
EVALUATING THE EFFICACY OF STATE-LED POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION AMONG ERITREAN YOUTH: A CASE STUDY OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT:

The process of political socialization is a critical mechanism for the stability and continuity of any political system, serving as the means by which political culture is internalized and transmitted across generations. In the context of Eritrea, this study investigates the effectiveness of state-led socialization efforts targeting college students through the primary agents of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS). Utilizing a mixed-method research design involving surveys and interviews, the study explores how the state seeks to inculcate revolutionary values such as self-reliance, social justice, and patriotism. However, the findings reveal a significant disconnect between state objectives and youth perceptions, characterized by high levels of political apathy, a preference for external media, and discontent regarding prevailing socio-economic conditions. The study concludes that the "top-down" nature of the socialization process and the pressures of globalization present formidable challenges to the state's efforts to mobilize the younger generation for nation-building.

Keywords: Political Socialization, Political Culture, Eritrea, PFDJ, NUEYS, College Students, Nation-Building, Globalization.

INTRODUCTION:

Socialization represents the fundamental process by which individuals become well-acquainted with a political system, facilitating the inculcation of values that allow them to function as conscious members of a political society. Academically, it is defined as the "process of induction into a political system" through which citizens learn, imbibe, and internalize the core beliefs, norms, and ideology of their nation. This developmental process is vital because it ensures the transmission of political culture from one generation to the next, acting as the primary vehicle for political continuity. When effective, political socialization shapes a population's knowledge and evaluative judgments regarding the legitimacy of the power system.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN SOCIALIZATION AND POLITICAL CULTURE:

The modern conceptualization of political culture, popularized by Almond and Verba, encompasses the collective orientation of a people toward the essential elements of their political system. On an individual level, it involves subjective orientations that generate supportive norms and attitudes toward political authority. Political socialization performs the critical functions of maintaining this culture and transmitting it to new cohorts, ensuring that the population experiences politics through the intended dimensions of the state. In Eritrea, this culture is deeply influenced by the thirty-year armed struggle, which established values such as commitment, comradeship, and martyrdom as central tenets of the national identity.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Despite state efforts, Eritrean college students are exhibiting a steady decline in political commitment and participation. Current evaluations indicate that students are losing trust in the government, resulting in unsatisfactory political engagement and a rise in political apathy. Within the higher education sector, there is a noted decrease in the enthusiasm for institutional activities, and many students harbor negative attitudes toward the state-led socialization process. This lack of partisan affiliation—due to the PFDJ being the sole political entity—limits alternative avenues for political expression and has led to a perceived crisis of legitimacy among the educated youth.

OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

The primary objective of this research is to assess the current political socialization process of college students in Eritrea and identify the main challenges hindering its success. The significance of this study lies in its potential to help the Eritrean government and its socialization agents identify better mechanisms for improvement while providing a foundational research base for future scholars interested in the intersection of youth and politics in Eritrea.

DEFINITIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Political socialization research analyzes the formation of individual political behavior by asking what is learned about political life, from whom, and at what stage. This process incorporates a vast array of socializing agents, including the family, religious institutions, educational systems, and the mass media. The ultimate product of effective political socialization is a nation's political culture, which refers to the distinguishing beliefs, values, and behavioral patterns that characterize a political community. It is composed of cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientations toward the political system and its various issues and objects.

POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

While research on political socialization frequently focuses on primary and secondary education, higher education remains a critical yet understudied formative stage of political learning. Recent findings suggest that the university serves as a fundamental site for socialization, where increased educational attainment often correlates with higher levels of political participation. In Eritrea, college students represent a key demographic (ages 18–24), yet their political participation has been steadily declining despite high enrollment rates. This trend necessitates a closer look at how college curricula and institutional environments can be modified to increase student commitment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INSTITUTIONALISM

Institutional theory emphasizes the causal role of political institutions in shaping political processes and outcomes. These theorists assert that the institutional environment strongly influences the development of formal structures and individual identities. Institutions serve as "higher-order" factors that constrain or constitute the interests and participation of actors. In the Eritrean context, state agents like the PFDJ and NUEYS serve as the primary socialization agents in colleges, attempting to shape student attitudes through ideological agendas.

SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY:

Social cognitive theory postulates that political socialization is a psychological learning process where individuals operate cognitively on their environment. The theory suggests that environment, behavior, and cognition all interact to influence political behavior. For instance, a child's increased political interest might result in a higher frequency of political talk, where cognition influences the environment. In Eritrea, the psychology of the youth is shaped by internal factors, such as state institutions and socio-economic climates, as well as external factors like globalization and "psychological warfare".

THE ROLE OF SOCIALIZATION AGENTS (PFDJ AND NUEYS):

Political socialization is not an abstract occurrence; rather, it is facilitated through institutionalized venues that provide the necessary templates for individuals to establish a political identity. In the unique political landscape of Eritrea, where a competitive party system is absent, the state functions as the primary variable in this process through its various arms, most notably the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS). These organizations utilize specific mechanisms—imitation, instruction, and motivation—to transmit political values cultivated since the armed struggle period to the youth, whom the state views as the vital intermediary between generations. By focusing on college students who are on the verge of entering the professional workforce, the state aims to ensure that future leaders are fully acculturated with the nation's political orientations. The PFDJ, as the leading political entity, attempts to build a specific political culture rooted in the collective memory of the long struggle for independence. The core values it seeks to instill include commitment, solidarity, martyrdom, self-reliance, and social justice. These values are promoted through branch offices located in every college, which carry out objectives such as fostering national identity, reducing sub-national sentiments, and training a loyal cadre of youth. Key activities involve lectures by invited scholars, seminars led by government officials, and audio-visual programs that showcase educational films and documentaries. Furthermore, the Nakfa School of Social Sciences provides a specialized cadre program during the summer, offering a platform for youth to debate contemporary issues while aligning them with the government's official doctrine.

Working alongside the PFDJ, the NUEYS focuses specifically on organizing youth into vigorous, strong-minded individuals equipped with political awareness and organizational skills. Its activities are strategically divided into "narrow" and "wider" organizational structures. Narrow organizational efforts target small, committed groups, such as those in music or art clubs, who receive preliminary leadership training and cadre education. Wider organizational activities aim to engage the broader student mass through co-curricular competitions in debating and general knowledge, as well as the Inter-College Youth Festival. This festival is particularly significant as it seeks to create a sense of national harmony and unity among diverse participants. Despite the heavy investment from the government, these efforts are often criticized for their top-down nature, which some argue limits the ability of students to express themselves freely and participate voluntarily in the socialization process.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS, OUTCOMES, AND CHALLENGES OF THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS:

The political socialization of higher education students is a uniquely critical yet frequently understudied demographic in political science research. While the Eritrean government has long focused on junior and secondary levels, the institutionalization of socialization within colleges only became a central objective following the establishment of the Eritrean Institute of Technology in 2005. This chapter provides a critical analysis of the outcomes and the formidable internal and external challenges that have defined this process.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES AND INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES:

The effectiveness of state-led socialization is primarily hindered by the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions within the country. According to survey data, 56% of respondents believe these conditions directly prevent their active participation. This discontent has fostered a deep sense of mistrust between the youth and state institutions, leading to high levels of political apathy. Furthermore, a pervasive fear and misunderstanding of politics exist among students; many avoid involvement in PFDJ and NUEYS activities to escape being perceived as "spies" by their peers.

The study further identifies structural failures at the institutional level. The current process is criticized for its "top-down" directed nature, which functions more as a government propaganda machine than a space for free civic engagement. Many of the tools used are considered outdated, as the revolutionary culture of the armed struggle era is often incompatible with the needs of a modern, peacetime generation. Additionally, the lack of civic education in the college curriculum and the absence of diverse, non-state actors in the process result in a one-directional socialization effort that fails to inspire the educated youth.

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES: GLOBALIZATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE:

Beyond internal barriers, external forces significantly influence the mindset of Eritrean college students. **Globalization** acts as a powerful agent of cultural change, transmitting Western values such as individualism and liberalism through the internet and entertainment media. These global influences often weaken the effectiveness of state efforts by offering alternative lifestyles and viewpoints that attract the youth more easily than traditional state narratives.

Complementing this is the threat of **psychological warfare**, defined as planned operations intended to influence the emotions and objective reasoning of a target audience. The study suggests that external actors utilize media and diplomatic channels to create division, convincing youth that national policies like self-reliance are destructive and that their leadership is tyrannical. This invisible warfare aims to divert the minds of students, leading to mental paralysis or the desire to flee the country, thereby halting the socialization process entirely.

EVALUATION OF OUTCOMES AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION:

The outcomes of these socialization efforts are measured through annual evaluations that assess cadre commitment and general readiness. However, empirical findings from this study suggest these efforts are largely failing. A staggering 82% of surveyed students believe the PFDJ and NUEYS are ineffective in their influence. This ineffectiveness is further evidenced by student media preferences: 54% of respondents prefer external channels like Al Jazeera, BBC, or CNN over local state-owned media. The local media's lack of freedom of expression and absence of inspiring programs have pushed the youth toward external sources of information, further diluting the impact of state-led political education.

CONCLUSION:

Eritrea achieved its national identity through a continuous struggle for liberation, resulting in a political culture rooted in values of freedom and independence. The armed struggle successfully socialized the mass population, but

maintaining this awareness in a new generation requires persistent institutional effort. This study finds that while college students are central to this process as future leaders, the current socialization process faces significant internal and external obstacles. High levels of discontent regarding socio-economic conditions, coupled with the pressures of globalization and psychological warfare, have led to significant youth apathy. The reliance on a monolithic party structure has struggled to create a shared sense of destiny among modern youth, as nationalism has shifted from a mobilizing strategy to a static institutional instrument.

To enhance the effectiveness of the political socialization process and reverse the trend of youth disaffection, the state must implement strategic reforms that move beyond monolithic, top-down indoctrination. Primarily, the Eritrean government needs to improve the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions within the country, as addressing the fundamental discontents of the youth is a prerequisite for rebuilding trust and encouraging active participation in national agendas. Academically, the educational system should be modified to include dedicated civic education and governance courses in the college curriculum, alongside updated history lessons, to foster a political culture that is genuinely supportive of the state through enlightened consciousness rather than coerced propaganda. Furthermore, investment in socialization agents like the PFDJ and NUEYS must be increased to modernize their tools and methodologies, ensuring they remain compatible with the rapid pace of globalization and can compete with external media for youth attention.

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