscription policy, and abandoning the open-ended and forced nature of the practice could rehabilitate Eritrea in the international community.

Recommendations

The Government of Eritrea should:

1. Abandon its open-ended forced conscription and investigate possibilities of a return to the two-year conscription or a voluntary standing army. Open-ended forced conscription has a disastrous impact on the economy and creates youth exodus. Additionally, abandoning open-ended forced conscription can result in increased international donor assistance.
2. Address mistreatment of conscripts, deserters, and returnees.
3. Prevent at all costs sexual violence and rape by camp commanders of female conscripts.
4. Seriously reconsider the need for and costs of a large standing army due to a diminished existential threat after the election of Ethiopia Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed paved the way for rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia.
5. Reconsider the effectiveness of the ENS as a vehicle for national unity and transmitting national core values.
6. Encourage conscripts to embrace differences rather than homogenising the heterogeneous and multiple identities of the Eritrean polity.

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