

ME'ISONE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE (contd.)

As we have noted already, the main aim of the rightist alliance at this time was the total liquidation of the dual power situation that developed in the country after 1976. The Soviet Union was also interested in this because it was convinced that if the situation continues unchecked it would lead to the establishment of a democratic and independent Ethiopia. And such a democratic victory was incompatible with soviet domination.

By May 1977, the contradictions between the new rightist alliance led by Mengistu and his organization SEDED on the one hand and the democratic forces led by ME'ISONE and the POMOA on the other were clearly coming to the open. All the reactionary forces that were formerly backing the Alemayehu clique now stood behind SEDED. Using the same old arguments about "law and order" they opposed the development of the democratic mass organizations and the immediate proclamation of full democratic rights. They pointed to the "dangers" that would follow if the arming of the "Committees for the Defense of the Revolution" was to be continued. Fearing the development of the democratic mass organizations which they did not control, the SEDED leaders switched around and sided with the rightist forces. The questions of democratic rights and arms again became the central issues of contention between revolution and counter revolution in Ethiopia.

Faced with this betrayal, the popular masses, under the leadership of ME'ISONE and the POMOA regularly took to the streets and staged massive demonstrations to support their democratic demands and to oppose the volte-face operated by the SEDED opportunists. The response of the new rightist alliance was however, a stepping up of the repression and the acceleration of the drive to dismantle the democratic mass organizations. Arrests and assassinations again started to take a heavy toll of the democratic forces.

In this context, it is not surprising that the increasing soviet involvement in Ethiopia's internal affairs soon became an element of the internal class struggle and an issue of contention between the rightists and the democratic forces. As a matter of course, all the forces who stood behind ME'ISONE and demanded the immediate proclamation of full democratic rights, the arming of the people, the consolidation of the democratic mass organizations and the continued participation of the people in the revolutionary process opposed soviet intervention in the country's internal affairs. On the other hand, SEDED and all the rightist forces behind it welcomed soviet "internationalism" not only to compensate for the dwindling popular support but also to acquire the means for the liquidation of the democratic process.

For the Ethiopian people, the issues at stake and the motives behind the rightists' stand were increasingly becoming

clear. Consequently, hardly two months after the official ending of American presence in Ethiopia, the slogans of "National Independence" and "Self reliance" found their right place along side the other burning issues of the Ethiopian revolution.

Thus, when Mengistu Haile Mariam left for Moscow in May 1977, the breach between his group and ME'ISONE was already there. The soviets who were closely following the internal struggle in Ethiopia and who knew the respective positions of the contending forces, were quick to exploit these differences. Just as they were trying to play off the EPRP against the "right opportunist" ME'ISONE in the years preceding 1977, they now poured admiration on the "revolutionary and internationalist" SEDED and vilified the "maoist" and "bourgeois nationalist" ME'ISONE. Mengistu returned with clear instructions concerning the formation of a pro-soviet "workers' party" and the creation of a soviet backed "revolutionary army" that was to "pacify" and subdue the Ethiopian people. For the purpose he was assured that soviet assistance in the form of political, military and security advisors would be forthcoming. The stage was thus set for the unprecedented repression and the counter revolutionary development that were to follow soon.

In June, disturbing signs of the impending Somali invasion were clearly perceptible. ME'ISONE militants, specially those in the Harargue region, filed reports which stressed the danger and demanded the reinforcement of Ethiopia's defences in the Ogaden and the immediate arming of the democratic peasants' and workers' organizations in the region. But the reactionary civil and military bureaucrats on the one hand and the Soviet Union and its allies on the other hand had their own reasons to minimize this danger. The internal rightists argued that ME'ISONE was deliberately "exaggerating" the danger in order to get arms for "its" peasants and workers. The Soviet Union and its allies wanted to disrupt the country's defences in the Ogaden in the hope of pressurizing the Derg into accepting an "East African Federation" in which the Ogaden could be included as an autonomous component. They provided "intelligence" reports which not only concealed the Somali preparations but also went as far as suggesting that units of the Ethiopian army stationed in the Ogaden be transferred to the North West Gondar region where "the EDU and American Imperialism were preparing an all out offensive against the revolution". Despite repeated warnings on the part of ME'ISONE and patriotic officers the rightists complacently fell into the trap. In June 1977, the "GESET TOR" an elite mechanized brigade stationed in the Ogaden was moved to the North West. Hardly a month later, in July 1977, the Somali army swiftly moved into the Ogaden and within a few days reached the outskirts of Harar and Dire Dawa...

Even while the Ogaden region was ablaze, the rightists did not loose sight of the internal class struggle. Not only they intensified the repression against the democratic forces but they soon proceeded to disarm the "unreliable" and "Pro-ME'ISONE" peasants' associations and started a policy of arming the AMHARA and other landlords in the regions. The terms of "Narrow-nationalist" and "Somali agent" were used systematically to

liquidate all the progressive elements of the oppressed nationalities and the POMOA militants in the region. At the same time a policy of "National reconciliation" was inaugurated in order to enable the country "to cope with the Somali aggression". By virtue of this theory, former high ranking officers that have been purged from the army for opposing the revolution were called back to active services and placed at key posts. But the so-called "reconciliation" stopped there. At the same time dozens of democratic and patriotic young officers were dismissed, arrested or executed both at the fronts and in other parts of the country. As ME'ISONE opposed all these developments its militants were increasingly and systematically harassed and persecuted. Faced with this situation the choice left to the organization was either to accept the betrayal and maintain the alliance with the Derg or break the alliance and go underground in order to continue the struggle. ME'ISONE made the later and honourable choice and on the 20th of August 1977, the ministers, high ranking government officials, POMOA cadres and other militants that were engaged in legal work went underground.

Once the Somali army was in full control of the Ogaden, the Soviet Union summoned the two sides to Moscow and ordered negotiations that were to lead to an "East African Federation" on the lines described above. The Ethiopian delegation refused to accept the "fait accompli" and instead demanded the total withdrawal of Somali troops from the Ogaden. Not only the negotiations failed but pro-american circles in Ethiopia were quick to "discover" the soviet plot and to put strong pressure on the Derg to restaure the alliance with the United States. This spectre of the "american option", the fear of losing the newly acquired lucrative arms trade with Ethiopia, the prospects of "all round cooperation" with a potentially rich country, the stand taken by most African states who condemned the aggression and above all the impossibility of staying "neutral"... all these factors combined to persuade the Soviet Union and its allies to choose side and stand behind the Derg. This choice was rewarding. In what was to become the most important arms' deal in African history, Ethiopia soon bought sophisticated soviet material worth hundreds of millions of dollars. At the same time Soviet bloc military and security "advisors" flocked to Ethiopia.

Very soon the country started to become the scene of unprecedented and blind repression as the rightists and their new allies set out to liquidate all the democratic mass organizations and the vanguard elements of the pre 1977 period. Thus hardly six months after the "discovering" of the Ethiopian revolution by the Soviet Union and its allies, not only the whole region was emblazed but also the revolution entered a phase of agony that was to increase with growing soviet involvement in the country's internal affairs.

In spite of the repression, and indeed because of it, the opposition to the Derg's rule and to increasing soviet domination continued unabated. The people continued to struggle for their democratic rights and demanded that they be armed to defend the country and the revolution. But by the end of the year the rift

between the democratic forces and the Derg was so serious that any positive response to this popular and patriotic demand became out of the question. The masses were not "reliable". Instead, the Derg decided to call in Cuban troops to "defend the Ethiopian revolution". The real purpose was however to liquidate the rising democratic and patriotic opposition within the armed forces and in the country as a whole. Thus in January 1978, hardly a month after the arrival of foreign troops in the country, The Derg unleashed what it called the "red terror" campaign. This period, which will go on record as one of the darkest pages in the contemporary history of Ethiopia, officially lasted two months. Literally thousands (5000 according to conservative estimates made by Amnesty International) of young Ethiopians, workers, intellectuals, officers and soldiers, vanguard elements of the oppressed nationalities etc. were slaughtered by the regime's henchmen. During the months that followed, mass arrests took a heavy toll of the democratic forces. By August 1978, more than 20.000 militants and elected representatives of the democratic mass organizations were already thrown into the overcrowded prisons of the "revolutionary" regime.

It is significant to note that when Fidel Castro visited Ethiopia for the first time in March 1977, the Ethiopian revolution was clearly on the offensive. And there were no foreign soldiers "defending" it. But by the time he returned to the country in September 1978, one wonders if he had realized what "Internationalism" has done to the Ethiopian revolution. With the "Internationalist" material, moral, political and diplomatic support, a whole generation of marxists, democrats and patriots, those very elements who constituted the vanguard forces of the revolution when Castro first came to Ethiopia had already been decimated and Ethiopia had turned into a "prison state".

Once the way was thus cleared for the "consolidation" of the counter revolution, the Derg and its foreign allies turned their attention to the task of formalizing and institutionalizing Ethiopia's dependence on the Soviet Union. This led to the signing of the "Ethio-Soviet treaty of friendship and cooperation" and to the acceleration of the efforts to regroup the high ranking civil and military bureaucrats into a soviet dominated "workers" Party of Ethiopia".

The "friendship treaty" was signed in Moscow in November 1978. It may be pointed out that this is the kind of treaty that the Soviet Union invoked to justify its invasion of Afghanistan. In addition to the general provisions dealing with "the development and deepening of unbreakable relations in the political, economic and trade fields" which are designed for the further exploitation of the country, the treaty contains some provisions that are clearly incompatible with Ethiopia's sovereignty.

The first such provision is the one dealing with "military cooperation". Article 10 of the treaty declares "In the interest of ensuring the defence capability of the high contracting parties they shall continue to cooperate in the military field". This provision not only allows the continued presence of foreign

troops in Ethiopia but has also opened the way for Soviet military bases in the country. It gives the Soviet Union and its allies the "right" to train and control Ethiopia's armed and security forces. It gives them the "right" to flood the country with sophisticated weapons of mass slaughter that are being used against the people. In the past 3 years, Ethiopia which is one of the last developed countries in the world, has disbursed well over 2 Billion U.S dollars to pay for the arms imported from the Soviet Union. The various wars and the repression sustained by soviet arms and foreign troops, and the need to pay for the material and the "services" have already disorganized the Ethiopian economy and have turned the country into a ravaged land.

Another provision of this "friendship" treaty is the one dealing with Ethiopia's foreign relations. According to art.11, the country is not allowed "to enter into any alliance or participate in any alignment of states or in actions or measures" directed against the Soviet Union. Ethiopia cannot "enter into any international agreements incompatible with this treaty". The diplomatic and "internationalist" jargons notwithstanding, this article simply means that the Soviet Union will dictate Ethiopia's foreign policy. The Derg's denunciation of the Peoples Republic of China, its stand in the Vietnam/Kampuchea issue, its approval of the soviet invasion of Afghanistan, its role in the non-aligned movement etc. are but a few examples to show that the Ethiopian regime has turned the country into a protectorate of the Soviet Union.

Parallel to this attempt aimed at providing a legal framework for its domination, the Soviet Union also encouraged the efforts of the Derg to create a "Workers' Party of Ethiopia". The preparations to form the party were directly supervised and controlled by the Soviet Union and its allies. A certain V. Charaev and the Cuban Raul Valdes Vivo were particularly active in these preparations which led to the creation of a "Commission to organize the Party of the working peoples of Ethiopia"(COPWE) in December 1979. With the creation of this commission, all other political groupings were formally outlawed and penalties including capital punishment were decreed for opposition to the Commission's work. This put the country on the course of a single party military dictatorship under the control of the Soviet Union and its local agents.

But in a traditionally patriotic society such as Ethiopia, all this betrayal and soviet domination are not going unchallenged. For the Ethiopian people soviet domination is not only national disgrace. It has come along with it's lot of repression, terror, famine, exile and misery. As far as ME'ISONE is concerned, it has never envisaged the struggle for Ethiopia's national independence in isolation from the overall revolutionary endeavour. Concerning the foreign policy that is to be followed by the new Ethiopia it has clearly opted and fought for constant non-alignment. Part II, E of its political programme, devoted to the question of national independence clearly states this option. It also underlines that :

"All treaties and agreements to which Ethiopia has been a party of and which violates its national rights and independence are to be abrogated". As for "military cooperation", it states, in no uncertain terms "the country shall not be a party to military pacts and alliances of any sort. No foreign military force shall be harboured nor any foreign military base maintained on the Ethiopian soil".

This is crystal clear. The Ethiopian people and their vanguard ME'ISONE will never accept soviet domination. As part of the struggle for democracy, self determination and social justice, they will continue to fight for the restauration of the motherlands national independence. In this struggle, the Ethiopian peoples know that all progressive mankind is on their side. They are also convinced that however protracted and difficult the struggle may be, they will surely triumph and create a new, democratic and independent country on the ruins of all traitors and their foreign masters.

* * *