

THE ETHIO-ERITREAN CRISIS: WHY?

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Before we embark into investigating the causes and implications of the current Ethio-Eritrean conflict, it is very important, in the first place, to have a thorough understanding of the nature and evolution of the relationship between the forces at the helm of the conflict, namely the TPLF & EPLF or to be formal the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea.

RELATIONS AS FRONTS:

The struggle against the military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam brought these two nationalist forces, the TPLF & the EPLF closer together to form basically a military alliance. Politically, the TPLF supported the struggle for the Eritrean independence while EPLF reciprocated by supporting the self-determination of Tigray within the Ethiopian political framework.

At the same period, the TPLF strived to maintain relationship with the ELF, another contending nationalist force in Eritrea, but this relationship from the beginning was compounded with a number of problems which lead to animosity and finally in 1987 was completely broken as war erupted between the ELF on one side and the EPLF and TPLF on the other. Militarily, the ELF was defeated and forced out from its base area. This war, no doubt, enabled the EPLF to control the entire rural Eritrea with no contending force. So much so, the TPLF also emerged as a sole force in Tigray after driving out the forces of the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). All this was done by sheer military force.

The EPLF in Eritrea and the TPLF in Tigray were now the only well organized military forces that would determine the ensuing struggle against Mengistu's military regime and evidently the future political shape of that area. Although they were fighting to topple the same military dictatorship of the Derg, and hence quite rational to form a military alliance and effectively coordinate their military activities, nevertheless, they appeared to have nothing in common politically. Their political agendas or programs were mutually exclusive: the EPLF striving the independence of Eritrea from Ethiopia and the TPLF opting for the self-determination of Tigray within the bounds of Ethiopia.

True, since the formation of the TPLF in 1975, both the TPLF and the EPLF had started as intimate partners of struggle against the military regime of Mengistu. They effectively coordinated their military assault. Each participated in the others theatre of

operation as one army under one command. Together, they shed blood in one or the other front against the same enemy.

Politically though, serious differences had emerged that resulted in severing relationships for quite some times until military necessities forced them to work together again. A remarkable break off unfolded in 1985, when the Meles Zenawi group created a Stalinist party known as the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) within the TPLF and characterized the EPLF leadership as bourgeois roader and puppet of imperialism, incapable of realizing Eritrean independence. To make matters worst, the TPLF had harboured leftist ELF splinter organizations like Sageme and Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea (DMLE), with the aim of supplanting the EPLF. On its part, the EPLF had closed the out let to the Sudan which the TPLF was using to transport relief aid for the 1985 famine victims in Tigray. Despite the occasional emergence of such difference, relations of the two fronts appeared to run smooth basically because of the dictates of military realities posed by the common enemy.

However the relations appeared rectified, the political scares which were caused by the ideological dagger were so deep rough differences were liable to reemerge at any moment especially when there was no dire threat from a common enemy that calls for alliance. The existence of the radical opposition fronts, even at a distance, were constant reminders of the threat the TPLF, in collaboration with the ELF splinters, could cause to the very existence of the EPLF as a political force in Eritrea.

Bogged by its own internal contradictions and rejected by the Ethiopian people who could no more bear its authoritarian rule, the Derg failed to resist any offensive and even was unable to complete the then on going peace negotiation sponsored by the USA at London in May 1991. (A sponsorship of these with military muscle that excluded democratic political forces which happened to be one of the seeds of prevailing instability in that region...).

In any case, the military alliance enabled both the EPLF and the TPLF to get rid of Mengistu's military regime and establish an EPLF lead government in Eritrea and a TPLF lead EPRDF's government in Ethiopia in May 1991. The formation of an independent government in Eritrea and the creation of an EPRDF government in Ethiopia was concluded with out the participation of major political forces who had meaningful share in the struggle and had significant number of constituency. These political forces are still banned from working inside their respective countries and are forced to operate as an opposition from out side. Had these political groups been included in the USA sponsored London talks, and hence in the transitional process which got the support of some European governments including the Dutch, that subsequently was manipulated by the EPLF and the TPLF, it would have been possible to strictly define the nature and modalities of the relationship between Ethiopia and the newly emerging state of Eritrea, thereby avoiding any ambiguity that evidently appeared to be the cause for indulging in war.

EPLF and TPLF in power:

Their joint military venture based on the exceptional determination of their armies and the full cooperation of both people who despised the military regime helped both the EPLF and the TPLF to assume power in Eritrea and Ethiopia respectively. The TPLF immediately transformed itself from a nationalist into a multi-nationalist organization known as the EPRDF by including hardly known small groups like the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), later called Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO).

With out consultation of the concerned Ethiopian people, the EPRDF under Meles took two highly sensitive measures which perhaps affected the inner feelings of almost every Ethiopian.

(a). the endorsement of Eritrea's independence in the name of the Ethiopian people without their mandate. Meles offered Eritrea what was not his, and that was painful to every Ethiopian.

(b). the policy to restructure the political set up of the whole country on Ethic basis, purely an adventurous experiment.

These and other undemocratic measures placed the EPRDF from the beginning, in direct confrontation with the Ethiopian people and the major political and civic organizations who have meaningful representation of the people.

Equally in Eritrea, the EPLF under Isayas totally rejected even a symbolic participation of opposition parties and civic groups in the political process shaping new Eritrea.

These two developments in Ethiopia and Eritrea which have generated massive opposition from all parties and civic groups who for obvious reasons do not comply to the enforced political process, naturally exerted immense pressure on both governments that constantly put them in highly precarious position. Although the defiance is more vigorous and visible on EPRDF both were compelled by the volatile circumstances to renew their alliance by signing a military pact, this time power politics and infantile diplomacy included. So they did rejuvenate their military alliance with a wider scope of security and intelligence schemes.

This hard reality was the corner stone of their cooperation after both seized power in their respective domains.

The fact that the EPLF had more experienced army and relatively advanced military organization than that of the TPLF/EPRDF placed it at a vantage point to manoeuvre and take advantage of the relationship, the summation of which have led to the present crisis.

Now let us look into some of the major factors that contributed to the coming forth of the current conflict.

-1- Immediately when the EPLF seized power in Eritrea, it took drastic measures of expelling Ethiopians who had established their living there for years with out the faintest idea that one day they would be treated as foreigners. Many lost their jobs while others could not take their properties with them. The EPRDF government took no measure to defend the rights of its citizens and in fact it stood by the side of the EPLF government in condemning those Ethiopians as associates of the defunct Derg. (Ref. EPRDF News BU. Aug 30, 1991). While Eritreans in Ethiopia were treated with respect.

-2- Ever since Eritrea declared independence, a number of pertinent issues including the status of Eritreans living in Ethiopia who hitherto had Ethiopian citizenship and the privileges that goes with it, particularly in the sphere of property ownership, trade and government job opportunities have never been defined. While in Eritrea, the privileges an Eritrean would enjoy vis a vis that of an Ethiopian or any foreigner for that matter were set in place. This unfair relationship, obviously placed the Eritrean to grab more privileges than his Ethiopian counterpart.

-3- During the march to Addis Ababa in May 1991, an EPLF mechanized brigade took an active role and later on part of this brigade remained in Addis to take care of Meles Zenawi's security. The obscure presence and free mobility of this mechanized contingent was opposed even by the TPLF army including the defence minister Seye Abreha who subsequently was removed of his post for he could not go along with the intruders of his professional domain.

-4- Eritrean opposition parties including these favoured by the TPLF leadership which were and are still banned in Eritrea were also forced to close their offices and live in Ethiopia. Some of the opposition, specifically ELF-RC members, were even detained until they were rescued by human rights organizations like Amnesty International before they were declared "disappeared".

-5- Until last year, Eritrea had no currency of its own. The EPRDF allowed it to use the Ethiopian Birr, by which the Eritrean government would purchase Ethiopian products that earn foreign currency (products like coffee, hide and oil seeds) and exported it to earn hard currency for its own, obviously depleting Ethiopia's foreign earnings. When the Eritrea government issued its own currency called Nakfa, the expectation was that it would circulate on parity with Birr. However, such expectations in the face of stiff world economic realities proved to be hollow and the Nakfa has to find its right place, way down the Birr and Eritrea has to bear the burden of yielding its own products for export. This matter, perhaps was the most serious incident that turned the EPLF government to go for war.

-6- The boarder issue, which had never been addressed in the conventional way since Menelik and the Italians signed a treaty at Wuchale on the 2 May 1889, could not lead to war because the TPLF and EPLF governments have not even talked about it seriously, unless they wanted it as a pretext to cover up the dire causes of the war ie. the internal economic and political instability in both cases. The question 'Who started the war in May 1998?' is not so important, simply because both governments have been creating the conditions for war by forging an unbalanced and unfair relationship that was liable to break any moment when confronted with hard economic and political realities, conventionally referred as 'national interest'. Driven by too ambitious dreams of lifting a nation to the level of Hong Kong in one go, each was rushing to claim and control what ever resource was available within its vicinity. Naturally, this state of affair led to wroth confrontation, including armed clashes in places like Humera, Badema and Bada for one or the other reason. In his recent interview (25 June 1998) with Florence Aubenas (a French journalist ?), Isayas Afewerki refers to the incident in July 1997, where two Ethiopian Battalions entered Eritrea from Tigray as one instance. Meles, on the other hand, in his interview with Asser flatly denied occurrence of any clashes or even differences and went on to deceive the Ethiopian people declaring, "our relation's document is signed with ink and blood" (Asser, 2nd/no.9. Dec.-Feb.98).

-7- Ever since the Italians set foot in what is known now as Eritrea and began to carve out its boundaries since late 1890s, except for Menelik II, no other Ethiopian leader recognized an independent Eritrea let alone a demarcated boarder between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This is not to say that boarder issue of Eritrea was without controversies. For most of Eritrea's existence as an entity, it was a provincial matter that had been settled by local administration. Once Eritrea declared independence, the first task of both governments should have been to clearly set the boarder relationship by defining or redefining it, instead of letting any one of them claim what ever land they feel is theirs picking this or that map which suites their ambitions.

By way of addressing the nature of the conflict, here it is worth observing that the boarder issue was just one ordinary element and not by any means the only driving cause of the conflict

So the May 98 war that erupted in the Ethio-Eritrea boarder area was not simply caused by boarder disagreement, although boarder dispute may have partially contributed to the conflict. As I have tried to state earlier, the root causes of the conflict lies in the economic and political contention the two governments are indulging in as a way of resolving their respective problems, coupled with their incapability to devise a comprehensive and integrated scheme with their respective people and intelligentsia, to address the deep rooted socio-economic problem the society they claim to represent is confronted and forge a viable democratic cooperation.