

TPLF's Counter Revolution and Potential Antidotes

Part 1

Derese G Kassa (Ph.D.)

TPLF: Before and After Incumbency

Even after 27 years of its reign, we struggle to understand and qualify the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). It is an organization of many contradictions. It was founded by young radical Marxist Leninist intellectuals who bitterly fought their fellow school mates about the primacy of the "National Question" in Ethiopia as opposed to "Class Struggle." The Ethiopian state, they submitted, should only be interpreted and comprehended as an Amhara project. National oppression, in TPLF parlance, did not even represent domination by an Amhara ruling class but the Amhara "nation" in general. Its insistence on Tigrayan identity, its unwavering commitment to establish the republic of Tigray and how it framed Ethiopia first as a "colonizing" and later "oppressing" entity makes one wonder "Was this a Marxist Leninist Front to begin with or nationalist?"

Even from the cannon of Marxist Leninist literature, one that struck home to the TPLF as the *purest* form of socialism came from the strangest place. Not from Leninist or Stalinist Russia, not even from Mao Zedong's China, but from Enver Hoxha's Albania. Albanian "communism" aspired to turn the clock back to a classless communal society by promoting de-industrialization and de-mechanization of agriculture forcing communities to imagine an agrarian utopia. The closest this was experimented upon was by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and we all know how that story ended. How college students from a rural

backwater - Tigray- in one of the least industrialized nations in the world-Ethiopia- found Albanian socialism heuristic and relevant to their world view itself is baffling. Or maybe not. John Young, a veteran student of the TPLF, explained it as follows.

Ethiopia on the eve of the 1974 revolution was a ramshackle empire on the periphery of international economic and state systems. But its educated youth were products of what Skocpol calls “world historical time”: they were able to appropriate knowledge and ideas of world history, particularly socialism and social revolution, and they attempted to put them to use in the transformation of Ethiopia.

Then there is the ascetic, self-effacing, Front idolizing culture where the organization itself occupies a mythical status and those that died in the struggle sat on a pedestal as “martyrs” of the revolution. In fact, the language of political violence in TPLF is awash with biblical terms such as “sacrifice”, “shedding blood”, “salvation” [*harinet*] etc. One wonders if the millennia old Christian traditions of Tigray melted with its nationalist cum Marxist import. Even after three decades of incumbency, TPLF old guards do not relent to remind us that they “shed their blood” and “sacrificed their brothers and sisters” to accede to power.

For all its warts, however, it was an organization that meticulously built its support base within the Tigrayan peasantry. It penetrated Tigrayan churches, mosques, the state bureaucracy, schools, businesses and establishments. It is now very difficult to draw the line between the Front apparatus and the people of Tigray. It functioned as a quasi-state entity in provinces that it “liberated” from the Derg in its days as a rebel force. It was steeped in the business of building schools and health centers for mothers and children while waging the guerilla fight against the government. It built a public relations and later

foreign relations corps where it solicited financial, political and later military support from powers in the region and beyond. In this, both the TPLF and EPLF stood out as staggering exceptions to other African guerrilla movements known to be rag tag vigilantes marauding villages to extort, exploit, rape, and terrorize civilian populations. In other words, this is not Charles Taylor's "Independent Patriotic Front of Liberia" (INPFL) or the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) of Uganda. John Young summed up TPLF's posture within Tigray as follows, "While the TPLF did use compulsion and violence to maintain the discipline of its members and to counter its opponents, it rarely or never used such means in dealing with peasants en masse."

In May 1991, the TPLF, one could argue, had three ideological pillars. It was primarily an ethno-nationalist entity premised on antagonizing not just the Derg but the Ethiopian state itself. Its methods of popular organization, propaganda and world view on global political economy were, on the other hand, decidedly Leninist and Maoist. It cut its political teeth by purging all other political organizations then operating in Tigray and fought an existential battle with the Derg. Political violence was the source of its power and its major weapon of resistance against other forces. There only were a handful moments when TPLF allowed a contending political force to co-exist let alone share power with it. Even those moments were short term tactical gestures which ended unceremoniously for opponents. Its yester affairs with the OLF are a case in point here.

Enter 27 years, this being has morphed into a strange animal. In Meles Zenawi, it found the ideology of Authoritarian Developmentalism appealing. This doctrine stresses the need of a vanguard party (in this case EPRDF) that can propel Ethiopia from poverty and rent seeking - that it posits is inherent in the workings of global neo-liberalism. Here again, it harkens back to its old leftist roots but in the same breath declares that the ultimate goal is to build capitalism in Ethiopia. This is serious dislocation. Over the past 27 years, TPLF tamed its ethno-nationalist rhetoric partly because of the need to govern the country. But its core remained the crux of the EPRDF. In fact, it yielded a Tigrayan political elite group that controlled the country's military and intelligence apparatus, business and financial dealings. This "ethno-class" flexed its muscles through major avenues. Systemic, pervasive and institutional discrimination prevailed in the military and security apparatus where more than 95% of the senior officer corps stayed ethnic Tigrayan. The ruling elite and their kinfolk embezzled public funds, and amassed wealth through corruption, graft, tax evasion, and illegal money laundering. The level of rent-seeking we witnessed on Zenawi's watch makes one wonder, "Who is the rent-seeker here?" So in concentrating wealth and power in the hands of the Tigrayan elite, TPLF entrenched its ethno-nationalism. Last but not least, violence was writ large. Up until the past 3 months, the nation jailed its opposition party leaders, human rights activists, journalists, religious leaders and subjected them to inhuman, elaborate technologies of torture and violence. To sum up, TPLF became a party of a propertied urban ethno-class that unabashedly retained its ethno-nationalist domain and vintage politics of violence.

Designs of the Counter-Revolution

That was where we were until Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power. Popular unrest exploded by the youth in Oromiya, Amhara regions and other parts of Southern Ethiopia. Popular discontent boiled among Muslim Ethiopians. The disaffection and resentment from the urban middle class and civil servants simmered underneath. There was no room where dissent can be ventilated let alone articulated. And the fact that, the middle level and senior level leaders of OPDO and ANDM joined forces with the public forced TPLF to a corner. It begrudgingly accepted the election of PM Abiy.

It was however written on the wall that the TPLF would wage an ideological and political battle against the new PM from the get go. What was not obvious for most of us was the design of this counter-revolution. The broad contours and some of the granular details have emerged in the past 6 weeks. In my view, the TPLF has developed three overarching strategies on how to reverse reform in Ethiopia

Strategy 1. Chaos and its Dividends

The rumors of TPLF's political death are exaggerated. In fact, it is now clear that the Prime Minister commands but TPLF controls. It looks like TPLF took a page from the cardinal mistake US forces made when they invaded Iraq. They ousted Sadaam and de-capitated the military and security complex that held the country together. De-baathification, the massive outlay of security forces and marginalization of Sunni forces plunged Iraq into chaos. By the same token, the former security chief, Getachew Assefa, and its armed security syndicate have now become a fifth column in Ethiopia. They hatch, mastermind, finance and execute

inter-ethnic violence. In just a space of 6 weeks, we witnessed conflict between the Somali and Oromo, Amhara and Oromo, Oromo and Gedeo, Gurage and Kebena, Wolayita and Sidamo. Urban flashpoints included Hawassa, Jigjigga, Assosa, Nekemte, Bahir Dar, Gondar, Woldiya and Dessie. The number of internally displaced Ethiopians exceeded more than 2 million people. Fake news and active propaganda measures inciting hate speech, division and conflict were taken by TPLF's troll farmers.

Inciting chaos and public violence would yield the following three dividends. Littering the nation with news of wanton violence and destruction would de-legitimize Prime Minister Abiy's government. It would make him lose public confidence. Second, the logic of perpetual chaos means old divisions and fault lines would re-emerge. The rancor and division between the pro-unity and democracy forces and ethno-nationalists could flare up again. Chaos would uncover previous ethnic and religious fault lines that the TPLF could exploit to sway political forces from within the Oromo and Amhara public. Last but not least perpetual chaos could sway the international mood and support Abiy's government has. In fact, I am of the opinion that TPLF strategists could weigh in how the next electoral cycle in the US and a change of administration could for instance hedge their bet in Addis. Consider a hypothetical where Mrs. Susan Rice becomes the next Secretary of State. La long duree, TPLF has calculated violence would pay off. We should disabuse ourselves of the notion that TPLF old guards are doing this out of desperation or that this violence would ebb down on its own. It will not. An outstanding question here is *"How does Abiy's government view TPLF's strategy of inciting chaos and violence? Does it consider it an act of desperation by a loose band of renegades and their mercenaries or as a premeditated, organized plan of action that spans years?"*

Strategy 2. Horses for Courses

The TPLF knows full well that it cannot maintain its political and economic domination without coopting and installing the Amhara and Oromo elite. The EPRDF was that scaffolding which held for 27 years. The EPRDF is no more. Abiy Ahmed's reforms to liberalize the political and economic space go directly against the interests the Tigrayan ethno-class. His emphasis on national unity and Ethiopiawinet undercuts TPLF's entrenched ethno-nationalism that resents greater Ethiopia. So there is a dire need for a new EPRDF.

TPLF is working hard to form it out of the dying embers of the old EPRDF. It is calculating that it could sway hardliner Oromo nationalists from within OPDO and outside. Dawud Ibsaa's OLF and Oromo media activists suspect of Abiy come in are useful candidates here. It has resuscitated the question of Sidama nationalism with hopes to have a major ethnic bloc. There of course are its satellites in Afar, Somali, Benishangul Gumuz, and Gambella regions. The attempt to court pack the EPRDF with new member parties from these regions is to out vote the OPDO-ANDM-SEPDM block. It is also worth considering how the TPLF may broaden the tent within Tigray itself. The Mekele roundtables with Arena, Aregawi Berhe's TAND, former notables such as Gen. Tsadkan G. Tensay will give it a new lease of life in the eyes of the Tigrayan public. The latter may as well be more defensive (giving no turf for the opposition) than offensive. A seminal question however would be *"What is going to be the strategic response of Team Abiy toward this "new horses for courses" strategy of rupturing the OPDO base and encirclement from the peripheries?"*

Strategy 3. Dilly dallying, Non-committal and Defiance

Dr. Debrestion's gestures and actions tell a lot about TPLF's art of dilly dallying, non-committal, and defiance to Abiy's leadership. You could see him in Addis one sunny morning lauding the reform effort and declaring his support for the Federal government. That same afternoon he issues an official statement resenting rapprochement with Asmara or you could hear him cheer lead a demo declaring the prospect of Ethiopian disintegration. How about the botched military air operation to Mekele where Federal troops dispatched to bring ex-officials to justice were arrested by the regional government? Is there method to this madness? I think so.

It is easy to dismiss such gestures as personal idiosyncrasies. Some even exonerate Debretsion saying he is caught in the cross fires between reformers (aka Arkebe Oqbay) and hardliners (Abay Tsehay and Sebhat Nega). I beg to differ. The dilly dallying and open revolt of Mekele against Abiy's decisions tells me there is total non-committal on the part of the TPLF. There could be a handful of individuals who insist reform under Abiy is good but they are not a block at all! The overwhelming stance within the TPLF is defiance and resistance. By design or default, such dilly dallying and non-committal enables TPLF's counter-revolutionaries. Playing the good cop (Arkebe et al) bad cop (Debretsion et al) game runs the clock down. It protects the old guards of the TPLF and their economic empire from any serious political and legal ramifications. But most importantly, such dilly dallying and projected ambivalence from TPLF throws Abiy's government off its game. Should it act or sit on the fence and watch this play out in its favor? In both scenarios,

however, TPLF purchases the time it needs to execute strategies 1 and 2. Here is another seminal question. *“Is Abiy Ahmed’s government willing to take risk and cut to the chase with the TPLF heavyweights in time?”*

In Search of Antidotes

Strategies to reverse TPLF’s counter revolution would be based on answers to questions I posited above. First, “How does the Abiy government view TPLF’s strategy of inciting chaos and violence?” Does it consider it an act of desperation by a loose band of renegades and their mercenaries or as a premeditated, organized plan of action that spans years?” Second, “What is going to be the strategic response of Team Abiy toward this “new horses for courses” strategy of rupturing the OPDO base and encirclement from the peripheries?” Last but not least, “Is Abiy Ahmed’s government willing to take risk and check mate the TPLF old guards in time? Or is he willing to let this play this out (... of hand too)? Holding all these variables constant, I will discuss potential antidotes in the second part of my article. Stay tuned.

Derese G Kassa. (Ph.D.)