

## TPLF: Reform or Decline?

---

*Medhane Tadesse & John Young*

**Founded and led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991, after a sixteen-year armed struggle against the military regime that had ruled Ethiopia since 1974. While not formally a marxist-leninist party, the TPLF nonetheless was devoted to these ideals and they figured prominently in the structure and functioning of the organisation. While the TPLF's base represented the peasantry of Tigray, its leadership was dominated by young, radical intellectuals. Itself representing an ethnic group of relatively modest size, the TPLF formed a coalition of ethnically based organisations, the EPRDF, in 1989, to give itself Ethiopia-wide political scope and legitimacy. Once it came to power, the Front faced serious problems of adjustment, but managed to overcome them thanks to the coherence of its programme, the commitment of its cadres, and the cohesiveness of its leadership. In the face of dramatically changed international circumstances, the EPRDF moderated its policies, abandoning marxism and embracing the free market. It weathered an insurrection by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 1992-93, contained Islamist incursions from Sudan and Somalia, won the war against Eritrea (1998-2000), achieved a measure of economic progress, and took large steps towards state decentralisation and smaller ones towards democratisation.**

Consequently, it was a shock when the TPLF Central Committee split in acrimony in March 2001. In the following months, many senior members of the Front's leadership were purged, some were jailed, and the organisation went through convulsions that spread to other components of the EPRDF and the army. Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister, chairman of both the TPLF and EPRDF, emerged dominant and initiated what was described as a wide-ranging process of internal reform in the EPRDF. It is important to know what this crisis reveals about the nature of the TPLF specifically and Ethiopian political culture in general. It should be noted that, as is the case with other political movements in Africa, the EPRDF has effectively merged with the state, therefore, the crisis of the Front is in effect a crisis of the Ethiopian state.

Ultimately the authors conclude that while there were differences over policy and ideology among the leadership, of equal significance was a contest over power. This involved struggles over power between Meles and a dozen of his colleagues, between elements broadly associated with state organs and those associated with the party apparatus, and between Tigray-based TPLF officials and those around the prime minister. Ideological concerns and struggles for power merged in ways that can still not be completely understood, but it can be said with confidence that the result is a shift in power from Tigray to the central government in Addis Ababa, from the instruments of the party to the state, and from a group among the TPLF Central Committee to Meles Zenawi.

## Unfolding Crisis

The seeds of the crisis in the TPLF were sown during the war with Eritrea. Relations between the Tigrayan and Eritrean comrades-in-arms during the mortal struggle against the military regime in Addis Ababa had their ups and downs (Young, 1996; Medhane, 1999). However, there were no evident differences within the Front's leadership on that score until war broke out with Eritrea in 1998. Disputes then broke out over the conduct of the war, between those who advocated an all out effort against the regime in Eritrea and others, led by Meles, who were sensitive to pressure from abroad to limit the scope of the conflict and bring it to an early end. It is likely that such differences overlapped with personal considerations and hardened into factions. Critical in this early period were disagreements over recommendations made by the OAU on the Technical Arrangements to end the war. After a heated debate the Central Committee (CC) voted (17 to 13) to reject what the majority regarded as overly conciliatory proposals. Significantly, Meles was in the minority.

This was the first concrete expression of division within the leadership, and made clear the gap that had opened between Meles and senior colleagues in the Central Committee. Many observers now believe that bitterness over this issue was the catalyst of the crisis. Had the war not occurred then, the existing differences could have been ironed out and the party could have been spared the grief it was to endure.

A victorious Ethiopian offensive brought the fighting to an end in the spring of 2000, and launched a tortuous process of peacemaking that has still to be definitively concluded. The time had come to assess the regime's performance after a decade in power, and to prepare the agenda for conventions that were to be held by both the TPLF and EPRDF. It was customary for the TPLF to hold far reaching, critical evaluations periodically. The Central Committee decided to carry out a multi-dimensional evaluation of the Front's past performance, and to assess the dangers confronting the revolution (*Renewal*, Special Issue, No. 1).

In the summer of 2000, Meles presented a paper on 'Bonapartism' to the Central Committee, which charged that the TPLF's leadership was decaying and becoming distant from its constituency. Four Politburo members prepared their own presentations which expressed concern about the influence of foreign powers in Ethiopia, proposed to assess the merits of class reconciliation versus class struggle, and to define what ought to be the nature of the proletarian party in Ethiopia.

Against this background, the Amhara branch of the EPRDF, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), asked to participate in the proceedings because the TPLF was debating issues of national interest. It seems likely that the ANDM – which until now has always deferred to the TPLF – saw an opportunity to play a mediating role and improve its standing in the EPRDF. This proposal was rejected after extensive debate in the TPLF CC at the end of 2000. Once again, Meles and his followers, who supported ANDM participation, were pitted against those who would later be identified as 'dissidents', and lost. It would appear that the group led by Meles wanted the ANDM leadership to participate in the meetings because it could be expected to endorse his position.

The TPLF CC met in January 2001 and went on to debate 'Bonapartism' for a whole month. Bizarre though this debate was, CC members realised the outcome would have a critical impact upon the TPLF. Tewolde Wolde Mariam, a leading dissident, was heard to say at the time that the Front would suffer whatever the outcome of the leadership wrangle; and that proved to be the case. Meanwhile, Meles' allies in the

ANDM quickly endorsed his 'Bonapartist' thesis within their own organisation. At the end of February, it was approved also by the TPLF CC with a small margin of 15 in favour to 13 against.

The minority then walked out of the Central Committee and demanded the calling of a national convention to resolve the dispute, as provided by the TPLF constitution, and the establishment of a committee to investigate allegations of corruption in the TPLF leadership. It was a grave tactical error. By walking out of the Central Committee the dissidents violated the principle of democratic centralism and collective leadership, thus giving Meles a major tactical advantage. He moved quickly to suspend twelve of the dissidents for violating party rules, and dismissed them from their party posts. They, in turn, issued a statement claiming the crisis had its origin in disagreements over the conduct of the Ethio-Eritrean war (*The Reporter*, 26 March 2000).

Meles immediately called a conference of TPLF cadres in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, where he appealed to ethnic solidarity, intimating the survival of the Front and the future of Tigray were at stake. Once more the dissidents walked out of the meeting, and Meles again carried the vote. The dissidents appealed to the TPLF Audit Committee, which ruled on 11 March that their suspension was a violation of party rules. Meles overruled the Audit Committee and suspended several of its members from the Front. He claimed party rules apply only during normal times, and these were not normal times. The dissidents were next dismissed from the posts they held in the federal and state governments and from the national and regional assemblies to which they had been elected. Several of them were accused of corruption and imprisoned.

While Meles worked to consolidate support within the TPLF, the only party in the country with genuine grassroots organisation and strength, his opponents appealed to the leadership of the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Front (SEPDF), weak and subservient components of the EPRDF. Meles' victory in the TPLF cadre conference had demonstrated that he held control of the EPRDF apparatus and, with the support of the ANDM already in hand, the OPDO and SEPDF were soon brought into line. But not without misgivings and hesitation that were to lead to widespread purging of their ranks soon afterwards. When the ANDM called a meeting of the EPRDF Politburo hoping to demonstrate solidarity with the Meles group, the OPDO leadership did not attend. Instead, it pressed for the reinstatement of four dissidents who had been dismissed from the TPLF Politburo. Massive purging decimated the cadre ranks of the EPRDF branches subsequently, with the exception of the ANDM. In the midst of this cleansing campaign, Kifle Gebre Medhin, Chief of Security and Meles' trusted aide, was murdered by a fellow TPLF officer, under circumstances yet to be fully clarified. This heightened the atmosphere of uncertainty and crisis in the ruling Front and the country.

## Renewal

The purges were part of a process called *Tehadso* ('renewal'). In theory, the task was to carry out the delayed ten-year assessment of the EPRDF and draw the necessary lessons. In practice, it became a massive purge designed to root out allies and sympathizers of the TPLF dissidents and others labelled as politically degenerate and corrupt elements. Narrow (ethnic) nationalism, was a target in the OPDO and the SEPDF, that is, the non-Abyssinian branches.

The 'renewal' spread from the EPRDF to the army in May. The expulsions included the respected Chief of Defence Staff, Lt.-General Tsadkan Gebre Tinsae, and other senior officers, presumably because they had failed to openly support Meles. There is no indication of a plot by the dissidents or elements in the army to remove Meles illegally, nor is there any evidence of a consensus to force him out of office legally. Clearly some wanted Meles to engage in self-criticism for what they considered his mistakes during the Ethio-Eritrean war, and to oblige him to return to the collegial form of leadership that was TPLF tradition.

The next step in the 'renewal' process was to hold cadre meetings, followed by congresses of the TPLF, ANDM, OPDO and SEPD, in July-August 2001. Orchestrated by the Meles group in close coordination with the ANDM leadership, the congresses (now purged of dissidents) unanimously approved motions condemning the dissidents for factionalism, violation of democratic centralism, threats to the existence of the EPRDF, anti-democratic behaviour, etc. Furthermore, the congresses endorsed new economic and political strategies that Meles formulated in many tracts he produced during this period. Although the dissidents contend that Meles had rejected revolutionary democracy, he did not openly deviate from what is basic dogma in both the TPLF and EPRDF. Meles continued to endorse revolutionary democracy, a political system he holds is different from liberal democracy, because it protects individual as well as group rights.

Nonetheless, these meetings served to shift the ruling party away from its long-standing radicalism in at least two critical areas. First, it was resolved that the EPRDF, in origin a coalition of peasants, workers and revolutionary intelligentsia, would now open its ranks to the national bourgeoisie. Second, it was decided that the country would be integrated into the global economy (*Renewal*, November 2001). In a related move, the EPRDF endorsed a clear statement in favour of capitalism, thereby resolving abiding tension and confusion within the movement. Thus it would appear that while the TPLF crisis did not begin with serious ideological concerns, it did produce a significant shift in the ideological orientation of the party. The leadership claimed – with some justification – that it had brought clarity and unity of purpose to the EPRDF. Until this time, it was said, politics dictated everything. Afterwards everything would be dictated by the economy, or at least argued from that premise.

It is clear that the dissidents would not have swallowed such notions, and it is unlikely the majority of EPRDF delegates would have endorsed them, were the dissidents in attendance at these meetings. Approval was possible because Meles had assumed a dominant position in the leadership of the EPRDF, and the cadres had nowhere to turn. The dissidents maintain that Meles's extensive international contacts led him to turn against his commitment to revolutionary ideals, and all that followed was a result of his masterful attempt to turn the TPLF against itself. Be that as it may, it is clear that the result of the 'renewal' process was to affirm the leadership of Meles and to marginalise his opponents.

But there are limits to how far the EPRDF can move away from its marxist-leninist origins. On one hand it has accepted the presence of a national bourgeoisie, on the other it has made clear its continuing support for the development of an autonomous national economy in which the state retains a major role. Moreover, in such key areas as national self-determination, land tenure, federalism, the vanguard status of the TPLF and EPRDF, support for the peasants, and lukewarm attitude to pluralism and civil society, the ruling party has not shifted position. Two years after the crisis there

is little evidence in terms of policies and programmes to suggest anything more than marginal changes. The highly publicised post-crisis decentralisation programme to empower district level administration, the civil service reform, and the fight on corruption, which currently figure prominently in the government's agenda, were not areas of contention with the TPLF dissidents.

### **A Peasant-based Revolutionary Party**

While political and ideological differences go some distance in providing an understanding of the nature, course, and outcome of the TPLF crisis, other explanations must also be considered.

Studies of successful peasant-based revolutions show that they take place only when a discontented, urban-based petty bourgeoisie make common cause with a discontented peasantry, as was the case in Tigray (Young, 1997). These same studies conclude that upon achieving success, the leaders take up residence in the city – the focus of power – and become increasingly distant from their peasant base, eventually transforming themselves into a middle class with its own particular interests.

The skills acquired during armed struggles are not the same as those needed to administer a state, and many revolutionary parties have failed, or experienced major problems, in making this adjustment. Upon assuming state power, revolutionaries must take up new responsibilities and attempt to develop broader constituencies. They must also participate in an international system, which invariably involves further compromises and adjustments. The selfless life of the revolutionary in the countryside is exchanged for the self-centred life style in the city and involves integration into a wider urban society. Guerilla armies with a high degree of democracy and informality are transformed into conventional armies based on rank and privilege, thus further undermining the revolutionary ethos.

Many of these findings apply to the TPLF. The move of many TPLF leaders, who had lived with the peasants and shared their deprivations in the Tigrayan countryside, to Addis Ababa, exposed them to an alien material world divorced from the realities of peasant existence. Inevitably, some cadres were corrupted, yet many remained dedicated to the cause. In order to take effective control of the state apparatus, the Front had to appoint many of its cadres to positions of power and responsibility for which they were ill prepared. Power attracted careerists to join the ruling party. Attitudes to women, comradeship, communal living, religion, and the value of a simple lifestyle were increasingly challenged. The task of the TPLF army changed from attacking the state to defending it. Finally, a Tigrayan-dominated army had to be transformed into a national institution with fair participation of other ethnic groups.

The inevitable undermining of revolutionary values weakened the collective ethos of the TPLF, strained relations among its leaders, encouraged careerism and opportunism. Defending particular interests became a primary objective, and the party as an entity suffered. In the absence of democratic means to resolve the crisis, cadres were left with the stark choice either of supporting Meles or being purged. Assessment of the issues themselves sometimes became secondary to concerns of personal political survival. Changes in the political culture of the TPLF permitted a level of callousness and a disregard of organisational procedures that would not have been possible in the past.

## Revolutionaries or Pragmatists?

Given weak states, uneven development, and incomplete integration, revolts in the African countryside are not uncommon. But the TPLF-led revolt was nonetheless unusual. Its leaders acquired their revolutionary ideals and understanding of marxism-leninism in the student movement during the fading days of the imperial regime. While imbued with the thinking of this movement, the future TPLF leaders rejected the prevalent notion of a proletarian revolution and a country wide struggle, in favour of a peasant revolution imbued with provincial Tigrayan nationalism (Young, 1997:92-118). Launched in February 1975, the largely student-led TPLF developed its ideology and programme in the most conservative province of Ethiopia, where the quasi-feudal ideals of the Orthodox Church and the imperial regime still had a strong hold on the people. The TPLF leadership made it clear in its thinking and practice that the struggle was as much against these local traditions and values as against the military regime in Addis Ababa.

The TPLF sought to counter the prevailing attitudes of secrecy and suspicion with a commitment to transparency best exemplified by the notion of *gim gema*. Roughly translated as 'evaluation', *gim gema* was designed to critically assess every aspect of the Front's programme, the quality of its leadership, and the personal conduct of all its members; publicly at great length (Young, 1997b:95). This populist democratic practice became a cornerstone of the TPLF's concept of governance, and it was introduced to all branches of the EPRDF and, after victory in 1991, into the various institutions of the state. Leaders of the TPLF invariably believed that *gim gema* was required to ensure that the movement maintained its revolutionary ideals and would not succumb to the temptations of state power. Typically, *gim gema* took one of two forms. A 'hard' version applied to TPLF cadres and made them accountable for both their performance and their personal behaviour. A 'soft' version applied to officials in institutions of government and focused largely on performance.

The TPLF never had the power to fully introduce *gim gema* into the federal government and a civil service which continues to be assessed by its own rules. It never solved the problem of giving *gim gema* a legal basis and refining it in light of the new conditions of administering a state. *Gim gema* should have served to ensure the ideological unity of the TPLF, and not become a means to punish individuals, as was often the case, because the process was too subjective. As one senior cadre noted, during the armed struggle party members were receptive to *gim gema* and personal criticism because they had little to lose materially, but after victory careers and social standing could be threatened. These inadequacies would come to the fore during the Front's crisis.

Concerns with security in the context of a revolutionary struggle necessarily placed limitations on openness and debate and fostered secrecy, all of which were contrary to the kind of democratic culture the TPLF espoused. In addition, a small minority of TPLF leaders had a virtual monopoly of theoretical knowledge, and although informed about ideological and political perspectives, the rank and file was never equipped to engage their leaders in debate. In any case, the imperative need for unity discouraged dissent, thus undermining democratic values. These traditions remained strong in the TPLF and were evident in the crisis under discussion.

Revolutionary zeal proved inadequate in other areas too. Very early, the TPLF recognized the systemic discrimination of women in Ethiopian society, and a highly enlightened environment was created within the organisation. By the mid-1980s, probably more than one-third of its fighters were women, often escaping the

repression of their homes (Young, 1997:178-181). However, resistance by the patriarchal Tigrayan society represented by Church and Mosque led the leadership to weaken its commitment to women, even if the principle of gender emancipation was not renounced. A similar pattern can be discerned with respect to the reactionary forms organised religion takes in Tigray. The TPLF never challenged the basic tenets of Orthodox Christianity, and developed close working relations with many parish priests. As a result, productivity continues to suffer from prohibitions against working on Sundays and the innumerable saints' days and the Church's opposition to ploughing by women.

The Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (MLLT), founded in the mid-1980s, to which all senior TPLF leaders belonged, and which was regarded as the vanguard organisation within the Front, was quietly dispensed with when the EPRDF acquired state power in 1991. In retrospect, a debate over the role of the national bourgeoisie that pitted chief ideologue Gidey Ziratsion against Meles Zenawai in the mid-1980s, and to some extent represented a struggle between reformist and revolutionary perspectives, was a harbinger of the struggle that is the subject of this analysis. In both instances reformist and pragmatic positions and their exponents won out. An element of ideological watering down may also have been necessary to take on board the various components of the EPRDF, which did not have the commitment to revolutionary change characteristic of the TPLF.

The TPLF was committed to collective leadership and strongly opposed any kind of personality cult; often there was confusion about who the chairman of the party actually was. Gradually two individuals, Tewolde W. Mariam, who was appreciated for his organisational skills and sober thinking, and Meles Zenawi, who was known for his quick intelligence and communication skills, assumed leading positions as an informal team that was to function remarkably well until the mid-1990s. One cadre has described this relationship as 'the soul of the TPLF'. A crucial step was the decision to vest the leadership of the party and government to the same person – Meles. Apparently the TPLF leaders thought that *gim gema* and other informal means could ensure accountability, but giving such power to one individual does not seem consistent with notions of collective leadership. As one senior dissident cadre later ruefully said: 'We thought he could be handled.'

Thus, the TPLF made compromises at every step, no doubt necessary to achieve its ultimate objective of gaining power but, at the same time, weakening its struggle against the feudal values and institutions that dominated, and still dominate, Ethiopian society. By turning away from the commitment to a full-scale transformation of the Ethiopian state and society, and by reducing its enthusiasm for *gim gema* and collective leadership, it sowed the seeds for the crisis of 2001.

## **Tensions Between Party & State**

When the TPLF took over the administration of Tigray province in 1989 while the armed struggle continued, it faced no major problems or tension in the relations between party and local administration since, in fact, no distinction was made between them; the party itself ran the administration. This was not possible to do when the TPLF took over the state and reorganised it in the form of a decentralised federal system based on self-governing ethnic regions. TPLF cadres were dispersed through the federal and regional administrations, the military and security apparatus to ensure party dominance. The EPRDF had to establish regional governments where none had previously existed. In fact, it failed to create autonomous governance

institutions with legal foundations. The party was clearly dominant, but faced problems with state functionaries who were not its members and elected officials who were not reliable. While the party operated on a level above the state, there was so much overlapping membership in the upper levels that most Ethiopians had difficulty distinguishing between the two. The Prime Minister was answerable to the party and not the parliament, an institution also controlled by the EPRDF.

In the face of limited development in the mid-1990s, the people of Tigray demanded greater engagement by the TPLF, a view endorsed by many senior party leaders. These same leaders also wanted Tigray and the TPLF to remain the focal point of decision-making in Ethiopia (Young, 1997b). Several senior party officials were reassigned to Tigray to take charge of a TPLF development offshoot named EFFORT. Prime Minister Meles, on the other hand, reigned supreme at the centre of the state, and acquired a high profile and support in the international arena; in both areas he acted with increasing independence from party control, relying mainly on a group of advisers of his own choosing.

The Ethio-Eritrean war was the catalyst that produced a challenge to Meles' quasi monopoly of decision making. It appears that a majority in the TPLF wanted an aggressive military strategy to demolish the Eritrean war machine, to assert Ethiopia's hegemonic role in the Horn, and to demonstrate that it would not be a pawn of the West in the region. This position also had significant support in the EPRDF. TPLF Politburo member Tewolde Wolde Mariam was leader of this hardliner faction, and it was he, not Meles, who was the most powerful person in the country during the war years, a situation that the latter has acknowledged. The conduct of the war was decided by the Central Command, of which Meles was a member and played an important, but not dominant, role. Meles represented a moderate approach, mindful of the economic and diplomatic damage the war was doing to the country. His opponents accused him of giving in to Western pressure and gambling with Ethiopia's sovereignty.

These differences also overlapped and were exacerbated by personal ambition and animosities, all of which were to come to a head with the end of the war. Meles' alliance with the ANDM, the formulation of the Bonapartist thesis, and the administrative measures enacted subsequently were all designed to reclaim power and influence that he had lost during the war. Thus the failure of the TPLF to clarify the relations between the party and the state after 1991 contributed to the rift among the leadership.

## **Meles in the Leadership Nexus**

From the beginning of the armed struggle Meles was well positioned to advance in the leadership of the TPLF. First, until 1979 Meles was the head of the cadre school and served as an instructor. He also served as deputy in the Political Department to leading ideologue Abai Tsaheye, with the rank of associate Central Committee member, and in 1979 he became a full member of the Central Committee (Zeratsion, 2000). These two positions gave him a very influential role in developing the ideological orientation of the TPLF. Second, these roles also gave him a close relationship with, and understanding of, the cadres that was to prove beneficial in the future. Third, from this involvement he was well placed to respond quickly to crises with ideological explanations and perspectives. Meles' work on political and ideological perspectives to the exclusion of military or other responsibilities



permitted him to acquire considerable knowledge, as well as the opportunity to train and organise cadres and disseminate his views. However, at all times Meles' contributions took place within the context of the leadership.

The responsibilities he was increasingly assigned were also indicative of the respect with which he was held in the TPLF. Meles utilised these advantages to play a formative role in the creation of the MLLT in 1984-85 to develop the ideology of the TPLF, shift the orientation from Tigray to Ethiopia, and carry out the necessary research to better pursue the objectives of the movement, particularly in the military sphere. In retrospect, however, it can be seen that the MLLT also served as a vehicle for Meles to pursue his leadership aspirations. Thus, he pressed for the dominance of the Political Department, which was closely linked to the MLLT (Tsfay Atsibeha and Kahasay Berhe, 2001). The Political Department in turn increasingly gained dominance over the foreign mission (of Seyoum Mesfin, currently Ethiopia's foreign minister), the military committee (of Azegawie Berhe, the TPLF's first leader), and Meles' major political challenger, Gidey Zeratsion (then deputy leader of the TPLF). It was also against this background that he began to develop a close cooperative relationship with Tewolde, whose own considerable assets served to advance both the party and the more politically ambitious Meles.

A pattern thus emerges that can be seen in the current crisis. First, crises within the TPLF invariably break out in the leadership and have little impact on the base. Second, personal differences figure prominently along with ideological differences. Third, having claimed that the existence of the Front is at stake, Meles provides ideological perspectives to save the organisation. For example, in 1984-85 Meles put forward his thesis that the Front faced major dangers because of empiricism (the notion that the Front lacked scientific theories) and its acceptance of pragmatism (by which he meant opportunism). In the crisis under consideration he proposed the thesis of Bonapartism, according to which the TPLF had become independent of its peasant base. During the mid-1980s this approach led to the marginalisation of Gidey and Aregawie, and in 2001 it led to the dismissal of the present TPLF dissidents. Having achieved his objectives in both cases, these theses were quietly and quickly dropped. Fourth, in each inter-party crisis Meles assumed a leading role providing solutions, which at the same time enhanced his power in the organisation. Fifth, struggles over power invariably involved marriage alliances and family associations, which have a long history in feudal Tigray. The successive victories of Meles and his prominent role in all of the conflicts gained him enormous confidence and indeed even his enemies affirm his intellectual and ideological superiority over 'other' members of the leadership.

But increasingly this superiority served to undermine the TPLF's commitment to collective leadership at the expense of enhancing the role of Meles. Indeed, a critical component of the present crisis was the effort by those now identified as dissidents to maintain a system of accountability of Meles based on collective leadership. From this perspective three periods can broadly be identified: the first up until 1984 and the formation of the MLLT when the collective leadership was fully operational and there was a level of intellectual equality between the leaders; the second period which corresponded with Meles' growing consolidation of power in the TPLF and continued until the outset of the current crisis (with the exception of the period of the Ethio-Eritrean war), and the third period currently in which Meles assumed a position of unchallenged supremacy.

## Problems of Legitimacy

Although the TPLF established the EPRDF in order to gain a national base and legitimacy in Ethiopia, it never lost its minority identification, and this has always been a source of insecurity. The EPRDF parties and others designated as 'allies' – from Benishangul, Gambella, Afar and Somali regions – effectively watered-down the revolutionary content of the TPLF, and their weak performance in turn exacerbated the problem of legitimacy. Nowhere is this problem greater than in Oromia region. While the rebel Oromo Liberation Front has not posed a serious security problem since its aborted insurrection in 1992-93, it continues to challenge the regime politically, and the EPRDF does not appear to have a policy to confront the problem, or even the inclination to take it up seriously. The political and administrative weaknesses of many of these parties and the regional governments they control forced the TPLF to become more involved in their affairs than was politically desirable, thus furthering the widespread view that Tigrayans dominate every facet of government throughout the country, belying their own commitment to ethnic federalism.

The kinship between Tigrayans and Eritreans further encouraged disdain of the TPLF, which was held to have facilitated the establishment of an independent Eritrean state. Indeed, the commonly held view of the Ethiopian intelligentsia before the Ethio-Eritrean War, was that the TPLF was under the control of the EPLF (Medhane, 1999). The fact that some of the TPLF leaders, including Meles, do indeed have family ties to Eritrea, and that Eritreans did appear to have a privileged position in Ethiopia in the early years of EPRDF rule, further strengthened a virulent assault on the Front. Constantly accused of lacking a patriotic commitment to Ethiopia, the TPLF leadership sometimes found it necessary to take extreme actions to prove the contrary, such as the expulsion of Ethiopians of Eritrean ancestry during the war.

In addition, the rejectionist attitude of many Ethiopians means that many accomplishments of the TPLF are underestimated or not acknowledged. These views are reinforced by unrelenting propaganda from the Ethiopian diaspora abroad, whose majority is strongly opposed to the TPLF. Against this background it is difficult to see what the TPLF can do to achieve legitimacy in Ethiopia. A convincing victory in the Ethio-Eritrean War offered great possibilities for gaining legitimacy since the conflict had Ethiopia-wide support and should have made it clear that the TPLF is not beholden to the EPLF. But the untimely outbreak of the TPLF crisis had the effect of squandering this opportunity for political advance.

## Culture in Ethiopian Politics

Culture did not determine the course and outcome of the TPLF crisis, but the pursuits of the key actors, their personal relations and values were framed by the Abyssinian, and in particular Tigrayan, culture of which they were products. Few analysts of Abyssinian society have not been struck by the distrust, suspicion and secrecy of its people and this figured highly in the crisis under examination. Molvaer in particular has emphasised these values in his study of social control in Ethiopia (Molvaer, 1994). Levine and others attribute this to the *rist* tenure system of the Abyssinians, where rights to land could be challenged by even close members of the family, thus making them objects of suspicion (Levine, 1967). Moreover, Abyssinian society historically was deeply divided by gender, region, class, allegiance to feudal nobles, and this segmentation even divided families. The land tenure system was destroyed by the revolution of 1974, but the limited degree of modernisation, low levels of urbanisation, and Ethiopia's traditional isolation, mean that the values that were a

product of feudal society still have resonance in the society. Tigrayan political history in particular is dominated by local based conflict, civil war, divisions, betrayals and shifting alliances, which weakened the region within the Abyssinian power nexus and almost certainly was a major factor in Tigray's marginalisation for almost one thousand years.

That such a culture could produce a highly disciplined, organised, and united movement like the TPLF is remarkable. But the crisis that broke out in the Front in 2001 makes clear that the leadership did not escape its past, notwithstanding *gim gema* and party values which stressed open debate and transparency. And perhaps this is not surprising when it is appreciated that senior members of the leadership, such as Azegawie Berhe, Sebhat Nega, Meles Zenawi, and Tewolde W/Mariam, were drawn from families of the lower nobility that were deeply imbued with the values of the traditional order. TPLF handling of inter-elite conflicts, including the one under examination where comrades were personally denigrated, humiliated, and punished is consistent with a pattern reaching deep into Tigrayan feudal history.

## Implications

The crisis of 2001 is a watershed in the history of the TPLF; it changed the nature of the Front. Its members are becoming increasingly passive, no longer certain of their commitment, and it is doubtful whether they would be willing to endure the kind of sacrifices they willingly endured in the past to advance the interests of the party. The TPLF has lost leaders in the party and army of great integrity and experience, to the detriment of the organisation's intellectual and organisational capacity. The working relationship between Meles and Tewolde, which many cadres today say was pivotal to the success of the TPLF, has been severed, almost certainly to the detriment of the TPLF in general and Meles in particular. Tigray is no longer politically united, and there has been a clear decline in support from the region, which was the backbone of the TPLF since 1975.

The crisis undermined the position of the TPLF within the EPRDF, and among the Ethiopian public there is growing awareness of the regime's weakness. The fact that an objective in-depth assessment of the TPLF's performance was not carried out because of the crisis, weakened the Front's capacity to identify and correct its flaws, undermined a tradition of effective self-criticism, and bodes ill for the prospects of future assessments. The anti-corruption campaign in turn suffered from the widespread view that it is largely a vehicle to incriminate political opponents, further undermining the credibility of the regime. The dispute concerning strategy in the war against Eritrea served to raise questions about the integrity of the group led by Meles. Meles' leaning for support on the ANDM gave that organisation greater leverage in the EPRDF. To the extent that this and other components of the EPRDF are enabled to play a greater role in this organisation it is to be welcomed, but to date they have not developed the requisite organisational and political capacity for a leading role.

A further set of implications relates to the reorganisation of the state, specifically the streamlining of federal ministries and procedures to facilitate development, decentralisation to districts, and reduce the role of TPLF cadres in the regions. In the aftermath of the crisis the party and state have largely united under a single leadership. Tigray is no longer the political and economic centre or model. Divisions within the leadership have fostered greater internal insecurity in the country, and this has been exacerbated by purges in the army and changes in the security services. The crisis has furthered Meles' move to assume the role of an Ethiopian leader, rather than

a Tigrayan leader. This could be a healthy development, but it is limited by the fact that to date he still lacks legitimacy in most of the country. Nationalist sentiments of a pan-Ethiopia character are being given greater credibility and this again raises the spectre of Amhara chauvinism. And with the strengthening of the central government and the adopting of identical plans of governance by all the regions, questions are being raised about the meaning of ethnic-based federalism.

Meles' leadership has been strongly endorsed in the West because he is seen as a moderate moderniser, open to rational argument, while his opponents are widely depicted as dogmatic hard-liners. The regime's standing with the international financial institutions and the great power is high. There is every expectation that Ethiopia's economy will continue to integrate in the global market. Banking, communications, and other restricted sectors will be opened to foreign capital.

## Conclusions

The experience of the TPLF is broadly in line with that of other revolutionary movements with respect to the problems involved in the transition from a guerilla movement to a governing party, adjusting to party-state tensions, the decline in revolutionary zeal, adapting to the international state system, and the outbreak of divisions within the leadership, particularly over pursuing reformist versus revolutionary policies. However, the Front has not fully dispensed with the principles and values that have guided it since 1975. For example, the TPLF still endorses self-determination and devolution of powers to the districts, democratic centralism, rural land nationalisation, building a strong national economy, commitment to long-term planning, continuing use of marxist discourse and analysis, and a principle based foreign policy. Perhaps most significant is the commitment of the TPLF and EPRDF to the empowerment of the peasantry. Unlike virtually all other ruling parties in Africa, the EPRDF is not beholden to urban or financial interests and continues to be very protective of Ethiopia's sovereignty. The willingness of the TPLF leadership to engage in a critical and far-reaching assessment of their performance of ten years in government speaks to their integrity and courage. However, their failure to effectively carry out that assessment, map out a way forward, and at the same time maintain the unity of the party and the EPRDF, makes clear their limitations as leaders.

Crucially the commitment to ethnic based federalism is increasingly in doubt. Even before the TPLF crisis, the Front appeared to be moving toward a more pan-Ethiopia vision, and this was strengthened by the war with Eritrea in which the banner of nationwide nationalism was raised. Meles' weakness in Tigray and his alliance with the ANDM have furthered this change in direction. While giving support to a broader Ethiopian vision might seem admirable, it can only be pursued at the expense of ignoring the continuing reality of Amhara chauvinism, which not only places limits to the achievement of an Ethiopia that provides equity for all its ethnic groups, but also encourages an imperial vision when looking beyond the country.

The TPLF's program of revolutionary change was repeatedly compromised during the years of armed struggle. These compromises were no doubt necessary to achieve a high degree of acceptance and commitment to the cause among Tigrayans, but they were achieved at the cost of undermining the transformative project. And by so doing they facilitated the weakening of the commitment to changing the position of women in Ethiopian society, altering the role of religion, dispensing with the MLLT, which had been established to serve as the vanguard in the revolution, and even

undermining collective leadership, an issue at the core of the present crisis. The outcome of party-state tensions has been resolved by effectively fusing the two focal points of power – the state and party. As a result of the defeat of the dissidents, the state is now unquestionably the dominant organ of governance in Ethiopia and the party is assuming the role of servant to the state. The same pattern can be seen in the regions. This should mean the growing importance of governance structures, including the parliament and national and regional assemblies, although to date the evidence is limited.

In examining the role of Meles it can be seen that he has become the unchallenged intellectual and ideological guide of the party and the government, and as a result has accumulated a disproportionate share of power in the Ethiopian state. As noted above, Meles has successively and effectively marginalised his TPLF opponents and concentrated power in his own hands and those of close colleagues. No doubt capable, his capacity is almost certainly exaggerated, and more ominously, there would appear to be few mechanisms to ensure his accountability. While even Meles' opponents acknowledge his intelligence, many feel discomfort about the dependence of the government and the party on one man.

The restrictions imposed by Abyssinian culture largely encompasses all other explanations of the course and outcome of the crisis and the transformation of the TPLF. In effect, the idealism and revolutionary fervour of the TPLF cadres ran up against the brick wall of the deeply entrenched conservatism of Abyssinian culture. The heroic period of the TPLF is thus over. Although somewhat overstated, Genenew is essentially correct in arguing that, 'the split has revealed that the TPLF is neither very different nor culturally distinct from other Ethiopian political groups' (Genenew Assefa, 2001). Internal power struggles, the breakdown of collective leadership, the failure to resolve divisions between cadres carrying out party functions and those involved in the state, and the Front's failure to achieve legitimacy, all figured in undermining the revolutionary character of the organisation. But the endurance and resistance of a conservative Abyssinian culture would in any case have markedly limited the kind of changes initially favoured by the TPLF.

On balance a sober reading of the Ethiopian situation suggests that the TPLF-EPRDF has many accomplishments to its credit. These include maintaining relative peace and security, major expansions in the areas of health and education, making limited steps towards democracy and transparency, and achieving measurable economic advances, particularly among the peasantry. Moreover, the commitment to national self-determination and the establishment of regional governments were probably the only measures that could have ensured the survival of the Ethiopian state in 1991 and still provide the best model for governance in Ethiopia. The EPRDF has also gained a high degree of international legitimacy and the support of IFIs, despite zealously protecting national autonomy. It has pursued a realistic and principled foreign policy in sharp contrast to the adventurist proposals of the various opposition groups. And although the TPLF's handling of the crisis and the treatment of the dissidents is to be abhorred, it nonetheless represents a considerable advance over the conduct of past Ethiopian governments.

In the end, opposition weakness will likely ensure the continuing rule of the EPRDF. The opposition has not been able to formulate realistic alternative economic policies or approaches to national and regional governance. And to date the TPLF dissidents give little indication of any desire or capacity to challenge the dominance of Meles in the Ethiopian state. Indeed, the biggest threat to the survival of the EPRDF

government – as its leaders regularly acknowledge – is Ethiopia's deeply entrenched poverty. Without major economic advances any Ethiopian government will be vulnerable. But the role of the TPLF in Ethiopian political life is in decline, the revolutionary fervour and zeal that motivated its cadres for twenty-six years has been dissipating since the outbreak of the crisis, and this will be to the loss of the country.

In retrospect, the period from the assumption of power in 1991 to the outbreak of the crisis a decade later can be seen as a period of transition, but one that could not be completed until basic questions of power and ideological direction within the ruling party had been resolved. With the TPLF's dominance waning and the power of state leaders, and in particular Meles, clearly rising, a consolidation is underway. Having weakened his power base in Tigray during the course of marginalising his opponents, Meles is dependent upon his control of state organs, elements of the TPLF, his ANDM allies, and a small entourage. Thus the transition still continues. The TPLF is divided, the ANDM does not have deep roots among the Amhara, and the state bureaucracy has never been sympathetic to the EPRDF. Unless Meles can create a broader and presumably pan-Ethiopian base of power, which does not seem likely, his position and that of his followers will be insecure. And given the effective merger of first the TPLF, and now the Meles core, with the Ethiopian state, both face a crisis of legitimacy.

The TPLF and the EPRDF preserved the Ethiopian state when came to power in 1991 by carrying out far-reaching reforms, and in particular introducing ethnic federalism. And against the background of the TPLF-state crisis, the Front must again embark on a major reform programme, this time combining the achievements of its years in power with committed efforts at democratisation and reconciliation. Ethnic-based federalism, security of land for the tillers, protection of the interests of the peasantry, and the territorial unity of Ethiopia must all be ensured. The hegemony of the TPLF and EPRDF must end. The TPLF's historical moment has passed and there can be no justification for such parties in a world where popular democracy and globalisation rule. Beyond that, almost all aspects of governance and the economy must be decided upon through democratic means.

The TPLF at its worst has followed Ethiopian traditions of control and direction at the expense of democratic decision-making, but at its best the Front has attempted genuine consultation and dialogue with the masses. It is these latter values that must be drawn upon if Ethiopia is to begin the process of moving beyond its authoritarian past and build a democracy that matches its unique character. To the extent that it has the capacity civil society must be involved, but given its weakness – a product of state and societal authoritarianism – a transitional government that includes key opposition elements must take the lead. The TPLF may not survive this process, and will certainly not survive as a hegemonic party, but it would be to its eternal credit and consistent with the values that a generation of its cadres fought and died for, if it initiated a process of genuine democratisation, and for the first time in Ethiopian history a government that not only gave up power willingly and peacefully, but actually facilitated the process.

*Medhanie Tadesse* is a historian in Ethiopia; *John Young* is currently doing research in Southern Sudan; e-mail: johnryoung@hotmail.com