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<http://www.rsf.org/eritrea-what-really-happened-at-asmara-s-24-01-2013,43947.html>

Africa - Eritrea

No transparency

What really happened at Asmara's ministry of (dis)information ?

24 January 2013

The Eritrean capital, Asmara, saw an uprising on 21 January that was both unexpected and short-lived. Around 100 soldiers staged a mutiny and stormed the information ministry. The army responded by surrounding the building with tanks. After a 12-hour interruption, the state broadcast media resumed their normal programming, the mutineers withdrew and officials went home.

What really happened that day at the information ministry? Some information began to filter out the next day, and more has emerged since then. But it has not been easy to follow events as they happened. And establishing what this incident means and what it may bode for the future is even harder.

Eritrea is one of the world's most closed countries and has one of the last totalitarian dictatorships. The mystery surrounding the events of 21 January and the chorus of denials and contradictory comments on social networks are the logical consequence of a situation in which privately-owned media have been banned since 2001 and no foreign press correspondents have been permitted since 2010.

This Horn of Africa country is ranked last in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index and is Africa's biggest prison for journalists, with at least 30 detained. Seven have died or committed suicide in detention as a result of the appalling conditions.

When the only media allowed to operate inside a country are government-run propaganda mouthpieces, the exile media play a key role. This is the case with *Radio Erena*, an independent radio station based in Paris and supported by Reporters Without Borders. It was *Radio Erena* that sounded the alert. We will get back to this. First the facts.

Mutineers take "Forto," state media interrupted

Early on the morning of 21 January, around 100 mutineers took up positions in the information ministry, an enormous ochre-coloured building known as "Forto," which sits atop a small hill overlooking Asmara.

The rebel soldiers quickly gathered all the employees "in the same room" and then Asmelash Abreha, the head of state-owned *Eri-TV*, which broadcasts from within the complex, was forced to begin reading a communiqué on the air.

The communiqué called for implementation of the 1997 constitution, which has been suspended since the 1998-2000 war against Ethiopia, and for the release of political prisoners and all those who were arrested while trying to flee the country illegally across its land borders.

After he had read the first two sentences, the TV station's over-the-air signal was suddenly cut and its satellite signal began broadcasting archive footage. Army tanks quickly surrounded the building. They also reportedly took up protective positions at the presidential palace, located just a few hundred metres away, and at the airport. The rest of the city apparently remained calm but communication with the outside world became very complicated.

"Snowing in Paris"

After being off the air all day, *Eri-TV* resumed broadcasting at around 10 p.m. with news from Europe. "Snow in Paris is disrupting the everyday activities of the French," the news programme announced. The mutineers withdrew in the evening, and the information ministry's 500 or so employees all went home. The next morning they were all back at work, as usual.

The 1993 precedent

According to reports from various sources, including the opposition exile website *Awate.com*, it seems that the mutiny was led by four people – Col. Saleh Osman, two majors and a captain – but was spontaneous and not very organized. Col Osman was a hero of the anti-Ethiopian resistance in the port city of Assab during the 1998-2000 war.

What happened to the mutineers and how was the situation resolved? The authorities did not make any arrests. "The mutineers withdrew peacefully," said journalist Léonard Vincent, the author of a book about Eritrea, speaking on *Radio France Internationale*. In fact, not a single shot was fired.

An Eritrean interviewed by Reporters Without Borders and Martin Plaut, in a post entitled "[21 January in perspective](#)" on his blog, both said the incident resembled one in 1993, a few days before Eritrea's independence declaration, when a few ex-fighters staged a brief mutiny to demand their back pay.

To this end, they surrounded the office of the future president, Issaias Afewerki, then a hero of the liberation and head of the single party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice. The situation was quickly resolved by means of negotiation, but some of the ex-fighters were later arrested or disappeared.

But never since independence in 1993 has *Eri-TV's* programming been interrupted as it was on 21 January.

After official silence, comments, spin and denial

Although just embryonic and ephemeral, this week's uprising quickly drew the attention of the international community, foreign media and Eritrean diaspora because Eritrea is an extremely authoritarian country where fear is universal and any form of protest seems inconceivable.

At first there was complete silence from the government. The first official comment came the next day from Yemane Gebremeskel, the president's senior adviser, who said: "All is calm today, as it was indeed yesterday."

Comments followed from a few Eritrean officials based abroad, including the ambassador to the United Nations, Araya Desta; the ambassador to the African Union, Girma Asmerom; the ambassador to Japan; and the consuls in Australia and South Africa. All played down the incident and criticized "garbage reports" in foreign media in the pay of "Eritrea's enemies."

"The government is insisting that the situation is under control while reluctantly admitting that there was an incident," Léonard Vincent wrote.

Meanwhile, the exile opposition and government supporters waged a furious battle on social networks. Rahel Weldeab, who works for the pro-government National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students, tweeted: "People in Asmara are going about their daily lives while 'experts on the Horn' cry coup (...) I live right near the airport, nothing is happening."

Another person on Twitter criticized the comments about the human rights situation in Eritrea and said that freedom of information was respected because journalism is taught at school. The exact message says: "And you can be a journalist in Eritrea. They even teach journalism in school. I don't know wtf you talking about".

Radio Erena, first with the news

Amanuel Ghirmai, an Eritrean exile journalist with *Radio Erena*, was extensively quoted by all the international news media on 21 January. Throughout the day, international media turned to the Paris-based independent radio station to find out what was happening in Asmara.

And for good reason. [Radio Erena was the first radio station to report that an incident was](#)

[unfolding in the Eritrean capital](#). Alerted early in the morning, the station took to the air at 9 a.m. (Paris time), an hour earlier than usual, and continued to follow events as they happened.

With support from Reporters Without Borders, *Radio Erena* was launched in June 2009 by a group of Eritrean exile journalists. Headed by **Biniam Simon**, a former *Eri-TV* star anchor, it relies on a network of local correspondents and contributors. Its independently-reported news and information provide an alternative to the government's propaganda.

Because of its success and the quality of its programmes, *Radio Erena* quickly became a government target. Its satellite signal was jammed and its website was the victim of a cyber-attack last summer, after it had been broadcasting for three years.

More information about the jamming and the complaint that Reporters Without Borders filed with the judicial authorities in Paris:

- [On RSF.org](#)
- "[Ordinary heroes](#)", by Léonard Vincent

After several months of seeking ways to elude such acts of sabotage, *Radio Erena* is back on the air in Eritrea and the neighbouring region (East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula), broadcasting daily on the shortwave (since 15 November) and by satellite (since 26 December).

Radio Erena can be heard every evening from 8 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. (local time) on 11560 kHz on the shortwave.

It can also be received 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by satellite:

Satellite: 7 degrees West (Nilesat)
Frequency: 11678 MHz
Polarization: Vertical
Symbol Rate: 27500
FEC: 3/4

French-language media coverage of *Radio Erena* (September 2012 - January 2013):

- "[Radio Erena, fighting for the airwaves](#)" (*Libération*)
- "[Radio Erena, the free voice that Eritrea wants to gag](#)" (*Le Monde*)
- "[Radio Erena is the only independent radio station broadcasting in Eritrea, so it's no surprise they don't like it](#)" (Interview with Biniam Simon by RFI's Sonia Rolley)
- "[Radio Erena, an investigation into state piracy in Eritrea](#)" (*Slate Afrique*)

[Also read Léonard Vincent's article about information minister Ali Abdu's recent defection.](#)

Photo : Asmara ([ctsnow](#))

You can download those documents on our website :

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