

FOR A DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE

On September 12, 1974, the uprising of the peoples of Ethiopia that was sparked six months earlier, scored one of the earliest and most important victories of the revolution. On that day, Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed following tremendous popular pressure. This victory, spectacular as it might have been, was neither the last nor the most significant. But it is celebrated every year as an important landmark that cleared the way for the most radical transformation of Ethiopian society that was to follow.

More than a decade after the February upsurge, however, Ethiopia holds a series of unenviable records which stand as many refutations to the present dictatorship's extravagant claims. Even as we are writing these lines, more than 7 million Ethiopians are at grips with one of the most deadly famines in the country's history. In one camp near the town of KOREUM in northern WOLLO about 40 people are said to be dying every day. Ethiopia under the military regime has been turned into a prison state and a war ravaged country. Millions of people including thousands of the country's intellectuals have been driven into exile forming a diaspora spreading from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf to Europe, Asia and North America. How many have been internally displaced as a result of the regime's wars is a matter of conjecture but the figure of 3 million does not appear excessive. Nowhere else, perhaps, repression, war and natural disasters have combined so effectively to spread hunger, misery and death as they do in present-day Ethiopia.

The tremendous problems facing our country and its people should not however lead to the conclusion that a decade of untold sacrifices was all in vain. It was not. In the process of the turmoil that characterized the country over the past ten years, Ethiopia has undergone far reaching social, economic and political transformations.

The feudal economic order and its political and ideological hold on our people have all be shattered. A short-lived democratic experience awakened millions who became involved in the political process in a way previously unknown in the country. But by the end of 1977 the forward march of the democratic revolution was arrested by an unholy alliance of internal traitors and foreign expansionists. If the price paid to obtain the victories of the revolutionary years was indeed very high, it is almost impossible to imagine the extent of the disaster that followed the post-1977 assault on Ethiopia's demomcratic and patriotic forces. The repression was all the more blind and ruthless as the traitors and their foreign masters had to face the determined resistance of the entire people who had no intention of letting slip away the democratic victories that had been dearly acquired.

This brought incalculable harm to the democratic revolution. A retrospective of post 1977 events clearly shows that the objective pursued by the regime was the wholesale liquidation of a generation of the country's democratic and patriotic forces who constituted the vanguard of the liberation struggle starting in the mid-sixties. The fury that accompanied the repression, which to some distant observers looked disproportionate to the actual dangers facing the regime, can only be explained by the desire to crate an "alternative gap" similar to the one attempted by the Italina fascists in February 1936 when thousands of young Ethiopians including more than 300 foreign educated intellectuals were massacred in Addis Ababa in three days.

All this did not, however, bring peace and tranquillity to the dictatorship. The regime's assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, Ethiopia is still a country in turmoil. The political awakening of the people acquired during a decade of struggle and great sacrifices is an irreversable phenomenon. And as long as the present dictatorship, or any other



regime for that matter, fails to resolve the problems of democracy, self-determination and national independence which were on the agenda of the February movement, it can never rest at peace.

That is why the struggle will continue. And today, more than ever before, the key to victory lies in the formation of the long overdue national democratic alternative to the military regime. A lucid assessment of the situation of the vanguard forces shows that at present there is no credible national democratic alternative to the regime. But it is also clear that the potential does exist. If this state of things, which resulted from wholesale massacre, continues to this day, it is neither for lack of a broad-based opposition nor to the absence of democratic opposition movements. It is rather the continued lack of unity among the democratic nationality and multi-nationality movements which accounts for the present "alternative gap."

The nationality movements which developed as a response to growing chauvinism, legitimate as they are, cannot be a substitute for this democratic alternative. A united front, if it is to be credible and effective should be constituted from all the country's democratic groups and organizations. In this respect, it is encouraging to note that the Tigray People's Liberation Front has recently come out with elaborate political and organizational proposals which can contribute towards the formation of a broad democratic alliance.

As the peoples of Ethiopia enter another decade of struggle in order to fully realise the democratic objectives of the February movement, ME'ISONE calls upon all progressive forces to get together and hammer out their differences as a step toward unity. This we believe is a priority task if we are to fulfill the responsibilities bestowed upon us by the tens of thousands of Ethiopians who sacrificed their lives in the struggle for liberation and by the millions who still suffer under the grips of the ruthless tyranny.

NEW ETHIOPIA