

EDITORIAL: MORE VICIOUS THAN AN «ORDINARY» ONE-PARTY STATE

What kind of regime is unfolding in Ethiopia? How dangerous is it for the country's peace? Most people in the international community, once ready to give the benefit of the doubt to EPRDF now seem extremely perplexed and opinions are more varied than they were before the end of the «transition». Some governments in the west - especially the US and UK - have applauded the «success» of the democratization process. But even these governments claim that it is «only one step forward» in Ethiopia's march to democracy and express hope that the process will be completed given adequate time and support. There are of course others who see no need for even such minimal reservations.

Once example of such supporters of Ethiopia's «already completed democratization process» is the notorious anti-Soviet Cold Warrior, the «journalist» Colin Legume who befriended TPLF in the '80s when the Front was waging war not only against Mengistu but also against «Soviet social imperialism». Colin Legume who now seems to conduct his own Cold War II is so admiring of the

successful transition process that he seems to blame almost the entire human race for not having understood and applauded as vociferously as he did the momentous events that had taken place in Ethiopia. After complaining that «Once again, a major positive development in Africa has passed virtually unreported in the European and American media», he claims «Ethiopia has qualified to take its place among the world's parliamentary democracies following the recent multi-party elections».

A close scrutiny of international reactions to the recent elections suggests, however, that such vocal and ardent support is marginal. The dominating trend now seems for Westerners to admit that the «transition» has failed and that what is being established in Ethiopia where 540 of the 548 seats in the Federal Parliament, the «Supreme organ of State power», are secured by EPRDF supporters, is a «one party regime».

This, of course, is a commendable development. But unfortunately it is far from enough. First because it is an extremely superficial understanding of Ethiopia's complex realities which can lead even well-meaning western governments and NGOs to arrive at the dangerously wrong conclusions concerning the tasks of the country's democratic opposition forces. Second, because the kind of regime we have in Ethiopia is far more dangerous and vicious than an «ordinary» one-party government.

Western admission that what we now have in Ethiopia is an «authoritarian one-party rule» is usually coupled with its lot of paternalistic pronouncements concerning the democratization process in Africa in general and in Ethiopia in particular. If we leave aside those western diplomats who openly point to the need for «authoritarian rule» for Ethiopia if this country is to hold together in the first place, what most others say is this: «The democratization process leaves much to be desired. It has started with the demise of the Derg regime. The country is more open and free than it has ever been before. There is relative peace. The democratic process should be pursued and completed. The government and the

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opposition must try to learn from past experience and mistakes and do everything to foster and encourage the country's democratization. You can't build democracy overnight. You must proceed slowly and step by step by building on whatever has already been achieved».

Build democracy slowly and step by step? Such arguments have long been refuted and dismissed as irrelevant to our country's reality. The «Working document» prepared by 7 major organizations for the Peace and Reconciliation conference held in Addis Abeba in December 1993 noted for example: «Cognizant of the fact that the Ethiopian peoples have hitherto been subjected to centuries of oppression, we do not expect the realization of democracy overnight. Such an expectation would be naive and unrealistic. On the other hand, however, we do not subscribe to evasive and delaying utterances to the effect that democracy should be built slowly and step by step. First because the current situation under the incumbent regime is not conducive even to step by step realization of democracy ... and that the little that has been accomplished is in danger of being undone. Thus it is not difficult to foresee a predicament emerging where oppression and struggle are jointly fated to exacerbate and spiral.»

Build lasting peace using the relative peace that now prevails in Ethiopia? This argument has also been refuted in the same document which outlined the conditions for building peace in Ethiopia and pointed to the fact that such conditions did not exist.

«Peace is not simply the absence of war. If peace obtained through the absence of war or diminishing armed conflicts is to be transformed into lasting peace, a society must rid itself of problems that lead to war in the first place. If these problems persist, then conflict resolution mechanisms should be worked out and accepted by society as a whole. We even go further and say that setting up such mechanisms - although an important step forward - cannot by itself guarantee lasting peace. In order for such mechanisms to continue to function, the country's political forces and civil society must tirelessly try to consolidate them by working towards enhancement of a democratic culture.

Those who claim that peace prevails in today's Ethiopia should consider what we have noted above and realize how dangerously far we are from a genuine peace process. Armed conflicts have not yet

stopped. There are still unresolved problems that can lead to further conflicts. There are no democratic mechanisms accepted by society to enable us to solve these problems peacefully Because of lack of peace and democracy, civil society's contribution to the peace building process is limited ...».

It should be clear from this that the step by step approach, which takes it for granted that the country's democratization process would continue unabated and that after another five year period of «building on what already exists» genuine multi-party elections would be held in the year 2000, will not work. It will not work because there is not much to build upon. The transition period is over but armed conflicts escalate. We have a constitution but this is no different from what we had under Emperor Haile Selassie and Mengistu. The development of civil society so crucial to the peace building process will not be an easy task. In short what we shall witness in the coming months and years will not be the «deepening» of the democratic process but that of the country's crisis. Conflicts will escalate because on the one hand «The political survival of this regime is hinged upon its obstruction of democracy which it considers as a threat to its very existence» (Working document p. 9) and on the other hand «The peoples of Ethiopia will have to intensify their struggle as it is out of the question for them to surrender to tyranny» (CAFPDE: For a new democratic beginning - April 1995).

In its struggle for survival the regime will surely be obliged to lay bare its true nature. Unless they resort to their usual attitude of looking the other way, even EPRDF's western friends will not fail to see that Ethiopians are not dealing with an «ordinary» one-party authoritarian government. They will discover that it is more vicious because it will develop into a totalitarian regime trying to control all major aspects of life in society. They will see it is more dangerous to peace and the brotherhood of the peoples of Ethiopia because it will try to «consolidate» its totalitarian hold on the country by stirring up ethnic hatred by ostensibly and provocatively favouring the Tigreans in a bid to isolate them from the rest of the people. The ingredients of such a dangerous scenario are unfortunately already there.

There is an attempt to impose a totalitarian hold on the country. This is not only political control which TPLF arrogated to itself by virtue of the Stalinian constitution it imposed on the Ethiopian peoples. Other aspects of TPLF's grip on Ethiopia have

hitherto escaped international scrutiny.

In the economic domain, the Front did not stop at decreeing state ownership of land in is predominantly agrarian society. After having reluctantly accepted the principle of a «market economy» the Front is now trying to consolidate its hold on this sector through its own «private companies». Now TPLF's (and EPLF's) business corporations are penetrating almost all spheres of activity covering import-export, wholesale and retail trade of domestic products, travel and tourism, construction, transport, insurance, etc.

While the private press is being progressively strangled and no private radio or TV network is allowed in the country, TPLF not only monopolizes the state owned mass media but it has also its own «free press» and radio stations which reach not only Ethiopians at home but also compatriots residing as far away as Washington D.C. and Los Angeles.

In the same manner, trade unions and other professional associations are deliberately stifled and forced to give way to «independent» trade unions created by EPRDF itself. As is usual for every regime in Ethiopia, the Orthodox church has been brought under EPRDF's control and attempts are underway to dismiss the leadership of the «Supreme Council of Islamic affairs» which is to be replaced by a «coordinating committee» composed of notorious EPRDF cadres. Governmental «non-governmental organizations» dealing with civic education, human rights, democratization, etc. are being created and recommended to the donor community as «independent» groups through complaisant western NGOs. The Relief Society of Tigray (REST) is fast becoming the country's dominant relief organization.

As if all this is not dangerous enough, the country's «leaders» are playing with fire by using the extremely sensitive issue of ethnicity as an instrument of power. This, we believe, is the most outrageous and irresponsible facet of TPLF's policies. The issue is as clear to Ethiopians as it is confused and blurred to Westerners who are carried away by EPRDF's rhetoric on «liberation of oppressed nations and nationalities» and the «secession clause» in the new constitution. The fact of the matter is that TPLF's (and EPLF's) leaders are narrow and vindictive Tigray-Tigrigny ethno-nationalists who are trying to consolidate their hold on Ethiopia by playing the Tigrean people, both in Eritrea and Ethiopia, against

the rest of the country.

In fact there is a deliberate Machiavellian policy which tries to induce both Tigreans and non-Tigreans into believing that TPLF's rule is an ethnic based dictatorship by the Tigreans and for the Tigreans. The aim which TPLF leaders are pursuing is clear: They take advantage of the anti-Tigrean hatred to persuade the people of Tigray that they are not only its benefactors but also its sole protectors against all the other ethnic groups in the country. This is calculated to force Tigreans to bind their fate with that of TPLF's leaders. The problem is that given the prevailing atmosphere, TPLF's strategy is working and passion is fast taking the upper hand in the country's politics. It is becoming increasingly difficult for Tigrean democrats who in any case have no access to their native «one-party province» to persuade their people to dissociate themselves from TPLF's dangerous policies. Democrats from other ethnic groups are also finding it difficult to «preach brotherhood» among all the country's ethnic groups in a situation where «anti-Tigrean passion» is steadily on the rise.

This is what makes the ethnic problem the most sensitive issue in Ethiopian politics. Ethnic hatred is fast turning the country into a time bomb. The problem for those in the struggles for lasting peace and democracy and brotherhood of the peoples of Ethiopia is not one of «completing» the unfinished democratization process and reaching the year 2000 poised to win the next elections. We know we are dealing with no «ordinary» dictatorship but with one that thrives on hatred. We also know that if TPLF uses ethnic hatred to secure and maintain power, other forces are manipulating the same dangerous method of struggle to snatch power from the TPLF. Given this explosive contest, there is no use talking about the next elections. The most urgent task for all the country's democrats now is to address this issue before passions get loose and turn the country into another Rwanda.

If there is any country on earth where the so-called «preventive diplomacy» which to date has not «prevented» any conflict anywhere, is to be tried, we say it is Ethiopia. But if the international community is to play any constructive role in averting a tragedy in Ethiopia, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the kind of «one-party rule» that is now misruling the country.