

Reflections on the Eritrean Revolution

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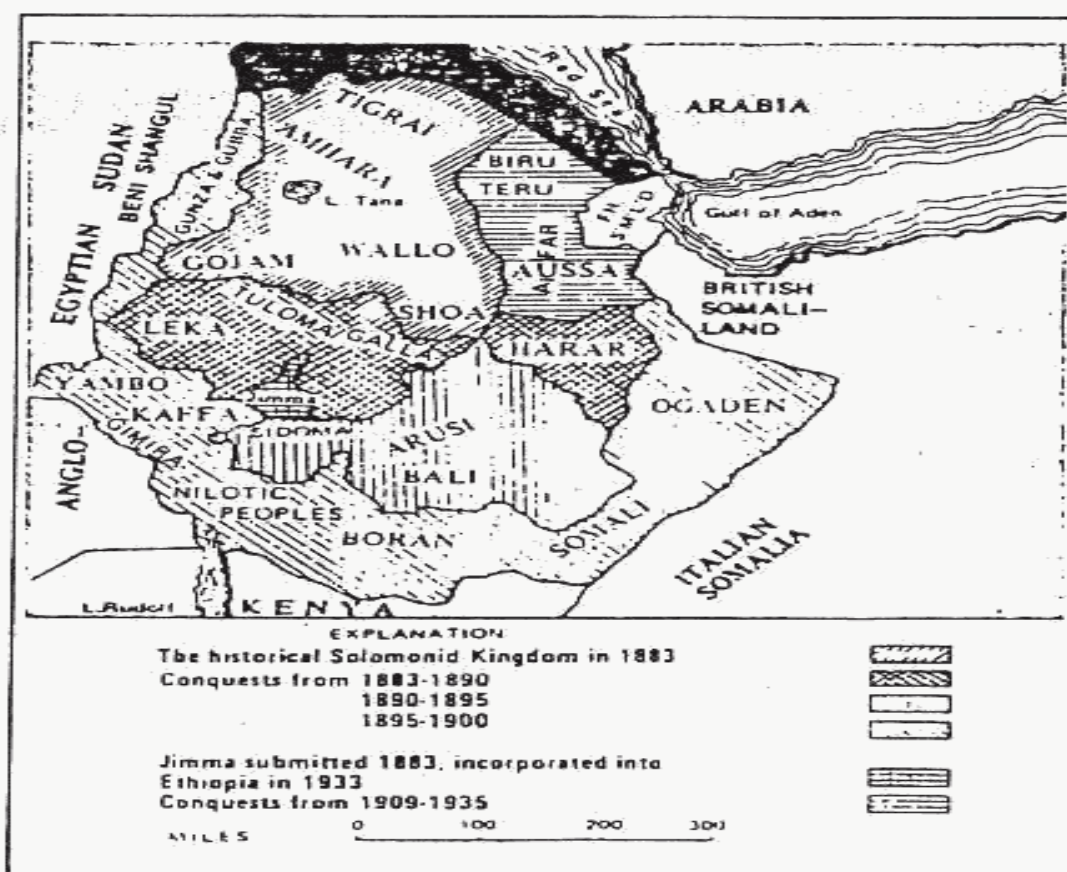
Both Ethiopia and Eritrea like any other African country owe their demarcated territorial boundaries to the European colonial powers that partitioned Africa among themselves by the end of the 19th century. Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II and his successors, Zewditu and Haile Selassie, did recognize Eritrea as an Italian colony. Besides, it is to be recalled that when the Europeans were scrambling for the colonization of Africa, Menelik II, on his part, was busy at conducting military campaigns to subjugate the Oromos and Somalis in the Ogadean. Hence he participated in the partition of Africa (see the map below).

In accordance with the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947, defeated Italy renounced its claim upon its colonies: Eritrea, Somalia, and Libya. But since the four Great Powers couldn't agree with the disposal of Eritrea, the matter was referred to the General Assembly of the United Nations.

The right of the Eritrean people to self-determination was trampled upon in the U.N. forum. The U.S. was bent to bring the strategic area of the Red Sea under its control, as was clearly stated by the then Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles: "From the point of view of strict justice, the opinion of the Eritrean people should be taken into consideration; nevertheless (American) strategic interests in the Red Sea and considerations of security for the countries of the world make it necessary to reunite this country to Ethiopia, which is our friend." Thus the U.S., utilizing its influence and power in the U.N., managed to tie Eritrea to Ethiopia by imposing Federal Resolution 390 A (V) against the will of the majority of the Eritrean people.

In 1962 the late Emperor Haile Selassie unilaterally abrogated the Federal Resolution and annexed Eritrea to his Empire. As the final report (paragraphs 176 and 192) of the U.N. Commissioner in Eritrea testify, during the Commissioner's consultation with the Eritrean people in various regions of the country there were people who were apprehensive about the resolution's violation or their domination by Ethiopia. They demanded "that the U.N. should guarantee the Constitution or that there should be a U.N. observer in Eritrea to see that the country's autonomy was respected." Their fear was not unfounded; history has proved them to be right.

Economic, social and cultural development as well as democratic rights of the Eritrean people were stifled by Haile Selassie's feudal-bourgeois regime. When all peaceful means failed, the Eritrean people, in order to regain their right to self-determination including secession, resorted to armed struggle under the leadership of the Eritrean Liberation Front in 1961. The war for liberation has now been going on for twenty-two years. The overwhelming majority of the Eritrean people have



been mobilized and have shown heroic feats and indomitable spirit. Indescribable atrocities have been perpetrated upon them: over 100,000 people massacred; more than 2,000 villages destroyed; not less than 600,000 people evicted from the country, about a third lead an abject life in refugee camps scattered in different towns of the Sudan.

Therefore, the popular and legitimate Eritrean revolution is part and parcel of the world revolutionary movement. Its aim is to win political and economic independence and is avowedly anti-feudalism, colonialism, imperialism, and internal reaction. The Eritrean armed struggle for national independence is the longest in Africa and yet the least known.

Why then is the Eritrean revolution ignored, misunderstood or ill-represented? This is due to internal and external factors.

Internal factors

When the E.L.F. embarked on armed struggle in 1961, it had intrinsic shortages with grave consequences. First, one should take into consideration the prevailing situation at the time.

The political consciousness of the people was corresponding to the low socio-economic development of the country where ethnic, religious, patriarchal and regional values, interests and considerations overshadowed that of class. The small feudal-bureaucratic bourgeoisie of Eritrea had been in the process of being assimilated with its Ethiopian counterpart. The small Eritrean working class originated from and still had strong ties to the peasantry. But it was neither well organized nor conscious enough to lead the liberation struggle. So, the task of leading the struggle fell upon the relatively more conscious petty-bourgeoisie which had a vital interest in independence. There were negative effects from the political dissension of the late nineteen forties among the different political parties.

Haile Selassie saw a threat to his autocratic regime in the burgeoning Eritrean bourgeois democratic institutions. This led to his unwarranted meddling in the internal affairs of the Eritrean government. He banned political parties, free press, workers' trade unions, the right to assemble,

and the establishment of new factories in Eritrea. Some industries were either transferred to Ethiopia or forced to close down. Such acts sparked the latent Eritrean nationalism which was manifested time and again by the workers' and students' peaceful demonstrations and strikes.

Consequently in 1958, the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM)¹ was founded to regain our people's right to national independence by peaceful means. It started to organize the people clandestinely. Indeed, it had played a positive role in arousing national sentiment especially in the urban areas until it was cracked down by the police. The ELM proved to be incapable of carrying the struggle to a higher stage, namely, armed struggle. So the E.L.F. was formed in 1960 to fill this gap and a year later started the tortuous road of the liberation war.

The leadership of the E.L.F., right wing petty-bourgeois, called itself the Supreme Council. It had neither a clear political program of action nor a military strategy. In fact it harbored the naive idea of attracting and involving the U.N. through skirmishes against Ethiopian forces of occupation. It did not have an objective appraisal of the problems to be overcome. It did not creatively exploit the experience gained in the struggle for independence by its predecessors. The Supreme Council did not preoccupy itself with the decisive factor in achieving victory: the question of national unity. This was a bad omen for the Eritrean revolution.

The Supreme Council badly presented the Eritrean cause abroad and in order to strengthen the power base of their main supporters divided Eritrea into five military zones which was supposed to be under a central command known as the Revolutionary Command based in Kassala, Sudan. They appointed fighters for posts not on merits but loyalty to them and their ethnic and/or regional origins. Even though the division into zones enhanced the rallying of thousands of fighters behind the front and extended the torch of liberation to the four corners of the country, in the absence of adequate political education, they soon degenerated into ethnic rivalries. The zones became an end in themselves, and their leaders saw themselves as independent warlords. During 1964-69 democratic rights of the fighters and people, especially the

peasantry who bore the brunt of the struggle, were violated. Many young fighters gave up fighting and a lot of them surrendered to the enemy. Yet the Supreme Council, ridden by an unbridled power struggle, had no remedy to offer.

It was obvious that the Eritrean popular struggle could not put up with these shortcomings that would doom it to failure. Therefore, in 1967 a clandestine reformist movement was born within the E.L.F., thanks to the relative maturity of some of the rank and file of the Eritrean Liberation Army (E.L.A.) which was determined to challenge the supremacy of the Supreme Council. The main task of the reformist movement was to: (a) abolish the division of Eritrea into five military zones and to bring the Eritrean Liberation Army under a single command in the field; and (b) call a National Congress of the E.L.F. to adopt a political program and democratically elect a leadership that would take over control.

The reformist movement succeeded in giving an impetus to the fighting spirit of the Eritrean people as the resolutions of the Military Conference of Adobha in August 1969 shook the Supreme Council's power to its foundations. It is worth mentioning that: (a) a General Command was formed from the five zones to conduct military affairs based in the field; (b) a preparatory Committee for National Congress of the E.L.F. was set up and the congress was decided to be held within a year; (c) the integration of the E.L.F. was agreed; (d) the five military zones and the Revolutionary Command were abolished; members of the R.C. as well as zonal leaders and their deputies were forbidden from becoming members of the General Command; (e) a commission of enquiry was set up to find out what offenses were committed by the Front against the fighters and the civilian people; (f) the Supreme Council was asked to represent the Front abroad until the convening of the Congress.

But the S.C. was not dealt with a deadly blow. Even though it was never to enjoy the same prestige and power it had before, it would be misleading to claim that the democratic forces within E.L.F. was consolidated and victorious; because the contending factions of the S.C. were sufficiently represented in the General Command not only to sabotage the democratic resolutions of the

Adobha conference but also to split the E.L.F. At this juncture, the conflict within the S.C. reached its highest stage to the extent that they could not work together. Each group strove to win the support of the G.C. and to outdo the other. The G.C. invited them to come to the field and settle their differences; neither wing heeded the call. Two months after Adobha conference, a faction of the Supreme Council under the leadership of Osman Salih Sabbe held a meeting in Omman and declared that it was still the leadership of the E.L.F. The General Command reacted by issuing an historic communique in which it condemned the Omman meeting and declared the dissolution of the S.C. in December 1969.

In the early seventies, the democratic struggle against the S.C. was blurred and thwarted when the E.L.F. was virtually split into four factions whose main protagonists were the very people who brought havoc to the Front, i.e. members of the Supreme Council, former members of the Revolutionary Command, zonal military leaders and the General Command which was not able to preserve its unity and to defend the democratic resolutions of Adobha.

The political and organizational developments of these factions will be dealt with below. What is worth mentioning here is that the inability to bridge the rift, the off-and-on bloody conflicts among the different organizations and the absence of a single body that would represent the Eritrean revolution as a whole are the main factors that have weakened the Eritrean struggle in the field and have casted doubts on the ability of our people to win victory and govern themselves democratically. This has consequently contributed, to a certain extent, to the deprivation of political support to our just cause.

External factors

The United Nations

The U.N. as the author of the Federal Resolution 390 A (V) that tied Eritrea to Ethiopia ought to have interfered when its resolution was transgressed and finally abrogated by Ethiopia. Such was the expectation and understanding of the Eritrean people when they accepted the resolution as had

the Panel of Legal Consultants quoted below from the Final Report of the U.N. Commissioner in Eritrea para. 201: "It is true that once the Federal Act and the Eritrean Constitution have come into force the mission entrusted to the General Assembly under the Peace Treaty with Italy will have been fulfilled and the future of Eritrea must be regarded as settled; but it does not follow that the United Nations will no longer have any right to deal with the question of Eritrea. The Federal Act and the Eritrean Constitution will still be based on the resolution of the United Nations and that international instrument will retain its full force. That being so, if it were necessary either to amend or to interpret the Federal Act, only the General Assembly, as the author of that instrument, would be competent to take a decision. Similarly, if the Federal Act were violated, the General Assembly could be seized of the matter."

Ethiopia, by its flagrant violation of the Federal Resolution, has shown its contempt for the U.N. as well as its unreliability. Thus, the status of Eritrea has been reversed to the pre-federal status i.e., colonial. Yet, to this day the U.N. has turned a deaf ear to the appeals of the Eritrean revolution and has been apathetic to the indiscribable sufferings of the Eritrean people. Hence, the U.N.'s indifference and negligence of its obligation has done incalculable damage to the Eritrean cause because it is tantamount to tacit approval of Ethiopia's distorted claim that the Eritrean question is its internal affair.

The Organization of African Unity

The O.A.U. does not recognize the Eritrean liberation struggle as a part and parcel of the continent's liberation movement. It evades the Eritrean question as a U.N. responsibility, since it had been dealt with by U.N. long before O.A.U. existed. However, the underlying reason is that many African states are so fearful of their own precarious make-up that they prefer to ignore the issue. In accordance with its Cairo meeting of 1964, the O.A.U. respects the boundaries of African States inherited from colonialism. Be that as it may, many of those who advocate respect for colonial

boundaries fail to take into consideration the fact that Eritrea has well-defined territorial boundaries inherited from colonialism. The borders between Eritrea and Ethiopia were demarcated at the Addis Ababa Treaty of 1896 between Ethiopia and Italy and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in Asmara in 1891. Thus, there is no justification for the O.A.U.'s refusal to deal with the Eritrean cause. The O.A.U., paying due respect to the U.N.'s resolutions and its own charter, justly advocates for the Namibian people's right to self-determination. It is unbecoming of its *raison d'être* to ignore the outrageous crimes being perpetuated against the Eritrean people for no other reason but simply because they are suffering under the hands of a black African power. So, the O.A.U.'s unwillingness to grapple with the Eritrean question for whatever reasons has been detrimental to the Eritrean cause. Nyerere is quoted to have said (*Africa Now*, December 1983), *inter alia*, "... There is an exaggerated respect for sovereignty and I think, we are wrong and we use the O.A.U. Charter as an excuse.... The other point is — and again we are all affected — who will cast the first stone? We look at ourselves and, to be honest, we say: 'I am not going to be the first one to cast the first stone.'" May he be the first one to cast the first stone at the coming O.A.U. meeting!

The Great Powers

The United States

Haile Selassie was supported by the U.S. in his unjust war against the just cause of our people. Without American military, economic and diplomatic support, imperial Ethiopia would not have been able to withstand the protracted war of liberation. The U.S. policy towards Eritrea remains against independence, and the Eritrean liberation movement is seen by Washington only as a potential tool to destabilize the Derg so as to bring about a change of rulers compatible to American interests. The long objective of the Eritrean revolution is to build a just society free from the exploitation of man by man and that is unacceptable to Washington. Hence the "champion of the free world" is

for the liquidation of the Eritrean revolution.

The Soviet Union

The U.S.S.R. was in favor of Eritrea's independence when the case was debated in the U.N. by the General Assembly in 1950. At present it has a diametrically opposite stand. Besides, without its massive military support the Derg would not be able to conduct its atrocious successive campaigns against the Eritrean revolution. In short, both the NATO and WARSAW countries have been unscrupulously taking part in the vain attempt of the Ethiopian rulers to quench the just struggle and democratic aspirations of the Eritrean people. This reminds us of the dictum: "There are no permanent friends and enemies but permanent interests." Regrettably, the Eritrean revolution still lacks shrewdness to single out primary enemies and to forge strong alliances with other forces, albeit potential enemies.

Arab Countries

Relatively speaking, the Eritrean revolution has succeeded in getting political, material and moral support thanks to its geographical proximity, cultural and historical ties to the Arab world. Indeed, the common struggle against Zionism and imperialism — i.e. Ethiopia's strong relations with the Zionist state of Israel and the U.S. — have enhanced recognition of the Eritrean revolution by several Arab countries.

However, the world being a cluster of systems, some of the Arab countries specifically Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Sudan have the intention of creating groups that will be under their thumbs in order to interfere in the internal affairs of the Eritrean revolution. This has weakened our revolution because they support and encourage discredited groups of our people. The Iraqi Ba'athist regime and its insignificant Eritrean lackeys falsely claim that Eritrea is an Arab land and Eritreans are Arabs. This has lent weight to Ethiopia's unfounded allegation that the Eritrean struggle is nothing but a secessionist movement instigated by the Arabs.

Mushrooming of liberation fronts

Eritrean Liberation Front (E.L.F.)

The E.L.F. convened its first National Congress by the end of 1971 and produced a National Democratic Program. After a decade of armed struggle, thanks to the E.L.F., enemies, friends, short term and long term objectives were clearly defined. It was a progressive program which aimed at winning independence and building a new democratic Eritrea. The first National Congress, with regard to national unity, resolved to exert efforts to rally behind its National Democratic program all nationalist forces so as to build one national democratic front under one leadership and one liberation army.

The Congress condemned Sabbe's wing of the Supreme Council and its henchmen, military leaders in the field who boycotted the Congress and stood against the democratization of the E.L.F. But it decided to approach their supporters through democratic dialogue. Essaias Afeworki's² faction was exempted from condemnation and a committee to contact it was set up.

During the same period the most active wing of the Supreme Council led by Osman Salih Sabbe — a splint from the E.L.F. — was busy in forming its own organization. It rallied behind it two other disgruntled factions headed by Essaias Afeworki and Adem Salih.³ The outcome was the formation of the Eritrean Liberation Front-Popular Liberation Forces (E.L.F./P.L.F.), at times they also called themselves Eritrean Popular Liberation Forces (E.P.L.F.). They did not have a common political program nor a unified leadership. Until 1973 every faction had its own military leaders in the field. Sabbe's wing changed its name to the Foreign Mission and represented three factions abroad. In 1973 the military figures of the three factions formed a Field Military Committee and integrated their forces. This was indeed an opportunist regrouping for survival of narrow group interests at the expense of national unity. Yet without any political program it posed itself as the democratic alternative to the E.L.F.

The E.L.F. did not succeed in attracting the supporters of the splinter groups for, in Eritrea like

in any other developing country, loyalty to one's clan, ethnic origin and/or religious denomination overrides class alliances. One the other hand, the Front was not bold enough to purge itself and its election of Idris Mohammed Adem,⁴ president of the Supreme Council until then, as its Chairman made some people look askance at it. Furthermore, the presence of two liberation armies led by narrow-minded people contending for supremacy plunged Eritrea into bloody fratricidal war in 1972. Contrary to the hypocritical claim of the fronts of each always being on the defensive, each was in fact doing its best to liquidate the other. The internecine strife — thanks to the civilian population's strong disapproval of the war and call for dialogue to settle differences as well as the ordinary fighters' reluctance to continue fighting against one another and the realization that neither could win the war — ended late in 1974. In fact, cessation of the hostilities and cooperation of both fronts played a big role in foiling Ethiopian thrusts in the suburbs of Asmara and in encouraging thousands of Eritreans from all walks of life to join them at that time.

In May 1975, the E.L.F. held its second National Congress and further deepened its national democratic program. It reconsidered its unity approach by repealing its previous discrimination of the E.P.L.F. leadership, and resolved to enter into democratic dialogue with them in order to solve secondary issues. Consequently, a number of negotiations took place until 1980. The first was held in Khartoum in September 1975. It resulted in nothing but serving as a pretext for a split within the E.P.L.F. in March 1976 — the Foreign Mission versus the Field Committee. But the real issue was a power struggle. The former realized that it had no significant followers in the field; so it strove to create an army of its own under the guise of unity; whereas the latter wanted to bring under its control the foreign domain as well.

The two E.P.L.F. splinter groups held their respective Congresses in the first quarter of 1977. The faction led by the Foreign Mission retained the name E.L.F./P.L.F. and the other called itself Eritrean People's Liberation Front (E.P.L.F.). The E.P.L.F. for the first time laid a political program which was fundamentally the same as that of the

E.L.F. The E.P.L.F. maintained that the E.L.F./P.L.F. were a group of reactionary elements; whereas the E.L.F. considered both of them nationalists and endeavored to unite the three organizations.

It is remarkable that when the E.L.F. condemned the Sabbe faction while exempting Essaias' faction, the latter chose to ally itself to the former and thereby escalated the civil war in the early seventies. When the E.L.F. called both splinter groups to negotiate, the E.P.L.F. (Essaias' part) refused to sit if the Sabbe group was to participate as well. The E.L.F./P.L.F. on its part exerted efforts to build its own organization with money, tribal and religious incitements. It succeeded in raising a few hundred fighters from the Eritreans living in the Sudan. The main architects were again Sabbe and Adem Salih's group. They couldn't go along together and another split occurred within them and took ethnic form. Thus, the three factions that united and boycotted the first National Congress of the E.L.F. responded to its offer for democratic dialogue after its second National Congress by widening the gap and creating new organizations.

The Struggle for Unity

The Eritrean people continued their efforts to unite the revolutionary forces. They are — regardless of their political inclinations, religious and ethnic origins — aware of the fact that there would be no victory without unity. Several attempts were made in 1976–77 through the "Eritrean People's Committee for Rapprochement" to mediate between the fronts to let "bygones be bygones." The overt stumbling block between the E.L.F. and the E.P.L.F. was their stands on the E.L.F./P.L.F., but actually the main reason was their different approaches to the unity question. The E.L.F. was in favor of the establishment of one national democratic front through a unification congress after a definite period for coordination; whereas the E.P.L.F. was for a united front for an indefinite period.

The Eritrean People's Committee was not able to resolve the issues. A handful of its members sympathizing with E.P.L.F. sabotaged its ac-

tivities because it was clear that the E.L.F.'s proposal was closer to the hearts and minds of the people. However, the main cause of its failure was its lack of organization and unity formula.

The E.P.L.F. could not state clearly what it meant by a united front. Sometimes it claimed that there was ideological difference between the fronts. But when it failed to substantiate this theoretically, it resorted to "We don't have ideological differences but we have differences in practice." It is to be recalled that even its General Secretary, Ramadan Mohammed Nur, in an official meeting in Damascus in April 1977, said, "By a united front, we mean just coordination, period; otherwise, you may call it even a packet of cigarettes." When he was pressed to give a reply to the question: How do you see yourself and how do you see the E.L.F.?, he said, "Both of them are national democratic fronts."

Many an E.L.F. fighter could discern behind the façade, "ideological difference, united front, unity of theory and practice, the stand on E.L.P./P.L.F., unity of democratic forces and elements, etc. . . ." to mean that the E.P.L.F. leadership was not prepared to stake its power on unity. On the other hand, the E.L.F.'s correct line was manipulated, though unsuccessfully, to strengthen the position of its right wing faction. After a long precious time was lost in beating about the bush, the E.L.F. and the E.P.L.F. signed the following unity agreement on October 20, 1977. They:

- (a) declared their determination to build one national democratic front in Eritrea;
- (b) agreed to form a Joint High Political leadership and joint committees in different fields: military, economic, social, information, etc.;
- (c) authorized the Joint High Political leadership to prepare for a unification congress;
- (d) called the third force (E.L.F./P.L.F.) to join either of them; and
- (e) resolved to meet again after a month to implement the agreement.

The broad masses of the Eritrean people welcomed this agreement' enthusiastically and pinned their hopes on it. However, they soon became disillusioned.

If the agreement was the outcome of a sincere dialogue, it would have been implemented. The truth is that it was concluded at a time when internal and external pressures by the people's and friendly countries' demand for unity was strong. Besides, the E.L.F./P.L.F.'s declaration that it would join the fronts if they united deprived the E.P.L.F. of its trump card of evading unity under the pretext of its stand of not sitting in a round-table negotiation including the "third force" (E.L.F./P.L.F.). Thus, knowledgeable observers of the Eritrean revolution accepted the agreement sceptically and were not surprised when it was betrayed. The E.P.L.F. did not respect the scheduled appointment to meet after a month under the pretext of being preoccupied with the Massawa war which it had initiated. The E.P.L.F. in contravention of the agreement, was conducting secret meetings with representatives of the Derg in the Democratic Republic of Yemen and the German Democratic Republic. Later on, the E.L.F. was also doing the same thing in secret meetings with Derg representatives in Italy. Moreover, the E.P.L.F. was physically liquidating in cold blood prominent E.L.F. cadres such as ZeEyesus, Gherezghiher and Kibrom. It was also harassing militia-men and peasants who staunchly supported the E.L.F.

The Joint Committees, formed after a great deal of effort, could not work harmoniously. Both fronts were responsible for this. When Ethiopia launched its offensives after it had received massive weapons from the Eastern Bloc, the E.P.L.F. not only refused to lend a hand in defending the border areas under E.L.F.'s control, but it spread false information about the decimation of the E.L.F. forces by the enemy. The E.P.L.F. boasted that there was no force capable of wresting Keren — then a liberated town — from its hands. Subsequently, when the enemy reoccupied Keren many E.L.F. sympathizers said, "We knew their turn would come;" a few were quite pleased. This demonstrates the gap and shortsightedness prevailing at that time between the two fronts.

The E.L.F. leadership was neither exposing E.P.L.F.'s destructive acts nor defending its fighters. Not because it was, as it pretends to be, responsible and didn't want to plunge Eritrea into a

civil war again, but because the right wing faction headed by Abdella Idris had the upper hand and just like the leadership of the E.P.L.F. didn't want to stake its powers on unity and had an interest in foiling the agreement.

E.P.L.F. gave the coup de grâce to the agreement when it, in cooperation with Tigray People's Liberation Front, (T.P.L.F.)⁵ launched military attacks against the E.L.F. in August 1980 which lasted a year. This immersed the Eritrean arena into fierce civil war again. Consequently, the Eritrean revolution was weakened in general and the E.L.F. in particular, due to its own internal weakness and the E.P.L.F. onslaughts as well as neighboring (Sudan, Saudi Arabia) regimes' plot against it. When the E.L.F. was forced to withdraw the bulk of its force to the Sudanese border area, the Sudanese authorities disarmed it. It was a political decision to deprive the E.L.F. from the decisive position it had held up to that time. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the number of fighters killed in the internecine clashes of the fronts exceeds that of those killed by the enemy. Indeed, this is one of the greatest services one can do for the Ethiopian rulers.

Comparison and Contrast between the E.L.F. and the E.P.L.F.

Each organization claims to be: a national democratic front; a true representative of the toiling masses of Eritrea; a champion of the question of national unity; and committed to Eritrea's total independence by means of armed struggle. The political program of the E.P.L.F. is more or less similar to that of the E.L.F. Both fronts declare that their ultimate goal is to create an independent and democratic Eritrea. The class origins of the fighters of both fronts are peasants, students, petty-bourgeois, intellectuals and workers. Both of them have been under the control of a group of people who advance their respective group's interests at the expense of the national and/or organizational interests as demonstrated by their handling of the unity question. They don't abide by the resolutions of their respective congresses. In 1975, the leaders of the E.L.F. and the E.P.L.F. were authorized to lead their organizations for one term of three and

two years respectively. But all of them have been in power for more than three terms, i.e. more than nine and six years respectively.

In its social composition, the E.L.F. reflects Eritrea in that it is a miniature of the Eritrean society. Therein lies its strength and weakness, in that its ability to win support of the overwhelming masses of Eritrea is a great asset, but in the absence of a competent leadership that can keep the balance, this turns out to be a liability which any ambitious politician may exploit through tribal, ethnic, religious, etc. differences to disrupt the unity of the organization. In fact this is what we have witnessed since 1976 until 1982. The E.P.L.F. is composed of almost solely from the Eritrean highlanders and a sect of the eastern lowlanders. Its more or less homogeneous composition contributes, relatively speaking, to its stability and cohesion.

Organizationally, the E.L.F. is loose and tolerates democratic expression of opinions; at times this "democratic toleration" turns out to be a fertile ground for adventurous, spontaneous movements which play into the hands of rightist and leftist opportunists. The E.P.L.F. is a solid organization with no democratic rights; it is characterized by a strict military discipline whose underlying sanction is fear of ruthless punishment.

Social Policies

Mass Organizations

The E.L.F. strives to encourage workers, peasants, women, youth, students, etc. to build democratic unions to safeguard their respective interests and to play their historic role in the armed struggle as well as in building a democratic Eritrea. It recognizes their semi-independent status. The E.P.L.F. has also started to organize different mass organizations after its congress but one may see them just as an appendage to its military policies; a school for its chauvinist propaganda, totally dominated by its political bureau. With an exception of a few enquiring ones, they are blind to the contradictory and erroneous information they get. They might end up in a mass base for a fascist force short of an eye-opener development.

The E.L.F.'s Social Affairs Bureau, true to its from-people-to-people program, has been motivating, organizing and guiding the peasants to play an active role in improving their living conditions. Thus, the E.L.F. has given basic medical courses to youngsters so as to enable them to render first aid services to their respective areas, and provided medical personnel to densely populated areas. The inhabitants have also shared in providing material needs such as medicines, and building clinics, etc. as well as in administration through a committee elected by them and responsible for them. The same can be said in the field of education. It tries to imbue Eritrean children with scientific knowledge and love of humanity.

The E.P.L.F. also gives medical and educational services to the people. However, the striking difference between the manners of the two organizations is that the E.P.L.F. does not believe in conscious and active participation of the masses and dismantled a number of schools and clinics under E.L.F.'s control in 1977-80 just because they were run under the auspices of the E.L.F. For the E.P.L.F., the broad masses are just like clay which have to be moulded, willy-nilly, as it sees fit.

Land Reform

The E.L.F. issued and executed land reform proclamations with full participation of the peasants. It benefitted especially the poor peasants and women who had never had the right to hold land on their own save through their husbands. No peasant was prohibited from tilling his plot for his support of the E.P.L.F. As a matter of fact few of E.P.L.F.'s supporters were members of the executing local committees. Such policy was consciously pursued by the E.L.F. at a time, when the E.P.L.F. was not letting E.L.F. supporters plough their fields under its control specifically in the region known as Bahri in Hamassien. The E.P.L.F. has never provided a studied land reform program, and when the E.L.F. declared its proclamation, the E.P.L.F. opposed it and did its best to hinder it,

though it did also conduct some land reform acts in some areas.

Question of Establishing Village Committees

The E.L.F. was doing away with the old feudal system of administrating a village by a tribal chief and substituting it with a democratically elected village committee composed of five persons. But the E.P.L.F. was for the old order at first and later on started to follow suit anomalously.

Dealing with Justice

The E.L.F. has had two separate courts: a military court exclusively deals with the E.L.A. and spies, and a civil court settles disputes that might arise among the people. Furthermore, prosecution and execution of justice were not conferred on one and the same body but on two separate ones. The E.L.F. was paying due respect to traditional rules and saw to it that village committees were settling cases accordingly. Nevertheless, where it felt imperative need for change, it led the people to take necessary steps to have them changed.

The E.P.L.F.'s HALEWA SEWRA "Guard of Revolution" — security department — plays the role of prosecutor and executor. It is an open secret that many people became mad after the inhuman treatment they had undergone for a long period of time in E.P.L.F.'s prisons without even being told what crimes they were accused of. Besides, without providing any alternative law to the traditional rules, it gave authority to its cadres to use their discretion to deal with disputes among peasants. Indeed, many an Eritrean knows that the E.P.L.F. does not care about justice and that is why it is nicknamed the "small Derg."

Indoctrination and Propaganda

The E.L.F. exerts efforts to imbue its fighters with a scientific concept of the national democratic revolution. It has attempted to spread basic tenets of historical materialism. Since the term "nationalization" has been abused it might be proper to cite how it was presented by both fronts. The E.L.F. maintains that it is the main sectors of

the economy such as the means of production, natural resources, banks, communications and transportation, etc., which should be nationalized and geared to uproot the cause of exploitation and to attain economic independence and steady development.

The E.P.L.F. might as well have tried to do the same, but what is conspicuous is that it has been deliberately inculcating in its fighters erroneous concepts of nationalization, united front, political consciousness, etc. The intention was to give justification for their anti-unity stand. The E.P.L.F. fighters' understanding of the question is shockingly odd, for they will sincerely argue that personal properties such as watches and rings are objects that ought to be nationalized. The fact that the E.P.L.F., unlike the E.L.F., divests new recruits of their personal belongings such as watches, rings and any amount of money — they might prefer to keep — was cited time and again as evidence of ideological difference!

In the field of propaganda, the E.P.L.F. by far excels the E.L.F. because of the cohesion and capacity of its leadership to exploit successfully the intellectual force of its supporters who gained knowledge of propaganda and agitation. One should also take into consideration that the highlanders, the bulk of E.P.L.F. supporters, had a greater chance for educational opportunities than other compatriot lowlanders — due to unequal socio-economic development — a by-product of colonial policies. This accounts for much of E.P.L.F.'s success in propaganda. Also in the field of efficiency the E.P.L.F. has shown its superiority to the E.L.F. Indeed it deserves admiration.

Leadership

The E.L.F.'s historical development and social composition didn't allow it to become a one-man-organization. So, the coalition of petty-bourgeois right wing and left wing opportunists have had the upper-hand for a long time under the domination of the rightists. The leaders as a whole were neither committed to the letter and spirit of, nor were they able to defend, the N.D.P. of the E.L.F. They didn't have harmony even in the face of attacks. They were not able to contain their contradictions

and meet the challenge single-mindedly, for they were giving priorities to their respective factions.

However, there has been room for liberal tendencies. The Administrative Committees⁶ were more or less free to implement the National Democratic Program in the light of their respective circumstances. This shows that there was no strict central guidance. Nevertheless, the rank and file of the F.L.F. have, by and large, succeeded in inculcating in the broad masses what the organization stands for and have played a great role in politicizing of the people. But they were not organized enough to defend their organization and to settle accounts democratically with the leadership. This explains, in part, the causes for E.L.F.'s success or failure.

Ever since the E.P.L.F. quenched what it called "destructive movement" ("Menca Movement")⁷ in 1973, it evolved into a sort of one-man organization, at the head of petty-bourgeois leftist opportunists. It strives to achieve supremacy in Eritrea by fair or foul means. It is so centralized and efficient that it can have its plans executed easily. It is so ruthless that nobody — among its rank and file — dares question its wisdom. It is so powerful that it can make its fighters swallow rules that deprive them of their democratic rights under the pretext of organizational interests. No fighter has the right to confide in another; no fighter can have a private talk with his parents or relatives except in the presence of another fighter. It has been able to guard itself by recruiting agents who conduct secret surveillance. Thus, the fighters are filled with awe, because feelings of suspicion prevail among them. One thing is clear, no matter how strong the E.P.L.F. leadership is at present, sooner or later they will be exposed and discredited just like the way many tyrants before them were thrown into the dust heap of history, for they can neither fool nor subjugate the Eritrean people indefinitely.

The Fronts' Images Before the Eritrean Public

The E.P.L.F. opted for Machiavelian methods — to be feared rather than loved; to do anything that helps attain its goal whereas the E.L.F. chose the reverse. So the former is feared and latter is loved. Would the peasants love the E.P.L.F. when it buys

their coffee, fruit of their labor — not even letting them take any home for personal use — and then sells it back to them at double the price? This happened in Bahri-Hamassien. The E.P.L.F. prohibited any peasant or civilian town-dweller who happened to come from the E.L.F. controlled area to benefit from its markets while the E.L.F. did not take any such measures against the people who came from E.P.L.F.-held areas. If one commits minor mistakes or is suspected of being an E.L.F. supporter, one is taken away from his land and forced to till E.P.L.F.'s fields for days or weeks. Many have been imprisoned and killed for the same "offense."

The E.P.L.F. confiscates grain collected by the peasants for both fronts for selfish ends and to foster hostility between the E.L.F. and the peasants; whereas the E.L.F. is content with exposing the willful acts of the E.P.L.F. Farmers, in the fertile Hazomo area for instance, were compelled to give at first a fifth and later a quarter of their produce to the E.P.L.F. under the pretext of helping them to distribute the land it retained for its own use as it did in Adi-Tekelezan. A peasant who was not present during land distribution had to pay fifty Ethiopian dollars to the E.P.L.F., as happened in Gura, to get his share of the land. Contrary to the desire and call of the Eritrean people, the E.P.L.F. launches attacks against the E.L.F. by forging alliances with aliens.

Therefore, in spite of all its defects, the E.L.F. is seen by the majority of the Eritrean people as the embodiment of their democratic aspirations whereas they see in E.P.L.F.'s Eritrea nothing but a military dictatorship. Those who know the E.P.L.F. from afar or superficially or were subjected to its effective propaganda may raise their eye-brows to hear this, but to an Eritrean insider, it is not to be wondered at.

Unwarranted Meddling in the Internal Affairs of the Eritrean Revolution

It is understandable if friends and supporters of the Eritrean revolution urge for unity and put forward constructive ideas. However, some have been trying to dictate the course of the Eritrean revolution. What Sudan and Saudi Arabia are doing now is a

case in point. Thousands of E.L.F. fighters, avoiding bloodshed, handed over their weapons to Sudanese authorities with the hope of getting them back as soon as possible. It turned out to be a vain hope. Abdella Idres,⁸ E.L.F.'s former head of the military office, staged a coup d'état in March 1982 with full support of Khartoum and Riyadh. Consequently, Sudan withdrew its recognition from the main leadership of the E.L.F. headed by Ahmed Nasser⁹ and declared unequivocally that it would not accord facilities to the main E.L.F. anymore.

Under such circumstances the main E.L.F. led by its vice-chairman Dr. Habte-Tesfamariam (Ahmed Nasser was still under Abdella's prison) concluded a unity agreement with Sabbe's E.L.F./P.L.F. Though Sabbe managed to get the upper hand, his organization proved to be incapable of playing a role in building an effective national democratic front. The Revolutionary Council in its April 1984 statement declared the agreement null and void. From the very beginning it was doubtful whether the E.L.F. leadership took a wise step, because it should have been taken for granted that Sabbe's notorious clique could never be a haven for the E.L.F. Time has shown that it was a wrong option, for it was not a principled one.

Again the problem is that individual/clique and organizational interests come before national interests. The E.L.F./P.L.F. seem to have opted to lie low now and just maintain a nominal liberation army in the periphery of the Sudan. The E.L.F. has been victimized because of its progressive program, its unwillingness to be a pawn in the hands of any power and its determination to conduct its internal and foreign policies independently. When Ahmed Nasser went to Moscow in 1978 and 1980 and met some Soviet officials, the Saudis were shocked, and the Sudanese were displeased for not being informed of his trip beforehand. They felt their own systems would be threatened if some sort of compromise solution were reached between the E.L.F. and Ethiopia through the mediation of the Soviet Union. Their fear might have been reinforced by some irresponsible, adventurous and ill-studied statements of the E.L.F. leadership, intending to curry favor with the Soviet Union. What they might not know is that the rank and file of the E.L.F. were protesting such opportunistic moves.

According to the wishes of the Saudi and Sudanese authorities, the three factions headed by Osman Salih Sabbe, Abdella Idris and Adem Salih were to be united half a years ago! But nothing concrete has been done so far, except the signing of a unity agreement in Jiddah in January 1983. The E.P.L.F. on its part has forwarded a so-called unity proposal which recognizes political independence of Eritrean organizations and individuals but calls them to join the military wing of the E.P.L.F. This emanates from its obsession to be the sole authority in Eritrea. It is not democratic but domineering. Therefore, neither the tripartite agreement nor the E.P.L.F.'s proposal could be accepted by the E.L.F. The E.L.F.'s unity proposal remains the same: democratic dialogue, on equal footing, to solve secondary contradictions and to build one national democratic front in Eritrea.

Even now the E.L.F. is made a scapegoat for the failure of the tripartite agreement. So the Sudanese authorities have started to hunt and imprison prominent E.L.F. members expecting that it will facilitate the creation of an Islamic force whose main spokesman would be Osman Sabbe, Abdella Idris and Adem Salih. Those who have been arrested since August 1983 are:

1. Ibrahim Mohammed Ali, member of the Revolutionary Council, former head of the Social Affairs Bureau.
2. Ammanuel Habte, Brigade Political Commissioner and a member of the Provisional Military Committee of the Eritrean Liberation Army.
3. Ramadan Salih, General Administrator of Unit 10 and a member of the E.L.A. Provisional Military Committee.
4. Abdella Nasser, member of Administration Board-Economic Officer.
5. Mohammed-Nur Abdukahsai, Brigade Political Commissioner.
6. Tekle Melekin, a member of the Administration Board, Political Bureau.
7. Berhane Ghebrekidan, in charge of supply, Economic Bureau.
8. Menghistab Asmerom, a Board member of Cadres' School.
9. Ghirmai Ghebresellasie, member of the Revolutionary Council.
10. Woldesus Ammar, head of Foreign Information Office.

The E.L.F. is falsely accused of being a communist organization in the Arab countries and that is why it has been singled out, especially its democratic force, as an imperialist target. Contradictory as it might sound it is also denigrated as a conservative pro-Arab, Islamic front in American and Europe. How can one reconcile such contradictory statements?

Vicissitudes of the Eritrean Revolution

During the relatively peaceful coexistence of both the E.L.F. and the E.P.L.F. in 1975–80, a great deal of ups and downs took place. By mid-1978 the whole country was liberated by either the E.L.F. or the E.P.L.F. except five towns — Asmara, Massawa, Assab, Barentu and Adi-Keih — which were also besieged and repeatedly attacked. However, due to lack of unity and massive military support of the Soviet Union to the Derg, the balance of power tilted towards the enemy and both fronts were forced to make strategic retreats to the countryside.

In 1978 the Constituent Congress of the General Union of Eritrean Peasants, attended by 460 democratically elected peasant representatives, was successfully concluded under the following slogans: "To strengthen worker-peasant alliance," "To equitably and democratically settle the burning question of land," "To establish cooperative works as bases for the transition to the socialist relations of productions," and "To cement class unity of the poor and middle peasants." Now its viability has been greatly hampered.

From 1975 to 1977 nationalist sentiment was at its peak; thousands of youngsters were eager to join the military wing of either the E.L.F. or E.P.L.F. Both fronts could not afford to absorb all of them and they literally had to turn back thousands of them. Nowadays, though the wish to see an independent Eritrea still prevails, eagerness to actively participate has waned. The main reason is the inability of the leadership of the Eritrean fronts to subordinate their petty interests to the common national interest.

It is high time Eritrean revolutionaries abandon the vicious circle of putting the wrong order to priorities — with individual, clique and/or organi-

zational interest put before national interest; realize that all the splits within the Eritrean revolution (1970–82) point out that backward relations override class alliances and that to fight more diligently and responsibly an objective appraisal of the internal and external conditions is needed so as to consolidate and deepen the democratic gains; become aware of the fact that criticizing the leadership is not a remedy and the revolutionaries should make their presence felt among the masses by setting a good example in words and deeds through commitment to the National Democratic Program.

The struggle goes on, but the right way of attaining national unity, the prerequisite for national independence has yet to be fought for!

Notes

1. The ELM attempted to conduct armed struggle in the field in 1965 but was liquidated militarily by the E.L.F.

2. Essaias Afeworki is now Vice-General Secretary of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front; he is the strongest man within the organization.

3. Adem Salih is now the head of the Military Office of E.L.F./P.L.F. His faction used to call itself Eritrean Liberation Forces, 3rd group E.P.L.F.; it was commonly called Obelawain after the name of the place where it established its organization. It is favored by Iraq though it doesn't play any conspicuous role in the liberation war; whereas Sabbes' is favored by the Gulf Emirates.

Essaias and A. Salih were members of the General Command.

4. I.M. Adem was Chairman of the Eritrean Assembly. He resigned when Ethiopia abolished the two Eritrean official languages, Tigrigna and Arabic; he has now retired from politics.

5. The T.P.L.F. is an Ethiopian organization that fights for Tigrai's (an Ethiopian province) right to self-determination. It unfairly meddled in the internal affairs of the Eritrean revolution.

6. The E.L.F. has divided Eritrea into 12 administrative units. It used to assign an Administrative Committee to each unit. The Committee consists of a General Administrator, Political Commissioner, representatives of the military, security and Social-Affairs and economic Bureaus (altogether six persons).

7. Menca Movement is a movement sprouted within the E.P.L.F. It alleged that the democratic rights of the fighters was not respected and demanded the establishment of a committee that controls the observance of the fighters' democratic rights. It exploited the contradiction that existed among the leaders at that time. The leadership managed to contain its contradiction and liquidated the leaders of the movement. This took place in 1973.

8. Abdella Idris represented the conservative right wing within the E.L.F. As soon as he realized his exposure and the weakening of his position, he didn't hesitate to betray the National Democratic Program of the E.L.F. and put himself at the service of Saudi Arabia and Sudan. He has a few hundred followers mainly from western lowlands who profess Islam.

9. Ahmed Nasser, was E.L.F.'s chairman since 1975; he was under Abdella's custody from March 25, 1982 until January 1983. At present, Ahmed Nasser has assumed the E.L.F.'s chairmanship.

Mekalh Harnet is a pen name of an Eritrean who teaches at a university in W. Europe.