

## **The Ideological and Political Causes of the Ethio-Eritrean War**

An Insiders View

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Dear chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

I first of all would like to thank the initiators of this conference for their endeavour to explore and contribute to the peaceful resolution of the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

I would also like to thank all of you, who have shown great concern and interest in resolving the bloody predicament of the two countries and have used your energy and resources to attend this conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great opportunity to be able to debate and express our opinions in an open and free atmosphere, and without fear to any authority. I am sure if we had this chance at home, we could have averted this tragic war long before it happened.

Ladies and gentlemen

In my deliberation to day, I am going to see the different causes of this conflict and the possible solution out of this predicament. As the chairman explained, I have been part of the movements (the TPLF and EPLF) for 12 years and have been through the ups and downs of the relationships between these two organisations. Therefore some of the information presented here is from my own experience, which I personally had encountered or participated. Hence this paper presents the development of events that led to the present situation, and is more narrative than analytic.

Since its inception in 1975 the TPLF, while looking for the support of the Eritrean fronts, was also aware of the difficulties to balance the relationship to the two fronts in Eritrea, the EPLF and the ELF. Both of the Eritrean fronts directly or indirectly demanded loyalty to them. This was a difficult task to TPLF, but the first decision it made was to consider both fronts as representatives of the Eritrean people and to have an equal and free relationship with both of them. As you can imagine, this was not without any cost. There was pressure from both fronts, and support was not forthcoming as the TPLF expected.

From the outset the TPLF had sent two parallel delegations to both EPLF and ELF at the same time. The first military training and small armaments were received from the EPLF, which however created suspicion in the ELF. The frictions between the TPLF and ELF started at the early stages of the TPLF. The operational areas of the TPLF and ELF were

geographically close and hence ELF's interference, pressure and involvement in Tigray were frequent. The ELF was also trying to support more loyal groups like TLF and EDU and later on, the EPRP. The relationship with ELF was polarized even more by ELF's border control regiment's claim of some of the border regions (like Badme, Zalambesa, and Bada), and some military activities inside Tigray without the consent of the TPLF. Several attempts were made to solve the problems between these two fronts. As the supposed loyal groups disappeared due to their confrontation with TPLF, there was no choice for the ELF but to accept the TPLF as a credible force. Hence, there was some good relationship for a short time and resulted in a small support in the form of armaments and diplomatic missions from the ELF. The outlet to the Sudan through the ELF controlled area was smoothened, meaning control and restrictions were reduced. But the border problem still remained. In an attempt to improve relations, several meetings were held between the TPLF and the ELF leadership. As to my knowledge, there has never been an official claim of the border areas by the ELF leadership. However it was always a cause for provocation and conflict between the two fronts, which even at last led to the final show up of forces in 1983.

After the initial support of training and supply of weapons, for twenty fighters of the TPLF in 1975, the relationship between the EPLF and TPLF was frozen until 1978. The warm relationship between EPLF and EPRP was mainly to account for this development. The EPLF was inclined to support the EPRP because the later was popular and visible in the Ethiopian politics. Furthermore, the EPLF was very reserved to support nationalistic movements to avoid diplomatic allegations that it was working to dismember Ethiopia. The EPLF was also worried that the emergence of other national movements in Ethiopia would undermine its cause for independence in the diplomatic sphere. By 1979, the relationship between EPRP and EPLF had faded due to political disagreement on the Eritrean independence issue. By then, the EPRP has lost its popularity in Ethiopia, weekend by the red terror and internal divisions. At that time, the EPRP was also militarily driven by the TPLF out of Tigray, while on the contrary the TPLF has consolidated politically and militarily. As a result of all these developments, the EPLF and the TPLF started to restore their relationship. Soon they started military co-operation against the 1st military campaign by the Derg in Eritrea. This improvement in relationship was manifested in all fields of co-operation: in diplomacy, public relations, mass media, military and material. Thousands of recruits from TPLF were trained in EPLF, and in 1983 thousands of fighters were sent to the trenches of EPLF to support the EPLF against the 'Key Kokeb Zemetcha'. This was the height of the relationship, unfortunately it didn't last long.

Until 1982 the relationship between the EPLF and TPLF was unbalanced. It was the TPLF which tried to mend relationships and acquire some help from the EPLF. The EPLF was superior, paternal and arrogant. This attitude of the EPLF, if not on the grassroot level, had caused great ill feelings in the leadership of the TPLF. But things changed after 1982. At that time it was not only the TPLF which needed a better relationship but also the EPLF. The rapid military growth of the TPLF had made it a force to be reckoned with and to be counted upon by the EPLF. As the EPLF was pressed by huge military campaigns of the Derg in its trenches, it badly needed military support from the TPLF. Now, relationships became mutually balanced and reciprocal. Both needed each other.

While areas of co-operation improved, areas of misunderstanding, competition and conflict also emerged. Inside the TPLF political and military issues which question the merits of participation in the trenches of EPLF were raised. Issues concerning the political lines of the EPLF and its democratic nature became agitational. Heated debates and disagreements flared among the fighters of both fronts in the trenches of EPLF. Besides, arms captured by joint operations, the non-governmental organisations (NGO's), the diplomatic circles, etc. became areas of contention and competition. The two fronts, which were at the heights of co-operation, soon began to depart and heading towards confrontation.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to enumerate and elaborate a little more on this.

#### 1. The Political and Ideological disagreements:

From 1982, the TPLF was preparing for the formation of a Marxist-Leninist party which resulted in 1985. As a result, there was a wide movement and campaign to maintain political and ideological clarity. There was no issue that was untouched or unravelled. The intention for such a movement was of course genuine, but ended up in galvanising a conspiratory group. The people who were responsible for the proceedings (Abay Tsehaye and Meles Zenawi in the political department) misused the movement for their political ambitions. During this period they got the opportunity to learn the conspiracy machination of Stalin and Mao Zeidong. To gain upper hand on the political forum in the TPLF, they dwelled on issues which separate them with their political adversaries inside the TPLF (Ghidey and Aregawi), which of course compelled them to take adventurist moves and positions on their external relationships. This was the period of complete

madness and confusion in the TPLF. The leadership failed to handle internal and external differences democratically. It became completely dogmatic and conspiratory. We will soon see why I am saying this, while confining my self to the issues related to the EPLF.

The main political disagreements with the EPLF can be summarised as follows:

- On the nature of the Soviet Union. The TPLF considered it as social imperialist while the EPLF considered it as a wronged socialist friend
- On the question of nationalities. The TPLF recognised self-determination including and upto secession while the EPLF didn't accept secession under a democratic system.
- On the military strategy of the EPLF. The TPLF was opposed to the trench warfare of the EPLF and urged mobile guerrilla-warfare tactics.
- On the question of united front in Eritrea. The TPLF opposed the united front proposal by EPLF to Eritrean forces, and also on defining the nature of national forces.

To the details of these issues, I would refer you to the paper published by the TPLF, in Tigringa, under the title " The Eritrean Struggle From Where to Where, April 1984" pp. 96-172.

There was no disagreement internally in TPLF on the political stands related to EPLF, but on how to handle the difference. The political differences were raised on a meeting between the two fronts (where I also participated) in November 1984. At the beginning the EPLF was not receptive to the proposal by the TPLF to communicate these differences to respective fighters, but at the end agreed to do so. The TPLF went even further. The Meles' group wanted to publicly campaign against EPLF. This of course infuriated the EPLF and was an issue of dissent inside the TPLF. This was not a crucial political deviation for the TPLF, which could not be avoided, but the Meles' group wanted to capitalise on the issue to gain upper hand inside the TPLF by characterising the opposition as pragmatist. In the course of my presentation it would be clear if the TPLF was really guided by principles rather than pragmatism. For details of the differences in this issue I refer you to the publication of the TPLF in Amharic titled "Evaluation of the 10 years struggle by the communist core in the TPLF " endorsed by the 1st congress of the MMLT, July 1984 pp. 46-52.

The military participation of TPLF in the trenches of EPLF was also another source of dissent in the TPLF. The Meles' group totally opposed sending TPLF's army to the trenches while the opposing side (myself and Aregawi) argued that we have to send our army on tactical merits of each battle in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

As a result of the positions it had taken, the TPLF started an open campaign against EPLF through publication and in public gatherings. TPLF's troops were withdrawn from Eritrea at the crucial time for EPLF, as the later was engaged by a series of military campaigns by the Derg. The TPLF declared its relation with the EPLF was tactical and even went to recruit and harbour opposition forces to EPLF. Immediately, in June 1985, the EPLF retaliated by breaking relationships and blocking transport route to the Sudan. This was bitterly felt by the TPLF and the Tigrean people at large. This was the bloodline during the great famine in Tigray (1984-85), hence the route for international support was blocked.

## 2. The border issue:

The border issue was raised for the first time at the meeting between the TPLF and EPLF in November 1984. At this meeting, the EPLF raised the issue and wanted to demarcate the boundary based on international agreements and documents. The areas under consideration were Badme, Tsorena-Zalambessa, and Bada. The TPLF agreed that there are areas between Ethiopia and Eritrea where they are not clearly demarcated. At the same time it argued that it was not prepared for such discussion and had not made documentary studies on the issue. Furthermore, the TPLF argued that it was not in a position to sign border agreements on behalf of Ethiopia because it did not have the legitimacy to do so. And hence, the TPLF proposed to maintain the existing administrative areas as they are and prepare the necessary documents for the final demarcation after the fall of the Derg. The EPLF was convinced by the argument and both agreed to postpone the demarcation and maintain the existing administrative regions.

One may ask why the border issue was so important for EPLF while it was still entrenched in the Sahel area?

The EPLF was very much constrained by its ability to get recruits for its army. It has been rounding up and forcefully recruiting people all over Eritrea. In such a situation, border areas like Badme were safe havens for people who wanted to escape recruitment. At the same time, there are a number of Eritreans living in these areas who were attractive for EPLF's quest of recruits. As a result, the EPLF was intruding these border areas and provoking a reaction from the TPLF. At one instant the two fronts were at the verge of war if the EPLF had not withdrawn. The EPLF could not afford to open another front while it was confined in the Sahel trenches by the Derg's army. To understand why the TPLF reacted violently to the intrusions, let us see what TPLF's policy was on the border issue (from my personal notes of the joint MMLT and TPLF leadership 03.01.1978 Ethiopian cal.). It states as follows (interpretation is mine):

1. Our knowledge of the border issue between Eritrea and Tigray is not well supported by documents. The TPLF should make an endeavour to have a clear knowledge and understanding of the border.
2. If the EPLF trespasses the present borders, even if we are not sure that the contested areas belong to Tigray, we will consider the EPLF as an aggressor and we will go to war.
3. If the documents for demarcating the border areas, which now are under the Tigrian administration, prove the contrary we will consider them as a Tigrean territory because they have been under 'effective administration of Tigray'. The identity of a people is determined by the unity and common history created under the same administration. This type of areas, which are under the Tigrean administration (areas in Belesa- Muna and in Erob, which in the maps are shown within the boundaries of Eritrea) will be under common administration of TPLF and EPLF. If the EPLF rejects this and tries to administer it alone, we will consider the EPLF as an aggressor.

From the above positions one can clearly see how nationalist and war mongering the TPLF is. One can also see its theoretical definition of a border and the double standard approach to demarcation.

### 3. The Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's):

The TPLF was introduced to the NGO world through REST with the help of ERA of EPLF. In a very short time, REST became credible among the donors, highly competing with ERA. This was a competition for aid as the donor organisations began to share their donation to both REST and ERA. Since this area of aid was as important as the military sector, the competition was an additional source of friction. Each began to outsmart the other, and when conditions allowed they sabotaged each other. To show how important this aid was, let me present some figures. In 1985 the total aid (both material and financial) for TPLF amounted to Eth. Birr 125 million. Excluding armaments it covered more than 80% of the TPLF's budget.

### 4. Captured arms and properties:

Another area of contention was sharing of booties after battles. There was always contention on sharing armaments and materials obtained in joint military operations. Most of the time the EPLF took the lion's share, which caused antagonism and dissatisfaction not only in the leadership, but at the grassroot level as well.

### 5. Mishandling of civilian Tigreans:

Since there are better cosmopolitan areas in Eritrea than in Tigray, many Tigreans and especially from Agame, usually travel to work in Eritrea. Most of them take the type of job despised and considered inferior by the Eritreans. The Tigreans are hence seen as inferior in Eritrea. The Eritreans use the derogatory "Agame" to describe many things that are socially or physically ugly. Besides, many Tigreans were suspected and treated as spies by the Eritrean fronts, particularly the ELF. Many Tigreans in Eritrea were uprooted and confiscated earlier by ELF and later by EPLF. The fronts have never tried to address mistakes they committed, nor attempted to heal the wounds of the Tigrean people. There has always been distrust and feeling of hatred by Tigreans against Eritreans.

Ladies and Gentlemen, having this as a background, I will try to see the situation of their relation from 1988 onwards.

The strong and adventurist positions of the TPLF were held between 1984 to 1988. In 1988 both parties have reconciled and renewed their relation and issued a joint statement

(TPLF, 1988). Since the joint statement of 1988 the TPLF has not uttered a single word on their political and ideological differences. What has happened to the principles of TPLF, the holy and sworn slogan of bringing all the differences open? Let alone mention differences the TPLF did not even stand to defend the interests of thousands of Tigreans and other Ethiopians whose properties were confiscated and deported by EPLF in 1991. We have recently heard from the EPRDF's government that the Eritreans had occupied some areas around Assab region even before the Badme incident. The treaties and agreements between the two were not public either. Why were all these kept secret? It is clear, the TPLF was not only pragmatist but also opportunist.

After the defeat of the Derg, we have seen the unholy and unbalanced relationships between the two fronts and governments. At the early stages the EPLF had two stakes against the EPRDF. One is the port of Assab for which the EPRDF was highly dependent. The other is EPRDF's weakness to accommodate oppositions and lack of political influence in the whole of Ethiopia. Because of its vulnerability, the EPRDF became very submissive to EPLF. We have all witnessed with anger and frustration the unbalanced relations since they took power, but allow me to mention some of them.

1. The EPRDF that advocates and recommends the benefits of unity for other nationalities in Ethiopia, has requested the UN to monitor the independence of Eritrea without uttering a single word on the need and advantage of democratically united Ethiopia and Eritrea.
2. The Ethiopian government allowed the Eritrean government to use the Ethiopian currency. This act in itself is nothing wrong, but the silence when the Eritrean government was abusing the Birr and violating the Ethiopian financial policy is beyond anybody's imagination. We have seen the Eritrean government officially exchanging one US dollar for seven Birr while the official exchange rate set by Ethiopia was five Birr for a dollar.
3. The EPRDF was unable to determine citizenship status of Eritreans in Ethiopia. Not doing so was also expedient for the EPRDF, as it has exploited the support of the Eritreans in its election campaign. The Eritreans were considered loyal and assigned posts in different administrative areas and kebele elections.
4. The military pact between EPLF and EPRDF has forced Ethiopia to fight against the Sudan, for the simple reason that Eritrea is engaged in hostility with the Sudan. The Ethiopian people were not however enthusiastic to the war drums of the TPLF against the Sudan. The EPRDF also faced strong resistance from its own army and members, and as a result was forced to retract its forces. This of course would cause a feeling of betrayal to the EPLF's government and distrust in their relationship. It must be also remembered that the EPRDF government blindly supported the EPLF in their conflict with Yemen.
5. The two parties had agreed to weaken oppositions. As much as we know there were no opposition groups harboured by EPLF. But certainly there were Eritrean oppositions supported and harboured by the EPRDF. It is clear what the agreement is immediately aiming at. All the sworn principles of the EPRDF have blown away and was no a hidden fact the victims were already in hand!

Having said this, let me come to the present war situation. Is the Badme incidence the

cause for an all out war? By now some of us might have reached some conclusions. Before I elaborate on this let me present some facts about Badme.

During the Haileselesie period, Badme was a 'wereda' administered under the Tigray province. Since the take over of power by the Derg, Badme has been under the administration of TPLF. The EPRDF has also established its own administration after it took power in 1991. The majority of the people who live in Badme are from highland Eritrea, especially from Hamasien. Both the TPLF and the EPLF, at their meeting in 1984, have agreed that the boundaries in Badme are not clearly demarcated and will be settled after the two fronts come to power. Resourcewise Badme is not of any significance and immediate interest for both parties.

From the facts we have seen so far, the border issue is not a new one. Why then is it suddenly a cause for a fully blown war between the adversaries? Why should they continue fighting as long as both sides agree the borders are not well defined?

The unbalanced and unholy alliance we saw has never addressed the horny issues during the armed struggle against the Derg. Such issues were covered by false and flattering words by both parties. On top of that however there have emerged new areas of contention. The most serious one is their competition to the Ethiopian resources and market. Both the EPRDF and the EPLF have huge organisational capital, largely plundered from their people. Both have invested their capital in Ethiopia and mainly on the transport and commercial sector. After the EPRDF secured its control over Ethiopia it started to constrain the trade relations and wanted to have an independent currency, which of course was initiated by the EPLF when it printed the Nakfa. As we can understand from the accounts of Alemseged Tesfay (Alemseged), the EPLF was frustrated by EPRDF's restrictions on the trade relations between the two countries. Now the EPLF has lost the major leverages, the Assab port and the insecurity of the TPLF. Djibouti has become an alternative outlet to Ethiopia. The oppositions in Ethiopia are weakened, and there is no reason for EPRDF to capitulate for the EPLF. The EPLF is aware of this, but counted on EPRDF's isolation from the majority of the Ethiopian people. An attempt to press the EPRDF to concede to its demands by military threat in Badme, was an option the EPLF grossly miscalculated. Until the take over of Badme by force in May 1998, we had not heard about the border issue from either side. Neither had we seen an attempt by the EPLF to take the case to international bodies like the UN, OAU or the International Court, if frustrated by the EPRDF in its attempt to resolve it peacefully. It is a great blunder by the EPLF to take Badme by force without going through all peaceful means. This was a golden opportunity for the EPRDF to settle differences militarily and to appeal and get sympathy from the Ethiopian people. As we all know, there was enough time to settle the border issue after the two fronts took power. To me, the border is only a pretext, which ignited the tensions growing out of the economic contention and unresolved grudges.

The consequences of this war are clear to all of us. As a result of this conflict we have witnessed casualties in tens of thousands, and indiscriminate, inhuman and abhorable mass deportations. The war has resulted in stagnation of economic developments and

incalculable waste of resources. Intending to get allies both of them are extending the war to neighbouring countries and destabilising the region. This war benefits none of the peoples of the two countries. In my opinion, there would not be any conclusive winner unless the conflict is settled peacefully. We have to stop this nonsense war ignited by the two irresponsible leaders of our countries, but how?

While I was writing this paper, I heard both countries have accepted the peace proposal formulated by the OAU in its 35th Summit meeting in Algeria. This is a positive sign, but will not be effective and lasting unless the peoples of both countries come out strongly and vocally against the war and demand democratic reforms in their respective countries. As I remarked at the beginning of my speech, no democratic system would go to such war with the trivial justifications we are presented with. Hence, through this conference I urge all peace loving Ethiopians and Eritreans to demand:

1. The immediate declaration of cease-fire and hostilities from both countries.
2. The withdrawal of both countries from areas occupied militarily and to remain in their respective borders before the conflict started.
3. The settlement of the border disputes peacefully with the mediation of an international body the UN or the OAU.
4. The cessation of indiscriminate and illegal deportation.
5. The compensation of those affected, for damages and losses, due to deportation and displacement.
6. The replacement of the two governments by a democratic system.
7. The leaders of both countries to be accountable for the loss of lives and damages caused by this war.

Thank You.

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Acronyms:

EDU - Ethiopian Democratic Union

ELF - Eritrean Liberation- Eritrean Relief Association

EPLF - Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front

EPRDF - Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front

EPRP - Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party

ERA - Eritrean Relief Association

REST - Relief Society of Tigray

TLF - Tigrean Liberation Front

TPLF - Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front

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