

## TPLF : A TIME FOR RETHINKING ?

In a general sense the political picture of Ethiopia a year or two ago was clear cut. Politically the Government of the Derg was isolated. Militarily the armed opposition forces were surging from victory to victory against crumbling government defenses. However, it was also clear that the government was unlikely to fall without a coordinated effort by the opposition. To tilt both the political and military balance in an irreversible popular direction, it was obvious that the democratic organizations had to pool their resources and present an alternative at the national level. As a result there were a number of common grounds on which agreements could be reached between democratic forces. It may be recalled that it was in October 1987 that, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (Meisone) issued a joint declaration.

However, in February 1989 the TPLF forces made marked advances and seized Mekele, the capital of Tigray. A clear cut military victory as it had been, the event also presented it with a crucial political question regarding the step it was to take next. Of the possible alternatives, the first was to secede and declare a Democratic Republic of Tigray. The other was to intensify the fight against the Military government in unison with democratic and patriotic forces.

As a result of the likely opposition from within Tigray itself and its untenability in the national and international circumstances the first alternative was not practicable.

The second alternative required the creation of a broad democratic front at the national level. That was in spite of the Ethiopian People Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPDRF) which TPLF and Ethiopian People Democratic Movement (EPDM) had formed in November 1988, sometime before the seizure of Mekele. The announcement of the joining up of TPLF and EPDM, about the independent identity of which there had always been a question mark and which in any case worked very closely, was not accepted by many as a genuine multi-national front.

It was while the question of a genuine front was thus unresolved that the movement of May 1989 by the military took place. The outcome of the event complicated both the political and the military situation to the extent of making future developments difficult to predict.

On one hand the Army, which lost over thirty generals and a number of senior officers, was disorganized. On the other hand since those officers were the very leaders who have been fighting alongside it for years the army did not accept the propaganda of the Derg that they were traitors, and that their pronouncements for peace and democracy were in any way against the interest of the nation. The army's animosity to Mengistu reached new heights. When the TPLF forces attacked there was no army worthy of the name prepared to fight for the government.

It was in such a general climate that the TPLF with EPDM begun to attack. Their forces under the banner of EPDRF advanced and reached the middle of Shoa in a short time. But the military advance was well ahead of the political one. As

a result, the apex of TPLF's 'military success' to date also marked the period of its entry into a chapter of a damaging political crisis. We believe three factors to be major contributors.

**ERITREAN INDEPENDENCE :** The cause for the first political crisis is TPLF's stand on Ethiopian Unity. Basing their judgement on the mistaken premise that 'Eritrea is an Ethiopian Colony' TPLF and EPDM have accepted the inevitability of Eritrean independence. So much so that the program of EPDRF considers the Eritrean question under the heading 'Foreign Affairs' in the same section that deals with South Africa, Palestine, etc.

At a time when TPLF Forces appeared to be converging on Addis Abeba their spokesmen were unambiguous about the fate of Eritrea. They announced that it would be independent as soon as the Derg was overthrown and a new government established. This is in fact a long standing position of TPLF. If there was anything new, it was that TPLF was on the verge of materializing its intention by force of arms. That is why it could be argued that the military success in a sense was also the cause for TPLF's political crisis.

As a result, many whom TPLF could not plausibly categorize as 'Amhara Chauvinists', considered it as a dangerous force. In spite of a lot of assertions to the contrary by misinformed commentators, very many democrats in present day Ethiopia amongst the Tigray, Oromo, Amhara and others, vehemently opposed to the Derg's regime, fervently believe in unity. But unity based on equality and brought about by the free will of its people. That is why the student demonstrations against TPLF should be taken more as pointers to the political crisis of the organization rather than as an agitation by disgruntled chauvinists.

**HARDLINE POLITICS:** The cause for the second political crisis is the hardline politics TPLF intends to follow. That got wide publicity after the interview which one of the TPLF leaders gave to the BBC correspondent Michael Birk during the latter's visit to the battlefield in November 1989. In that interview Hazile Demisse elaborated the organization's view that "Stalin was a great democrat, Gorbachev is a bourgeois libera and had never been a Marxist". He also added that, "The only socialist country in the world at present is Albania ...". There was nothing new about the idea, either. It had only become alarming by the military success which made its practice a possibility.

**THE SOLE ALTERNATIVE:** Deluded by the victory which TPLF believed to be in its grasp, it's attempt to consider itself as the 'sole democratic alternative' was the third cause for its political crisis.

At the time EPDRF was established, it was proclaimed only as the beginning of the United Democratic Front, be it a gradual one made up of the tactical and strategic phases. The need for other organizations to join it at least for the 'tactical phase' was particularly emphasized. The major obstacles for realising that were considered to be the two progressive and in TPLF's expression 'indecisive' organizations, Meisone and EPRP (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party). Invited though