

Is TPLF thinking undergoing change ?

It is to be recalled that not later than October/November 1989 leaders of the TPLF/EPDM coalition have been seizing every opportunity to assert their faith in Staline, "A democrat and a true hero of the working class" according to a certain Haile Demessie in an interview to the BBC and their admiration of Albania which TPLF's president, Melese Znawi called "The nearest thing we have to socialism". The uproar which followed both from Ethiopians and foreigners has now led TPLF's leadership to launch a campaign of disinformation which has led some foreigners to believe that the organization is moving towards democratic principles and pluralism.

After a visit to rebel Tigray in May 1990, Niel Henry of the Washington Post came out with articles which portray the TPLF as an organization which is "no more strictly marxist" and as one which has "Publicly espoused liberal democratic ideals".

Although nobody has come across any official statement to suggest abandonment of TPLF's orthodox stalinist ideology, Niel Henry claims to have reached this conclusion after holding discussions with Sebehat Nega, one of the leaders of the organization. The statements made by Sebehat Nega and quoted in the article to support the assertion that "TPLF's leaders are undergoing changes in their political thinking" are too vague and uncommittal to suggest the slightest move towards acceptance of multiparty democracy.

Sebehat Nega asserts "We want democracy. We want more political parties in Ethiopia. We have never said otherwise... We have proposed to form a broadbased provisional government made up of all opposition movements to draw up a constitution if and when Colonel Mengistu's government falls".

This was enough for the some what complaisant Niel Henry to detect a "Public espousal of liberal democratic ideals by leaders of an insurgent guerrilla force as classically strict and previously unbending as the TPLF".

Unfortunately, nothing in these statements by Sebehat Nega warrants such conclusions. Had Niel Henry enquired a little further into what TPLF's leaders mean by "Democracy" and by their "support for many parties in Ethiopia" the journalist would have discovered that they still adhere to orthodox Stalinism which - specially in light of what is happening in Eastern Europe - seems to him an ideology belonging to "a distant age".

The fact of the matter is that TPLF still adamantly rejects multipartism, individual liberties, fundamental human rights and a pluralist and open society as advocated by Ethiopia's democrats. This position -

together with TPLF's stand on the Eritrean question which it considers as a colony - has constituted the main obstacle to the formation of a broad-based opposition which could have constituted a serious challenge to Mengistu's dictatorship.

The question of democracy and that of multipartism were in fact important points of contention during talks between TPLF and Me'isone held in Rome from 29 to 30 March and Me'isone and EDPM a month later in London.

There was agreement on the necessity of a broad-based provisional government, one task of which would be to organize elections to a Constituent Assembly which will draw a democratic constitution for the country. But it emerged clearly that TPLF's long standing ideas on democracy and a democratic constitution did not undergo any change and that position was a far cry from that advocated by Me'isone and other Ethiopian democratic organizations.

Me'isone's delegation insisted that the kind of Constitution that our country needs is one which will set up multipartism, guarantee respect for human rights and individual liberties. It pointed out that not only these fundamental principles should be embodied in any future constitution but also insisted that there should be prior agreement among all would be participants in any provisional government to incorporate these principles in the constitution to be drawn. This we hope is Niel Henry's idea of democracy. We know it is not part of TPLF's vision of society. The stalinists dismissed these "democratic ideals" as "bourgeois liberal concepts" which they alleged were intended "to set up western domination and imperialist infiltration".

The arguments put forward to counter these "bourgeois liberal" concepts were orthodox Stalinist rhetoric : "We stand for Revolutionary democracy and for the dictatorship of the broad masses. The concept of democracy can not be looked at in isolation from the class struggle between exploiters and exploited. Multipartism is a bourgeois concept which all genuine revolutionaries should reject. Only workers, peasants and other revolutionary classes would enjoy unrestricted democracy while feudalists and capitalists who have vested interests with international imperialism would not be allowed to enjoy any democratic rights".

This official position of TPLF may seem to contradict Sebehat Nega's assertion that TPLF stands for "more political parties in Ethiopia". There is in fact no contradiction. In their frenetic attempts to confuse issues, TPLF's leaders have already worked out a confused theoretical concept "which rejects multipartism but stands for more political parties in

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.

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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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