

Part one

Two groups of the TPLF and two issues of Ethiopia

Ethiopia is for the first time in her history under the control of a tyrant who started with an open anti Ethiopian program. All Ethiopian rulers before Meles, including colonel Mengistu, whatever mistakes they might have made, were committed to the cause of Ethiopia.

The ruling group has started to be known as the "Palace Group". This group can also be called "The Meles- Sebhat Group "because Meles and Sebhat are its decisive protagonists, whereas the rest are their followers. It smacks of a clan with at least five of its members Meles, Mulugeta Alemseged. Sebhat Nega along with his sister Kidusan Nega and her husband Tsegay Berhe, etc... are connected by blood and marriage. The other group can not be named after individuals. Its members have neither follower-leader nor known blood connections. The dissident group is no doubt patriotic, but it has failed to articulate its Ethiopian position and implement it while it was in power for the last ten years.

The issues which are of cardinal importance for Ethiopia and on which the groups have real or alleged differences can be divided into two main categories: The question of national sovereignty and the system of exercising power.

We are convinced that differences on ideology, the practice of democracy, corruption, nepotism or power struggle did not lead to the division of the leadership of the TPLF. If we take ideology as an example, it is only a means of rallying supporters, defending interests, attaining certain goals or justifying certain measures. It would otherwise be naive to assume that any one of the groups would have a religious belief in any ideology. Many of the cadres who are trained and conditioned to imitate like domestic animals and not to think independently may believe in one or another ideology.

Meles has used the Stalinist organizational structure and centralism as well as the security apparatus to purge the dissident group and contain opposition. Tigrayans in the Diaspora who were otherwise at variance with their Ethiopian compatriots in giving blind support to the TPLF Regime are reaching unanimous decisions for the reversal of the drastic measures taken by Meles against the dissidents. This is a clear indication that Ethiopians at home and particularly Tigrayans would have done likewise, if they were as free from fear as their compatriots abroad.

The dissident group is raising the slogan of People's Democracy which it never implemented. For that matter, this form of democracy has never worked anywhere else. Both the measure taken by Meles and the slogan of the victims have their origin in the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray, or in the now defunct ideology of the Party of Labor of Albania. Corruption and nepotism could have been dealt with easily and individually unless these practices were promoted by Meles himself. The power structure within the

TPLF has already been stabilized since the early 1980s. It was suicidal to oppose Stalin or Colonel Mengistu after they had consolidated their absolute power. The same situation applies in the case of Meles and the dissidents know this from their collaboration.

At this point of time it is not clear whether any of the factions is prepared for real democratisation and for an end to corruption. Democratisation would mean the transfer of political power from the TPLF/EPRDF to the people, the release of all political prisoners, the lift of all restrictions on political parties and trade union activities and above all the call for a nation-wide dialogue that includes all political organisations including those banned by the Meles regime and the formation of a transitional government of national reconciliation. Therefore, to call for a democratic resolution is tantamount to supporting the traitors against those who are ousted. The Meles-Sebhat clique has amply demonstrated its anti-Ethiopian nature since 1976. It must be removed from the political scene and replaced by a government of the choice of the Ethiopian people before it causes irreparable damage on the nation.

Similarly, the struggle against corruption would mean controlling and auditing the small and big TPLF firms as well as firms owned by other political groups. It would also mean the right and power of the people to investigate wealth amassed under suspicious circumstances by relatives, friends and allies of state and party officials. Only the issue of sovereignty seems to be the point of difference between the factions and at the same time the common issue for the dissident group.

The dissidents obviously risked to differ with Meles, when the fate of Ethiopia and their personal dignity were at stake and Ethiopians were humiliated during the beginning of the war. Meles gave in, not because he commanded a minority but because he was aware of his weak position which is uniquely alien to the Ethiopian tradition of self-defense. He practically made a tactical retreat to prepare for a strategic offensive against his rivals. The dissidents seem to have been emboldened by their undeniable role in defending Ethiopian sovereignty to confront Meles and his followers. Whereas on the one hand their peaceful approach is laudable, the dissidents' accusation could have meant the loss of absolute power for Meles. Therefore the peaceful approach was so naive that it had to logically lead to Meles resorting to administrative measures to incriminate, isolate and destroy the dissidents. On the other hand, Meles has chosen to stand above the constitutional law of the country to expel elected parliamentarians in order to stay in power.

In the first place, liquidation, purges and incriminations are like a culture in the TPLF. Differences of opinion have never been tolerated. With the purging of Abay, all members but one who started the armed struggle and who are still alive have been purged. It is a system in which the people of Tigray are organized from above several times according to their profession, sex, age, in the form of law making, judicial and administrative committees (the committees were organized as imitations of the soviets), cadres, militias, as the members of the TPLF and the MLLT. This system facilitates control and mobilization from above. It is a system of mutual suspicion, fear, absolute obedience and loss of self confidence and initiative. This system of absolute intellectual and physical

control is spreading all over Ethiopia like an epidemic. It is a system which chocks people and instills fear; which puts loyalty to the tyrant above knowledge, experience and ability and retards development. Individuals appointed before they are declared to be elected by the people. The electors are executing orders from the government as an euphemism for the tyrant, when they cast their votes. The elected know that they have no chance of candidacy without the permission of the same tyrant. Hence the result, the elected owe their mandate to him and he can deprive them of it. They have to be loyal to him and not to the electors.

We are former members and dissidents of the TPLF. We will deal with the major crises in the history of the TPLF, in order to show the individual and collective positions and practices of the main protagonists of the present groups on the two issues to interested readers. The crises in the TPLF involving the system or national sovereignty were as follows:

The question of national sovereignty

Since it has its roots in the first issue of the program of the TPLF, we will begin with the present crisis. The question of Ethiopian national sovereignty takes us back to the 1976 manifesto of the TPLF. The aim of the TPLF according to the manifesto was to establish a democratic republic of Tigray. It was clearly an anti-Ethiopian manifesto.

When it started the armed struggle, the self-appointed leadership of the TPLF, excluding other founding members wrote a declaration which stated that the Front would dissolve itself and join an organization at a higher level, if such an organization came into being. The "higher level" was understood to mean at the level of the whole of Ethiopia, but its authors did not elaborate their role in the formation of that would be organization. Although the formation of a Tigrayan Front preferred ethnic consciousness to that of Ethiopianess, there was no reflection of any secessionist tendencies in the Front at the time, when the declaration was written.

An emotional feeling of being Ethiopian is anchored in the psychological make up of Tigrayans. But something alien to that make up appeared in the TPLF, when it was joined by Meles Zenawi and Sebhat Nega. Meles, who belonged to the group which was supposed to be trained by the EPLF had been scared by the sound of a remote gunfire and fled from Asmera without informing his friends. He joined the TPLF after some months in 1975, after giving some unbelievable excuses.

The leadership made some changes in the beginning of 1976 within itself. Sebhat became the chairman and Meles a deputy member of the CC and an assistant to Abay Tsehaye, who was the head of the political committee of the organization. Both Meles and Sebhat aggravated the undemocratic practice in the TPLF not only by excluding the rank-and-file-members but also members of the leadership, like Aregawi Berhe (the military commander of the Front at that time) etc. They dissuaded Abay Tsehaye to collaborate with them and wrote the anti-Ethiopian and infamous manifesto of the TPLF with the aim of forming the republic of Tigray and supporting the independence of Eritrea.

They sent Seyoum Mesfin like an errand boy to publish and distribute the manifesto in the Sudan. Abay, who enjoyed high regard for his decent character and who was influential as the head of the political committee of the TPLF was to prove to be a marionette in the hands of Meles with terrible consequences for members of the TPLF, the people of Tigray and later the people of Ethiopia.

The reaction of the members of the TPLF was confused, when they simultaneously heard the news about the manifesto and the fact that it was opposed by the EPLF. Kahsay remembers Asfaha Hagos, one of the founding leaders asking him if anyone had ever mentioned the word secession the previous year. They could not dismiss the criticism of the EPLF as a fabrication because they were confronted by a manifesto which was supposed to be theirs. But the opponents of secession and the authors of the manifesto in the leadership joined hands after some outbreaks of initial emotions and created the impression that all were responsible for the manifesto. The names of the authors of the secessionist manifesto were not known to none- CC members of the TPLF for more than 10 years, until Aregawi Berhe disclosed them after he was forced to leave the TPLF and MLLT by Meles, The problem caused by the first program did not develop into a crisis.

Although the members of the CC had hidden their differences on national sovereignty, the cadres of Meles, like Addisalem Baliema (for instance in a discussion on 6.6.1988 in Cologne) were agitating for a referendum for the people of Tigray till the eve of the ascent of the EPRDF to power. Since the relative military strength of the TPLF convinced him that he can control the whole of Ethiopia, Meles seems to have at least postponed the secession of Tigray.

However, Ethiopia is for the first time in her history under the control of a tyrant who started with an open anti Ethiopian program. All Ethiopian rulers before Meles, including colonel Mengistu, whatever mistakes they might have made, were committed to the cause of Ethiopia. The erosion of Ethiopian sovereignty did not begin with the the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In 1991, Ethiopia lost access to international waters. The MLLT/TPLF leadership lied to the people that Assab would remain free for Ethiopia. The Afar people who raised this question were silenced by force or many Ethiopians are languishing in prisons because they raised the interests of the nation. At the same time the clique in power was demolishing the Ethiopian defence establishment and arming its neighbour. And despite such grave differences in the Politburo, Meles lied to the Ethiopian people that the leadership of the EPRDF spoke as if they were reading from the same book.

To be continued

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Further information on this and other similar issues:

- A book by Kahsay Berhe, Ethiopia: Democratisation and Nation-Building - Documentation and Critical Analysis, which will soon be published,
- Can One Accuse a Dictator in Ethiopia?, 1997, by Kahsay Berhe and Tesfay Atsbeha,
- The National Movement in Tigray: Mythes and Realities, February 1991, by Kahsay Berhe,
- Die positiven und negativen Aspekte der TPLF-MLLT, Maerz/April 1990, by Tesfay Atsbeha
- Mystifizierung der Partei zur Glorifizierung einer Person, 1990, by Tesfay Atsbeha,
- Hizbawi Woyane Harnet Tigray: Nabeyn Kemmeyn?, March 1989, by Kahsay Berhe,