

Woyane/TPLF: A Story of Bravery and Restraint

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About 40 years ago, the people of Tigray was facing harsh socio-economic and political conditions that culminated from decades of bad governance, national operation and natural and manmade disasters.

The situation in the 1970s and the preceding decades were described by John Young, in his book "Peasants and Revolution in Ethiopia: Tigray 1975 - 1989", as follows:

"there was very little genuine capitalist farming in highland Tigray at the time of the overthrow of the old regime, and those who assumed the role of landlords were typically poor peasants who did not have the necessary oxen to do their plowing and therefore rented their land to rich peasants who had oxen. Wealth was thus normally defined in terms of possession of capital, largely in the form of oxen and not land....."

As a result of state centralization by successive elites from the province of Shoa in the century before the 1974 collapse of the old regime, Tigray as a whole had become a peripheralized underdeveloped region only weakly linked to the center. And within Tigray, the lowlands of the west, and to a lesser extent those of Tembien in the south-central part of the province, were areas where the state's authority was particularly weak and it was these same areas that became centers for the TPLF led revolution

In the past century alone this has involved the loss of the predominantly Tigrigna-speaking highlands of Eritrea as a result of Italian conquest, as well as changes to the provincial boundaries made by the government of Haile-Selassie. Tigrayan boundaries were drawn to include large numbers of Moslem Mars and to remove Tigrigna-speakers in the southeast and the west of the province, with the objective of diluting Tigrayan national consciousness and weakening the power of the provincial nobility."

The sufferings of the people of Tigray was also shared by other nation and nationalities of Ethiopia.

For more than half a century before 1974, Ethiopian farmers had been struggling to realize the full enjoyments of their produces. The Bale peasants uprising and the Gojam peasants uprising are notable in this regard.

Similarly, the Tigrai peasants bravely rose against the Imperial government in the 1940s. As Theodore M. Vestal elaborated:

"The "Woyane" revolt arose essentially out of dissatisfaction with imperial rule over Tigre province after the war. The Emperor's regime was faulted for maladministration, excessive taxation, official corruption, and consequent brigandage.

For almost five months, the Woyane movement blocked roads and controlled most of Tigre. Units of the new regular Ethiopian army with British advisors were sent to reinforce the territorial troops in the area.

In the ensuing Battle at Amba Alagi, government forces were attacked by rebel forces of up to 5,000 men. The situation was serious enough for the British

advisors to ask for bomber support for the 8,000 government troops and 6,000 territorials. Ammunition was in such short supply that the government forces nearly had to retreat. The British Foreign Office believed that this would probably cause the fall of the Emperor and judged it necessary to agree to the request for bombers. In addition the British military argued that the north road passing through Amba Alagi was vital to their communications in the continuing war against the Axis.

In spite of such bravery and strength, the first Weyane made reasonable demands. The slogans of the first Woyanne were clearly Pan Ethiopian and for equality and autonomy. Their proclamation after liberating Mekelle had five main points.

- Autonomous self-administration under Ethiopian flag and unity
- Administration by Tigrayan Customary laws
- Eradication of thieves and bandits (shiftas)
- Objection to payment of excessive taxation and payment to appointee of the Emperor

Nonetheless the heartless Emperor chose to quash the farmers with the help of his European friends.

As Historian recorded: Three Blenheim bombers from Yemen flew a number of missions. On the first runs, only pamphlets containing threats from the Emperor and the Ichege, the head of the Ethiopian Church, were dropped as the British originally refused to allow bombs to be used. Under pressure to relieve the British advisors and their troops, the RAF eventually carried out

bombing raids, culminating in a raid on Makelle where seventy were killed and 200 wounded. Even so, most killed were in the market place and were not combatants."

The last and decisive engagement that doomed the fate of the rebels took place on October 6. Between eight to ten thousand peasants, headed by Hayle Maryam, were engaged in the fighting. The government forces bombarded the rebels with artillery and mortars. The bombardment inflicted heavy casualties on the rebels' side. The serious blow to the rebels came with an aerial-bombardment by the British Royal Air Force. The RAF dropped a total of 116 bombs on rebel-controlled areas. This put the rebels in a precarious position and there upon, they began to disintegrate to different directions. To quote Hayle Maryam from Mekuria's article: "If it were not for the mortars, the artillery and the aircraft, we would have overwhelmingly won over the government"

Eventually the Imperial Regime was pulled to pieces in 1974. However, despite the sacrifices made, the regime change was hijacked by the group military officers, the Derg.

Regardless, at first, the people of Tigray greeted the 1974 regime change with some optimism, as it was elsewhere in Ethiopia. The euphoria of sudden change had awakened hopes of a new democratic order.

But that dream faded with the formation of the Provisional Military Government. Soon, the skepticism of the young nationalists, some of whom were former university students, began to grow.

The suffering of the people of Tigray was double-fold both during the imperial era and during the Derg era. They were forced to give away their harvests for free or at a nominal price. At the same time, their standard of living and productivity was declining due to the neglect of the central government and as a result of misguided policies. On the other hand, they suffered national oppression.

Therefore, they had no other choice but to continue their struggle even more bitterly, under the leadership of Tigray People Liberation Front on February 18, 1975.

The struggle was aggravated when the Derg lumped the Tigrean aristocracy and elite together and waged a campaign of mass arrest and liquidation during and after the Red Terror in Tigray, Addis Ababa and elsewhere in Ethiopia, where of the total number of Tigrean prisoners were estimated at around 70 percent.

It was said, in fact, that many non-Tigrigna speaking inmates learnt Tigrigna in jail as a result. Such acts only intensified the tenacity and resoluteness of the TPLF fighters.

Few years after its formation, TPLF was able to mobilize the people of Tigray. In the 1980s, TPLF controlled more than 75 per cent of Tigray. The TPLF fighters were able to move almost anywhere at will, with the support of most of the people, and even if the army could, by force, reach most places, but not hold them.

In fact, TPLF began to form militias throughout the countryside in response to demands from the villagers to have arms to protect themselves from the

casual and repeated violence of army patrols, and partly in order to take the war to the government throughout the region.

In early 1980s, the TPLF launched its "Southern Operation" and opened a new front in southern Tigray and northern Wollo, engaged Lalibella and Seqota. Their joint operations extended as far south as Wichale, Jarre and Haik, close to Dessie.

Similarly, TPLF was able to create alliance with Afar Liberation Front (ALF) and launched attacks on Bati and also in the areas near Mille.

As it has been observed by several writers, in most of the military operations the Derg was taken by surprise by the attack, demonstrating that the rebels were able to move with ease among the local population.

Nonetheless, TPLF remained to hold peace talks with the Dergue, despite its growing strength and territorial control.

Sadly, though TPLF have been fighting since 1975, Dergue have been unwilling to seat and talk for a decade. The pivotal turn that forced Dergue to recognize TPLF came in late 1980s. In the meantime, TPLF continued to advance and expand its struggle to answer the long grievances of the people.

In mid 1980s, drought hit northern Ethiopia. Millions in Tigray were threatened by famine, as the drought coupled with years of war, poor provision of agricultural input and market access as well as recurrent irresponsible bombing of civilian areas by the Dergue.

The Dergue refused TPLF's offer for a truce and for providing full access to humanitarian agencies. So, TPLF had to avert the catastrophe by sharing its

fighter's food to surrounding people, by transporting hundreds of thousands to refugee centers in Sudan and by lobbying & providing protections for aid organizations who were willing to enter through the border with Sudan.

The lesson of all these were clear for TPLF in terms of systematizing the party's political positions and in upgrading its organizational structure. The military strategy had to be changes to take the struggle to the next stage of asserting full control and flushing the Dergue army from its strong holds and bases around urban centers.

The only way to stop the suffering of the people is to shorten the war either through peace talks with the Dergue or by defeating it militarily. For either of the two to happen, TPLF must embark on a conventional warfare strategy and take the war into a higher stage.

Subsequently, TPLF developed a researched Military doctrine. The doctrine provided a clear guide on how TPLFs military capacity should be built, how it should fight, how it should secure areas under its control and how it achieves superiority over enemy forces.

The doctrine was based on international experience, the nature of TPLF, the nature of Dergue and the nature of the war. The former Chairman of TPLF Meles Zenawi prepared both the first draft paper of the doctrine and the final document after discussion with his colleagues and also gave trainings for TPLF fighters.

The doctrine was tested and proved effective immediately after the trainings when Dergue mobilized huge army to the region boasting it will end TPLF once and for all. Subsequently, TPLF fighters annihilated tens of thousands Dergue

army which camped around Shere town and soon flushed Dergue from all over Tigray.

Dergue was forced to admit it was fighting with a popular force rather than "some bandits".

However, TPLF didn't turn into a military adventurist. It consistently perused negotiations and peace talks both with the Dergue and other armed groups regardless of TPLF's fast growing military strength. TPLF's leading motto has always been to mobilize everyone who can contribute even by throwing a stone.

For example; TPLF persistently perused talks with OLF to establish ties and a common front. Though OLF had been ideologically unfocused and militarily weak organization that it was believed better to include all forces of change rather than rely on sheer military power.

Sadly, OLF was not of the same attitude. After several time-wasting discussions and talks, when TPLF sent as per their agreement two of its cadres to help train OLF fighters, OLF officials mistreated them labeling them spies and the whole effort failed.

Nonetheless, when TPLF/EPRDF facilitated the formation of a transitional government, the first task was inviting OLF to become part of the government including ministerial positions.

TPLF's attitude was similar towards EPDM(later ANDM) founders is perhaps most representative of TPLF's foresight and firm belief in cooperation. When ANDM founders split from EPRP and took refuge in TPLF control area, TPLF

leadership treated them as equal partners. As anticipated, ANDM became a well-organized force of revolutionary-democracy in a few years time.

Despite the difference in the number of fighters and resources, TPLF have always remained firmly committed to equal partnership.

In fact, the Second Congress of TPLF in 1989 clearly stated its willingness to cooperate with other organizations for a common front against the Derg. The Congress announced the following points in the detailed proposal:

- The aim of the united front would be to remove the Dergue and Soviet interventionism and establish a transitional government consisting of representatives of the member organizations.
- The transitional government would guarantee the full respect of democratic rights and pave the way for the creation of a people's democratic state.
- The government would ensure the resolution of the demand for self-determination through popular referendum.
- Any organization engaged in a tangible anti-Dergue, anti-Soviet political struggle was eligible for membership.
- all member organizations support the right of nations to self-determination both in word and deed.

When EPRDF was formed in 1988/89, TPLF and ANDM took equal seats in the leadership of the organization and elected Meles as their leader. This principle was applied when OPDO and SEPDM later joined EPRDF.

Before, concluding this piece we shall cite one historical event that demonstrated TPLF's unconditional willingness to negotiate with all forces for peace was not that surprising one.

The story was narrated by the renowned Professor Ephrem Yitsak soon after the passing of Meles Zenawi. He said: When a group of Ethiopian scholars and elders sent a request for all Ethiopian parties to take part in a peace talk, TPLF was the first to respond without preconditions.

In 1989, a group of elders and scholars led by Professor Ephrem Yishak sent letters to all Ethiopian armed groups as well as the Dergue regime requesting their willingness for peace talks. TPLF was the first to respond and affirm its willingness, while Dergue never sent a reply letter except oral responses.

TPLF's confirmation was not a lip service. In fact, the chairman Meles Zenawi sent a second letter urging the elders to hold the peace talks at the earliest time possible to save lives. Professor Ephrem described the situation as follows:

<< የደርግን ደብዳቤ በመጠባበቅ ላይ እያለን ከጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር መለስ ዜናዊ በድጋሚ ሌላ ደብዳቤ መጣልን። በወቅቱ እነሱ እያሸነፉ ነበር።

ይኼም ቢሆን ግን «አሸናፊ ነኝና ዕርቅ አልፈልግም» አላሉም። እኛ ሁሉንም የፖለቲካ ድርጅቶች ስዊስ ላይ ለመሰብሰብ ያስብነው እ.ኤ.አ በሰኔ ወር 1989 ላይ ነበር።

በደብዳቤያቸው «ስብሰባችሁን ሰኔ ከማድረግ ይልቅ ወደ ግንቦት ቀረብ አድርጉት» ብለው ጻፉልን።

ቆም ብዬ ስለሁለተኛው ደብዳቤያቸው ሳስብ፣ ሁሉም ነገር በሰላም እንዲያልቅ የነበራቸው ፍላጎትን ያሳየኛል። ጦርነት ከቀጠለ ብዙ ሰው እንደሚያልቅ ገብቷቸዋል። >>

However, due to Dergue's reluctance the elder's effort didn't bore fruit and the Americans had to intervene as negotiators.

The willing to hold peace talks with the Dergue continued even when TPLF/EPRDF fighters reached the outskirts of Addis Ababa and until Dergue became an irrelevant force by the change of the situation on the ground and the gallant fighters triumphantly entered Addis Ababa.

The decades of yearning of the people of Tigray for peace and national equality bore fruit in 1991 after 17 years of armed struggle under TPLF's leadership with bravery and restraint since February 18, 1975.