

Officers on trial: A Masquerade of Justice

The trial of 14 generals and 31 officers ranging from colonel to lieutenant who were allegedly involved in the 16 May 1989 coup attempt has begun in Addis Abeba before a military court chaired by Major General Kefelegne Yibza. All of them pleaded not guilty to the charges of treason read to them.

It is to be remembered that the 3 main objectives of the 16 May attempt were a negotiated settlement in Eritrea, constitutional changes to allow for better respect of human rights and the formation of a broad-based government with participation of all opposition organisations. Although at that time, all these demands were dismissed as acts of betrayal, developments over the last few months have clearly shown that the assessment of the political and military situation in the country, and the solutions proposed by the armed forces movement, were closer to reality than those of dictator Mengistu.

During the days following the attempt, Mengistu himself and other party officials were busy accusing the officers of sabotaging the war effort and blamed them for the reverses suffered in Eritrea and Tigray. Now that the 'traitors' had been eliminated, so the argument went, victory was around the corner. Berhanu Bayeh, at that time the minister for foreign affairs, went as far as to declare in an interview to the BBC "with patriotic and revolutionary officers having replaced the traitors who sabotaged the war effort, the army is now in a position to crush the bandits".

This dream of a quick military victory was never to materialize. Instead what followed was a series of humiliating military defeats in Eritrea where EPLF took control of the port of Massawa and particularly in central Ethiopia where the offensive launched to the south and west of Tigray brought TPLF forces to less than 200 km of Addis Abeba.

The call for negotiations made by the leaders of the May military uprising was termed by the government as "treason" and "betrayal of the national interests of Ethiopia". But hardly 3 weeks after launching these accusations, pressure from the armed forces, the entire Ethiopian people and the international community, coupled with that exerted by the Fronts, forced Mengistu to accept negotiations.

As for the political and economic system which provoked the army revolt, it has now become clear even to Mengistu himself that things could not continue as in the past. The March 5 proposals, although rejected by almost all opposition forces as too little and too vague, come as a reminder of the fact that the struggle of Ethiopia's peoples including that waged by the armed forces had awakened Mengistu to the realities of the country.

Given all these developments which took place within less than a year after the May coup attempt, one wonders why those who survived the summary executions that followed the revolt should be put on trial. How can Mengistu be credible before national and international opinion when he allows this masquerade of justice to continue against people who rose to demand peaceful negotiations and political changes which he now claims he has accepted?

(TPLF: contd. from page 3)

they were at the 'tactical phase' it was made clear and publicized as such that, at the right time, or the 'strategic phase', the masses would put them on trial for their indecision.

For TPLF, the need to cooperate with Meisone and EPRP, even at the 'tactical phase', appeared to have been made redundant by events after the 'victory' which it believed to be in its grasp. Much in the same sense that there was only "Albania ..." in the rest of the world, in Ethiopia TPLF and those who aligned themselves with it became the only democrats. In EPDRF's communique, Meisone and EPRP, no different from the government's "Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE)" became the enemies of the Ethiopian people.

One of the points in the resolution of the "Conference of the Masses" in Wello held between the 2nd and 9th of December 1989 under the aegis of EPDRF also confirmed that the fight was not only against WPE. It was also against Ethiopian Democratic Union and Ethiopian People Democratic Alliance 'for their ulterior motives', and against Meison and EPRP for their aim 'to impose on the country a western type political system'.

The crippling effect of the triple crisis on the overall fight to overthrow the existing government and establish an independent and democratic country need not be emphasized. It enabled Mengistu H. Marian, the arch-enemy of the Ethiopian people, to masquerade as the champion of Ethiopian unity. For the time being it made all those opposed to the government divert their attention to the direct and indirect danger caused by the TPLF. A clear indicator for that is the nature of the student demonstrations. The very students who in May shouted "Down with Mengistu" in support of the aborted Soldiers' Movement, came out condemning TPLF in November. The situation is the same in the Army. In May the call was to unite against the common enemy the Derg. In November the Army was concentrating on the direct danger posed by TPLF before being diverted and confused by the one in Eritrea.

The hard line politics of TPLF had made it possible for the Derg's totalitarian regime to be seen in a favourable light. The government's repeated transmission of the above mentioned BBC interview on television is to persuade the people to continue to submit to its harsh regime in the knowledge of the harsher one in the offing.

However the damage is not limited to giving a lease of political life to the Derg. TPLF's disregard for the formation of a credible national alternative, has complicated and postponed for an uncertain and long period, the liberation day which all the people of Ethiopia await with eagerness. And now as we enter that period TPLF, once again, has to address a crucial question. The step it takes will make a material difference to the formation of the United Democratic Front and the continuing agony of the Ethiopian people.