

ME'ISONE and the struggle for National Independence

Ethiopia has often been portrayed as a country with a glorious tradition of a rich and enduring civilization. Except for the brief Italian occupation in 1936-41, it is known as a nation which has maintained its independence for a number of centuries. Even during the hay days of colonial expansion, Ethiopia successfully repulsed each and every attempt of various foreign powers who wanted to put the country under their direct political rule. It was in the course of this struggle that in 1896 at ADWA, the Ethiopian people fought and won one of the most decisive battles of Africa against colonialism. What is even more significant is the history of the victorious resistance against Italian fascism between 1935 and 1941.

During these five years of brutal occupation, faced with the overwhelming power of fascism, betrayed by the feudal ruling oligarchy whose top representatives led by Haile Selassie fled to Europe, and abandoned to it's fate by the League of Nations, the Ethiopian people had no where to turn but to rely entirely on their own resources. Under these circumstances, they evolved one of the earliest and successful cases of popular warfare.

There is much the present generation of Ethiopians is proud of in this heritage. But this is not the whole picture. Beneath the pitoresque medievalism of Kings and Queens and the excessive glorification of what often goes as the history of independent Ethiopia, lied the overwhelming reality of the misery of our people. The ruling classes celebrated the history of independence in order to provide historical legitimacy for their continued rule and the exploitation of the people. The Ethiopian people who suffered untold sacrifices to safeguard the nation's independence have become subject to the most inhuman internal oppression.

The ruling classes tried to perpetuate their internal domination by improvising various ideological devices to project an image of unflinching patriotism and dedication to the sovereignty of the mother land. But in fact, every time their interests coincided with those of foreign aggressors they made common cause with the enemies of the country. On the other hand imperialist powers intrigued and exploited rivalries within the ruling circles in order to penetrate and get a foot hold in the country. Since the beginning of the century up to this day, the interests of the ruling classes and those of imperialists have increasingly coincided. Therefore the struggle for social justice has been a question intimately linked with the anti-imperialist struggle.

But this fact was not clearly understood by all Ethiopia's patriots of the earlier generation. During the Italian invasion of the country, the patriotic war of resistance was seen in isolation from the struggle against the feudal order in the country. It is true that there were some democratic elements who fought the occupant while at the same time opposing the return of Haile Selassie and the monarchy. But given the very low stage of development of the Ethiopian society, these forces mustered neither the necessary organization nor the democratic social base which would allow them to **realize** their objectives. The Italian invaders took a heavy toll of this democratic and patriotic sector which was essentially composed of intellectuals of the first generation. In addition to this the return of Haile Selassie from his exile in England and the repression unleashed against the patriots annihilated what little survived of these forces.

In the 1950s and specially after the signing of the so-called "mutual defence pact" in 1953, Ethiopia slowly became a neo-colony of American imperialism. To the point that in the process of acquiring this new status, the economic basis underwent a significant change which made the country a perfect example of a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society.

Here again the relationship between the imperialist domination of Ethiopia and the revolutionary struggle was at first quite difficult to establish. The conditions under which the imperialist hold of Ethiopia was exercised screened off the neo-colonial reality and the role of imperialism in Ethiopia's backwardness. The theme of "a long history of independence" as compared to the rest of Africa and the excessive glorification and mystification of the heroic past made it difficult to see the neo-colonial reality in its true lights. The struggle concentrated on the autocracy and few people recognized that without the support of imperialism the life span of the tyranny would be much shorter. They failed to see that any movement that fails to put the question of national independence and the anti-imperialist struggle at the heart of its preoccupations could not be revolutionary. At this early stage some even entertained the illusion that imperialism could be drawn into a position of neutralism while they carry on the struggle against the feudal tyranny.

This was particularly the case of the coup d'Etat attempt of December 1960. This attempt, engineered by a group of officers of the Imperial body guard and radical intellectuals was crushed not only by the army which stayed loyal to the Emperor but also by the active support of the US government. American pilots joined the loyalists and actively participated in putting down the rebellion.

Even if the attempt failed, this abortive coup served as a great lesson in many respects. It clearly showed to the young

generation of Ethiopians that the regime could not survive for long without the assistance of its imperialist allies and that in order to achieve genuine liberation the Ethiopian people have to struggle simultaneously against their twin enemies: feudal oppression and imperialist exploitation.

The young student movement which during the sixties developed to become the most radical political opposition to the autocracy drew the appropriate lessons from this and other developments both inside Ethiopia and on the international scene.

This student movement was the first opposition group to clearly identify feudalism and imperialism as the main twin enemies of the Ethiopian people and to clearly underscore the necessity of fighting these enemies simultaneously. With this young generation and for the first time in the history of the struggle of the Ethiopian people, the cause of social justice and that of national independence were understood in their intimate correlation. The democratic opposition to the imperial regime was thus set on a clear revolutionary course.

With the development of this radical movement however, two things became clear to the elements that were at the time the vanguards of the student opposition. Conscious of the inherent limitations of any student movement they set out to create the necessary revolutionary organization that would continue and lead the struggle for emancipation. In the second place the vanguard elements were convinced that only a revolutionary organization guided by the teachings of marxism could accomplish the revolutionary and patriotic task of liberating Ethiopia.

After wide ranging discussions within the vanguard elements of the student movement both in Ethiopia and abroad (Europe, North America...) the time came for the creation of the revolutionary organization that would lead and coordinate the struggle. It was in this context and with this conviction that these vanguard elements created ME'ISONE -the first revolutionary movement in Ethiopia- at a congress held in Hambourg (W.Germany) in August 1968.

The task that the organization set to itself from the outset was very clear indeed. The struggle was to be both revolutionary and patriotic. Given the conditions that prevailed at that time, and the fact that Ethiopia was a neo-colony of American imperialism, the latter was singled out as the main enemy of the country's national independence. But ME'ISONE's struggle was not only against American imperialism. It was also for the national independence of the historic motherland. This nuance is worth noting because without a clear understanding of ME'ISONE's early commitment to the honour and national independence of Ethiopia, there can be no clear appreciation

of its present opposition to Soviet bloc domination and exploitation. Both for the early militants of ME'ISONE and the thousands of revolutionaries that joined the organization during the subsequent years the struggle for the Ethiopian revolution has been intimately linked with the process of national liberation. Revolution has never meant and would never mean rejection of the tremendous and proud heritage of the Ethiopian past.

The objectives of the struggle so clearly defined the organization had to be tested in the heat of the tremendous revolutionary upsurge that engulfed the country starting in early 1974. Today, after 11 years of unswerving struggle in the service of the Ethiopian people, we take pride in saying that throughout these years of struggle and sacrifice ME'ISONE has firmly adhered to the revolutionary and patriotic stand of its early days.

In a revolutionary process as complex as the one we have experienced in Ethiopia, ME'ISONE always tried to clearly understand the shifting alignment of forces both on the national and international levels and to clearly identify the main enemies of the revolution and Ethiopia's national independence.

Depending on the period under review this task was sometimes easy and sometimes very complex. During the offensive years of the Ethiopian revolution (1974-77) the identification of American imperialism as the main enemy was clear both to militants and a growing section of the population. The agitational and political work done before the revolution, specially by the radical student movement, added to the counter revolutionary activities of American imperialism and specially the C.I.A. made it possible for the Ethiopian people to clearly identify and fight their enemies with determination and vigour.

This changed with the coming of the defensive period which started with the alliance of the treacherous and opportunist elements within the revolutionary movement and internal reactionaries with the Soviet bloc countries. Just as the old rightist alliance (internal reaction and American imperialism) was clear to see and easy to fight, Soviet bloc intervention on the side of the internal traitors who continued to parade as "marxists" and "revolutionaries" was confusing both to the Ethiopian people and international progressive opinion. But for ME'ISONE and other revolutionaries the change in the alignment of forces was clear from the outset. In order to give the reader a clear view of the situation, we may say that the two periods of the Ethiopian revolution coincide with the struggle against two types of alliances formed against the cause of Ethiopia's liberation. During the first period (1974-77) the struggle against internal reaction and American imperialism was to obtain those great victories that shook the feudo-bourgeoisie order at its foundation. But the second period that starts in 1977 was marked by an increasingly rearguard battle to defend the gains of the Ethiopian revolution against the new counter revolutionary alliance.

(To be continued)