

Why not give peace a chance ?

For more than a decade now, Ethiopia has lived under a permanent state of siege and war. Since the first general mobilization order under the catch word "Every thing to the war front" was launched during the Somali aggression of 1977 the country has experienced an endless series of decrees and resolutions calling upon the Ethiopian people to mobilize for what the regime calls "the final and decisive victory over the country's internal and external enemies".

The latest such 'resolution' was the one adopted by the country's rubber stamp parliament (SHENGO) which called for "Non stop recruitment" at the end of its fourth regular session which ended on 25 June. Retired army and police personnel as well as those who had been dismissed "for any reason" were urged to respond to the call. The SHENGO, even went as far as urging people who live in war affected areas to "engage in guerrilla warfare" against the guerrillas!

It is now almost a year since negotiations have started between the government on the one hand and EPLF and TPLF on the other. It is to be recalled that the beginning of negotiations had aroused much hope among the peoples of Ethiopia and the international community. But failure even to go beyond the "procedural phases" led to the collapse of the talks and as a result to intensification of the wars with all sides seemingly seeking "political solution" out of the barrel of a gun.

The intensification of military activities is all the more saddening that in spite of the tens of thousands of people that are dying every week all parties to the conflict know -or should know- that there could be no military solution to the problems at the root of the armed conflicts.

There can be no military solution first because none of the parties to the conflict can hope a decisive victory over the other. Even if most improbable victory is achieved by any of the warring parties, this would not mean elimination of the underlying causes that led to the conflicts in first place. The 'crushing victory' that Mengistu dreams of in Eritrea will not solve the fundamental problem at the root of the Eritrean war which is one of self-determination.

By EPLF's own reckoning military victory and a unilateral declaration of independence would not mean peace and tranquillity in Eritrea as long as democracy and peace do not prevail in Ethiopia.

Military victory by the Stalinist TPLF/EPDM alliance ? Although most improbable this would mean another and still more murderous round of turmoil, terror and chaos as the prospects it offers in terms of democracy is to say the least not better than the one under which the Ethiopian people have lived

and suffered for so long. One by Mengistu's regime would mean another lease on life to his agonizing dictatorship.

Bitter experience has shown to the peoples of Ethiopia that "General mobilization" orders and resolutions had never solved their fundamental problems but instead had drawn the country into devastating wars, famine, exile and ever deepening political, economic, social and moral crisis. That is why their call is for peace to be given a chance. But they are also increasingly aware that for peace to prevail in our country what is needed is instauration of democracy and search for peaceful and negotiated solutions to the disastrous wars the first victims of which are the people themselves.

It is the national and historic responsibility of all opposition groups and patriotic individuals to join forces and work together to further strengthen this awareness by launching a campaign of their own : One of general mobilization for peace and Democracy. This we believe is not only more in line with the aspiration of tens of millions of Ethiopians but also the only way out of the crippling wars that are threatening the very survival of their country.

Democracy for survival

The pending threat to Ethiopia's existence has brought about a heightened activity by Ethiopians both at home and abroad. Some demonstrate, others go on strike still other convene meetings. At the end of April over two thousand Ethiopians demonstrated in Washington DC under the motto "One country, one people". Among the placards they carried one stated that they stood for "One democratic Ethiopia". In the middle of May University students in Addis Abeba were on strike. The first, and in the circumstance heroic demand was that Mengistu Haile Mariam should abdicate his office.

To extricate the country from its pending disaster many Ethiopians repeatedly ask and struggle for the formation of a transitional government. This call is simple and clear cut. Yet that it is unacceptable to Mengistu's regime and the TPLF is increasingly becoming obvious. In the process of the former's attempt to prolong a one man dictatorship and the latter's effort to replace it with a very much similar one party system, both continue to sidestep to democratic alternative. Their responsibility for mutually leading the country into disaster is not only because of the thousands of Ethiopians that are killed each day. In the eyes of posterity the fact that neither presented a democratic alternative will also be a crime for which both would be held responsible.

Menguistu Haile Mariam, who on every public occasion reiterates "Our country is on the verge of destruction" merely adds "We have to die for it". He is unable to take a corresponding step of openness and courage by presenting a democratic solution to the country's problems. His March 5th speech led many to believe that the domino effect of what goes on in Europe has at last reached Ethiopia and a "New historical chapter" was underway. Even if the initial euphoria had within days been replaced by confusion, any lingering doubt was dispelled after the execution of 12 generals in May and arrest of students who demonstrated condemning this criminal act. It is now clear that the political priority of the regime is to prolong its rule even if it ultimately means the demise of Ethiopia.

The only way to bring back the country from the brink of disaster is to enact full democratic rights and, along with that, to institute a mechanism by means of which the problem of nationalities could be resolved by democratic and political means. Although this is seen by almost all Ethiopians as a prerequisite for peace Mengistu's regime is incapable of undertaking this step.

The alternative can not come from TPLF's "Revolutionary democracy" which would be a recipe for disaster. That is why Ethiopia's survival as a democratic entity more and more depends on the capacity of the country's patriotic and democratic forces to initiate bold political steps aimed at addressing simultaneously the question of peace and democracy.

That is why over the past year the idea of a democratic transitional government has been gaining ground among the country's opposition forces. It is encouraging to note that in spite of actual and historical difference more and more Ethiopian organizations and individuals are realizing the urgency of the formation of such a transitional government dedicated to set up a multiparty democracy in Ethiopia and capable of mobilizing the entire people not for war but for democratic and political solutions to all the problems facing the country. It is their historical responsibility to pursue on this path which is the only one that can be envisaged if Ethiopia is to survive the present crisis and is to emerge as a democratic entity.

(TPLF : contd. from page 2)

Ethiopia". Asked to elaborate on this one TPLF delegate's answer short if not to the point : "Workers can create 99 political parties".

The Stalinists were "democratic" enough to concede that the choice between their "revolutionary democracy" and Me'isone bourgeois liberal brand would best be left to the Ethiopian people themselves. Asked about what they would do if the people reject their travesty of democracy their answer was a vague : "The masses do at times decide against their own interest. We will nevertheless accept the popular verdict but will continue the struggle for the realization of our revolutionary ideals." This could mean anything from competition within the framework of "liberal democracy" to resorting back to arms to continue the struggle for what they call "revolutionary democracy". The problem with TPLF's brand of democracy is that in case of victory it will leave no room for second place winners as the triumph of "people's democratic dictatorship" will mean an end of the democratic process, which could have allowed opposition forces to compete and win future elections. All these simply mean that be it in victory or defeat TPLF's "revolutionary democracy" will continue to stand in the way of peace and democracy in Ethiopia.

It is whilst any advance towards unity of Ethiopia's opposition forces is thus blocked by the Stalinists that some foreigners are falling victim to the organization's campaign of disinformation. If there is any fundamental change towards democracy Ethiopia's democrats would be the first to rejoice. But casual remarks by TPLF leaders to visiting journalists should not lead to such conclusions and be confused with "official espousal of liberal democratic ideals" by an organization which still adheres to totalitarian views of a "distant age".

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