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English Summary

This thesis is an attempt to contribute to the historical study and explanation of an ethno-nationalist movement which emerged in 1975 rose to power in Ethiopia in 1991. It gave a critical, retrospective analysis of the political history of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the *de facto* ruling party in today's Ethiopia under the name of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The study began by explaining the political and social conditions under which the TPLF emerged, how the armed struggle started, and how the mobilization of the people took place. It also dealt with the background to the conflict between the various ethno-regional liberation fronts and other revolutionary groups and the military government that took power in the wake of the overthrow of the imperial government of Haile Selassie I in 1974. A core issue in the revolutionary turmoil of those days appeared to be the developments surrounding the issue of 'national self-determination' and how it was conceptualized at the various stages in the TPLF's struggle. The study went on to explain the nature of the TPLF's relationship with the various warring parties in Ethiopia as well as with the EPLF in Eritrea and the way in which the revolutionary elite of the TPLF leadership staged the 'vanguard of the revolution', namely via the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT) as an important instrument to gain power and redefine the movement. It finally narrated how the TPLF captured power in 1991, and then moved on to a comparative analysis of the TPLF and four other nationalist movements in Africa.

The social and political conditions in Tigray in the 1960s, and by extension, Ethiopia at large, from which the TPLF emerged, were characterized by rampant poverty, political repression, autocratic rule and ethno-regional and ethno-linguistic disparities. However, the interpretation of this situation that was politically ethnicized at one point and ideologically charged at another need to be revisited and to engage the TPLF's current official historiography as well as several scholarly efforts made to this effect. Tigray, like the rest of Ethiopia, experienced a grinding poverty that reduced the people to what Frantz Fanon once called 'the wretched of the earth'. In addition, political repression by the autocratic government of Emperor Haile Selassie suffocated political and economic change and generated deep unrest among the population, notably

the emerging educated strata (students, teachers, civil servants). In the aftermath of the liberation of Ethiopia from Fascist Italian rule in 1941 and in the light of high expectations of post-war restoration of order, there was a first rebellion in the greater part of Tigrai in 1942-43, the *Woyyane* rebellion. It was a precedent in the history of the country and created a regional consciousness and an 'example' of the sort that was carried over to the young generation. The founders of the TPLF had this consciousness as part of their background when they started to confront the military regime of the *Dergue*, although they developed different ideals. The rising tide of the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s, that was Marxist through and through, also had a huge influence on the pioneers of the TPLF. As a result, theirs is a case that appears ideologically a fusion of Marxism and ethno-nationalism, emerging in a time of ideological upheaval on the national political scene. This was reflected at times of schism or critical moments in the history of the TPLF. The two major shades among the pioneers were, therefore, those who saw their movement as part of a national struggle by the Ethiopian people against autocracy and repression, while the other shade resorted to a more 'parochial' orientation of ethno-regional exclusiveness. By resorting to the elusive idea of self-determination, which included secession from Ethiopia and the formation of an independent Republic of Tigrai, essentially like that of the EPLF in Eritrea, the latter wing exploited the fluidity of ideas of ethnic identity and 'ethno-national self-determination' for its own ends. Since ethnic identity is often being used to construct differences that were not there before or forgets realities that have existed, ethnic exclusiveness was stretched to the extreme (as later reflected in the 1995 federal Constitution of Ethiopia).

The historical irony is, however, that the parochial wing of the TPLF shifted its position once it had purged its rivals among the pioneers and claimed to be the champion of the pan-Ethiopian perspective, by forging the EPRDF. This was concluded around mid 1990, with the impending fall of Addis Ababa to the TPLF's final offensive. This shift of position reinforces the contention of this study that ethnicity serves as an ideology of mobilization or collectivises for political ends that may be resolved within or outside a given state, and that the elite, by claiming to represent the cause of the people but often running after their own power interests, play a decisive role in dictating

the mobilization process. In the first place, envisaging the idea of Tigraian secession, an entity that constituted the historic core of the Ethiopian nation, was a questionable, if not delusive claim. In general, theoretically the grounds for secession from existing states are tenuous, and in constitutional theory recognition of an absolute right to secession is not common. The shift towards secession thinking by some in the TPLF was influenced by political events on the ground rather than by a change of ideology. The military government's victory over Somali forces in the 1977 war reverberated so quickly that its major protagonists in Eritrea resorted to a tactical retreat from the towns they had held since 1975. Pressure from the EPLF on the TPLF leadership to form a coalition with other fighting forces inside Ethiopia came at this time with a group calling itself the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM, a splinter group of the leftist urban guerrilla group EPRP) emerging on the scene in the Gondar region. Later in the 1980s, this EPDM formed a 'united front' with the TPLF in the shape of the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front). This was a case of an ideological shift towards pan-Ethiopianism by the TPLF sub-group prompted by political expediency rather than conviction. It was made possible by the dual heritage of the Ethiopian student movement, which was inspired by both socialist thinking based on national, class analysis and on ethnic/ethno-regional thinking, stimulated by the Eritrean question, seen as a national/colonial question. This basic ideological ambivalence continued in the TPLF leadership in the years that followed.

On the ground during the struggle, the political message used to mobilize the people of Tigray was mainly that of ethno-nationalism. In the historical sense, ethno-nationalism poses a dilemma: is it only a convenient agenda or means of mobilizing people that did not have developed class and national identities, or can it be the basis for nation-wide political solutions to inequalities, etc. in federal or other form? The big question in the Ethiopian case was (and is) whether or not the form the oppression that the people of Tigray were experiencing to was indeed only 'ethnically based' and exclusively against their language, culture, etc. and was exploiting Tigray's 'resources'. Or was the rule and hegemony by a Shewan-Amhara-led elite (notably in imperial Ethiopia) the standard form of structural oppression also found among the other non-Shewan-Amhara ethnic groups? It seems that Tigrayans were not oppressed in the

exclusive sense as the TPLF Manifesto of 1976 claimed. Its assertion that ‘...the Tigraians have been made to be the most hated, suspected and discriminated people in the empire, thereby making harmonious life absolutely intolerable’ (TPLF Manifesto, February 1976 E.C.) was rather extreme. The way the oppression was interpreted mattered a great deal, particularly in view of a search for alternatives. Because the Manifesto claimed that the oppression against the people of Tigrai was exclusive, it formulated the predicament in the form of what in Leninist discourse is called ‘national oppression’ (of a people or ‘nationality’), and secession was then thought to be the solution. In fact, the oppression in Tigrai was not much different from the oppression characterizing the masses of other ethnic groups in Ethiopia. And the way both the imperial and military governments resorted to quelling the rebellions in the different parts of the country was of the same militaristic nature with the measures it took in Tigrai.

The TPLF leadership put forward ethno-nationalism with ‘self-determination including and up to secession’ as its principal goal mainly because that stood the best chance of building an effective fighting force and building up power. The self-determination agenda advanced to mobilize the masses of Tigrai was *not* largely adhered to by the people; on the basis of their historical experiences and achievements they even strongly believed that they were not only just Ethiopians but that they constituted the core of Ethiopia’s ancient civilization. The disparity between the self-determination agenda and the inherent pan-Ethiopian aspirations of the masses was high. Tigraians generally, in their religious or cultural ceremonies, reflected their loyalty to the Ethiopian nation. But with the largely peasant society of Tigrai appeared to have ‘accepted’ the self-determination enterprise, partly because they came to believe in the promises of socio-economic transformation programmes and in the liberation from state oppression, and partly for fear of reprisal or coercion of the TPLF if the mobilization process would be opposed.

If the Tigraian masses had *not* bought the TPLF’s self-determination agenda, what would that have made of the movement? Was it a social revolution, a people’s movement or a movement in the service of the political elite? Beginning with the element of social revolution: this first of all constitutes a radical process that negates the

status quo ante, characterized by a political overthrow of the *ancien régime* and its replacement with a popular power that follows thoroughly transformative political, social and economic programmes. In this respect the TPLF indeed had revolutionary slogans and practical moves on land reform, women's rights and participation of the people in self-administration (via *baitos*). However, as important as realizing change – much of which remained short of consummation - such measures were meant to induce and mobilize the people to primarily support the war and secondly to improve their lives or empower them.

Another major element that could have made it a revolutionary power is democratic governance, which needed the state's role to be that of regulating and empowering rather than ruling/dictating, as the military *Dergue* regime had done. The TPLF's perception of governance already during its time in the struggle was the well-known Leninist concept of the vanguard. The theory of the vanguard allows little or no room for participation of sectors outside the ruling party, which has the role of monopolistic decision-maker for the masses, the civic movements and opposition organizations. After 1991, the space for the non-party political sector that had existed in Ethiopia was allowed mainly due to the complex heterogeneity of Ethiopian society, a lack of constituency outside Tigray that necessitated tolerance, and the donor countries' pressure to open up. Without changing its role of ruling/dictating, the TPLF experimentally allowed space for media freedom, opposition parties, civic groups and local NGOs to participate in political life, while keeping a policy of ultimate authority towards them when it came to essential policy matters. But a competitive democratic system was not developed, as it would endanger the EPRDF's comprehensive programme for Ethiopia and their hard-won power and privilege. A substantial literature by both journalists and academics shows that the essentials of governance in Ethiopia since 1991 have not changed, and in fact have led to a rooting of dominant party rule across the country. Here one can see an almost seamless continuity with the pre-1991 period and the ideology and control practices of the TPLF/EPRDF then pursued in its route to power. Most freedoms were retracted in the past decade, and political and economic control reasserted. In all, the case can be made that the TPLF can only in some sense be called a revolutionary movement.

The claim to be ‘revolutionary’ was reiterated in a much more elaborate fashion in the formula ‘revolutionary democracy’. This concept is essential for an understanding of the TPLF and current politics of the government. While not extensively treated in this thesis, it has been developed since ca. 1990 and means a rejection of liberal democracy as unfit for Ethiopia on a number of grounds. The option of what was called ‘revolutionary democracy’ was taken because the TPLF/EPRDF was allegedly massively supported by the peasantry, ‘representing primarily their interests’, and because Ethiopia is predominantly rural, the EPRDF therefore represents the interests of the majority of the population. It alleges that this aspect makes it democratic, while its ‘radical’ policies give it a revolutionary content; hence, the claim for ‘revolutionary democracy’. This is the Leninist concept of ‘the vanguard’ turned inside out. For ideological reasons the TPLF is estranged from democracy as a system of representative and accountable government also with regard to the peasantry it claims as its constituency – because they have no independent say in the process.

As to the question of ethnicity and ethnic politics – that was the cornerstone of TPLF’s political reforms after 1991, and which led to the institutionalization of an ethnic-based federal system, with regions and districts based roughly on ethno-linguistic lines: the discourse of rights and democracy is couched in terms of the ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ of Ethiopia – to do justice to its diversity and to the claims of the various peoples. Democracy in this model is equated autonomy and (in principle) self-determination with secession as an option if groups are not happy in the federation. The model has been widely discussed and it will not be pursued here except to relate it briefly to the history of the TPLF and its ideologies as sketched in this thesis.

Ethiopia has a significant ethnic heterogeneity, with about 80 language groups. The TPLF had its social base only in Tigray. As a ‘mono-region’ movement, controlling the whole of Ethiopia with its different groups and regions after the fall of the military regime carried great risks and challenges. In 1991, after taking over power, there were a number of other opposition political groups claiming their stakes and it was necessary to bring about political stability as soon as possible. Once in power, the TPLF devised a political system based on ethnicity seen as the only suitable way to implement ‘revolutionary democracy’ and ensuring its rule. Ethnic federalism on the basis of

ethno-linguistic identity was the formula. But it was contested and carried risks. The fluid and shifting nature of ethnic and ethno-regional identities was rigidified into fixed ethnic group labels and administrative divisions. Article 39 of the 1994 constitution gave the right of self-determination up to secession to these units, who were politically represented in newly set-up 'People's Democratic Organizations (PDOs), a kind of party duplicates into the various regions with which the EPDRF/TPLF was able to extend its party and state structure to all ethnic groups in the country.

We thus see that not unexpectedly the ideological and organizational structure of post-1991 Ethiopia has emerged quite directly out of the TPLF experience before its taking power. Its political ideology of rule, based on 'revolutionary democracy' and ethnic-based federalism is an updated adaptation of Leftist ideas and Marxist-Leninist models in the political sphere, combined with a more liberalized economy, in which though the party and the state have a dominant role.

Although clear data on the opinions of people are difficult to get, indications are that the TPLF approach to governance – both as to its authoritarianism and its ethnicization policy - is decreasing in popularity among the wider public. Evidence of this were the controversial 2005 elections. According to domestic and foreign observers, local conflicts are frequent, ethnic group relations are tense, religious antagonisms grow, complaints about suppression of (political and human) rights and police and army over-reaction are a cause for concern, and economic favouritism and corruption are lamented widely.

One of the TPLF's survival strategies has continued to be the invoking of the malleable material of ethnicity and ethnic nationalism. As ethnic mobilization was the TPLF's means to seize power, it now appears that ethnic polarization may be created which as a result is threatening the state power structure and national cohesion. There is insecurity about sharing on national agenda, mistrust against the government and other ethnic groups, many times irrational (political and economic) competition, and a new dynamics of 'we vs. them' conceptions. On the other hand, recent studies revealed that, perhaps sceptical towards, or dismayed with what ethnic politics brought them, more people are becoming defiant of ethnic categorizations that tend to overgrow notions of Ethiopian identity. The realization of the pitfalls accompanying ethnic politics may,

however, lead the nation eventually to forge a more rational design where diversity becomes a more balanced building block of wider unity in a system that combines respect for the facts of diversity and the politico-economic needs for a workable unifying framework in a less ethnic-federal form that would discourage the political manipulation of ethnicity

To return to the research question of this thesis: it was about why, how and on what ethno-cultural and other basis the Tigrayan nationalist movement emerged and prevailed, how it successfully *mobilized* a critical mass of people behind it, and what the role of the political elite vis-à-vis the masses was during and after the struggle. We highlighted the role played by ethnicity but in a peculiar combination with revolutionary socialist ideology that yielded both contradictions and elements of a strong though authoritarian power ideology. It was hypothesized in a general sense that in an underdeveloped multi-ethnic society such as Ethiopia, where civil and political rights were traditionally not institutionalized, political-economic ‘resource competition’ was a regular feature, and collective claims are not recognized or adequately handled by the state administration, the tendency for ethnic resistance/conflicts to emerge is high. With power concentrated in the centre and in the hands of a privileged class, and basic resources being scarce and conflict-generating, the political elite of a dominant ethnic or regional group in its quest for power tends to manipulate ethnic antagonisms to remain in power, which in turn leads to forms of countervailing ethnic resistance. The case study of the TPLF and its emergence and experience in government has borne out this hypothesis, and our account has also show that the same mechanism may continue to operate under the new political regime based on the very notion of ethnic-based governance, showing deficiencies in the allocation of equity and rights.

In this thesis, the study of the rise and consolidation of an ethno-nationalist insurgent front turned government has no doubt shown that ethnic nationalism is a forceful mobilizing ideology. In general it will remain so, also in comparable social conditions - as long as political repression, economic marginalization and social injustices are prevalent in a multi-ethnic and diverse society dominated by a political force that openly or tacitly claims to represent a certain ethnic group. Ethno-nationalism is forceful because it can be enacted as the embodiment of the material and social

concerns of a given people. This situation makes ethnic mobilization inevitable and the imminence of confrontation real. On the basis of either primordial or instrumentalist views of ethnicity, the self-appointed political elite of an ethnic collectivity or group can draw this collectivity to become a force that can be mobilized for the realization of political, economic or military aims, as illustrated here with the TPLF. It can unseat an incumbent regime and achieve real or perceived advantages. We have seen this trajectory unequivocally in the case of the TPLF. But since the phenomena and agenda of ethnic nationalism are fluid, they can be easily manipulated by the elite in arbitrary and dubious ways. The political consequences for the people in whose name the struggles were fought can be a deception certainly when an institutionalized democracy is not realized that negotiates identities, rights and equitable economic development. In Ethiopia the future is still determined by the political elite which set the course of the ethnicized struggle. But ethnic mobilization can only play a positive role if it is based on establishing and institutionalizing civil liberties and human rights upon which diversities are accommodated and differences are mediated democratically.

This thesis has thus demonstrated that however real and justified ethnic grievances may be, and however understandable mobilization on an ethnic or ethno-regional basis can be, the resulting and often organized politicization – and thereby rigidification - of ethnic identity on a mass basis carries highly problematic aspects for a national political order. The ‘ethnic model’, especially when coupled to an authoritarian political system of governance, provides doubtful solutions to the issue of multi-ethnic identities and ethno-regional disparity of a country, and diverts institutional democratic options. This underlines the assumption of this thesis that ethnicity – by nature fluid and manipulable - is best handled with care, lest it takes on a life of its own and becomes the prime conflict-generating force in the social, political-economic and not the least psychological sense.