

Carlos Cardoso Memorial Lecture 2021

5 years ago I was at a human rights conference in Miami. I was looking through the program to decide what I wanted to go to when an event caught my interest. It was a panel discussion about the attacks on journalists and journalism, featuring some really interesting speakers. It seemed to be perfect for me, I was at the conference to raise awareness about the press freedom situation in Eritrea, and thought I could recruit people from the audience and maybe even the panelists.

One of the speakers on the panel was the Angolan journalist Rafael Marques de Morais. Many of you have probably heard about him or even know him personally, and if you do, you know he is a bit of a superstar in this field. I had no idea who he was when I went to the event but when I heard him speak, I was so impressed by his work and his bravery. And then he started complaining about the poor solidarity among Africans, and when I heard this I felt extremely disappointed.. During the Q&A, I raised my hand and when the moderator finally picked me I asked "Rafael, you are a prominent and well-connected journalist, and I completely understand that you are probably more than overwhelmed with your own situation, but why have you and all other African journalists with a platform like yours failed your Eritrean colleagues - the most persecuted journalists on the continent who are in desperate need of your solidarity and support?"

My name is Vanessa Tsehaye and I am an Eritrean human rights activist. I am incredibly honoured to be giving the 2021 Carlos Cardoso Memorial Lecture and the opportunity to speak in front of such an esteemed audience. My lecture has a very simple mission - by the time I finish, I hope to have convinced as many of you as possible to support your Eritrean colleagues in prison or in exile in whatever way that you can. To do that, I will tell you my own story, my uncle's story and my beloved country's story.

My parents left Eritrea in the late 80s when the country was in the midst of an independence war and ended up in Northern Europe - Sweden to be precise, where I was born and raised. This was obviously very far away from Eritrea, where my mom's almost entire family still was. As a young child, my mom would always tell me stories about her home and her siblings - it was her way of bridging the physical distance between us. She had this one game where I would list the names of her siblings and tell her about them - who they were married to, what their children were called and what they did for a living etc. And I loved it!

One day when I was five years old, my mom told me that one of her brothers who I always talked about in our game had been imprisoned. I was obviously very young and did not understand the full circumstances of the situation - all I knew was that my mom had told me that my uncle had been taken to a prison even though he had not done anything wrong, and my basic understanding of prisons and justice was that only people who do bad things went to prison, and if my mom had said he did not do anything wrong, this was really really unfair. This made me furious. I went to school and told all my friends, our parents even caught us "fundraising" on the school yard one day with the intent to buy a plane ticket to go and pick my uncle up from prison.

And with age, this anger just grew. I finally got to meet my cousins when I was 7 and then we got much closer when they moved to Europe, and I just could never understand that their father had been imprisoned without doing anything wrong and that no one was doing anything to free him.

But with age, my understanding of the circumstances regarding his disappearance also grew. My uncle's name is Seyoum Tsehaye, and I learnt that he was no ordinary man.

He was a photographer and journalist, who was widely known and loved in Eritrea and whose work was internationally recognised and celebrated. He was born in 1952 - the same year that the United Nations established a federation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Prior to this, Eritrea had been an Italian colony and when Italy lost their colonies following the second world war, it became a British protectorate. Ethiopia was strongly lobbying world powers to create a federation between the two neighbouring countries, mostly because Ethiopia is a landlocked country and Eritrea would give them access to the coast. The UK and US wanted to thank Ethiopia for its support during the second world war, and made the federation happen. Eritrea was promised autonomy within this federation but this was not respected. Haile Selassie, the emperor of Ethiopia, quickly started restricting the rights of Eritreans and outlawed the free press and political parties in the country. 10 years later, in 1962, Ethiopia violated the terms of the federation by officially annexing Eritrea and claiming it as its province. As a response, Eritreans took up arms and began what would end up being Africa's longest independence war.

In 1991, after 30 years of fighting, Eritrea finally gained independence. The guerilla group that led the country to independence, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (the EPLF) became the ruling political party, the People's Front For Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), and Isaias Afewerki, the guerilla leader, became the country's first president. The war of independence had been fought on the premises of democracy, justice and equality, but when independence finally came, there were no elections - Eritreans were promised that the lack of democracy only was temporary. The new government needed time to establish democracy, and so the people gave them time.

This temporary period was supposed to end in 2001. It had been ten years since independence was won, the brutal border war with Ethiopia had finally ended, and the first elections were scheduled to take place later that year. But tensions were in the air. There was a clear understanding amongst the people that the events of 2001 would set the blueprint for the newly established nation. This led all interested parties to fight hard for their vision of Eritrea to become a reality.

My uncle was a vocal, fearless, and principled man. Even during the war of independence he had troubles with the leadership. He was even imprisoned for a whole year while he was working as a teacher at the guerilla camps because he shared his views on democracy.

During the war he was a prominent and brilliant photographer and documentary maker and his work was known and praised all around the world. After independence, he became the first director of the national television station, Eri TV. But because he continued to speak out against the leadership, he was soon demoted from this powerful position to one more

harmless at the Ministry of Tourism. Eventually, Seyoum quit and became a freelance journalist focused on the wellbeing of the Eritrean people.

And as the government policies became increasingly authoritarian, Seyoum's reporting intensified. He became active in a movement of journalists and politicians demanding action from the highest leadership in the government. And they used only their pens and their voices as their weapons.

When the students protesting new policies that violated their human rights in April 2001 were shut down by police, detained, and even killed in detention, Seyoum wrote: "The leaders of the future are being killed by the leaders of today." He urged the government to have an open dialogue with the people to ensure the best result for the country.

At the same time, a group of 15 politicians and high ranking military personnel published an open letter to president Isaias Afewerki, criticising the fact that no election preparations were being made. They called his regime illegal and unconstitutional. They were warned not to continue. But they did. And they did it loudly. These government officials started speaking to local and international media, and the issue grew bigger.

On the 18th September 2001, with the whole world's attention riveted on New York and the terrorist attacks that had happened a week earlier, the Eritrean government quietly shut down all independent media. In the days that followed, Ten journalists, including my uncle and 11 politicians who had been involved in the public outcry for democracy, were taken from their homes and put in prison.

Until this day, no one has been charged, prosecuted, or been given an official reason for their imprisonment. Until this day, the only information we have about their conditions and whereabouts come from prison guards that have fled who have said that the prisoners are held in a maximum security prison in the middle of the desert where it is burning hot during the day and freezing cold during the night, with their hands and legs tied 24 hours a day. Until this day, no one has been allowed to visit these prisoners and not one of them has been released.

Since then, Eritrea has been governed without a constitution, parliament and any elections and since then, it has turned into one of the most censored countries in the entire world. It is the only country in Africa without any independent media, any, at all. There is barely any access to the internet, only 2% of all households have access and even then, it is heavily surveilled by the government. There is no civic society space whatsoever, even the only university in the country was shut down and there is not a single person in the country that criticizes the government in public. Any sign of opposition is met with intimidation, imprisonment, or death. And this intimidation reaches all the way to the diaspora.

When my uncle was warned about the risks of his work he replied: "If we don't give them a voice, no one will." And he was right. Imprisoning my uncle and his colleagues was a part of a wider plan by the Eritrean president to gain ultimate control over the Eritrean people. A shutdown of independent media is a shutdown of democracy as a whole. That is why that week in September 2001 is now known as the week Eritrea officially became a dictatorship.

By silencing the people who already were speaking up against their crimes, shutting down institutions that would encourage dialogue and debate, and creating an environment where the price to speak up is your life, the Eritrean government has become free to do whatever it wants, without anyone challenging them.

And 20 years later, the results are absolutely devastating.

All capable Eritreans, male and female, have to serve in the country's mandatory military training and national service program where they work in different sectors for very little pay and under terrible circumstances that the UN has likened to slavery. The UN also found that the the discrimination and violence against women in military training is to such a degree it also constitutes "sexual slavery and torture".

There is no freedom of religion, freedom of association, freedom of expression, freedom of press or freedom of movement - you are actually not allowed to leave the country or travel without getting permission from the government, which is almost impossible to obtain because the government wants you to stay in the country. And many who try to exercise any of these freedoms, or are suspected of doing so, will be detained alongside people who defect from national service.

Eritrea is often described as a big prison - not just because of the censorship there, but because so many are actually detained. There are countless prisons and prisoners in Eritrea, but because of the censorship we don't know just how many. This is how an Amnesty International report describes the prison conditions:

"Cells and other confinement spaces are generally severely overcrowded, damp and unhygienic. Food, water and sanitation are inadequate. Numerous detention centres use underground cells or metal shipping containers as cells. Many of these detention centres are in desert locations, meaning that cells underground or constructed of metal experience extreme heat during the day and extreme cold during the nights. Torture and other ill-treatment are reported to be widely used as punishment, interrogation, and as coercion.

Underground cells and shipping containers are usually unventilated, the prisoners are denied access to daylight. The cells have no sanitation facilities and prisoners are only allowed out for very short periods for toilet purposes, once or twice a day, according to numerous testimonies from former detainees. Food given to detainees is minimal and of very poor quality. Amnesty International has received multiple reports of deaths in detention as a result of torture and other ill-treatment, harsh conditions in detention including extreme heat in underground cells and shipping containers, or as a result of lack of medical care for treatable diseases, including malaria. Other prisoners have reportedly died as a result of illnesses caused by inadequate food and sanitation.

There is no transparency, and no process of officially informing families of the death of a relative in detention. However, occasionally information is leaked through friendly guards, by bribery, due to hospital admissions or from released prisoners. The government of Eritrea continually refuses to confirm or deny these reports, or to provide information on the whereabouts or health of prisoners."

A United Nations commission has held that the human rights violations that the Eritrean government is committing against its population amounts to crimes against humanity.

Eritreans, especially the youth, are forced to choose between a life in Eritrea with no control over their present or future or a life on flight where they encounter unimaginable horrors traumatising and even killing them. Over 5,000 people flee every month - choosing to rather risk dying on flight than stay as slaves.

The leaders of today are killing the leaders of the future - just like my uncle warned all the way back in 2001.

The fact that people in Eritrea couldn't speak up did not only allow the government to operate without anyone challenging them, but also stopped the world from fully knowing what was happening in Eritrea. Because of the shutdown of the free press and the extreme censorship, there were no investigative pieces, no shocking pictures or videos exposing the crimes, no first hand testimonies from the ground.

Instead, the responsibility fell on the diaspora to document crimes and raise awareness, which is possible from the outside, but the lack of access to the country - the people and the ground where the crimes were happening, has made it much more difficult to do so adequately. We know for eg that there are some really serious human rights violations happening as we speak, - but without access there to confirm it or people willing to speak to us over the phone, it is hard for us to document the crimes, get it published or amplified by publications and institutions with the power to challenge the Eritrean government. And the lack of up to date information, detail and graphics has also made it even more difficult to engage non-Eritrean audiences. But the lack of access is not our only problem - as stated our entire movement - journalists, civil society, opposition figures and parties - are based in the diaspora, and building sustainable and functioning structures in the diaspora is quite difficult for several reasons.

Firstly, the government's repression reaches far beyond Eritrea's borders, even more in the countries where the Eritrean government has a friendly relationship with the local government. If you criticize the government in the diaspora, you risk losing your land rights, inheritance - and risk detention if you return. Your family members are also at risk. In Africa, where Eritreans usually only have an Eritrean citizenship and the governments have a good relationship, they usually just keep their mouths shut to avoid any problems. Eritreans who have criticized the government worldwide experience threats, harassment, intimidation and even violence. The fear that this environment has created has, as planned, silenced many Eritreans.

In addition to this, the few Eritreans who are actively involved mostly do it in their spare time, and sometimes without the professional training for what they do - whether it is journalism, campaigning and advocacy. Of course, you don't have to be a professional or do work full time to contribute to the movement - but a movement is so much stronger if it also has people working on it full-time and who have the skills to do the things they do. There is not much funding for the kind of diaspora work that we do, and even though we have many professionals in our community, they can only do so much when they work in the evenings and weekends. I'm so proud of what our movement has accomplished despite these

challenges, but it pains my heart that it has come at such a big cost, especially for the women. Our movement is dominated by men, and so when they are forced to work on this outside of their work hours, their wives and girlfriends get even less support at home. Some of our greatest activists and journalists are women, but I have seen first hand how little support they receive and how negatively their around the clock work has impacted their family lives and mental health. And in addition to supporting their immediate families, almost all Eritreans also have to work even more to also support their family members both in Eritrea and those who are fleeing.

We have a situation where people inside the country cannot speak up and people outside are extremely limited - so what in the world could the solution be?

When I started high school, I decided that it was time for me to try to find out. For a long time I had complained about the silence around my uncle and Eritrea and then I realised that I was a part of the problem. I was 16 years old. Old enough to take on the responsibility and for three years, I had been a part of a very active Amnesty International group, which meant that I had some campaigning skills. I also lived in a country where the tools to protest and speak up were at my disposal. I had no excuse to remain silent.

The problem was that there wasn't enough pressure on Eritrea - from the inside or from individuals, institutions and states on the outside. There was a movement on the outside, but for the reason I mentioned, it wasn't strong enough. And that's when I decided to focus on the two groups who were not being targeted at all, but if mobilised properly, could be incredibly useful in our fight.

The first group was diaspora born Eritreans like myself and the second group was non-Eritreans, like you. There are so many Eritreans like myself, born and raised in the diaspora, with passion, skills and connections who could do wonders for our movement if put to use correctly. The reason they hadn't been mobilised before was because our movement focused on the older generation, our parents, and most of the work and meetings were conducted in our local languages and in ways and on platforms that our generation did not resonate with. At the same time, I thought there must be countless non-Eritreans who, if informed and mobilised, also could do wonders for our movement and increase pressure on the Eritrean government to change and on their own governments to step up their engagement on this critical situation.

I decided to start a human rights organisation and I named it One Day Seyoum, after my uncle, to continue his mission to inform the public about the situation in Eritrea and mobilise people to demand change. Our goal was to make it as easy as possible for people to get involved - so we focused both on creating informative resources, such as videos, articles, magazines, events, social media content and on creating a platform where we collectively campaigned on issues and members and our online followers easily could take action to get involved, both to campaign and to directly support Eritreans who have fled the crisis. When I started One Day Seyoum, I also took my first step to becoming a journalist, a filmmaker, an organiser and a campaigner. I have since done quite a lot of work in all those areas, both at One Day Seyoum and elsewhere. I have written many pieces and also worked as a producer for Al Jazeera, I went to law school and now work as the Horn of Africa campaigner at Amnesty International. I never saw the contradiction in using communications, journalism

and the law to campaign - because we had to use as many campaigning and mobilisation tools as we could think of. And I loved doing all of them.

Even though we have a long, long way to go, our movement has grown massively in the past 8 years. We have successfully targeted and involved countless diaspora born eritreans and changed the nature of the movement completely. But when it comes to non-Eritreans, we haven't made as much progress.

There is still very little pressure from non-Eritreans, and foreign states on Eritrea - and the pressure that does exist mostly comes from the West.

After I called out Rafael, we spoke for a long time. Just a few weeks later, he published a letter to Seyoum in the Mail & Guardian where he wrote:

"Recently, at an Amnesty International meeting, I spoke of the poor solidarity among Africans fighting for rights. Your niece, Vanessa, was in the audience. She challenged me to express my solidarity and join in the campaign for your freedom. Of course! I was ashamed that she had to ask. Here in Africa, most of the time we are so bogged down by our own troubles that we hardly have the time to notice how much weaker we are for not standing together.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues - I really do not intend to make anyone feel shame or guilt. The disappointment I felt when I listened to Rafael speak was not really directed to him personally, he was not responsible for my uncle's detention, the human rights crisis or Africa's silence on these issues. But when I sat in that audience, none of that mattered. I had only been involved in the movement for a few years then - but I was already tired, tired of the difficult work, tired of knowing how bad the situation was and despite that, receive so little support from the outside world. But as Rafael rightfully said, in Africa, most journalists and activists are too overwhelmed with their own issues to have time to both learn about our neighbouring countries and figure out how you can support. I started One Day Seyoum to make it as easy as possible for people to learn about the situation and how to get involved, and that is what I intend to continue doing in Africa as well.

And I think the first step to doing that is engaging African journalists. I don't have to tell you twice how important journalism is and what a powerful tool it is. There is a reason why the authoritarian crackdown that started on September 18th 2001 started with the government shutting down the free press first thing in the morning. Once that was gone, they could go ahead with the arrests and everything else that followed.

And so today, plea to all African journalists listening, use your voices, pens and platforms to fight for your Eritrean colleagues and until they are free, continue their work to expose the truth to the public. When Rafael gave the 2014 Carlos Cardoso Memorial Lecture, he mentioned that when he was jailed in Angola for calling the president, José Eduardo Dos Santos, a dictator and corrupt, Carlos Cardoso was instrumental in mobilising lawyers, journalists and concerned Mozambicans to lend their support to him. Today, Rafael and I are great friends, and the same way Carlos supported him when he was detained, he has been mobilising people to support his colleagues in Eritrea too. I hope that Carlos Cardoso's memory not only can inspire us to be more brave to challenge people in power at home, but

to also do what we can to support our sisters and brothers when they are in need. By exposing the truth and raising awareness, you can help get more people in Africa involved which will increase pressure on the Eritrean government. I believe that if Africa truly steps up, we have a real shot at challenging the Eritrean government for their human rights atrocities. As a first step, I recommend that you get a copy of One Day Seyoum's 2001 magazine - ur inaugural issue features pieces from leading Eritrean writers, artists, and activists, as well as allies to our cause, who have all created work around the theme:"The Past, Present, and Future of Eritrea." and is a great resource for anyone who wants to get involved.

But in addition to the change your support and solidarity could create, I also want you to think about your Eritrean colleagues as individuals, and not just professionals, and the impact your solidarity and support could have on a personal level. When I was in high school, two Swedish journalists were imprisoned in Ethiopia and the entire country was engaged in the fight to free them. When they were released they said that what kept them alive, more than any visits or food and books they were given, was hearing about all the support and knowing that they were not forgotten.

Think about the Eritrean colleagues as if it was your friend or even yourself. Think about their loved ones as if they were your loved ones. What kind of support would you have wanted if you had been detained, without charge, without trial, and without any access to the outside world for 20 years? What kind of solidarity do you think your loved ones would have needed to even start to mitigate the overwhelming feeling of loss, longing, sadness and fear they would be experiencing?

I am immensely proud to be the niece of such a brave and principled man like Seyoum Tsehaye. I am constantly approached by people who knew him or knew about him from his work and they all speak about him with such admiration and love. It always reminds me of why the Eritrean government saw him as such a threat. Reporter Without Borders writes, citing one source, that Seyoum was transferred to Eiraeiro - a maximum security prison in the middle of the desert - in about 2003. They describe an incident where he was seen being beaten by guards a year or two after arriving in the camp. Very agitated, with his head shaved and a long beard, he rebelled several times against the guards in charge of him, refusing the prison food and repeating : "I did my duty," "it is my responsibility" and "I don't care if I die here."

It is clear for anyone who knew Seyoum before he was imprisoned that he believes in his mission more than anything and that he has no intention to ever give up his fight. Neither do I and all the people he has inspired. I urge you all to join us in whatever way that you can.