

# **Inside the EPLF**

## **The Origins of the ‘People’s Party’ & its Role in the Liberation of Eritrea**

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**Abstract:** At the third congress of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front in February 1994, delegates voted to transform the 95,000-person organization into a mass political movement, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice. The congress gave the PFDJ a transitional mandate to draw the general population into the political process and to prepare the country for constitutional democracy over the next four years. Near the close of the three-day conference, Isaias Afwerki, the country’s acting president, surprised many of those present with an announcement that a clandestine Marxist political party had guided the Front for almost 20 years and that it had been disbanded in 1989, shortly before the end of the independence war. Since then, however, there has been little public discussion of the historical role of the party or its legacy. Drawing on interviews with key participants, this paper explores the origins of what was known as the Eritrean People’s Revolutionary Party and its impact on the liberation struggle during the nearly two decades of its clandestine existence. Questions I address include: How, why and by whom was the party formed? How did it function in relation to the Front as a whole? How did this change from the 1970s to the 1980s? And why was the decision taken to disband the party in 1989? Still to be examined is the party’s legacy in the post-liberation era and how its political culture and mode of operation shapes the contemporary political landscape.

### **Introduction**

During the first decade of its existence, in the 1970s, the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) developed a reputation at home and abroad as a highly disciplined political movement whose members consistently — sometimes eerily so — articulated its outlook, promoted its programs and modeled its values. One of the key features that differentiated the EPLF as a national liberation movement was its commitment to simultaneous social and political struggle and the incorporation of this approach into its political culture as well as its practice. It was this aspect that made it a revolutionary nationalist movement, as it worked to transform the society it fought to liberate.

The EPLF accomplished extraordinary things with meager resources. Despite the continuing absence of sustained external support, the Front steadily improved its military capacity, while simultaneously building basic infrastructure (construction, transportation, communications), promoting economic development (agriculture, animal husbandry, commerce and trade), delivering social services (education, health, emergency relief), and campaigning to alter fundamental power relations within rural society (land reform, marriage reform, restructuring of village administration). A dynamism was evident that was easy to appreciate but difficult to explain. Visiting journalists often described the EPLF as a “well-oiled machine,” marveling at its accomplishments while at the same

time signaling their unease over the refusal of the Front's members to acknowledge weaknesses or faults.

The quality of organization and the high level of consciousness among its members were among the Front's most distinguishing features. But so, too, was its opacity. How could a steadily expanding guerrilla army with so little outside support function so well and have such a high degree of consensus within it? The answer was not immediately apparent, but it was obvious that leadership was central. As is now clear, it was not only who led the Front but how they did so that explained their effectiveness in action and their unusual degree of political and organizational unity — how the leadership was able to make use of collective strengths, to identify and correct deficiencies, and to steadily replenish and expand its ranks. It was the existence of a highly disciplined, secret party within the Front that accounted for much of this.

For nearly all of its existence, the EPLF was guided by a clandestine Marxist party — the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP, usually known simply as the 'People's Party') — that gave it vision, program and direction while molding its members to reflect its goals and objectives and to spread its message. Despite the secrecy surrounding the party, its impact was readily apparent in all that the Front did. A grasp of its origins is central to appreciating the role it played in building the EPLF and in liberating Eritrea, as well as in shaping the political culture that continues to define the country's post-independence political landscape.

### **The Origins of the Party**

The seeds for the People's Party were planted in the perilous political environment of the 1960s, when the only armed nationalist force in Eritrea was the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), whose politically conservative leaders, based outside the country, were anxious to end Ethiopian rule but not to see Eritrean society changed. On the contrary, they had powerful vested interests in preventing initiatives in that direction, and they acted ruthlessly to suppress them. Yet they were also divided amongst themselves and deeply distrustful of one another. This created spaces for various opposition currents to arise and grow in the field.

At that time, to voice support for a secular nationalist perspective within the Front, let alone a left political agenda, could put one at risk of isolation, imprisonment or even death, so much of this evolved quietly, in one-on-one encounters among the liberation fighters. Radical ideas were swirling around the liberation movement at that time, and activists from a wide array of political trends were joining it. However, most did so with little grasp of the movement they were entering or the dangers they would soon face because of their outlook, or simply because of their ethnic or religious origin.

Some of the ELF's first foot-soldiers came out of the Sudan Communist Party. Others joined after studying in the Middle East where they were exposed to left parties and Arab nationalist movements and ideas. Among them was Romedan Mohammed Nur, a student from the coastal lowlands who joined the ELF in 1963 while studying in Cairo and was sent to Syria for military and political training. Romedan would go on to play a key role in the formation of the People's Party and the EPLF. By the middle of the decade, other recruits began to come from the mostly Christian, Tigrinya-speaking highlands as well. This in itself posed a problem for the highly factionalized ELF, then

dominated by warlords from the mostly Muslim western lowlands and eastern coastal areas, whose personal ambitions overshadowed any semblance of nationalism.

Many of the newcomers brought an eclectic agenda for social and political change drawn from Marxist “classics” and popular accounts of other liberation struggles then circulating on the campuses — an agenda at odds with the disheartening reality they found in the field. Fighters sent outside for training — to Syria, to Cuba, eventually to China — also brought back ideas and experiences that clashed with the situation in rebel-held Eritrea and the backward thinking of the ELF’s leadership. One of the student radicals from the highlands to join the ELF in 1966 was Isaias Afwerki, the country’s current president and another People’s Party founder. He told me later that he was stunned at what he found when he arrived at the ELF’s offices in Kassala, Sudan that September:

In those days it was something like an obligation to join the movement for national liberation. Emotionally and sentimentally, everyone was with the ELF.

But when I joined the armed struggle in 1966 with many of my friends, we began to know the real ELF. The first day I arrived in Kassala [Sudan], I was frustrated, people telling me about the ugly nature of the ELF. It was a nightmare. For some reason that no one explained, we were ostracized. There was an atmosphere of terror where you had to go out in groups, especially at dusk. There were no instructions, there was no organization, but if you asked questions, you were labeled as an agent of the Ethiopians. Not only highlanders — everyone who joined the ELF found himself in this situation.

The shocking thing was that during high school, you never knew who was from what tribe, from what region, because there was not a hint of that kind of thing. But in the ELF everything was based on your clan or tribe. This created the ground for a new outlook, a reformist trend. Anyone who got there with high nationalistic feeling would be in the camp against the ELF leadership. It was not a battle of ideas or ideals — it was a question of whether there was nationalism or not. You would never talk about ‘Eritrea’ inside the ELF — always it was tribes or clans or religious affiliations that mattered. Revolutionary ideals had to be injected into the ELF to make it a real nationalist movement.

Isaias had been a member of a secret nationalist organization in secondary school in Asmara. He and others of this group went on to university in Addis Ababa where they expanded the organization and developed contacts with Ethiopian revolutionaries. Once in Kassala, Isaias wrote to his comrades to alert them to what he found there, but the letter didn’t reach the others. That December Haile Wold’ensae, another leader of the Addis Ababa student organization, joined Isaias in Kassala, where he heard the bad news firsthand:

When I opened the gate, he told me to shut my mouth, make no comments, no proposals. He would tell me everything when we could talk separately. I couldn’t imagine what was going on.

He took me to a restaurant to talk. The first thing he told me was that the situation was a complete mess. There was no national leadership, no national program. To raise questions about this was to risk everything.

The idea of having a clandestine organization within the ELF was the order of the day from the very beginning. It was a very dark moment for us, but we knew there was no other way, that we had to commit ourselves to be dedicated no matter what the cost, that we even had to differentiate between those nationalists who could be committed to a long-term strategy and those who were only emotional.

This was a very dangerous endeavor. In the beginning there were three — Isaias, myself and Mussie [Tesfamikael]. We took an oath to rebuild a genuine national movement, and we signed it with our blood.

Each man carved an “E” into his upper arm to signify his commitment. The scars are still visible today.

At the time they made this pledge, the ELF was organized into autonomous geographical (and also ethnic or clan-based) divisions, drawing on the experience of the Algerian liberation movement. However, by structuring the Front this way, ELF leaders were able to carve up Eritrea into personal domains allied to one another but not functioning as a coordinated national army (or political movement). “None of these people ever talked about Eritrea,” said Haile. Everyone wanted to have his own fiefdom. We called them the ‘generalismos.’”

At first, there were four such divisions, ringing the center of the territory. Each one had its dissidents, though it was difficult and dangerous for them to maintain contact with one another. In 1965, as more and more highlanders sought to join the ELF, a fifth division was formed in the Hamasien highlands. The ELF took this step both to mobilize manpower and resources there and to balance a power struggle taking place within the Front’s Revolutionary Council (RC).

From the outset, the form, structure and leadership of the 5th Division was contested. A highly respected Christian serving in the Sudan army, Tsegai Gebremedhin, was selected to head it, but he soon fled after one of the ELF-RC leaders, Idris Ghalaudios, circulated rumors that Tsegai was a target for assassination. “At that time, no Christian had any guarantee of safety,” said Haile. “We were not even taking any malaria pills for fear we would be poisoned. In battles, we were mainly guarding ourselves against bullets that came from behind.”

Meanwhile, a growing Chinese interest in the Eritrean struggle introduced a new element to the volatile political mix. ELF leaders had approached China for support, but the Chinese had reservations over the Front’s weak leadership. When they agreed in 1966 to provide the ELF arms, they conditioned it on a promise to send the political commissars from the Front’s five divisions to China for special training. Among them were Isaias, chosen to represent the new 5th Division in the highlands, and Romedan, representing the 4th Division from the coastal lowlands. As Haile recollects it:

The Chinese said there would be no arms, no money, before they trained these people. Isaias was chosen partly to get him out before [the ELF leadership] eliminated him. I went to the new 5th Division to be a link with our clandestine

organizations in Eritrea and Ethiopia. The third one of us [Mussie] was to stay in Kassala, where he had started a magazine, 'The Renaissance of the Youth,' and be a link there.

Throughout the next year, tensions built within Eritrea over control of the 5th Division, its mission, even its size and operational objectives. ELF leaders also acted to isolate and punish dissidents in all five divisions. According to Haile, this harrowed the ground for the political lessons Isaias and Romedan were learning in China:

This was why there came a need for a clandestine organization that had to go beyond a national program. We needed an ideal that could match or challenge all these problems — not just the corruption of the ELF leadership but the narrow nationalisms that dominated the movement. We needed an ideal to use as a tool to fight all these things, and we needed a revolutionary party to wage this struggle. This reality created an incentive for an outlook to deliver a solution to all these problems.

The Chinese idea from the beginning was to give us this ideal through their training, but only two of the ones who went — Isaias and Romedan, who met each other there — looked at the Chinese experience to see how Eritrea could benefit from it. For them, it was enlightening to see that the Chinese revolution had gone through a lot of problems, some of them similar to ours.

At a minimum, this was a stimulant. At best, the Chinese experience offered us some possible solutions. This is when they decided on their own to have this 'inside' organization. But the other three [ELF commissars in China] were totally alienated. They only saw the trip as a vehicle to get arms.

Along with their military training, Romedan and Isaias got lessons in party-formation, as their Chinese teachers insisted that no revolution could succeed without a party to lead it. The two began to discuss the problems in the ELF with their lecturers, according to Haile, who said that this polarized the delegation as the other three accused them of working against the ELF: "When they took their meals together, these three would take their knives and make threatening gestures, saying, 'This is what will happen to you when you get back.'"

ELF leaders knew some of the trainees would come back ideologically charged — this was the height of the Cultural Revolution in China — so they were wary of the group to begin with. One of them, Idris Ghalaudios, was also worried that RC rival Osman Sabbe, who had set up the trip, was conspiring to reap the benefits of the arms that would flow from the arrangement, so he traveled to Beijing to meet the students and establish his own links with the Chinese. When he arrived, the three conservative trainees told him of Isaias's and Romedan's growing radicalism. His response was to assure the Chinese that the five students would be their disciples and radicalize the whole of the Horn of Africa with their teachings. "He told them that they would be the ones to form a party and spread the Red Book, and the Chinese believed this," said Haile.

Idris left China at this point, but there was little doubt that a confrontation was in the offing. When the five students finished their training and flew to Damascus, Idris was waiting. On their arrival, he told them the whole thing had been a trick — there would be

no Red Books in Eritrea, no party, no new ideals, only a chance to get arms and money. He also insisted they turn over their political texts and study materials to him for safe keeping, as they were to fly through Saudi Arabia on their way to Sudan, and carrying such documents could be dangerous. They never saw their materials again.

When the group returned home, the ELF was imploding. The 5th Division had disintegrated into political infighting. Many people suspected of disloyalty to the ELF leadership had already been killed. At the same time, Ethiopia had begun a series of devastating military offensives that threw the entire Front into disarray. The result, said Haile (who was in Sudan most of this time), was chaos:

Many villages were burned, and many people became refugees, but when one division was attacked, the others relaxed. There was no coordination. ELF units were going from village to village to get food, but then they fled, leaving the people to pay the price. Women were giving food to the fighters even when their children were hungry. At last, some of them started to protest, saying the fighters escaped when the enemy came without even helping them to escape, too. People began to withhold food. Many also went to Sudan where they saw what the leadership was doing while they suffered. This discredited the ELF and the model of the five divisions, and it helped the nationalists in each division to organize opposition to it and to the division between the field and the outside leadership.

This opposition coalesced around three issues: unifying the fighters, bringing the leadership inside, and guaranteeing the human rights of the civilian population, whose only role to that point was collecting money and supplying food to the fighters. “These three slogans were the mobilizing tools for a rectification movement,” said Haile, who fled to Kassala as the Front descended into an orgy of political repression and violence. And this was when Romedan and Isaias returned. The turmoil in the field helped them to survive despite plans by the leadership to eliminate them. But it also disrupted efforts to consolidate the clandestine nationalist opposition into an organized party. “The idea of forming a party was short-circuited,” said Haile. “There was no breathing space for it then, so from 1968 to 1971 we worked on a mass basis.”

Two left trends — guided by distinct political lines — began to emerge within the nationalist opposition then. One, fiercely nationalist but with Maoist overlays, would form the basis for the Eritrean People’s Revolutionary Party in the early 1970s and, through it, the EPLF. The other, a more conventionally pro-Soviet grouping, would crystallize as the Eritrean Labor Party and take nominal control of the ELF after the RC disintegrated. But before this happened, there was a fierce battle for control of the liberation movement and the resources it commanded, followed by a lengthy process of political struggle within and among the breakaway factions.

In 1968, representatives of the 3rd, 4th and 5th ELF Divisions met in the field to select a twelve-man provisional leadership for what they called the United Force. The group included radical nationalists and individuals who went along simply because they had problems with the old leadership. This uneven political mix carried within it the seeds of future discord. “It was a mistake to include reactionaries in this group,” said

Haile. “They became a Trojan Horse to make more intrigues later. Still, when the enemy tried an offensive to take advantage of the situation, the United Force succeeded in defending territory for the first time. This sent a big signal to the people and to the other divisions, and it threatened the old leaders.”

With fighters fleeing the other divisions in droves and the United Force organizing and politicizing both their members and civilians in the regions where they operated, the beleaguered ELF-RC, led by Idris Ghalaudios, made a final bid to control of the movement. At a hastily convened conference at Adobha in 1969, Idris called for “unity” while mobilizing his supporters and allies to purge the radical nationalists.

As Haile tells it:

They dominated the conference and immediately began to imprison and kill the democratic forces. Before we could organize ourselves to resist, we had to escape. I went to the Ala Valley. Others went to Sudan, so there was no way to coordinate the establishment of an alternative. The situation was even worse than before, and it was very difficult to have confidence in anyone.

Three groups broke off from the ELF at this point. Romedan went to Aden with a group led by Mohammed Ali Umero (now Eritrea’s ambassador to Kenya). In the months they remained there, the fighters were exposed to numerous left and Arab nationalist political movements and governments, as South Yemen was then a haven for radical ideas and organizations. During this time, members of this group began to discuss the need to form a party to reform the liberation movement. Among those in these exchanges — which did not lead to conclusive action — were Umero, Romedan, and Mahmoud Sherifo (the Minister of Local Government in post-liberation Eritrea, often characterized as the second-most important position in the new state). This group sailed to the Dahlak Islands in small wooden dhows from where they made their way to the Eritrean mainland.

A second group, under Isaias, took refuge in the highlands in the Ala valley, south of Asmara. A third remained in Sudan. The Aden group took the name People’s Liberation Forces (PLF). The second one, in Ala, became known as the PLF 2. The third, nicknamed the Obel group, was called the Eritrean Liberation Forces. Together, they would evolve into a coalition they were to name the Eritrean People’s Liberation Forces. Once consolidated at an organizational congress in 1977, this was adjusted to the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front. But it took them a while — and a lot of struggle — to get there.

### **The Launch of the Party**

The initial step in launching the party was taken at a clandestine gathering in the scorched desert of Eritrea’s Dankalia region in 1971, when revolutionary activists from the PLF1 and the PLF2 met for the first time since the fracturing of the ELF.

On April 4, 1971, like-minded revolutionaries from the two PLF groups established a secret political formation to rebuild the national movement on a more unified and a more radical social and political basis. Among those at this meeting were Isaias, Abu Bakr Mohammed Hassan, Umero, Ibrahim Afa, Mesfin Hagos, Ali Sayid

Abdulla, Mahmoud Sherifo, Hassan Mohammed Amir, Ahmed Taha Baduri, Ahmed al-Keisi and a handful of others.

“We met there and discussed the need to form a core among us before uniting the new forces, to campaign on the basis of nationalism and progressive ideas, and to rid the others of the prejudices and grudges of the past,” Sherifo said later. “We decided to work in a very secretive manner. Marxism would be our leading ideology, and we would call ourselves the Eritrean People’s Revolutionary Party.”

Haile Wold’ensae (then in an Ethiopian prison) and others not present at this first meeting — Romedan and Alamin Mohammed Said, among the most prominent — were also among the party’s charter members. Most would figure in the EPLF’s top leadership throughout the liberation struggle and in the post-independence state, with the exceptions of Ibrahim Afa, Abu Bakr Mohammed Hassan and Hassan Mohammed Amir, who were killed in the war with Ethiopia.

Much of the early work of the People’s Party was aimed at molding the EPLF into a coherent political and social force — one that could model revolutionary behavior as well as promote new values and that could develop a national identity capable of subsuming the sectarian divisions that had undercut the liberation movement until then. “The main achievement of the party was national unity,” said Haile.

It brought youngsters from the different Eritrean ethnic groups to work together in the most difficult conditions of survival, and it gave them an ideal that provided some light at the end of a very dark tunnel.

Even now we can say that the party made miracles. It made people commit themselves. It made every individual think of himself as part of the whole organization and even in the most difficult situation not to lose his bearing. Each fighter was facing challenges without looking backwards — and addressing the basic issues of the society in order to transform them. One of its main strengths from the beginning was to address the woman issue.

Nevertheless, the party barely functioned as a distinct political force during the first years of its existence, as the emerging Front fought to survive against attacks from both the ELF and Ethiopia while consolidating its own organizational and political structure. One of the factors that pushed party-formation to the top of the political agenda was an eruption of political infighting in 1973, initially identified with a ‘leftist’ group known as menqa (Tigrinya for “bats,” referring to those who fly about at night) just as the Front was preparing to move into the densely populated highlands.

The stage was set when the two PLFs, which were in the process of integrating their respective forces, shifted their bases to the Sahel in 1972. They did this in order to give themselves the security to work out their political differences while maintaining their logistical links with South Yemen, from where all their arms and supplies came. Once the first two groups relocated, the Obel group, whose politics were more eclectic and whose links with the other two less organic, joined them. The plan was to politicize the rank-and-file of the three former ELF forces to develop a basis for unity-from-below through a congress to be convened once the main differences were worked through. But pressures from both the left and the right threatened to abort the project.



Haile Menkerios worked in the information and propaganda department of the joint forces at the time these events took place, though he was not yet a member of the secret party-building group. He recalls this period as one of increasing political tensions from both ends of the political spectrum. A leftist faction within the Ala group associated with Mussie Tesfamichael became frustrated with the slow pace of political development and pushed for a rapid transformation of these groups into a revolutionary political formation, challenging Isaias's leadership in the process. As word of these developments reached Osman Saleh Sabbe — the rightist former ELF RC member who was then representing himself in Yemen as the head of the new liberation forces (which he called the ELF-PLF) and securing arms and supplies for them — he began to mobilize his loyalists to oppose what he correctly perceived as a threat to his increasingly tenuous position by the direction the movement in the field was taking. This placed the revolutionaries grouped in the new People's Party in a squeeze from both political flanks.

Their response was to pre-empt their attackers in the summer of 1973 by hurriedly combining the leaderships of the PLF1 and the PLF2 under Isaias's command. The Obel group, where Sabbe's influence was strongest, pulled out of Sahel and shifted its base of operations to Adobha and Barka to avoid participating in this process. Once there, however, it was hammered by the ELF, whose main strength was in this region, and most of the group's fighters fled into Sudan.

Meanwhile, weeks after the merger of the two PLFs, the menqa faction, whose leaders were marginalized in the command of the newly combined forces, stepped up its opposition to the PLF leadership. This galvanized Sabbe loyalists and others on the right flank into action. In the ensuing political struggle, which paralyzed the movement, a number of fighters were arrested. Some, including Mussie and five or six others, were executed. Others in the 'leftist' faction were brought back into the fold through an extended process of criticism/self-criticism. Several others, identified with the rightist faction, were executed later. Whatever the details, the experience reinforced the leadership's conviction that greater political cohesion and more centralized organizational control were needed if the Front was to advance its liberation agenda. Building the party was to be the vehicle for this.

Haile Menkerios, who joined the party in 1975 but was never a member of its leadership, points to these events as the seminal experience that gave the People's Party its prominent role in the formation and development of the larger liberation movement. "This party did not form to deal with external issues," he told me. "The need for the party arose from this internal disunity. We were all saying that there was no guarantee of the continuation of our revolutionary outlook unless we formed a revolutionary organization." Haile was invited to. Others, like Sherifo, downplay the incident, insisting that it retains significance largely because of the executions that took place afterward. However, few dispute that this period was a turning point for the EPLF and for the party that was to lead it.

## **The Politics of the People's Party**

During the organization's early years, Isaias was the leader of both the party and the Liberation Front. Romedan was the second in command of both. Another half-dozen or so individuals made up the collective party/front leadership — mainly those I have

already named. (Throughout most of the EPLF's existence, its Politburo was composed of the party's smaller central committee.) When the armed struggle entered a new, expanded phase in 1975, and the PLF began to grow rapidly, they met in Bahri and decided there should be a distinct party leadership outside the Front leadership. At that point, Haile Wold'ensae (recently released from an Ethiopian prison) and Alamin were charged with organizational and political party development – preparing manuals for political education, drafting a party program, drafting a party constitution, developing a group of highly conscious cadres and so on.

In 1976, with some 150 active members, the party held its first clandestine congress in the slopes north of Asmara, near the small village of Merara. There, they committed the organization to a socialist political program for the long-term future and a national democratic agenda for the liberation of the country now. Delegates elected a central committee with Isaias and Romedan as the Secretary General and Assistant Secretary General, respectively. Haile Wold'ensae and Alamin were confirmed in their political roles, and Haile was tasked with setting up an ideological department and a cadre school.

Nearly a year later, in January 1977, the EPLF held its first organizational congress, adopting a National Democratic Program drafted by party members and circulated among fighters and civilian members before its acceptance. The party also drew up a leadership slate that was accepted more or less as presented. Henceforth, the Front would be led by a 13-member political bureau selected from within a 37-member central committee that was chosen at the Congress. Romedan was to be the EPLF's general secretary, Isaias the vice general secretary. Haile Wold'ensae would head the Front's political department and Alamin would run its foreign relations department.

By this point, the EPLF functioned as a disciplined political organization whose members shared a common outlook and acted as political emissaries in their interaction with civilians and rival factions. It was separated into military and non-military wings. The Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLA) was organized, U.S.-style, in tiers of three units each, starting at the squad level and up to 500-person battalions. For example, three squads comprised one platoon, three platoons one company, and so on. However, the command structure drew on socialist models, with a three-person leadership composed of a military commander, a political commissar and a vice commander, and no other forms of rank within frontline units. Decisions were made collectively by the three leaders, but once in battle the military commander had undisputed authority.

The notion that each fighter had to model the EPLF's politics was embedded in the structure of the organization, which set out to re-mold its members in order to transform the society at large. This started in training camp, which lasted six full months for most new recruits, and it continued within the Front as members met three times weekly for political education led by cadres within their units. The content of these sessions varied according to issues of the day, but in the mid-1970s, as the EPLF went through a major growth spurt, the main thread followed a curriculum produced in the field that started with a reprise of Eritrean history and proceeded to a highly sophisticated analysis of the revolution's goals and objectives. Marxism was the methodology.

The political education for fighters and civilians alike followed a formal curriculum contained in a book produced under party direction in 1975 titled *General Political Education for Fighters*. Each chapter provided a focus for discussions. The

topics ranged from the origins of Eritrea and an analysis of its cultural and class composition to reflections on the revolution and its goals, the identification of Eritrea's friends (workers and oppressed peoples of the world, all progressive forces, the socialist countries) and enemies (Ethiopian colonialism, imperialism, zionism, internal reaction), the tactics of the revolution, the handling of contradictions and the political economy of ancient and modern societies.

The last chapter concluded: "If you fight against imperialism as a united people, organized and led by the workers, you step toward socialism." On the back cover was inscribed the slogan: "An army without a revolutionary ideology is like a man without a brain. An army without a brain can never defeat the enemy."

The EPLF cadre school, through which many party members were recruited, took up more advanced study of Marxist methodology and politics. Topics included dialectical and historical materialism, common political deviations and the nature of "revisionism." The People's Party also ran its own intensive cadre school.

Despite its clandestine nature, Estifanos 'Bruno' Afeworki, a veteran of the party from the early 1970s but not in its leadership, says that it functioned for most of its existence as an effective vehicle for collective, action-oriented leadership:

The People's Party was a very democratic and egalitarian party [he said] — a platform where EPLF cadres could openly discuss any issue — military, political, social — any issue that surfaced in that period. We drew up short- and long-term programs — the NDP for the EPLF, socialist transformation for the EPRP. The party tried to transform the EPLF society itself, while the Front was liberating Eritrea and its people, step by step. That was the key that enabled the EPLF to succeed. The party was very strict about the role of the army and its relations with the population, for example. You were demoted immediately if you did anything wrong to the people.

The party also had its own structures — a cadre school, a politburo, a central committee, even regional administrations — just they were smaller than those of EPLF. We had members in Asmara — in the factories and among the intellectuals — among the peasants in the villages outside Asmara, in the refugee camps in Sudan, in Europe and the USA. No one had a special office for the party, everyone was immersed in the EPLF structure, not like today when we have professional politicians — people who are only doing politics. In fact, a politburo member might also be a brigade leader.

The EPLF's most decisive interventions came in the areas of land reform, village democratization and gender equality. Organizers surveyed land tenure in rural Eritrea — which varied widely from one region to another — and set about reorganizing it on a more egalitarian basis through newly elected village administrations. The EPLF mid-wifed these committees into existence through a system of sectoral representation based on new mass organizations of peasants, women, workers and youth, themselves segmented by class position. Each sub-set selected its own representative, producing a People's Assembly of mostly poor women and men of all ages. Though this formulaic approach was modified as the years wore on, it signaled a commitment to empower the disenfranchised majority through entirely new social and political mechanisms. Party

cadres were instrumental in carrying this out, while the process itself served as a recruiting ground for new party members.

Village elections were held as often as every three-to-four months as people learned to evaluate the performance of their new officials and to oust those who didn't measure up. Quotas were set for women's representation in the new assemblies, and marriage laws were reformed to free women from arrangements that in many cases kept them in life-long bondage. These and other such measures antagonized some conservatives, but they were accompanied by the provision of social and economic services — health care, early childhood education, adult literacy, agricultural extension, veterinary assistance and so on — that were often channeled through the new associations and committees rather than directly administered by the Front. This helped to stop the grumbling by those whose prerogatives were curtailed. By arguing that women's full participation in the independence struggle was essential for the country's liberation, the Front also tried to make it unpatriotic to contest women's increased prominence in social and political affairs.

Most of this was party-driven.

### **The Convergence of the Party & the Front**

In 1977, the Ethiopian army was collapsing and the liberation of the country appeared in sight. However, the national movement remained deeply divided. Political unity was a heated topic in the EPLF and the ELF and throughout the society, but the two fronts made little progress toward it. Negotiations were carried out on a party-to-party basis with no lasting results. Several attempts to cooperate on the frontlines, including joint assaults on government positions, failed badly and led to sharp recriminations, mostly aimed at the ELF, whose command structures were weak and whose fighters lacked the discipline under fire of their EPLF counterparts.

Unity talks, carried out sporadically through the late 1970s, never got beyond the formal stage as both fronts — and the parties operating within them — held out for approaches that played to their respective strengths. The EPLF favored a gradual process of coordination and dialogue at all levels in order to build a united front from below. The ELF called instead for an agreement to combine the two forces through a one-time, movement-wide congress in which each front would be represented according to the size of its membership. These positions reflected obvious organizational self-interest, as the EPLF, with its highly politicized membership, would have an advantage over the ELF in an extended political encounter, while the ELF, with its larger numbers, might have an edge in an abbreviated contest where size alone determined power. This divergence was consistent with each organization's way of dealing with political matters. It was never resolved.

Meanwhile, the 1978 strategic retreat triggered a gradual rethinking of the party's and the EPLF's general strategy and tactics and a modification of their approaches to social transformation. There were no sudden ruptures, but there was an acceleration of the trend toward the "Eritreanization" of the movement on the organizational, political and ideological levels. Not only the direct involvement of the Soviet Union but also the behavior of the rest of the world, socialist or otherwise, encouraged the movement to

believe that when the chips were down, there was no one to trust but the Eritreans themselves.

Political education remained a constant feature of life in EPLF areas, though it gradually altered in form, substance and frequency. It took place in small meetings, through intensive courses of study, and in large public seminars. It could involve military units, sectoral groups or whole villages. Its aims were to discredit the enemy, to build commitment to the EPLF, to transmit specific lessons on the meaning and method of political struggle, or simply to increase morale and self-confidence. After the retreat, this process opened up to include more dialogue and more exploration of topical issues. Organizers were advised that meetings should be short and “untiring” and that they should be scheduled in consultation with the participants to ensure active involvement. Sessions ranged from the difference between Ethiopian-sponsored kebeles and EPLF-supported peoples’ assemblies to interpretations of Middle East politics, discussions of the meaning of democracy and disquisitions on women’s right to sexual satisfaction in marriage.

To support the intensified political work, the EPLF reopened its cadre school — run by the party — and trained over 400 new organizers from 1979-82 (compared to 266 in 1975). Meanwhile, basic education continued in civilian society and within the military. Adult literacy was a major focus of the mass organizations, and frontline combat units routinely met behind their trenches to study language, mathematics, geography and other primary subjects, as I witnessed in 1979 during a two-week trek on foot from Nakfa to the highlands outside Asmara. Each unit also had its own cultural troupe, which regularly performed the songs and dances of all Eritrea’s ethnic groups for the fighters and for villages where they were stationed.

But disunity in the field continued to plague the movement. EPLF attempts to revive the unity talks with ELF near the close of the decade were unsuccessful. By 1980, tensions were at a peak, and the number of armed clashes between the two Fronts steadily increased, even as the EPLF prepared for another round of fighting with Ethiopia. (ELF forces were no longer on the frontlines.) In the spring of 1981, renewed civil war broke out, and the EPLF drove the ELF out of the country altogether. Remnants of the defeated Front took refuge in Sudan, some to eventually reconcile with EPLF and rejoin the war with Ethiopia, others to remain in opposition and to attack the postwar EPLF government in the 1990s. Many ELF members simply scattered into the diaspora, as had happened in 1970 during the Front’s first big split.

Though the ELF’s collapse allowed the EPLF to turn its full might against Ethiopia for the first time, it also put enormous pressure on the Front’s (and the party’s) political resources, as it tripled the size of its operations. In 1982 alone, during one of Ethiopia’s most brutal and protracted military campaigns (Red Star), the EPLF organized over 550 new village committees.

At about this time, the Front stopped sub-dividing its mass organizations on the basis of class. It took this step in part due to the demands of its expanded area of operation, in part to the leveling effects of a drought ravaging Eritrea, and because party leaders began to see it as too mechanical an application of Chinese-derived political formulas. However, there was a renewed emphasis on socio-economic development in the liberated and semi-liberated areas.

Land reform remained at the core of the Front's work in the densely populated highlands where it was seen as a springboard to social revolution. From 1981 onward, mutual aid teams were organized among poor peasants to increase the scale and cost-effectiveness of their farming activities. Despite problems with resources and logistics and in the midst of yet another, even longer Ethiopian military campaign in 1983, the EPLF also renewed its efforts to improve rural productivity through agricultural extension work, assistance with animal husbandry, and projects such as poultry-raising and vegetable gardening run by the mass organizations. Consumer cooperatives were established, and loan cooperatives were set up to finance village infrastructure projects. Perhaps the most effective project in the first half of the 1980s, though, was the public health program under which scores of traditional village health workers and mid-wives were given special training and linked into a national network of preventive and curative medicine. Throughout, the watchword was self-reliance: doing more with less.

In retrospect, the signature of the People's Party is readily apparent in this fairly rapid adaptation to otherwise disastrous conditions. But a much more detailed reconstruction of these events and the party's role in them needs to be carried out. Questions to be asked include: How, when, where and how often did party leaders meet? How did they communicate with mid-level cadres and with the party rank-and-file? Who were the key players in the party at this time? What lessons did they take from their new experience in the field and internationally, and how did the party's political line evolve through this tumultuous period? What criteria were used to select new members or to advance to higher levels of party leadership? How did the rapid growth in numbers affect the party's internal discipline, political coherence, and outlook? And much more.

Whatever was exchanged in the clandestine party meetings — most of which were rigorously documented at the time — conditions in the field in the 1980s played a central role in the party's changing outlook. As difficult as things seemed in the late 1970s, they soon worsened. The two longest and most destructive Ethiopian military campaigns of the war were conducted in 1982 and 1983. Then, in the mid-1980s, war and famine combined to create a human crisis of almost unimaginable proportions.

Persistent drought seared the brittle land until the population of northern Ethiopia and much of Eritrea teetered on the brink of starvation. By this time, some 360,000 Eritrean refugees had already fled to Sudan, most due to the war, some as early as 1967. Several hundred thousand more were internally displaced, either subsisting with help from relatives or under the care of the EPLF, whose humanitarian arm, the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), mounted a cross-border relief operation from logistical bases in northeastern Sudan. However, though millions of dollars in aid poured into Sudan once news of the famine broke, relatively little of it made its way into Eritrea, since most international donors — with the exception of the European Protestant churches and a handful of solidarity groups — declined to support work in guerrilla zones. In December 1984, when I toured the area, ERA was feeding more than 100,000 people in thirty camps inside Eritrea, and the numbers were growing by the day. Much of the money from the Eritrean diaspora, though by early 1985 Western NGOs finally became significant contributors.

Not surprisingly, this situation had a further dampening effect on the party's political mobilization. Organizers found it increasingly difficult to produce convincing results from social experiments in an economy where there was no surplus, and where

people were almost entirely preoccupied with basic survival. As one frustrated cadre put it to me at the time, “The people can’t eat ideology.”

Other factors also fostered a moderation of the radical socialist politics of the 1960s and 1970s. The end of the civil war with the ELF encouraged the EPLF to be more inclusive, as the Front reached out to Eritreans of all political stripes on the basis of their nationalism. The need to assign scarce cadres around vast new areas of the country to reach people in former ELF areas limited the ability of the EPLF to carry out its social reforms and its political mobilizing at the level of complexity it had brought to its early experiments. Seeing nearly every socialist-oriented movement and government in the world troupe in and out of Addis Ababa helped undermine faith in the litanies of the Left that had informed the Front’s early ideological development, even as protracted internal debates over the nature of the Soviet Union continued without resolution within the party. The experience of administering the liberated zones also fostered a growing sense of the limitations of state-centered development models.

Taken together, these factors did not provoke a political about-face, as one might have expected, but they did foster a more pragmatic approach to economic policy and more openness to experimentation. Precisely how they did so deserves further elaboration, as the ability to steadfastly maintain focus on the commitment to national liberation, whatever the ideological or political tools appropriated to advance it, is a definitive feature of this movement. But it became harder and harder to operate in the way they had.

Former party members say that the clandestinity of the party made it increasingly difficult to convene formal meetings, the more so as the Front expanded in membership and geographical reach. (One party activist said his marriage nearly ended in divorce because his wife became convinced that the excuses he was giving for attending secret meetings were covering up a liaison with another woman.) It became less and less practical to gather party members or party leaders together to discuss the issues of the day in the manner they had in the early years. As a result, much decision-making in the later years was done informally, with little accountability even to other party members.

Nevertheless, the Party was engaged in a continuing process of reflection throughout this time whose outcomes found expression at its 2nd secret congress, in late 1986, where it changed its name to the Eritrean Socialist Party and adopted a more social democratic program.

This shift in outlook was carried into the planning for the Front’s second congress in March 1987. A party-led preparatory committee circulated a draft of a revised National Democratic Program to every member of the EPLF, including fighters and those in the mass organizations, soliciting comments that were incorporated into the document during a year of intense debate. The party also drew up its own slate for the EPLF elections, which it quietly but effectively promoted in the lead-up to the congress.

Among the changes from the 1977 program adopted at the congress were the deletion of references to “imperialists” and “Zionists” in favor of allusions to “foreigners hostile to Eritrean independence.” The “masses of workers, peasants and other democratic forces” became “the people.” “Anti-feudal and anti-imperialist” popular organizations became “nationalist” associations. More significantly, the rights of all “nationalist political parties” were explicitly guaranteed; pledges to confiscate all land in the hands of the Ethiopian government and all foreigners and Eritrean collaborators were

scaled back to include only lands held by the former regime; plans to establish large-scale, state-run farming cooperatives were dropped; Eritrean capitalists were encouraged to set up factories and enterprises without reference to size; trade was to be “regulated” by the state rather than “handled” by it; and more emphasis was given to public education, treatment of prisoners of war and attention to the rights of Eritreans living abroad. While the rhetorical level dropped a notch, the most important pattern in these changes was a diminished view of the role of the state in Eritrean development and an explicit commitment to multiparty politics.

After this congress, the structure and substance of the Front’s political education for the mass organizations — and for fighters — lightened up further. Study groups that used to meet three times weekly for political education began to meet once each week or less. The content of the political education curriculum came from a new manual, published in 1989 to replace the 1970s text. The main focus was on Eritrea — the place and the nation — with less theory and more emphasis on practical issues facing the country and the liberation movement. There were also short sections on Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa; the Middle East; and the international situation. The syllabus was prepared for discussions at three successive levels, starting with a basic introduction to the concepts, then going into more descriptive and explanatory detail, and finally, in advanced sessions, approaching the material from a more analytic perspective.

The shift in content and in intensity had been a long time coming, according to Alemseged Tesfai, an EPLF veteran but not a party member who worked on the development of the new curriculum.

Political education within the EPLF had already been on a decline in the last years of the struggle [he said]. This was because Marxism had lost its attractiveness to many of the new breed of fighters who were joining the Front in order to run away from the derg’s similar rhetoric. More serious than that, even veterans were getting disenchanted with the old ideology — Soviet intervention, Cuban and South Yemeni direct military engagement on the other side and Chinese abandonment of Eritrea’s cause were some of the reasons. But then, the EPLF itself was, by the mid-eighties, distancing itself from hard-line Marxism. In 1989, it assigned quite a few of its university-level cadres to re-draft a new program of political education, one that was to be in tune with the ‘realities of the day’. Ahmed al-Keisi and Haile Menkerios led that effort and several cadres were part of it. It was decided in one of the meetings there (in Himbol) that the new political education, to be given to the EPLF rank and file and to members of the mass organizations simultaneously, should be free from Marxist content and dogma.

### **The Decision to Dissolve the Party**

Throughout the last decade of the liberation struggle, the party steadily converged with the Front — in its line, its program, its methodology, and its leadership — even as membership in both bodies expanded geometrically. This made the management of a secret party more and more difficult, and it led to anomalies in the quality of the cadres — so much so, that party leaders began to question the rationale for sustaining two parallel organizations. Haile Wold’ensae was among them:



We had expanded so much we had a lot of problems. Party cells were distant from the center. Unhealthy ways of recruitment began to crop up — people recruiting their friends, for example. We began to see a lack of competence in the primary organizations of the party. Rather than leading the Front, they started being problems for it. In some cases, they were more a problem than a resource. Finally, the CC [central committee] realized this and decided to intervene in the process of selection.

By the 1986 congress, the party was diluted from what it had been, and the CC began to question the validity of the primary organizations, the primary cells. They carried a lot of ideological weight but they were sometimes not very practical — always debating the question of the Soviet Union, the socialist camp, etcetera. There was a tension between realistic and unrealistic objectives, but this movement always had an inclination to be more pragmatic than ideological, to define a realistic, achievable program rather than to become idealist in our approach.

During these years, we began to shed some of our naïvetes. We were committed not to sacrifice our national interests to idealist philosophical interests, and we began to see that this clandestinity had its own problems. Also, some of our [party] members were less competent than non-members, some less disciplined. The party became a hiding place for unhealthy elements.

In the beginning, the party had to be clandestine. We existed in a hostile surrounding environment. We could not survive unless we were secret. But now the party had served its purpose and it was no longer a club of the best ones. So the issue we faced was: do we make it open and evaluate every individual and every cell in front of all the Front and all the people, which was the only way to rectify the party? Also, with all this streamlining, the setting up of achievable objectives, was there a gap between the objectives of the party and the objectives of the Front? If not, there was no reason to have two organizations.

We saw that the two were coming closer and closer, that there was little difference between them, so we asked, why shouldn't the party become the party of the mass? By 1986, the issues were there, but they were not resolved. By 1987, we became convinced of the need for change. The majority of the Front was now sharing the objectives of the party but were not members of it.

In 1989, we said, now we are entering a new phase. Therefore, the broad-based movement should replace the party in order to allow not only the Front members but the population as a whole to work for the objectives of the party, which had now become the objectives of the Front.

This was not an easy decision. Some thought it would be diluting it, that it was a wrong decision, that the party would be gone if it turned out we needed it, that this would be irreversible. Others thought the party would be a privilege that they would lose. Myself, I thought it was not possible to continue that way, but was there the possibility of a transition that every member of the party could feel part of that decision? Why not the whole Front being the party? But the Front was still narrow. There were remnants of the ELF still around, for example. So we determined that there was a need for a broad-based movement, not a party.

This led to the functional dissolution of the party in 1989 and the decision to transform the EPLF into a mass political movement, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), at its third congress in 1994. "There was no major shift in our orientation," said 'Bruno' Afewerki. "We were always a socialist-oriented movement, but slowly we started to be more nationalistic, more concerned about our national interests. And we lost a large number of our leading cadres during the war. This had a big effect. Finally, it matured into a nationalist party, and we dissolved it because there was no longer a need for it.

However, this left the nation with a yawning gap in collective political leadership during the country's first postwar years, when the locus of power shifted to the new government. Even the mass organizations ceased to function but for that of the women, which maintained its network of services and self-help programs, as the leadership's attention was riveted on state-building and on meeting the urgent but long-delayed needs of a war-weary population. Then, at the EPLF's 3rd congress in February 1994, most of the party's veteran leadership was sidelined, as a younger generation assumed responsibility for the administrative center of the reconstituted Front, its secretariat, where authority for day-to-day operations would reside.

"A debate came up after the war over the need for the continuity of the Front and its work — should it be the old leadership, or should there be new elements? We decided new ones were needed, so we chose a leadership from the generation that was mobilized in the '70s, not the '60s," said Bruno. But six years after the shift, he was less sanguine about its prospects. "The PFDJ is not a party in the way we were then," he said. "It is more amorphous, more diffuse. But it is a transitional organization, a nationalist umbrella, out of which parties could develop when the time is ripe. The basic belief of the People's Party was that that there should be a multiparty system in Eritrea. I hope this is still alive."

## **Summing Up**

The People's Party had its origins in the brutal internecine fighting of the 1960s, when the ELF imploded, devouring its children. The commitment to build it clandestinely was reinforced in the early 1970s as three breakaway but disunited ELF fragments struggled to reach common ground while battling for their survival against both the new ELF and the Ethiopians and as further infighting (the *menqa*) threatened to derail the consolidation of the new front. Out of these experiences came the conviction that a tightly organized, highly conscious political core was needed to build and direct the movement as it sought to transform the society in a revolutionary democratic direction while liberating it from Ethiopian rule.

The party functioned as an effective instrument of political leadership throughout its first decade. During this period, the EPLF fought off the threat to its existence from the ELF, broke its dependence on the rightist Osman Saleh Sabbe for external relations and established its own distinctive presence on the regional and global political scene, vastly expanded and deepened its social base within Eritrea and among the Eritrean diaspora, and survived the onslaught of the new Soviet-backed Ethiopian military machine (with the political disorientation that accompanied the geopolitical realignment of the two superpowers). The EPLF, with the People's Party at its head, went on in the

mid-1980s to carry the population through the worst human disaster — the 1983-85 drought and famine — the region had ever experienced, even as Ethiopia sought to use the crisis to further its military and political agenda.

However, the rapid, extensive expansion of the Front and party in the 1980s, then the only nationalist forces engaged in combat, had a moderating impact on their politics. Coupled with a process of reflection triggered by the changing regional and international alliances and by accumulated experience on the ground, this tempered the party's outlook to the point where it and the Front began to converge. By the end of the 1980s, there was little substantive difference between the program and line of the two organizations (or their leadership).

At this point, the need for a clandestine “vanguard” leadership began to come into question. With the difficulty members had convening meetings without giving themselves away and the growing perception that membership itself no longer reflected the best and most dedicated fighters and civilian activists — some suggested it had become a club of old-time party members and their friends — this sentiment spread. The impending end of the liberation war and the shift in focus to postwar nation-building accelerated it. However, exactly how, by whom and under what circumstances the decision was taken to dissolve the party, and how this was communicated to party members is not clear. Several former party central committee members say it was never actually dismantled. Instead, it was simply “frozen” in place and then permitted to disappear with no formal closure. Among other things, the peculiar character of this ending makes it more difficult today to examine the party's experience and its lasting legacy. It also feeds the tendency, inherited from the years in the field, to exercise political leadership through nonformal channels, rather than institutional ones.

The People's Party came into existence as an instrument of leadership. It succeeded on the planes of ideology, politics, organizational coherence, personal behavior and the construction of a genuinely national culture. But it also functioned as an instrument of command and control. It did so at first to maintain the Front's line, to ensure that elements did not develop that would disrupt the organization or weaken it from within, and to mediate the relations between its members and the outside world (including other Eritreans) so that the movement could present a solid front to its friends and its enemies. In time, however, it inevitably became more an instrument of control than one of leadership. How much of this has carried over into the post-liberation political environment needs to be better understood.

Eritrea's contemporary political culture reflects a paradoxical mix of self-imposed secrecy and social consensus, of authoritarianism and collective action. The ability to maintain a balance between these contrasting impulses served the people well during the struggle for liberation. But in the post-liberation transition, it has played a more contradictory role — on the one hand helping to promote the development of a unified national culture, while avoiding the ethnic, religious and geographical fragmentation that has torn apart other African nation-states, but at the same time impeding the evolution of this embryonic popular democracy to its next level.

A rigorous examination of the party's history — its strengths and its weaknesses, its successes and its failures, its pluses and minuses, and above all its lasting impact — is an important piece of the democracy-building process underway now. The chronic difficulties that armed political movements have exhibited in the transition from

resistance to democratic governance are well-documented. Can this political movement transcend the proclivity toward self-perpetuating authoritarianism that so clearly comes with this territory? I would argue that it has a far better chance to do so if its own heritage is available to those struggling for such goals.

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