

THE ERITREAN LIBERATION FRONT
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS SHAPING
ITS EMERGENCE, DEVELOPMENT AND DEMISE,
1960-1981

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The Eritrean Liberation Front: Social and Political Factors Shaping Its Emergence, Development and Demise, 1960-1981

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures, Tables and Maps.....	v
List of Abbreviations	vi
Acknowledgments.....	vii
Abstract.....	xii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Problem Statement and Rationale.....	1
Research Questions and Scope of the Study.....	4
Theoretical Considerations	4
Methodology.....	8
Relevance of the Study	11
Organization.....	11
CHAPTER ONE: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE ERITREAN WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE	13
Introduction.....	13
A Sketch of Eritrea’s Land and People.....	13
Early History: A synopsis	16
British Military Administration and the Growth of Eritrean National Politics	18
The Case of Eritrea in the International Forums.....	22
Political Situation inside Eritrea and the UN Federal Resolution.....	26
The Federal Period: A Prelude to War.....	28
Conclusion	31
CHAPTER TWO: ETHIOPIAN DOMINATION AND EMERGENCE OF THE ERITREAN LIBERATION FRONT, 1960-63.....	33
Introduction.....	33
The Eritrean Liberation Movement	33
Key Forces and Their Role in the Formation of the ELF	34
<i>The Eritrean Students in Cairo</i>	34
<i>Eritrean Soldiers in the Sudanese Army</i>	36
<i>The Students and Search for Leadership</i>	37
The Birth of the ELF.....	38

Preparation for the Armed Struggle	42
Hamid Idris Awate and the Beginning of the Eritrean War of Independence	44
The Agordat Operation	57
The Abrogation of the Federation and Its Aftermath.....	58
CHAPTER THREE: BROADENING THE WAR: ORGANIZATIONAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS, 1964-1969	63
Introduction.....	63
The Role of the Leadership Abroad.....	63
Expansion and Organization of the Army	71
Rectification Movement.....	84
Clandestine Operations	91
CHAPTER FOUR: FRAGMENTATION AND CIVIL WAR: 1970-1974	95
Introduction.....	95
Disintegration and Reorganization	96
CHAPTER FIVE: THE ELF: FROM TERRITORIAL EXPANSION TO HISTORICAL EXPULSION, 1975-1981	107
Introduction.....	107
Military and Political Developments, 1975-1978.....	107
Internal Dissention in the ELF	113
Military Dislodgement and Downfall of the ELF, 1979-1981	117
CONCLUSIONS	125
BIBLIOGRAPHY	129

List of Figures, Tables and Maps

Figures

The Formation of Political Parties in Eritrea	22
Hamid Idris Awate	50
One of the earliest ELF's pamphlets, June 1961.....	66
Bergeshish Meeting, 1962.	69
The Structure of the ELF	75
Members of the Supreme Council.	80
Some of the destroyed roads and railroads in the late 1960s.....	93
A scene of a derailed train in Ashadira on its way to Agordat, 1970.	93
The First Congress of the ELF, Arr, Novemeber1971. A Syrian journalist is shown holding a camera.	100
Family Tree of the Eritrean Liberation Front and other Political Organizations, 1961-1982.....	123

Tables

Eritrean Population by Language and Religion (1950)	16
Organization of the Eritrean Liberation Army, ELF, 1964	71
Organization of the Eritrean Liberation Army, ELF, 1964	72

Map

Eritrea in Northeastern Africa.....	xi
Language Map of Eritrea	14
ELF Areas of Operation, by District.....	124

List of Abbreviations

BMA	British Military Administration
DO	Divisional Officer
ELA	Eritrean Liberation Army (ELF's armed wing)
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELF-PLF	Eritrean Liberation Front-Popular Liberation Forces
ELF-RC	Eritrean Liberation Front- Revolutionary Council
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ESA	Eritrean Students Association (in Cairo, Egypt)
ESFA	Eritro-Somalia Friendship Association
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PLF	Popular Liberation Forces
RC	Revolutionary Command
RDC	Research and Documentation Centre (of Eritrea)
SC	Supreme Council
SDF	Sudan Defense Force
SDO	Senior Divisional Officer
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US/USA	United States (of America)
ZC	Zone Command

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Map 1. Eritrea in Northeastern Africa



Source: Anwar Seid Suleiman, “Imagining the Nation: Assessing the Role and Functioning of the Eritrean Assembly in the Eritrean-Ethiopian Federation (1952-1962)” (MPhil thesis, Leiden University, 2013), x.

Abstract

This thesis is a historical study of a socio-political movement that has been important in the recent history of Eritrea: the *Eritrean Liberation Front* (ELF). The ELF (1960-1981) was the first, and largely Muslim-based, armed resistance movement that emerged to contest Ethiopian rule over Eritrea. Formed in 1960, the ELF carried out political and military activities for the subsequent twenty years in the country, aiming at independence. The movement later lost the battle for supremacy to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), another broad-based insurgent movement, which took over the state power in 1991, and still rules the country under the name of 'People's Front for Democracy and Justice'. This has led to a historical and social and prolonged side-lining of the ELF, its history and its members, whereby they are almost seen as enemies. For this reason, the history of the ELF today remains one of the poorly researched areas of the Eritrean history. This thesis examines empirically the events and forces that gave rise to the emergence, development, and downfall of the ELF covering the period from 1960 to 1981. The outcome of the study reveals that the ELF despite the fact that it was the first armed resistance movement with the aspirations of the Eritrean people in face of the disappointments caused by the revoked federation, and Ethiopian repression, a number of internal and external reasons contributed for the eclipse of the ELF in the long term. The data for this study was collected over a period of six months from extensive archival resources hosted in the archives of government institutions, mainly in Asmara, and additional interviews with key informants. The objective of this thesis is, therefore, to fill a gap in Eritrean historiography and to make a contribution towards understanding of the developments leading to Eritrea's recent history and independence.

Introduction

Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century, Eritrea was an arena of uninterrupted armed conflict that went on for about three decades. The conflict was basically rooted in history and geography. But it was also aggravated by outside intervention for many years. Ethiopia being supported first by the US, Israel, and latter on by the USSR, and the Eritrean nationalists by socialist oriented Middle Eastern and Asian countries and organizations turned Eritrea into a proxy battle field between opposing forces during the Cold War era.

The protracted Eritrean war of independence started in 1961 under the auspices of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). The ELF (1960-1981) was the first, and largely Muslim-based, armed resistance movement that emerged to contest Ethiopian rule over Eritrea. Formed in 1960, the ELF carried out political and military activities for the subsequent twenty years in an attempt to gain independence. This armed resistance movement was, however, unable to accomplish its stated goals of achieving independence. Rather, the task of achieving *de facto* independence was realized by its offspring organization in 1991. This study is, therefore, an attempt to reconstruct the history of a socio-political movement that has been important in the recent history of Eritrea: the *Eritrean Liberation Front*. In the following sections an attempt is made to outline the fundamental research problem and the motivation for my interest in undertaking the intended study, research questions, scope of the study, theoretical framework, methodology, relevance of the study, and organization of the thesis.

Problem Statement and Rationale

In 1950, the UN passed a resolution that federated Eritrea with Ethiopia, without any form of plebiscite. Within few years, Ethiopia dismantled the pillars of the federation that guaranteed Eritrea's limited autonomy one by one without hesitation. Throughout the federal period, Eritreans protested against Ethiopia's violations of the Eritrean autonomy. As it became quite difficult to organize and agitate inside Eritrea, the task

of organizing a movement to promote the Eritrean cause fell on the Diaspora. Frustrated with the system, a new breed of Eritrean nationalists founded the underground *Eritrean Liberation Movement* (ELM)¹ in Port Sudan in 1958. The ELM sought to terminate Ethiopian rule through a *coup d'état*. But before the ELM could attempt a coup, the war for independence was launched in 1961 under the auspices of the ELF.² After that the country lapsed into a cycle of political disorder, violent conflict and human suffering in the three decades that followed.

The founders of the ELF were Eritrean political exiles and students in Cairo, Egypt, who drew inspiration from the Algerian revolution.³ The initial ELF leaders, who were living abroad, came mainly from Muslim backgrounds and this had a profound impact on the membership and mobilization of the ELF. Consequently, during the early years of the first decade of its history, the movement favoured Muslims over Christians.⁴

In the 1960s, the movement nevertheless grew steadily as it started to attract support from diverse segments of the population and from the Diasporas. The fighters (also called *Tegadelti* in Tigrinya, one of the most widely spoken languages in Eritrea) were individuals who came from diverse economic, social, educational, gender, and age backgrounds and came to be marked by their devotion to the success of the struggle. Some of the early fighters received training in Syria, China, Cuba, and Iraq; whilst the rest were trained in the liberated areas. Within the next ten years, the ELF became a serious threat to the Ethiopian rule in Eritrea. The impact of its existence was felt beyond the boundaries of Ethiopia, especially when Ethiopian planes were subjected to subversive activities. In 1970, there was a major breakaway from the initial movement. Three splinter groups emerged and latter coalesced to form the *Eritrean People's Liberation Front* (EPLF), which became a strong rival to the parent Front. The ELF remained a viable organization for the next ten years, but in the 1970s a series of armed clashes between the two dominant movements occurred. These

¹ Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 98-101; see also Dan Connel and Tom Killion, *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea* (2nd ed.) (Lanham, Toronto and Plymouth, UK: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2011), Connel and Killion, 218-20.

² Ruth, 103; see also Redie Bereketeab, "Eritrea: The Making of a Nation 1890-1991" (PhD. diss., Uppsala University, 2000), 183-184.

³ John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 113.

⁴ Redie, 185.

clashes were typically exemplified by a struggle for dominance. Finally, in 1982, the EPLF superseded the ELF and other smaller groups as the most effective armed resistance to the Ethiopian forces, and defeated the ELF in the process. The ELF fighters fled to Sudan, and many went on to Europe and North America, while some members opted to return to Eritrea and join the rival nationalist movement, the EPLF. In May 1991, the EPLF took control of the whole country from Ethiopia and Eritrea achieved its *de jure* independence in 1993 after holding a UN observed referendum, in which 99.8 percent of Eritreans voted for sovereignty. The EPLF transformed itself into the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994 and has been leading the country since its independence.

The ELF, emerging years before its rival the EPLF, and having been in a position of prominence in military terms with regard to the latter, nevertheless was superseded and destroyed in a relatively short period of time. This calls for investigation into the reasons why one movement, from the outside looking stronger, so spectacularly failed not only to achieve its aims but even to maintain itself as an organization, while a seemingly weaker front, the EPLF, not only managed to outflank and supersede its rival but also went on to occupy the whole of Eritrea. The Eritrean example, in this manner, offers a unique comparative example of two movements with different strategies and with very different fortunes. Although it is beyond the scope of the study to address the ELF from a comparative dimension, it is important to at least note that the Eritrean example may hold general lessons on the variables that affect the viability and strength of national-revolutionary movements.

In my previous career as a junior researcher and archivist at the Research and Documentation Centre (RDC), the acting national archive of Eritrea, from 2004 to 2012, I was confronted with a large amount of archival materials concerning the movement in question. Despite the availability of such bulky serviceable source materials, the history of the Eritrean struggle for independence remained by and large incomplete and undeveloped.⁵ This absence of well researched publications and analysis poses a challenge in developing a broader understanding of the dynamics of the Eritrean politics prior to the independence of the country. This experience instilled in me the desire to study the nature and development of the ELF using the idea of

⁵ Bairu Tafla, "Interdependence through Independence: The Challenges of Eritrean Historiography," in *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Harold G. Marcus. (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1994), 500.

writing history from the stand point of those former ELF fighters. In this study, special attention has been given to its origin, development, and demise of the movement, and the how and why questions have also been investigated thoroughly.

Research Questions and Scope of the Study

In light of the above mentioned problem statement, the project strives to answer the following research questions:

- i. How did the ELF as a movement emerge and develop?
- ii. Why did the movement undergo continuous internal splits within two decades of its formation? Why it could not forge unity and efficiency as a movement?
- iii. Why and how the ELF finally collapsed?

The study focuses on the period from 1960 to 1981 since this period marked the birth and collapse of the ELF. Following the delimitation of the scope, the period prior to the birth of the ELF has also been examined in order to provide a historical setting.

Theoretical Considerations

According to Natalino Ronzitti a war of national liberation is defined as an “armed struggle waged by a people through its liberation movement against the established government to reach self-determination.”⁶ From a different perspective these wars are often called insurgencies or rebellions.⁷ The definition of application of “wars of national liberation” is further elaborated by Abi-Saab who outlined the different types of armed conflict to which the term has been applied. According to him the concept of “wars of national liberation” applies to the following wars:

- (1) Historically, those struggles of peoples fighting a foreign invader or occupant;

⁶ Natalino Ronzitti, “Resort to Force in Wars of National Liberation,” in Antonio Cassese, ed., *Current Problems of International Law: Essays on UN, Law and on the Law of the Armed Conflict* (Milan: Dott. A. Guiffre Editore, 1975), 321.

⁷ Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Moscow's Third World Strategy* (NJ., USA: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 80.

(2) Those that have evolved within the United Nations and identified from the practice of States and international organizations, namely colonial and alien domination (or rule or government) and racist regimes ... are armed struggles aimed at resisting the forcible imposition or maintenance of such situations to allow people subjected to them to exercise its right of self-determination.

(3) Dissident movements in several countries which take up arms with a view to overthrowing the government and the social order it stands for. Their members may consider themselves as a “liberation movement” waging a “war of national liberation” against a regime or government which masks or represents “alien domination” but such conflicts do not oppose different “peoples” and the traditional consensus is to consider them as purely internal...

(4) Armed struggle of certain dissident movements representing a component people within a plural State which aims at seceding and creating a new State on part of the territory of the existing one...⁸

On the other hand, Pangalangan and Aguilin in their paper titled *The Privileged Status of National Liberation Movements under International Law*, provide a different perspective on the types of armed conflicts. In their expression:

Parties to an armed conflict, other than states, are legally classified – “along a continuum of ascending intensity” – as (1) rebels, (2) insurgents or (3) belligerents. Rebellion consists of sporadic challenge to the established government but which remains “susceptible to rapid suppression by normal procedures of internal security”; it is within the domestic jurisdiction of the state. Insurgency is a “half-way house between essentially ephemeral, spasmodic or unorganized civil disorders and the conduct of an organized war between contending factions within a State.” The material conditions for a condition of belligerency are (1) the existence of an armed conflict of a general character; (2) occupation by the insurgents of a substantial portion of the national territory; (3) an internal organization capable and willing to

⁸ Cited in Edre U Olalia, *The Status in International Law of National Liberation Movements and their Use of Armed Force*. International Association of People’s Lawyers, ND, 2. <http://www.iadllaw.org/files/THE%20STATUS%20IN%20INTERNATIONAL%20LAW%20OF%20NATIONAL%20LIBERATION%20MOVEMENTS%20AND%20THEIR%20USE%20OF%20ARMED%20FORCE%20by%20Edre%20Olalia.pdf> (Accessed 12/05/2013).

enforce the laws of war; and (4) circumstances which make it necessary for outside states to define their attitude by means of recognition of belligerency.⁹

In such sort of categorization one can observe the application of geo-military criteria as the basis for the characterization of armed conflicts. Having laid down some clarification on the meaning and representation of the term ‘war of national liberation’, let us have a look into some relevant approaches for understanding and explaining the cause(s) behind political violence.

What is it that mobilizes people to participate in a radical and high-risk strategic protest? Why did the Eritrean people eventually resort to take up arms and carry out the bloody war that went on for three decades? Several scholars have ventured to comprehend and find adequate scientific explanations behind this kind of political violence; yet, according to Foran, “no comprehensive theory of any aspect of revolution... has stood the test of time and comparative research.”¹⁰

The above question can be approached through the *Relative Deprivation Theory* (RDT). Gurr defines RDT in psychosocial terms as: “a perceived discrepancy between men’s value expectations and their value capabilities. Value expectations are the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightfully entitled. Value capabilities are the goods and conditions they think they are capable of attaining and maintaining...”¹¹ Gurr emphasizes the primacy of grievance and discontent in explaining political violence. He argues that “[d]iscontent arising from the perception of relative deprivation is the basic, instigating condition for participants in collective violence.”¹² From this explanation one can observe that people may take up arms and launch a national liberation war particularly when they experience a sense of relative deprivation and frustration with the system they live in. In connection with a strategy for revolutionaries, Gurr further states that “[i]f discontent is intense and widespread in a society, revolutionary tasks are simplified; if not, there are means by which it can be increased. Ideological appeals offer the best means, to the extent that their content

⁹ Raul C Pangalangan and Elizabeth Aguilin, “The Privileged Status of National Liberation Movements under International Law,” *Philippine Law Journal*, 58 (1983): 51.

¹⁰ John Foran, ed., *Theorizing Revolutions* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 7.

¹¹ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 13.

¹² *Ibid.*

is designed to justify new aspirations and specify means toward their attainment. Any relatively disadvantaged group is a potential audience for such appeals.”¹³

Gurr and Goldstone in their comparative studies on revolutions assert that a *widespread grievance* among the general population is “a necessary condition for counter elites who seek to mobilize a mass following.”¹⁴ In my view, grievances do not come out of a blue moon. The role of the state’s policies and practices, whether it is intentional or unintentional, is highly important factor in generating popular grievances. Grievance could be expressed in different forms, either covertly or overtly, depending on the kind of the political system and culture exists; but the way the state or the power holder react seems to result counterproductive. Regarding to this, the study made by Gurr and Goldstone shows that in the past “[i]n virtually every instance, threatened governments used force and violence in ways that increased popular resentment and active support for revolutionary movements.”¹⁵ This analysis helps us understand to what extent the brutality of successive Ethiopian regimes created a favourable ground for their adversaries, the liberation movements, to grow numerically and justify their claim as a legitimate act on behalf of the subjugated people. Using the same logic, an argument is made that revolutionary movements, too, might face the same counterproductive resentment and create favourable condition for factionalism when they apply force and violence to quell any form of opposition or perceived threat from within. This logic becomes substantially true to the history of the ELF. None of the brutal measures undertaken by the ELF leadership throughout the period against any form of opposition prevented factionalism. Repressive measures often tend to cement the ‘we’ vs. ‘them’ dichotomy, and may easily lead to the disintegration of a movement, like the ELF, emerging from regional, ethnic and religious diversity.

The question that comes here is that do grievances always give rise to rebellion? My intuitive answer is almost certainly and emphatically negative; because it becomes a dangerous excessive generalization to assume that whenever widespread grievances exist, people would resort to take up arms against the central government. In contrary,

¹³ Ibid., 353.

¹⁴ Ted Robert Gurr and Jack A. Goldstone, “Comparisons and Policy Implications,” in *Revolutions of the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. Jack A. Goldstone, Ted Robert Gurr, and Farrokh Moshiri. (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1991), 334.

¹⁵ Ibid.

past studies on insurgencies have, however, shown that revolutionary movements derive basically from collective grievances, and as Clapham noted, "...from blocked political aspirations, and in some cases also from reactive desperation."¹⁶

Tilly identifies mobilization as an important component of collective action. Mobilization, according to him, is defined as a "process by which a group acquires collective control over the resources needed for action."¹⁷ The resources may be of human, material or financial kind. Through this process "a group goes from being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life."¹⁸ Furthermore, Tilly provides three ways in which mobilization can occur. These are defensive, offensive and, preparatory. Defensive mobilization happens when people organize their resource in response to a threat from outside, which is referred to be a bottom-up type of mobilization. In the offensive mobilization, "a group pools resources in response to opportunities to realize its interests;" while in the preparatory case, "the group pools resources in anticipation of future opportunities and threats."¹⁹ Both offensive and preparatory mobilizations are often carried out top-down.

In this thesis, I argued that the ELF despite it was the first armed resistance movement of the aspirations of the Eritrean people in face of the disappointments of the revoked federation, and Ethiopian arrogance and brutality, a number of internal and external reasons worked against ELF in the long term, such as: its inability to break out from being perceived as a Muslim movements, power struggle, disunity among the leadership, the infighting of the ELF, the rise of the EPLF and the taking over of the mantle of progress and secularity by this organization. This thesis examines empirically the events and forces that gave rise to the emergence and downfall of the ELF.

Methodology

The material that forms the basis of this study was collected from a variety of sources consisting of both primary and secondary accounts. Since the literature on the subject

¹⁶ Christopher Clapham, "Introduction: Analysing African Insurgencies," in *African Guerrillas*, ed. Christopher Clapham. (Oxford: James Currey, 1998), 5.

¹⁷ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

in question is very scanty, the researcher was compelled to focus essentially on three types of qualitative data collection approaches, namely, archival research, interviews, as well as library and internet research for fragmented published and unpublished materials.

Archival materials are important source of information for developing an understanding of a particular episode. They are first-hand accounts. They serve as evidence not only in developing an interpretation but also in building an argument to endorse that interpretation.²⁰ Realizing this, archival materials such as organizational programs and structures, statements, declarations and communiqués, correspondence, political manuals, military intelligence and diplomatic reports, newspapers, journals, audio-visual materials etc. produced within the time period in question by the ELF, EPLF and successive regimes in Addis Ababa were consulted extensively and analyzed thoroughly.

A substantial proportion of the data was gathered over a period of six months (August 2013-January 2014) by going through enormous bulk of archival resources hosted by Eritrea's Research and Documentation Centre (RDC), the country's *de facto* National Archive. The RDC hosts a large and diverse collection of documents covering both the colonial and post-colonial periods. Their records can be classified into four main groups: (i) published and unpublished written materials; (ii) analogue and digital audio and video records; (iii) photographs; and (iv) cartographic collections. Many of these records were collected in the field during the war of independence in the form of interviews and as oral narratives and other relevant materials were gathered from diverse sources both in Eritrea and abroad. There are large quantities of unexploited Ethiopian intelligence records and military operations that were collected after the end of the war in 1991 but they are by no means complete. Nowadays, almost all the records in the Centre are registered in a database and are easily accessible. Since Eritrea is a young nation, one cannot expect a high degree of knowledge when it comes to the preservation of records. Surprisingly, there is, however, widespread awareness about the documentation and preservation of the country's national heritage. This is undoubtedly crucial in developing and reconstructing Eritrea's history. In addition to the RDC, I also visited the archives of the Eritrean Police Force

²⁰ Redie, 26-27.

in Asmara where I was able to consult huge dusty but essential documents, mostly intelligence reports, of the Ethiopian governments created prior to 1991.

To supplement the information obtained from archival records the researcher made use of fragmented second-hand accounts and interviews. Various books, journals, newspapers, unpublished dissertations were consulted when needed. The researcher conducted interviews with former ELF members and benefited from both formal and informal discussions. As Turner put it “[i]nterviews provide in-depth information pertaining to participants’ experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic. Often, interviews are coupled with other forms of data collection in order to provide the researcher with a well-rounded collection of information for analyses.”²¹ Hence, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews involving standardized, open-ended questions. Open-ended interviews was applied because it “allows the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up.”²² Thus, aiming at eliciting views and opinions, the questions were structured and tailored to specific respondents, depending on the time the respondent joined the armed struggle and the place in which one had in the power hierarchy in the organization. Based on purposive sampling technique qualified candidates were chosen for interview. It must be confessed that, due to time constraint and unavailability of credible informants, only four extended interviews were conducted by the researcher. Majority of the early ELF leaders are not alive today. But thanks to the remarkable work done by Gunter Schröder, who conducted interviews with tens of key ELF military and political leaders since early 1980s, the study benefited immensely and this no doubt complemented the information gap particularly during the first ten years of the armed struggle. A document consisting of over two hundred pages of English transcribed interviews by Gunter Schröder is available at the RDC. In addition, interviews formerly carried out by Zemheret Yohannes, Ahferom Tewolde, Alemseghed Tesfai and his staff members with key ex-ELF members, that are also available in cassettes at the RDC, were equally important in complementing and elaborating essential episodes in the history of the ELF. At last, it goes without saying that the fieldwork included the use of different sources on the web regarding the case in point. In many

²¹ Daniel W Turner, “Qualitative Interview Design: A Practical Guide for Novice Investigators,” *The Qualitative Report*, 15 (3) (2010): 754.

²² Turner, 756.

ways, most of the available information in various Eritrean websites suffers from lack of objectivity, particularly in dealing with certain contentious issues in the history of the Eritrean armed struggle. Thus, I have tried to the best of my level to avoid politically-laden information and concentrated with great care on the information relevant to the study.

Relevance of the Study

In part due to the protracted warfare that Eritrea went through until 1991 and due to political sensitivities, the history of the Eritrean armed struggle in general and that of the ELF in particular is poorly researched. Those few works that have already been published lay emphasis on the victorious movement, the EPLF. Furthermore, the existing official national narrative gives little attention to the history of the ELF, simultaneously suffering a lot from biased treatment. Hence, to this time the ELF failed to receive the level of analytical attention that remotely corresponds to its importance. As far as I am aware, the ELF has so far not received enough empirically-based scholarship. Thus, with this background in mind, the researcher embarked on a six-month fieldwork study in order to thoroughly look into the subject and make use of new archival resources in Eritrea as well as interviews with former members of the movement. Having done so, it is the hope and conviction of the researcher that this study will play its part in filling a gap in Eritrean historiography and to make a partial contribution towards understanding the developments leading to Eritrea's recent history and independence.

Organization

For the purpose of organization, the thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter one, *Historical Background to the Eritrean War for Independence*, is intended to serve as a backdrop of the study. It attempts to examine the origins of the political development in Eritrea following the collapse of Italian colonial rule, and the process through which the disposal of Eritrea was tackled at the United Nations. Furthermore, it analyzes and provides an account of the Federal period, and the simmering political movements that gave rise to the break out of the armed resistance in 1961. Before

doing so, the chapter provides an overview of the various groups of Eritrean population, the geography, religion, economy and ethno-linguistic composition, relevant for understanding ethnic and national mobilization in the Eritrean context. Chapter two, *Ethiopian Domination and Emergence of the Eritrean Liberation Front, 1960-63*, explores the formative period of the ELF and the beginning of the Eritrean armed struggle for independence. The role of key forces behind initiating the war, and brief history of Hamid Idris Awate and the reasons for his rebellion, and military engagements undertaken before and after his death are discussed in this chapter. The overall development aspect of the ELF during the first decade of its time is addressed in Chapter three, under *Broadening the war: Organizational and Political Developments, 1964-1969*. The chapter deals with the role of the ELF's leadership abroad, the expansion and organization of the ELF army, the internal squabbles, disputes and rivalries that were tearing apart the ELF in 1970. Major clandestine commando operations undertaken in 1969 are also discussed. Chapter four, *Fragmentation and Civil War: 1970-1974*, examines the proliferation of different independent politico-military organizations from the ELF and the subsequent civil war that went on for over two years and the underlying reasons that brought it to a halt. In the final chapter, *The ELF: From Territorial Expansion to Historical Expulsion, 1975-1981*, an attempt is made to trace important historical developments that shaped the course of ELF history from 1975 to 1981. These developments include both military and political aspects that characterized the internal and external dynamics of the movement. In examining these issues, special attention will be given to finding answers as to why the ELF could not forge the set of aims of unity and efficiency as a movement, and why and how it finally collapsed. Last but not least, the final conclusions wrap up the entire thesis.

Chapter One: Historical Background to the Eritrean War for Independence

Introduction

This chapter presents the historical setting of the Eritrean independence war. In order to understand the causes of the armed conflict (1961-91), it is important to examine the origins of the political development within Eritrea following the demise of Italian colonial rule, and the process through which the disposal of Eritrea was tackled at the United Nations. Thus, the chapter attempts to analyze and provide an account of what happened, why it happened and the effects it had in the subsequent political arena of Eritrea. In retrospect to the political development in the colonial period and the war for independence, the chapter starts by presenting an overview of the various groups of Eritrean population, the geography, religion, economy and ethno-linguistic composition, relevant for understanding ethnic and national mobilization.

A Sketch of Eritrea's Land and People

Eritrea, a former Italian colony (1890-1941), is bordered by Sudan in the West, Ethiopia in the South, the Red Sea in the Northeast and East, and Djibouti in the Southeast. The country has a total surface area of 117,600 square kilometres and about 1070 km coastline along the Red Sea.¹ The country is approximately the size of North Korea or slightly more than a collective landmass of the Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium.

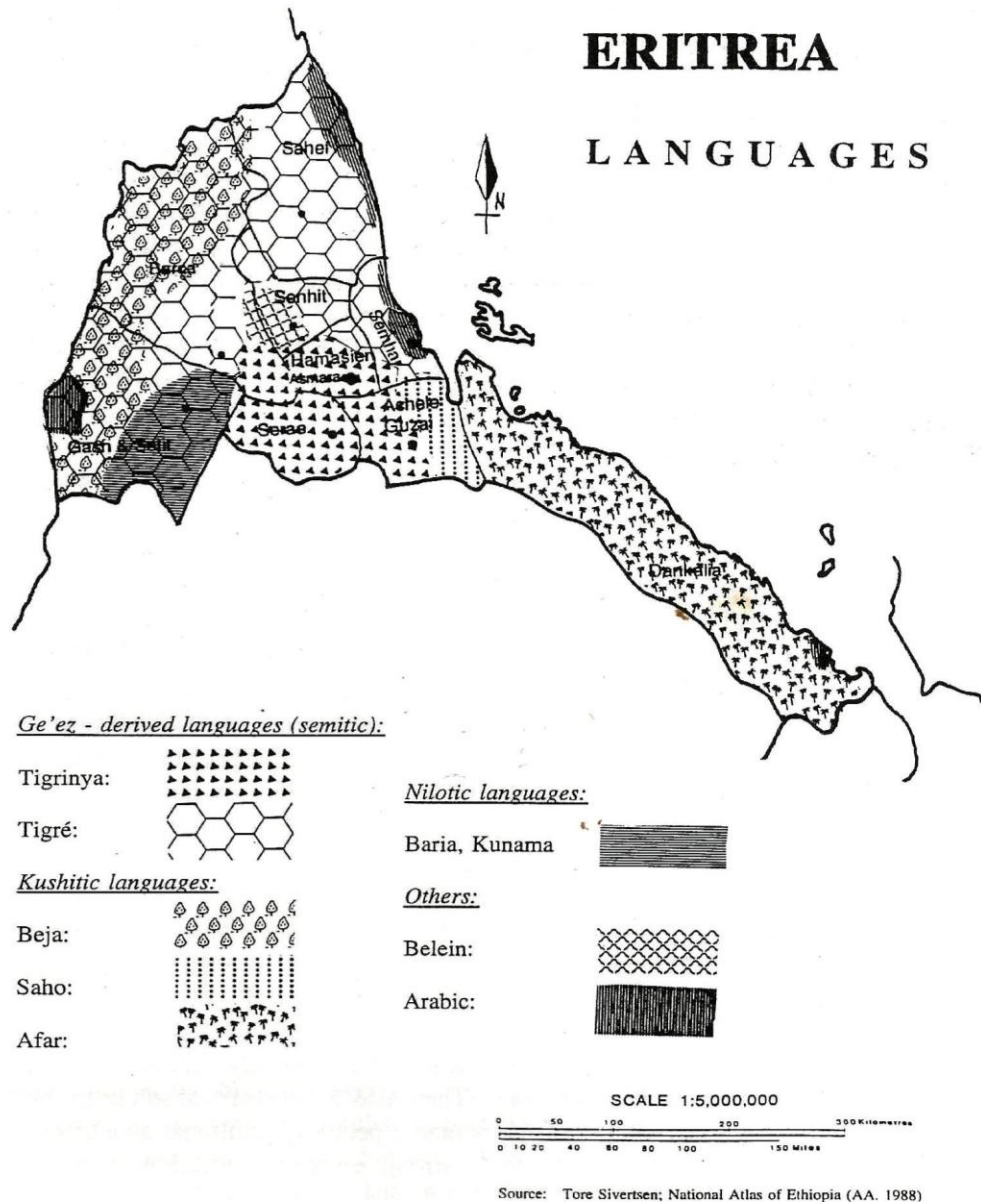
The territory is inhabited by at least nine linguistically defined nationalities: Tigrinya, Tigre, Bilen, Rashaida, Hidareb, Kunama, Saho, Nara, and Afar.² Although there is no up-to-date dependable demographic data of the different ethno-linguistic groups, the Tigrinya as well as Tigre speakers make-up the majority of the Eritrean population. In terms of religion, the population is almost equally divided between Christianity (mostly Eritrean Orthodox with smaller number of Roman Catholics, Protestants, and

¹United Nations Statistics Division, "2013 World Statistics Pocketbook: Country profile, Eritrea," <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=eritrea> (accessed March 12, 2014).

² Redie, 63.

other Christians) and Islam. In terms of economy and geography, the Tigrinya are predominantly Christians and mostly sedentary agriculturalists dwelling in the central plateau while the Tigre are partly Christian and partly Muslim semi-nomadic pastoralists inhabiting in the western, northern and eastern lowlands as well as the Dahlak Islands of Eritrea.³

Map 2. Language Map of Eritrea



Source: Redie, 65.

³ Abbebe Kifleyesus. "Folk-fairs and festivals: Cultural Conservation and National Identity Formation in Eritrea." *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, XLVII (2) 186 (2007), 249; Christine Matzke, "Engendering Theatre in Eritrea: The Roles and Representations of Women in the Performing Arts" (PhD. Diss., University of Leeds, 2003), 9.

The Afar who are predominantly Muslims and semi-nomadic pastoralists practice fishing and trading and inhabit the south-eastern region of Eritrea along the Red Sea coastal lands. While the Saho, a predominantly Muslim who engage in nomadic pastoralism inhabit the coastal lands and the southern highland of Eritrea; the Rashaida, an Arabic speaking Muslim migrants of the 19th Century, who practice nomadic pastoralism and engage in trade and commerce occupy the north-eastern part of Eritrea. In the south-central Eritrea, the Keren region from Hal-Hal to Halib Mentai, are the Bilin, consisting of Christian and Muslim agriculturalists.⁴

In the western and south-western part of Eritrea bordering Ethiopia, we find the Kunama and Nara (formerly called Baria), predominantly Christians and Muslims respectively with small numbers of ancestral believers found among the Kunama. These ethno-linguistic groups practice both cattle rearing and hoe-based farming in the fertile area between the rivers Gash and Setit. Whereas, the broad plains to the north of the western lowlands bordering Sudan, called Barka after the river, is inhabited mainly by the two Bejas, the Hadendowa and Beni Amer, a predominantly Muslim pastoralists, who have cultural and tribal relations with the Beja nomads in neighbouring Sudan. The Hadendowa have retained use of the Beja language, To-Bedawi, also known as Hedareb. The vast majority of the Beni Amer, however, speak Tigre while few speak the Beja language.⁵ The Beni Amer contributed a lot to the beginning of the Eritrean armed struggle. It was among the Beni Amer that the ELF, the first armed resistance movement against Ethiopia, formed its clandestine networks and guerrilla bases in the early 1960s⁶ (this is recounted in the following chapters).

The census conducted by the British in the early 1950s shows that the Muslims were predominant in the lowlands, while the Christians were the majority in the Central highlands. The Central plateau is the more urbanised and industrialized region compared to the western lowlands and Northern highlands, which throughout the past century have been distant from the centre of economic development, with the exception of Massawa. By the early 1950s Eritrea had an estimated population of

⁴ Abbebe, 249.

⁵ Peter With A.K, *Politics and Liberation: The Eritrean Struggle, 1961-1986*. (Denmark: International Forum, 1987), 43-46.

⁶ Connell and Killion, 121-123.

1,038,000 people, 81.7 percent of whom were rural peasants and nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists.⁷

Table 1. Eritrean Population by Language and Religion (1950)

Religion/ Language	Central Plateau	Lowlands/ North	Total
Muslim	104,000	420,000	524,000
Christian	470,000	36,000	506,000
Animist [Ancestral beliefs]	--	8,000	8,000
Rural Population			
Tigrinya	387,000	9,000	396,000
Tigre	--	272,000	272,000
Saho	63,000	7,000	70,000
Bilin	--	37,000	37,000
Afar	--	28,000	28,000
Other*	--	45,000	45,000
Urban Population			
Muslim	31,000	58,000	89,000
Christian	93,000	8,000	101,000

Source: UN General Assembly (1950) Session 5, Supplement 8 (A/1285), 10-11. Cited in Tom Killion, 282-283.

*The word "Other" refers to the remaining ethno-linguistic groups such as the Nara, the Kunama, the Rashaida and the Hidareb.

Early History: A synopsis

During the pre-colonial era the territory that constitute Eritrea today was contested by different powers. The Funj Empire of Sudan controlled western lowlands of Eritrea; whilst the Ottoman Turks established themselves in the northern Eritrean shorelines, including the port of Massawa, and remained there for some 300 years until they were replaced by the Egyptians who also established themselves along the Red Sea and Somalian coasts in 1865.⁸ The Dankalia region was ruled by the local aristocratic rulers of the Afar, along with the rest of the Afar homeland. The central Eritrean

⁷ Calculated from the figures provided in the table.

⁸ Araia Tseggai, "The Economic Viability of an Independent Eritrea" (PhD Diss., University of Nebraska, 1981), 60.

region, also known as *Medri Bahri*⁹, had been a fighting ground for the Tigriyan (northern Ethiopia) warlords for centuries. In 1885 Italy, supported by Britain, took control of Massawa.¹⁰ On 1 January 1890 Italy proclaimed the formation of its first colony by integrating the various ethno-linguistic groups under a single centralized government within the territory, naming it Eritrea after the Greek name of the Red Sea.¹¹

Italy's entry into World War II in 1940, however, brought the collapse of its half century old African empire. An assault by British-led forces concluded the occupation of Eritrea in April 1941. During the war Britain, as part of its war strategy, dropped leaflets that promised the realization of freedom and self-governance to the Eritrean people, if the *Ascaris* would desert from the Italians. One leaflet from the British government read:

Eritreans at Keren listen! We the English government address you as one warrior does another. The Italians have now ruled you for 50 years. ...Though you belong to a race as noble as any in the world, you have not even a flag of your own to fight for.

Eritreans! You deserve to have a flag! This is the honourable life for the Eritrean: to have the guts to call his people a Nation; to cease to be the slave of the Italian; to command battalions; to drive tanks; to pilot aircraft...¹²

Another leaflet dropped by the British also said: "Eritrean Soldiers, listen! Desert from the Italians and join us. ...you will receive your full reward. You people who wish to ...have your own flag, we give you our word, you shall be allowed to choose what government you desire."¹³ These leaflets produced positive results and consequently there was a massive defection of *Ascaris*, native colonial soldiers, who took side with Britain against Italy. In February 1941 alone about 1000 Askaris deserted from their Italian commanders, and a majority of them followed in the succeeding months, and this facilitated the collapse of Italian colonial authority in Eritrea. Thus, the British were initially welcomed by Eritreans as "liberators" from

⁹ Connell and Killion, 371. In this book, it is indicated that the term *Medri Bahre* was used to signify the land between the Tekeze River to the sea, and the area between Mereb to the coast before and after 20th century respectively.

¹⁰ GKN Trevaskis, *Eritrea. A Colony in Transition: 1941-1952* (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1960), 8. Britain supported Italy's interest in the Red Sea in an attempt to avoid possible French expansion and control over the increasingly strategic Red Sea coast since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

¹¹ Tekeste Negash, *Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941: Policies, Praxis and Impact* (Uppsala: Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1987), 2; Redie, 20-21.

¹² Quoted in E. Sylvia Pankhurst and R.K.P. Pankhurst, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: The Last Phase of the Reunion Struggle, 1941-1952* (Woodford Green, Essex: Lalibela House, 1953), 22-23.

¹³ *Ibid.* 23.

Italian fascist rule. Their victory that culminated in the occupation of Asmara, the capital, was welcomed and the people celebrated it cheerfully, hoping this would bring an end to domination and discrimination.¹⁴

In April 1941, the British replaced the Italians as the new masters of Eritrea. But it should be noted that British rule had never assumed the status of colonial rule like that of its predecessor. Rather, as victorious power, Britain from the onset assumed the status of ‘care taker’ of an occupied enemy territory until the fate of that colony could be decided after the end of the war. Thus Eritrea was used as an area of military operation in the war against the Axis Powers¹⁵ until Italy signed the terms of an armistice in 25 July 1943, a treaty where Italy surrendered all its former possessions in Africa.¹⁶ In any case, Britain set out its administration of Eritrea from the 1941 up until the execution of the UN-sponsored Federal resolution in 1952.

British Military Administration and the Growth of Eritrean National Politics

After the demise of Italian rule in Eritrea, Britain took the necessary steps to establish a provisional British Military Administration (BMA)¹⁷ in Eritrea. Headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, the administration was defined by its military nature, since authority to govern was vested in the hands of the Commander-in-chief of the occupied territory.¹⁸

As Jordan notes: “the principal aim of the BMA was ... to make the former state structure of the “Occupied Enemy Territory” inoperative, to dissolve the indigenous power structure, and to replace it with the British institutional and administrative state apparatus.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, during the first three years, the British faced a shortage of

¹⁴ Alemseged Tesfai, *Aynefelale Eritrea, 1941-1950* (Asmara, Eritrea: Hidri Publishers, 2001), 17-22.

¹⁵ Refers to the alignment of nations, namely Germany, Italy, and Japanese, which fought against the Allied Forces headed primarily by Britain, Soviet Union and United States of America during the Second World War.

¹⁶ Gaim Kibreab, “Ethnicity, Religion, and British Policy on the Disposal of Eritrea, 1941-1952,” *Africa*, LX, 2 (2005): 161.

¹⁷ In 1949 the British Military Administration (BMA) was transformed into a civilian operation, known as “British Administration” only to last until 1952.

¹⁸ Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1989), 73-74.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 74.

British administrative officers who could run the country. Hence for political convenience the BMA kept the existing Fascist administrative structure as well as former Italian authorities in Eritrea intact. Not only this, but also the previous traditional power structures continued to function. To maintain law and order in the country Sudanese forces were brought in. Gradually, however, the British started to alter the existing Italian and traditional administrative structures and traditional rulers were completely replaced with British appointees almost throughout the country.²⁰

The measures undertaken by the British resulted in widespread discontent among the general population. Some concerned groups covertly started to meet and discuss, which eventually led to the formation of the first nationalist association, *Mahber Feqri Hager Ertra* (Association for the Love of the Country of Eritrea) in May 1941. This secret society elected a twelve-man leadership, consisting of six Christians and six Muslims, intended to represent the entire Eritrean society. The Association was meant to serve as a “forum of discussion with the intention to participate in ongoing dialogue with the British concerning the day-to-day practical issues.”²¹ Subsequently, a massive demonstration, organized by the Association, took place in front of the Government Palace in Asmara, and approached Brigadier Kennedy-Cooke, the newly appointed head of the BMA in Eritrea. A delegation led by Abdel-Kadir Kebire, a prominent Eritrean nationalist, presented their request for the realization of Eritrea’s self-determination, in line with the promise the British had made in the pamphlets before. But the British seldom honoured their promises. The authorities turned deaf ears to the demands of the population. More to the disappointment of the people, the British authorities passed a law that banned virtually all forms of street demonstrations and protests. In effect, Eritreans had to face severe punishment with heavy fines for peaceful demonstrations. The situation continued until the ban on the formation of political parties was lifted in 1947, after World War II.

The end of the Second World War brought about a steady decline of Eritrean economic growth. The deterioration was caused by three important reasons. First, Eritrean industries failed to compete with the post-war European economy which began to supply the markets in the Middle East that had been supplied by the Eritrean

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Redie, 147. As the Association drawn gradually into politics it was disintegrated and gave rise to three political parties, namely, Unionist Party, Moslem League Party, and Liberal progressive Party.

industries during the war period. Secondly, the cessation of the World War II ended the demand brought about by the war. Thirdly, Britain was reluctant to promote investment in Eritrea during the post war period. When the issue of the future of the three former Italian colonies, i.e. Eritrea, Libya and Somalia, was brought before the four victorious powers (as we shall see in the next section) who assumed the authority to determine the future of these colonies in 1945, Britain, despite its promise to grant self-determination, presented their scheme for a partition of Eritrea between Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Ethiopia. One of the arguments put forward in support for their plan was that Eritrea would be economically unviable once it gained independence; to substantiate their argument, therefore, they started to destroy any indication that was thought to demonstrate the economic viability of Eritrea. A great number of industrial plants and infrastructures were dismantled and then sold or transferred to other British colonies.²² Silvia Pankhurst who visited Eritrea during the process of dismantlement reports that a cement factory capable of producing 1000 tons of cement daily, a potash factory, twenty radio stations, one hospital, an airdrome and quarters of the aviation personnel, floating docks with cranes, dynamos and motors of ships, sixteen large boats, 300 railway wagons, 500 oil reservoirs, 400 Zula luxurious houses, and some 75 buildings were dismantled in Eritrea.²³ As Trevaskis, the then political advisor of the BMA, clearly observed:

The British had requisitioned the plant and equipment essential for development; they had crippled the skilled labour force by shipping thousands of Italians overseas; they had deprived Eritrea of its most valuable agricultural asset by abandoning cotton production; they had paralyzed the one industry which might have revolutionized the territory's economy by restricting for gold; and they have made any large-scale development impossible by restricting the freedom of the banks to issue loans.²⁴

The deteriorating economy aggravated the social conditions of the country. Rising unemployment and massive inflation became a symptom of such economic decline. According to Killion, “[b]etween 1940 and 1944 the cost of living increased roughly 600 percent, while workers’ wage rose by only 60 percent.”²⁵ Moreover, higher taxes

²² Francois Houtart, “The Social Revolution in Eritrea” in *Behind the War in Eritrea*, ed. Basil Davidson et al. (Nottingham: Russell Press, 1980), p. 88.

²³ E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *Eritrea on the Eve: The Past and Future of Italy's “First Born” Colony, Ethiopia's Ancient Sea Province* (Woodford Green, Essex: “New Times and Ethiopia News” Books, 1952), 12-17.

²⁴ Trevaskis, 77.

²⁵ Tom Killion, “Workers, Capital and the State in the Ethiopian Region, 1919-1974” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1985), 300.

on the peasantry increased migration to the towns. All of these factors caused a general discontent with the new turn of events.

When the British allowed political liberalization and mobilization over the issue of the future status of Eritrea in January 1947, several political parties emerged one after another. The Moslem League was the first party to be founded formally in January 1947 in Keren. The Party demanded immediate independence of Eritrea or independence preceded by ten years of international trusteeship if the existing circumstance did not allow.²⁶ The Liberal Progressive Party, founded in February 1947, advocated for the complete independence of Eritrea.²⁷ In March 1947 the Unionist Party, that demanded the unconditional union of Eritrea with Ethiopia, was officially formed in Asmara.²⁸ Generally the political parties can be roughly divided between a unionist wing, favouring union with Ethiopia and an independence wing, advocating for independence. The Unionists got the support of the majority of the Christian population while the Independence wing was essentially composed of both Christian and Muslim populations of the country. Of the independence group, the Muslim League got the support of almost the entire Muslim population.²⁹ The commonly shared feeling among the Muslim communities was “the fear of being incorporated in the Christian dominated Ethiopia.”³⁰ Although the League had a sectarian name, it was not an Islamist organization as we understand it today. But the use of such term clearly shows the political schism along religious lines in the Eritrean society.³¹

According to Ellingson, the pro-independence parties were mostly financed by membership while the Unionists were “handsomely subsidized by the Ethiopian government although, of course this was never publicly admitted.”³² In the years that followed, politics in Eritrea was dominated by the struggle between the Unionist Party and the two pro-independence parties. In due course, the latter experienced split and realignment as shown in the figure below.

²⁶ Redie, 157-158.

²⁷ Ibid., 160.

²⁸ Jordan, 97.

²⁹ According to the indirect polling carried out by the Four Power Commission in Eritrea, the Muslim League won the support of 40.5 percent of the population. See Connell and Killion, 386.

³⁰ With, 54.

³¹ Connell and Killion, 386.

³² Lloyd Ellingson, “The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950,” *Journal of African History*, 18, 2 (1977): 266.

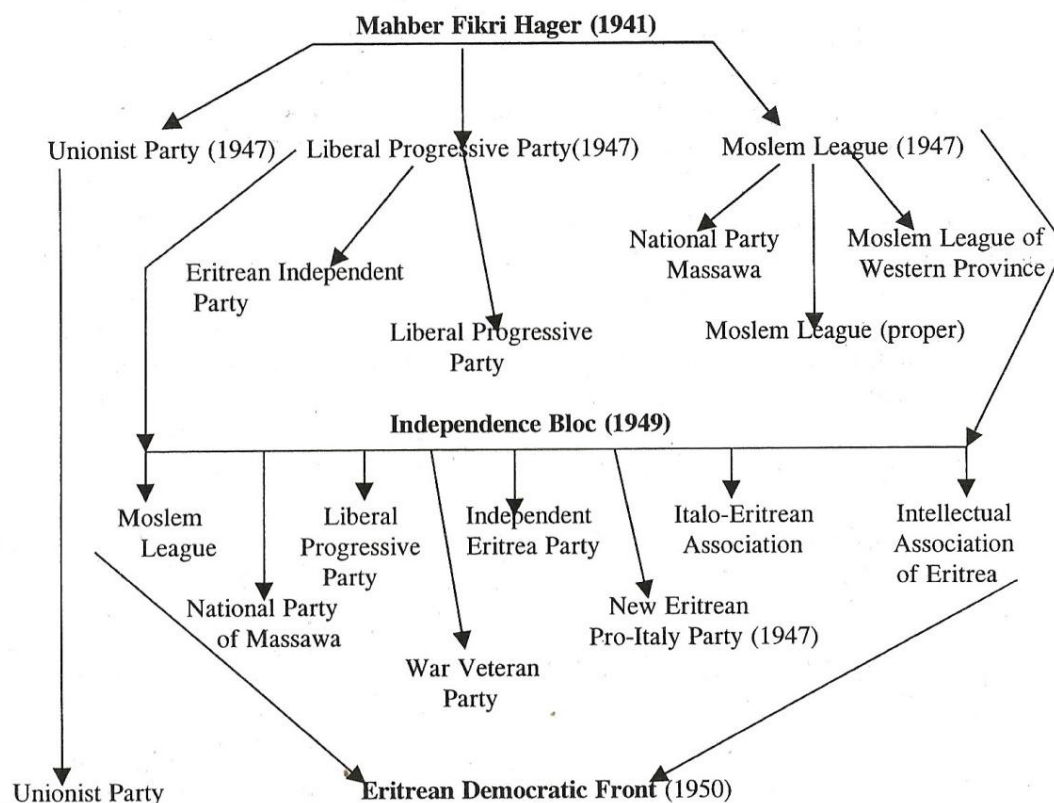


Figure 1. The Formation of Political Parties in Eritrea³³

Source: Redie, 148.

The Case of Eritrea in the International Forums

When the Second World War came to an end the disposal of ex-Italian colonies, namely Eritrea, Libya, and Somalia, was left to be jointly determined by the Council of Foreign Ministers of the U.S.S.R, U.S., U.K. and France. The first meeting of these four victorious Powers was held in London in September 1945. The American Secretary of State, James Byrnes, proposed that collective trusteeship under the UN would prevent the Italian colonies from becoming of military advantage to anyone. Under this scheme Eritrea was to become independent after ten years. The US scheme of collective trusteeship was strongly rejected by the USSR and France. The USSR argued that the Collective trusteeship formula would not be feasible since it had never been put into practice before. France viewed the plan as something that would

³³ Redie, 148. *Mahber Fikri Hager* (Association for the Love of the Country of Eritrea) was established on May 5, 1941 to represent the Eritrean society in the day-to-day interaction with the British regarding practical issues. As the Association gradually drawn into politics it was disintegrated and gave rise to three political parties, namely, Unionist Party, Moslem League Party, and Liberal progressive Party.

endanger their presence in the neighbouring French colonies of Chad, Algeria, Tunisia, and French Somalia. Hence they favoured Italian trusteeship.³⁴

Britain, on the other hand, rejected the proposal made by both the United States and France. As discussed in the previous paragraphs, Britain had the idea to partition Eritrea in mind, i.e., dividing Eritrea between Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Ethiopia.³⁵ The plan was in fact initiated way back before the end of the Second World War. In 1942, for instance, the British Governor of the Sudan visited Eritrea to gather information about the western Eritrean region adjacent to the Sudan. By 1943 the chief military administrator in Eritrea, Steven Longrigg, proposed three key elements that should be taken into consideration when dealing with the future disposal of Eritrea: “first, retention of strategic areas and communication lines; second, setting up a regime reflecting a ‘permanent ethnographical and economic reality’ to ensure the governability of Eritrea; and third, minimization of the cost of administering Eritrea.”³⁶ In the same year Britain had already started discussions with the US government on how to dismember Eritrea and give Ethiopia access to the Sea.³⁷ If Ethiopia was provided an outlet to the sea it would then be expected to give up the Ogaden region of the southeastern Ethiopia, which was under British occupation. British policy towards Somalia was to create a “Greater Somalia” by combining the British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland and the Ogaden if and only if Ethiopia agreed to surrender the latter region.³⁸ Subsequently Britain was interested in securing its geopolitical interests in northeastern Africa; hence it was actively engaged to influence the outcome of the decision to be taken by the Council of Foreign Ministers comprised of only the victorious powers.

The case of Eritrea was further complicated as Italy, Ethiopia and Egypt announced significant claims over the country. Italy wanted a fair share of administration to be assigned to Italian officials. On historical grounds, Egypt demanded for the return of

³⁴ Eyassu Gaim. “The Eritrean Question: The Conflict between the Right of Self-determination and the Interests of States” (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 1992), 80-81.

³⁵ Ibid. 82; See also Araia, 66-68.

³⁶ Gaim, 164; Okbazghi Yohannes, *Eritrea: A Pawn in World Politics* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991), 62.

³⁷ Gaim, 165. Gaim outlines some of the points discussed: “If access to the sea should be given through Eritrea, should all or only part of Eritrea be ceded to Ethiopia and if so on what conditions? If a part only should be ceded what disposition should be made of the remainder? Should Ethiopia be required to abandon any other territorial claim if her claim to access to the sea was met in Eritrea?”

³⁸ Eyassu, 82.

Massawa which was part of Eritrean territory under Egyptian control before the advent of Italians in the territory. Meanwhile, Ethiopia claimed that Eritrea was an integral part of its wider polity and it argued that it had access to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean since 3000 years.³⁹

In February 1947 a Peace Treaty between the four powers and Italy was concluded in Paris. Consequently, Italy renounced all its rights to its former territorial possessions in Africa. In addition, an agreement was reached between the four powers to ensure the disposal of the ex-Italian colonies in Africa within one year. If they were unable to reach an agreement within one year of the coming into force of the Peace Treaty with Italy, the question would be referred to the UN General Assembly.⁴⁰

In accordance with the treaty a four power commission known as the Commission of Inquiry representing the USA, Great Britain, France and the USSR arrived in Eritrea on 8 November 1947 and left on the 3rd January 1948. The main task of the commission was to ascertain the wishes of the inhabitants of the colony and to gather data on the prevailing socio-economic and political condition.⁴¹ On 31st August 1948 the commission submitted its report to the Council of Foreign Ministers.⁴² The data gathered by the UK and US delegates showed that 55.2 percent of the population was in favour of independence, or international trusteeship leading to eventual independence, whereas 44.8 percent claimed to support unification with Ethiopia. In addition the delegation observed that more than 90 percent of the population opposed to the return of Italian rule in any form. Alternately the French and Russian delegates disputed these figures. According to them 47.83 percent of the Eritrean population supported unification with Ethiopia while 52.17 percent favoured independence or trusteeship leading to independence.⁴³ Yet, both sides seemed to agree that the pro-independence were the majority.

By the summer of 1948, the debate among the Council of Foreign Ministers in matters regarding Eritrea made no significant progress. They simply restated their respective positions. The Soviet Union insisted on Italian trusteeship with a definite and

³⁹ Ibid., 86 and 94.

⁴⁰ Eyassu, 84-85.

⁴¹ Okbazghi, 82-83.

⁴² Eyassu, 89.

⁴³ Okbazghi, 83-84; See also Redie, 179.

acceptable time frame. Britain, realizing the impracticability of their partition idea, proposed the placement of Eritrea under Ethiopian administration. France wanted Italian trusteeship while allowing Ethiopia to annex the Danakil Coast, a 300 mile long stretch of land along the Red Sea. The United States advocated the enlargement of Ethiopia's access to the Red Sea by awarding it the Danakil Coast as well as the districts in the highland namely Akkele Guzai and Seraie while postponing the decision with regard to the rest of the country.⁴⁴

The Cold War that had divided the world into two spheres of influences – the socialist and capitalist camps, the former led by Moscow and the latter by Washington – had also a significant impact on Eritrea and other Italian colonies. Following the end of Second World War the strategic location of Eritrea, Libya and Somaliland, on the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean respectively, became an area of super power competition.

The United States had begun to use Eritrea as a “supply depot and its ports as a passage for American ships” since 1941. The British allowed the United States to use and expand its airbase in Gurai and the former Italian naval radio station “Radio Marina” in Asmara, Eritrea.⁴⁵ The British position on the disposal of Eritrea, therefore, was determined by the joint interests of both the United Kingdom and United States. Moreover, according to Eyassu, Britain and France, were also uncomfortable by the thought of possible uprisings that could emerge in their respective colonies in Africa and Asia if they supported the independence of Eritrea.⁴⁶

After three years of intense debate marked by divergence and convergence of policies the Council of Foreign Ministers was unable to come up with a common recommendation. Finally the question of Eritrea along with that of other ex-Italian colonies was referred to the UN General Assembly on the 15th September 1948.⁴⁷ In the following section we will see the political situation in Eritrea and the process through which the case of Eritrea was settled at the UN.

⁴⁴ Eyassu, 96; See also Okbazghi, 87-88.

⁴⁵ Araia, 66.

⁴⁶ Eyassu, 81.

⁴⁷ Tesfatsion Medhanie, *Eritrea: Dynamics of a National Question* (Amsterdam: B.R. Gruner, 1986), 16.

Political Situation inside Eritrea and the UN Federal Resolution

The period from 1948 to 1950 was generally characterized by intense campaigns of intimidation and assassination by the Unionists against those who led and supported the cause of Eritrean independence.⁴⁸ Opponents of the union were threatened with pamphlets and letters.⁴⁹ With regard to this, the UN commission for Eritrea reported that “[t]errorism had developed in Eritrea to support a [Unionist] policy. Some people who were opposed to annexation of the territory to Ethiopia had been subject to terrorist attack on their person and property. Others, out of fear, have been compelled to follow the party which advocated annexation to Ethiopia.”⁵⁰ Several sources show that the Unionists were considerably subsidized by the Ethiopian government in order to conduct organized terrorist activities against opponents of the union.⁵¹ Furthermore, the Orthodox Church was actively engaged in issuing threats. It openly warned through the newspaper *Ethiopia*, that whosoever supported the independence wing would be denied of religious services like baptism, communion, marriage, burial and absolution.⁵²

In June 1949, several political parties advocating independence formed a coalition known as the Independence Bloc.⁵³ The coalition was created in response to the Bevin-Sforza partition plan that was drafted by foreign minister of Britain and Italy respectively.⁵⁴ Due to the ongoing threat, however, many members of the Bloc, who feared for their lives and property, were compelled to shift their allegiance to the Unionist fold. Consequently, disunity among the members of the independence movement surfaced shortly after the arrival of the UN Commission.⁵⁵ The formation of the Independence Bloc is illustrated in Figure 1.

⁴⁸ Jordan, 124-127.

⁴⁹ For more detailed information on the number of killings, please, refer to Trevaskis, 96.

⁵⁰ Cited in Jordan, 127.

⁵¹ Ellingson, 266; Jordan, 124-127.

⁵² Trevaskis, 96; See also Ellingson, 275.

⁵³ The coalition comprised the following political parties: the Moslem League, the Liberal Progressive Party, the New Eritrean Pro-Italian Party, the Italo-Eritrean Association, the National Party of Massawa, the Veteran Association, the Independent Eritrea Party, and the Intellectual Association of Eritreans. For more information, please, refer to Ellingson, 276; Jordan, 130.

⁵⁴ The Independence Bloc clearly expressed its strong opposition to the plan of partition in its first issued newspaper *Hanti Ertra* [One Eritrea], first appearing in the 1950 in both Tigrinya and Arabic languages. See Eritrean Independence Bloc, “Hanti Eritrea,” *Hanti Eritrea*, 28 January 1950.

⁵⁵ Trevaskis, 96; Redie, 166; Ellingson, 278.

By September 1949 the General Assembly reached an agreement on the cases of Libya and Somalia. It resolved to grant independence to Libya and Somalia while the latter was to achieve sovereignty only after ten years of Italian trusteeship. The Assembly decided to send to Eritrea a UN Commission entrusted to ascertain the wishes of the inhabitants and make proposals for the future of Eritrea accordingly. The Commission included delegations of South Africa, Norway, Burma, Pakistan, and Guatemala.⁵⁶

The Commission held private and public meetings, hearings with the political parties and other organizations, and also formal consultations with interested governments such as UK, France, Italy, Egypt, and Ethiopia. After completing its investigation, the commission came up with a variety of findings and proposals for the future status of Eritrea. The Pakistani and Guatemalan delegations proposed independence after ten years of direct UN trusteeship. The Norwegian delegate proposed the incorporation of Eritrea with Ethiopia, but in case the solution met opposition in the Western province of Eritrea the United Kingdom would continue its administration.⁵⁷ The South African and Burmese delegations favoured the establishment of a common federal government between Eritrea and Ethiopia. While both maintaining internal governmental structures, the common federal government was “to possess the executive, legislative and judicial organs, and the head of the federation was to be the Ethiopian Emperor.”⁵⁸ Meanwhile, in his statement to the General Assembly in November 1950, the leader of the Eritrean Independence Bloc, Ibrahim Sultan, asserted that “this indisputable right to independence to which our country is devoted cannot be ignored without creating a new area of strife in East Africa...”⁵⁹

The United States, after hours of discussion with representatives of Britain, Italian, Ethiopian, Brazilian, proposed a formula somewhat similar to the proposal made by the delegations of South Africa and Burma. The formula provided for the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown. The solution

⁵⁶ Tesfatsion, 17; See also Eyassu, 134.

⁵⁷ Eyassu, 135-138; See also Okbazghi, 162.

⁵⁸ Eyassu, 139.

⁵⁹ Ibrahim Sultan was the chairman of the Eritrean Bloc for Independence. See Ibrahim Sultan, “Doc. No. 37. Statement by the Delegation of the Moslem League of Eritrea,” in *Ethiopia and Eritrea: A Documentary Study*, ed. Habtu Ghebre-ab. (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1993), 178.

was finally accepted by the western powers including Italy. Ethiopia declared its acceptance of it on November 1950.⁶⁰

On December 2, 1950, the UN passed resolution 390 A (V) which recommended that “Eritrea shall constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown.”⁶¹ Accordingly, Eritrea possessed an autonomous government with legislative, executive, and judicial powers over domestic affairs. Whereas, matters pertaining to defence, foreign affairs, currency and finance and interstate trade and communications became under the jurisdiction of Ethiopia. Meanwhile, the Independence Bloc and some section of the Unionist Party convened a Peace Conference (*Gubaie Selam*) in Asmara at Cinema Impero on December 31. Both sides expressed their commitment “to uphold and protect the autonomous Eritrean State.”⁶² Later on, the Independence Bloc changed its old name to the Eritrean Democratic Front – with the intention to create a democratic Eritrean state.⁶³

One major weakness of the Ethio-Eritrean federation, however, was the absence of a distinct federal government in addition to Eritrean and Ethiopian governments. The federal government, according to the stipulated framework was the government of Ethiopia. Furthermore, the resolution provided no international machinery where intervention could be facilitated in case of violation of the terms of the federation. With all its ambiguities the Ethio-Eritrean federation was officially and formally set in place on 15 September 1952.

The Federal Period: A Prelude to War

The period from 1952-62 is commonly known as the Federal period. During that time, the Eritrean Government possessed its own parliament, its own constitution, its own flag, and adopted two official languages (Tigrinya and Arabic). The constitution guaranteed the right to freedom of expression and opinion, and the right to freedom of

⁶⁰ Tesfatsion, 17-18. For more information on the discussions between the different States, see Okbazghi, 166-167.

⁶¹ “390 (V). Eritrea: Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea; Report of the Interim Committee of the General Assembly on the Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea,” *Resolutions adopted by The General Assembly during Its Fifth Session*, <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/5/ares5.htm> (accessed February 28, 2014).

⁶² Redie, 170.

⁶³ “Hanti Eritrea,” *Hanti Eritrea*, 3 January 1951.

demonstration and association.⁶⁴ As Redie, a researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute, notes, “both in its institutional and symbolic sense the Federation inculcated a sense of national identity in Eritrean society” and through the established institutions, “Eritreans were able to identify with, cherish and endow with a high symbolic value.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the new government lacked the necessary power to defend these externally imposed institutions.

Predictably, the federation did not work as it was stipulated in the resolution 390 A(V) passed by the UN. Ethiopia proceeded quickly to dismantle the pillars of the federation that guaranteed Eritrea’s limited autonomy one by one without hesitation. Independent newspapers were shut down, editors of newspapers were imprisoned, prominent nationalists like Woldeab Woldemariam, Ibrahim Sultan, Idris Mohammed Adem etc. were driven into exile, political parties and trade unions were banned, the Eritrean flag was replaced by that of Ethiopia, and use of indigenous languages in schools and official transactions was forbidden and Amharic was declared to be the official language of the territory while Eritrean laws were abandoned and replaced by Ethiopian law in 1959.⁶⁶ Following the British example, the Imperial Ethiopian Government, engaged in further crippling the Eritrean economy.⁶⁷ Having the upper hand in the ‘federal government’ Ethiopia intervened in the domestic affairs of the Eritrean Government and imposed fiscal laws under the pretext of ‘balancing’ the economic growth of the two countries, which, in the long run, undermined Eritrea’s economic activity.⁶⁸ A report addressed by an American Consul to a State Department shows that: “Several foreign groups (American and others) were interested in investing in cement plant, mining operation, petroleum exploration, minerals development and fish meal exports. However, very few of these investments came to fruition because the governmental authorities in Addis Ababa refused to grant the requisite approval. During the eight years of the federation period only two plants of

⁶⁴ “The Constitution of Eritrea,” 10 July 1952, 11-21, the Research and Documentation Centre (RDC). Henceforth, the abbreviation RDC will be applied in the subsequent citations.

⁶⁵ Redie, 176.

⁶⁶ Ruth, 89-91.

⁶⁷ Bereket Habte Selassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1980), 60-61.

⁶⁸ Araia, 155.

significance were established in Eritrea: a cotton spinning plant, by an Italian firm and a meat packing operation by the Israeli firm INCODE.”⁶⁹

Moreover, authorities refused to renew work permits of Italian managers and technicians’ of different businesses, and consequently “many Italian businesses were forced to close and thousands of Eritreans were left without jobs, who were then forced to migrate to neighbouring countries.”⁷⁰ Ethiopia therefore employed both direct and indirect actions to slow down economic activities in Eritrea. A weak Eritrean economy was once more portrayed to the world on the eve of annexation.

Throughout the federal period, Eritreans protested against Ethiopia’s violations of the Eritrean autonomy. Petitions were sent to the UN to guarantee Ethiopia’s respect for the federal arrangement,⁷¹ but the UN failed to speak against the violations. In 1957, students resisted through massive organized demonstrations. Workers conducted a general strike that went on for almost a week in 1958. But all these protests and demonstrations were quelled by the use of force which claimed the lives of many protestors.⁷² By mid-1960 the Eritrean Government was already reduced to the “Eritrean Administration” and the Imperial Ethiopian Government Insignia featured with a crowned lion carrying a cross was adopted for administrative purposes and the Seal of Eritrea was altered to read “Eritrean Administration under Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia.”⁷³ The outcome of this was aptly summed up by Redie as follows: “the prohibition against being educated in one’s own languages, the lack of access to newspapers in one’s own mother tongue, the deprivation of the possibility of listening to one’s own languages and songs on the radio, etc., fostered a deep national resentment. This, in turn, became the midwife of a flourishing Eritrean nationalist consciousness.”⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Tekie Fessehazion, “Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation, 1952-62” (Working Paper, Eritrean for Peace and Democracy, Washington, 1990), 40.

⁷⁰ Tekie, 40; Araia, 153-161.

⁷¹ Redie, 176; Ruth, 91.

⁷² Bereket, 61.

⁷³ Richard Greenfield, “Eritrea Fights for Freedom” (A paper, Eritrea Support Committee, 1988), 4.

⁷⁴ Redie, 176.

Conclusion

The development of the Eritrean-Ethiopian federation can be better understood when it is examined within the context of the then wider geopolitical interest of the different international and regional powers in the Red Sea region. As shown in this chapter the four major Powers, after wrangling among themselves, gave the Eritrea issue to the UN and after engaging in a heated debate, a federal formula was proposed, which called a “compromise” solution. It should be noted here that the formula was not a “compromise” solution only to the divided Eritrean population but also to the prevailing conflicting national interests of countries engaged in crafting the association of Eritrea with Ethiopia through the Federal Act. The American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, made it clear in his speech at the UN Security Council in 1952: “From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the US in the Red Sea basin, and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country [Eritrea] has to be linked with our ally, Ethiopia.”⁷⁵ Taking this into consideration, the role of different Eritrean social forces in shaping the destiny of the country was minimal. Their voice was heard but not listened to. It was the conflicting interests of the super powers, and particularly that of Anglo-American interests, that dictated the outcome of the final resolution provided by the UN General Assembly regarding Eritrea. Be that as it may, even the Federal arrangement, the very plan devised by them, failed to exist as genuine as it was stipulated in the resolution of the UN. In the end the resort to military solutions to “rectify” a perceived national case came after the failure of the international diplomacy. The Eritreans felt betrayed when Emperor Haile Selassie I proceeded unilaterally to dismantle the federal arrangement in violation of international principles and of the federal scheme mandated by the UN, and Eritreans plea for help fell on deaf ears.

⁷⁵ Bereket, 58; see also Tesfatsion, 19.

Chapter Two: Ethiopian Domination and Emergence of the Eritrean Liberation Front, 1960-63

Introduction

This chapter explores the formative period of the ELF and the beginning of the Eritrean armed struggle for independence. It presents an analysis of the process through which the ELF was formed, and examines the role that major groups played in initiating the war for independence. Moreover, it presents a brief history of Hamid Idris Awate, the pioneer in firing the first shots of the Eritrean armed resistance, and examines the reasons for his rebellion, and also demonstrates how the rebellion grew in number and action and eventually, into a serious concern for the Ethiopian government. Finally, the major military engagements and operations carried out during the period under discussion are dealt with in this chapter.

The Eritrean Liberation Movement

As discussed in the previous chapter, the increasing Ethiopian erosion of Eritrean self-administration was generating grievances and discontent among the general population. Being frustrated with the system many Eritreans formed secret organizations where they could discuss ‘what to do’ regarding the Eritrean issue. As it became quite difficult to organize and agitate inside Eritrea, the task of organizing a movement to promote the Eritrean cause fell on the Diaspora. As a result a new breed of Eritrean nationalists founded the underground *Eritrean Liberation Movement* (ELM)¹ (Arabic: *Harakat El Tahrir El Eritrya*; Tigrinya: *Mahber Shewate*), in Port Sudan on November 2, 1958. The founders were a group of young Eritrean refugees in the Sudan. They took the initiative of organizing political activities, aimed at terminating Ethiopian rule through a *coup d'état*. But before the ELM's coup could be attempted, the Eritrean armed struggle was launched in 1961 under the auspices of the *Eritrean Liberation Front* (ELF).² After that the country lapsed into a cycle of

¹ The ELM eventually succumbed to Ethiopian repression and attacks from the rival Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1965. See Connel and Killion, 218-20; Ruth, 98-101.

² Ruth; See also Redie.

political disorder, violent conflict and human suffering in the three decades that followed.

The ELM leaders were highly influenced by the Communist Party of Sudan; and Mohammed Said Nawid, the chairman of the ELM, was in fact a member of the party. To ensure the security of the people who were involved in the activities of the movement, they organized clandestine cells based on groups of seven individuals. This cellular organizational method allowed each cell to function independently, though each of the cells shared familiar features and purposes with its sister cells. As a result of this organizational method the movement came to be known as *Mahber Shewate* (Association of seven) in Tigrinya in the highlands of Eritrea, while in the Sudan it was called as *Harakat El Tahrir El Eritrea* (Eritrean Liberation Movement). The ELM was able to spread very fast in the Eritrean towns.³

Key Forces and Their Role in the Formation of the ELF

There are three groups that played an important role at the initial stage of the Eritrean armed struggle for independence spearheaded by the ELF. These groups were found among Eritrean students in Cairo, Eritrean members of the Sudanese Army and Eritrean political refugees. In the following pages, I examine the role of these different groups, their relation to the ELM and the subsequent move towards armed resistance.

The Eritrean Students in Cairo

The pioneers who took the initiative to establish the Eritrean Liberation Front were mostly young Eritrean students of Al-Azhar University and other higher institutions of education in Cairo, Egypt. The Students formed the Eritrean Student Association (ESA) in 1951. Apart from promoting sport activities, the club was initially dedicated to assist Eritreans in finding international scholarships in Egyptian schools and higher institutions. This has been captured by Idris Osman Galadewos:

“At that time students came on their own to Cairo. Some even walked from Wadi Halfa, after they had illegally crossed Sudan, to Aswan in order to escape the controls

³ Redie, 183.

at the border. Some of them died on their way. Only after arriving in Cairo they could hope to get a scholarship; there was no organized programme for Eritrean students for which they could apply while still being in Eritrea. After the Eritrean Student Association was founded it helped new arrivals to secure scholarships.”⁴

Although they were young, the students were highly influenced by the contemporary Algerian Revolution⁵, and the tripartite invasion (Britain, France, and Israel) of Egypt in 1956, which erupted when Gamal Abdel Nasser⁶ announced his intention of nationalizing the Suez Canal. At that time Ethiopia took sides with the West and in response to this Nasser allowed Eritreans to make radio broadcasts into Eritrea in 1956. Wolde-Ab Woldemariam, an Eritrean nationalist who was driven into exile in 1953 as a result of seven assassination attempts from the unionists, was in charge of the broadcasts. A few months later, the broadcasting was terminated because Emperor Haile Selassie switched his support to the Egyptian side on the dispute over the nationalization of the Suez Canal.⁷

Although the ESA, looking from outside, appeared an association with apolitical objectives, its members were rather engaged in the ongoing political activities in Eritrea. Since 1957, Mohammed Said Nawd recounts that, the ELM leaders had already established contact with some of the Eritreans in Cairo concerning the formation of an organization dedicated to the liberation of Eritrea.⁸ Around the end of May 1960, the ESA approached one of the ELM leaders, Taher Ibrahim Fedab, and requested him to reveal their organizational programme and philosophy before them.⁹ But the ELM refused to address the queries to the ESA’s satisfaction. Because answering such questions were thought to contradict the secretive nature of the ELM.¹⁰ This, in effect, generated discontent and doubts among the ESA members,

⁴ Idris Osman Galadewos, interview by Günter Schröder, Khartoum, Sudan, 1 January 1988, transcript, RDC. According to Idris, there were about 4500 Eritrean students (both secondary and tertiary level) in Cairo towards the end of 1950s.

⁵ The “Algerian Revolution,” also known as Algerian War of independence, was an important decolonization war between France and Algerian independence movements from 1954 to 1962, which eventually led Algeria gaining its independence from France.

⁶ Leader of Egypt who held the office of President from 1956 until his death in 1970.

⁷ Connell and Killion, 192.

⁸ Mohammed Said Nawd, interview by Günter Schröder, Khartoum, Sudan, 11 July 1988, transcript, RDC.

⁹ Taha Mohammed Nur, interview by Günter Schröder, Rome, Italy, 28-29 May 1988, transcript, RDC.

¹⁰ Mohammed Said Nawd, *MnqsiQas Harnet Ertra: Haqn Tarikh* [Eritrean Liberation Movement: The Truth & The History] (Asmara: Hidri publishers, 2001), 46-47. Mohammed Said Nawd, the founding father of the ELM, gives detailed reasons why the ELM opted to carry out its political activities with extra vigilant and utmost secrecy.

which eventually compelled them to search for alternative ways to challenge Ethiopian rule.¹¹

Eritrean Soldiers in the Sudanese Army

Eritrean soldiers in the Sudan Defence Force (SDF) also played a significant role in the starting of the Eritrean war for independence. Eritreans had been serving in the Sudanese Army since the 1940s, when Eritrea was under British mandate. Almost all the soldiers were Muslim from the Western lowlands of Eritrea. According to Muhammad Saad Adem¹², there were about 700 enlisted Eritreans. Militarily, they were well trained soldiers with a great deal of battlefield experience and knowledge of military tactics. Despite their limited educational background, many of them were able to achieve certain ranks in the military power structure of the Sudanese Army.¹³

Inspired by the contemporary struggles against colonial rule in Africa, such as the Algerian revolution, on the one hand, and the decolonization of Sudan from Britain on the other, the soldiers formed a secret association known as *Munazzamat at-Tahrir* (Liberation Organization) in 1956. The aim of this association was to share ideas on how to liberate Eritrea. For them, Sudan was relatively a safe-haven where Eritreans in Sudan could agitate. Later on, with the establishment of the ELM, most of the soldiers were recruited as clandestine members of the movement.¹⁴

According to former Sudanese soldier Mohammed Umer Abdela (also known as “Abu Tiyyara”), contacts between the Eritrean soldiers and the ELM began around late 1959 when the latter brought news to the soldiers about the removal of the Eritrean flag¹⁵ and the ELM’s decision to organize and agitate for the Eritrean cause. In response, they organized themselves and began to collect contribution for the cause of

¹¹ Taha Mohammed Nur, interview.

¹² Mohammed Saad Adem, (Unpublished manuscript, ND), transcript, RDC. Mohammed was an Eritrean born in Kassala, Sudan, and was an ex-soldier in the Sudanese army until he joined in the ELF. He was appointed as the head of the Revolutionary Command from 1965-68.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.; See also Adem Mohammed Hamid “Gendifel”, interview by Günter Schröder, Khartoum, Sudan, 09 February 1991, transcript, RDC. The association was led by Taher Salem, an Eritrean member in the SDF. There is no accurate information regarding the exact number of soldiers enlisted in that association. But Adem Mohammed Hamid “Gendifel” states that they were about 60 while Mohammed Adem Idris “Gezir” put it to 80. See Mohammed Adem Idris “Gezir”, interview by Günter Schröder, Khartoum, Sudan, 28 March 1989, transcript, RDC.

¹⁵ On 24 December 1958, the Ethiopia banned Eritrean flag in government offices and public buildings and replaced it with that of Ethiopia.

the ELM.¹⁶ They were also conducting internal debate regarding the status of Eritrea within the federation. Dissatisfied with the progress of the ELM, many of the soldiers were of the conviction that the best strategy to terminate Ethiopian rule was to resort to violence.¹⁷ Unfortunately, they lacked proper political organization that could enable them to implement this strategy. Under these circumstances, the Cairo-based Eritrean students decided to form the first armed resistance movement, in which Eritreans in the SDF played a significant role in the starting of the movement inside Eritrea. But before doing so, the Cairo-based group sought to secure the support of veteran nationalists from Eritrea in the leadership.

The Students and Search for Leadership

In the summer of 1957, a group of seven Eritrean students in Cairo gathered and held a secret meeting. The meeting was meant to discuss on the possibility of starting an armed struggle in Eritrea. As a starting point, they called themselves *Humat al-watan* (Arabic: meaning Protectors of the Homeland). Said Hussein was the leader of the group. A student at that time, he was not only well versed with contemporary revolutionary struggles in Africa and Asia, but also very experienced compared to his compatriots in military terms. In 1956, for instance, he participated in the Arab-Israeli war in Sinai as a member of the Egyptian National Brigade.¹⁸

In January 1958, Said Hussein dispatched a letter to Idris Mohammed Adem through Mohammed Adem Idris (“Gezir”), who was one of the members of the secret group. The letter basically requested Idris Mohammed Adem to leave Eritrea and join the Cairo-based group. Idris Mohammed Adem was one of the leading figures in the early nationalist movements. Born into a Beni Amer family in 1921 in Agordat and educated at Arabic secondary school in Gedaref, Sudan, Idris was among the few educated in Arabic script. He was the editor of the *Eritrean Weekly News* during the BMA. In 1952 he was elected to the newly established Eritrean Parliament and became the President of the Eritrean Legislative Assembly in 1955. Being a

¹⁶ Mohammed Umer Abdela “Abu Tiyara”, interview by Günter Schröder, Kassala, Sudan, 23 March 1989, transcript, RDC.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mohammed Adem Idris “Gezir”, interview by Günter Schröder, Khartoum, Sudan, 27 March 1989, transcript, RDC. The *Humat al-watan* group comprised of Said Hussein, Mohammed Adem Idris (also known as “Gezir”), Idris Osman Galadewos, Mohammed Said Umer (“Antata”) and Suleiman Mohammed Ahmed, amongst others.

nationalist militant leader who increasingly advocated for an independent electoral commission, he was demoted from his office. In 1957, he was finally put under house arrest in his home town of Agordat after he openly appealed for the intervention of the U.N. in Eritrea.¹⁹

Under these circumstances, Idris Mohammed Adem received a letter from the students in Cairo in which he was called upon to join the Cairo-based group. Coincidentally, one of the towering veteran politicians in the early nationalist, *Sheikh Ibrahim Sultan*, was also under house arrest since 1956. As shown in the preceding chapter he was the founder of the Muslim League and greatly known for championing the eradication of serfdom among the Muslim tribes in the early 1940s. Both of them accepted the call and in March 1959 they left Eritrea by crossing the Eritrean Sudanese border and fled to Cairo.²⁰

At an international conference organized by *Nahda Afrikiyya* (African Renaissance) in Cairo on 15 April 1959, Idris gave a speech on behalf of the Eritrean people and condemned Ethiopia for its violation of the U.N resolution.²¹ Idris sought armed struggle as the only strategy to achieve Eritrea's independence. He recounts that "when we got out from Eritrea, we put it to our mind that it should be solved by armed struggle. We came to the point that [the Eritrean] problem cannot be solved peacefully."²²

The Birth of the ELF

By mid-1960, the Eritrean nationalists were already divided into two camps: those who sought armed resistance as a strategy to terminate Ethiopian rule versus those who preferred non-violent means. The first strategy was favoured by those Eritreans

¹⁹ Connell and Killion, 307-308.

²⁰ Idris Mohammed Adem, interview by Günter Schröder, Khartoum, Sudan, 15 March 1989, transcript, RDC. The escape mission of Idris and Ibrahim came few months after the removal of the Eritrean flag in favour of that of Ethiopia and the generalized discontent and unrest that engulfed all over Eritrea in 1958. The escape was regarded as a big blow that urged the Emperor to seek an explanation to the matter from concerned higher Ethiopian authorities in Eritrea; and alarmed by these events, the Emperor despatched higher Ethiopian Army officers to Eritrea in order to review the state of Ethiopian troops around the Eritrean and Sudanese border. Drawn from Jordan, 169.

²¹ Idris Mohammed Adem, "The speech of the Eritrean delegation read by Mr. Idris Mohamed Adam, the former Chairman of the Eritrean Parliament," (Speech, *Nahda Afrikiyya* (African Renaissance), 15 April 1959), RDC.

²² Idris Mohammed Adem, interview...

based in Cairo and in the Sudanese army, while the latter strategy was pursued by members of the ELM.

Convinced by the ELM's lack of strategy for armed resistance and its slow progress, the Cairo-based group took the initiative to form an alternative organization that believed in armed struggle as the only means to gain independence. The first constituent meeting took place on the 10th of July 1960 in a place called *Hadiqet Al Asmak* (meaning, 'Garden of Fish') in Cairo.²³ The founding members, who came mainly from Muslim backgrounds, were Idris Mohamed Adem, Idris Osman Galadewos, Said Hussein, Mohamed Saleh Humed, Taha Mohammed Nur, Said Ahmed Hashim, Adem Mohammed Ali Akete, Mohammed Said Umer Anteta and a few others.²⁴ They established a Central Committee of eleven members chaired by Idris Mohammed Adem. As a starting point, they prepared a charter on 17th of July 1960 that defined the name of their organization, their goals and means to achieve their goals. A few months later, the formation of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was officially announced.

The formation of the ELF coincided with the decolonization of many African countries. In 1960 alone, seventeen African territories namely, in order of independence, Cameroon, Togo, Mali, Madagascar, DR Congo, Somalia, Benin, Niger, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Central African Republic, Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Senegal, Nigeria, and Mauritania gained independence from their respective European colonial rules. This massive change that swept across most parts of the continent inspired many young Eritreans in Cairo to seek their independence.²⁵

Determined to wage a war against Ethiopian troops in Eritrea, the ELF leaders started the necessary preparation for the armed struggle. Two interesting developments happened here. First, many Eritrean members in the Sudanese Army cancelled their membership in the ELM and switched their allegiance to the ELF. The chairman met them personally in Kassala, Sudan, and was able to win the support of these soldiers to side with the ELF. The Kassala-based group together with the chairman drafted a

²³ Idris Osman Galadewos, interview by Günter Schröder, Khartoum, Sudan, 11 July 1988, transcript, RDC. This decisive meeting was held about two months after the meeting with the ELM.

²⁴ Idris Osman Galadewos, interview; Taha Mohammed Nur, interview.

²⁵ Osman Saleh Denden. "Ma'erakat Iritriyah, Al-Juzu Al-Awal," Trans. Abdela Kelifa. (Unpublished Manuscript, RDC, ND), chapter one.

plan of action. The soldiers agreed to take responsibility of certain tasks inside Eritrea. Among these were recruiting members, collecting ammunitions and undertaking reconnaissance in preparation for the armed struggle in Eritrea.²⁶ While doing so, they agreed to terminate their service in the Sudanese Army peacefully so as to avoid any problem with Sudan arising from deserting with their arms.²⁷

The second important development was the task of publicizing the Eritrean cause outside Eritrea. Idris Mohammed Adem, the chairman of the ELF, was chosen to carry out this tedious diplomatic task since he had a passport (later on a Somali diplomatic passport) through which he could travel around freely. According to Mohammed Adem Idris (also known as “Gezir”), this was “something [that] the [Cairo-based] students could not do, as most of them did not have a passport.”²⁸

Idris Mohammed Adem accompanied by *Sheikh* Ibrahim Sultan, an Eritrean veteran politician, set out their initial diplomatic activity to Saudi Arabia in December 1960. In Saudi Arabia they met King Saud bin Abdulaziz and the Crown Prince Faisal. But the Saudis told them to appeal to the UN for support. On this point, there emerged disagreement between the Eritrean delegates. Idris Mohammed Adem says: “Ibrahim Sultan thought we were ... [there] to solve our problem by peaceful ways but I supported the idea of armed struggle.”²⁹ Unable to reach a common understanding on this matter, both of them made their way back to Cairo.

Idris Mohammed Adem made a second visit to Saudi Arabia alone. There, he met Osman Saleh Sabbe, who later on played an important role in developing external support, both financial and material, for the cause of the Eritrean war of independence.³⁰ Sabbe was an Eritrean born into a Saho family in 1932 in Hirgigo, about 5kms southwest of Massawa near the Red Sea. In the early 1950s he attended the Teacher Training College in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. While he was in Addis Ababa, he established contacts with many Ethiopian Muslims who were unhappy with their situation in Ethiopia. During his stay he strived to establish a Muslim student association. After the completion of his studies, he returned to Hirgigo, where he

²⁶ Mohammed Adem Idris “Gezir”, interview,...27 March 1989.

²⁷ Idris Mohammed Adem, interview...

²⁸ Mohammed Adem Idris “Gezir”, interview,...27 March 1989.

²⁹ Idris Mohammed Adem, interview...

³⁰ Ibid.

worked as a teacher in the School of Kekiya from 1953-58. Sabbe was believed to have been an influential person in shaping the political consciousness of his students among whom some became leading revolutionary figures in the subsequent decades to come.³¹

Idris Mohammed Adem recalls that Sabbe had an organization called *Al Urwa Al Wutqa* (The Firm Bond) in Massawa, dedicated to the improvement of the Muslims living in Ethiopia and Eritrea. After having discussion with Sabbe, the latter agreed to work with the ELF. Together they proceeded to Somalia in late the 1960.³²

In Mogadishu, on the 20th December 1960, Idris Mohammed Adem submitted a memorandum which comprised of complaints from the Eritrean people against the Emperor of Ethiopia to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Somalia, Abdirashid Ali Shermarke.³³ He submitted six important requests to the government of Somalia as summarized below. Idris Mohammed Adem, on behalf of the Eritrean people, pleaded with the concerned authority to allow as well as enable them:

1. To open an Eritrean political office in Mogadishu through which... [they] can exercise... [their] political activities and serve the demand of the Eritrean problem, such as organizing communications...
2. To adopt the complaint of the Eritrean people against the Ethiopian Government [in world's conferences and the General Assembly of the U.N.]
3. To direct through Somalia's broadcasting station... [their] addresses to [the Eritrean] people in Arabic and Tigrinya even in secrecy [so as to challenge Ethiopia's propaganda and lift up the morale of the people]
4. To organize... efforts [of the Eritreans] with that of ...the Somali people so that... [both of them] can face ...[Ethiopia] as a united power when... [Eritreans] start active resistance (i.e. the use of force...).

³¹ Nationalist leaders such as Romadan Mohammed Nur, Alamin Mohammed Said and Ibrahim Affa who made considerable contribution towards the struggle of Eritrean Independence were some of his students at the Kekiya School in Hirgigo. Connell and Killion, 412-414.

³² Idris Mohammed Adem, interview...

³³ The Original memorandum of the complaint of the Eritrean People was submitted to the UN by a former member of the Federal Council, Mohammed Omar Qadi, in 1957. He prepared this petition in Cairo after he led a series of legal challenges, filling petitions with the Eritrean Supreme Court. It was basically a petition protesting policies leading to Eritrea's annexation. Convinced to return to Eritrea by Ethiopian Authorities, Mohammed Omer Qadi went back to Eritrea, where he was, thereafter, sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment. But he was released after the federation was officially abrogated. See Connell and Killion, 380-81.

5. To grant some of the Eritrean students... Somali passports to get advantage of the educational chances granted.
6. To admit some of Eritrean youth in Somali military force and build up an Eritrean division to be trained side by side with their Somali brothers so that they can be ready for the struggle in Eritrea at the proper time.³⁴

After a lapse of one month, Idris Mohammed Adem was granted the permission to open the first cover association in Somalia under the name *Eritro-Somalia Friendship Association*. Besides, the government of Somalia allowed Eritreans to hold Somali diplomatic passports for many years.³⁵ With the rest of the requests, no credible source of information is available.

The Eritro-Somalia Friendship Association (ESFS) was set up on the 1st of February 1961. The association comprised of seven members with Idris Mohammed Adem and Osman Saleh Sabbe as Chairman and as Vice-chairman respectively. The main task of the society was to publicize the Eritrean cause all over the world by preparing and distributing memorandums and journals.³⁶

The diplomatic work in the 1960 did not end in Somalia. Having appointed Sabbe as Liaison Officer of the ELF in Somalia, Idris Mohammed Adem continued his visit to the countries of the Middle East, such as, Kuwait, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Syria. Although the first three countries, they claim, were found to be sympathetic to Eritrean problem, Syria officially announced over its media that it would give its full support to Eritrea and also agreed to provide military training in the Syrian soil, as we shall see in the next chapter.³⁷

Preparation for the Armed Struggle

In preparation for the contemplated armed struggle, the Kassala-based group sought to meet the renowned Hamid Idris Awate and Syedna Mohammed Ibn Dawd, a revered Beni Amer religious scholar. For that purpose, Taher Salem and Mohammed Adem

³⁴ Idris Mohammed Adem to Abdirashid Ali Shermarke, Prime Minister of the Republic of Somalia, 20 December 1960, RDC.

³⁵ Idris Mohammed Adem, interview...; See also Idris Mohammed Adem to Abdirashid Ali Shermarke, Prime Minister of the Republic of Somalia, 22 January 1961, RDC.

³⁶ Osman Saleh Sabbe to the Ambassador of Yemen in Somalia, 28 October 1961, RDC.

³⁷ Idris Mohammed Adem, interview...

Idris “Gezir” took charge of establishing contact with the latter and went to Agordat, Eritrea, from Kassala. After presenting their case to Syedna Mohammed through his deputy they agreed to arrange a meeting to discuss the matter adequately.³⁸

Accordingly, a secret meeting was held in July 1960 in Felasab, near Ashier, situated in southwestern part of Eritrea. The meeting was attended by eight people mostly from Kassala.³⁹ Resentful of Ethiopia for abolishing the use of Arabic language in the Eritrean schools, Syedna Mohammed agreed to collaborate with the ELF in setting up a network of ELF cells within Eritrea. Syedna Mohamed started to travel to different places in the Gash-Barka region urging the people to accommodate ‘guests’. By guests, he was referring to the people who would be involved in the armed struggle. Furthermore, he created a network of communication cells by appointing several individuals in every sub-district. After laying the groundwork for the ELF, Syedna Mohammed arranged a large gathering in his village near Agordat, in which Hamid Idris Awate was present. The meeting was held under the cover of a religious congregation. According to Adem Mohammed Hamid “Gendifel”, the religious leader urged Awate “to declare a *Jihad* because the abolition of Arabic was also an attack on Islam and that the Muslims should fight for the divine right of the Muslims and Islam.”⁴⁰ Apparently Awate did not take this up. When he was continuing his fighting, he did not phrase the struggle in terms of *Jihad*.

Ethiopian authorities later on became aware of the meeting. Syedna Mohammed was put under house arrest in Agordat immediately after he had returned from the meeting. Since then he was subjected to continual Ethiopian harassment. Nevertheless, he continued to support the ELF through private means until he fled to Sudan.⁴¹

³⁸ Mohammed Adem Idris “Gezir”, interview, ...27 March 1989.

³⁹ Umer Damer, Mohammed Umer Abdela “Abu Tiyara”, Mahmud Mai Betot, Adem An-Nur Tita, and Abdela Gurjaj, Group interview by Günter Schröder, Kassala, Sudan, 25 March 1989, transcript, RDC. The people who attended in the meeting were five from Kassala, Sudan (namely, Mohammed Adem Idris “Gezir”, Adem An-Nur Tita, Adem Mohammed Hamid “Gendifel”, Alamin Karar, and Alamin Hassaballah) and three ex-Eritrean police from Tesseney, Eritrea (i.e. Mussa Mohammed Hashim, Umer Kelifa, and Abdurrahman Mohammed Osman).

⁴⁰ Adem Mohammed Hamid “Gendifel”, interview by Günter Schröder, Khartoum, Sudan, 07 January 1988, transcript, RDC. Although Awate did not protest the call, he expressed concern about the difficulties of obtaining the necessary weapons for launching an armed insurrection.

⁴¹ Ibid. Syedna Mohammed Ibn Dawd stayed in Kassala, Sudan, until he passed away in 1967. Though he saw the revolution for just few years he remained to be a crucial figure in the early development of the ELF.

Hamid Idris Awate and the Beginning of the Eritrean War of Independence

Although there is no complete account of the life of Hamid Idris Awate, it is imperative in this context to provide a brief biography. Hamid Idris Awate, popularly known by his surname Awate, was born into a Hafera clan of Tigre-speaking agriculturalists in Habereda, near Agordat in 1911.⁴² His mother, Hawa Shibul, was from the Nara ethno-linguistic group. In the early 1930s Awate joined the Italian colonial army as an *Ascari* at a time Italy was making extensive preparation for the invasion of Ethiopia. He took part in several battles, got wounded, and finally abandoned the Italian Army in the early 1941.⁴³ Hamid Idris Awate was a polyglot who mastered seven languages, namely Nara, Tigre, Tigrinya, Kunama, Hidareb, Arabic, Amharic and Italian.⁴⁴

After 1941, the relative peace and stability secured during Italian colonization in Eritrea suddenly shattered. Banditism became increasingly problematic.⁴⁵ At this stage, Awate joined a *shifita* band of Ali Muntaz. These *shifita* bands were like local militias who operated mostly in their own region. Because of the frequent lawlessness in the region they were engaged in border warfare mostly against the *shifita* bands of Wolqaiti of Tigray in northern Ethiopia and the Sudanese Hadendwa. Awate's prime concern was to protect the property and livestock of the Nara and the Beni Amer, with whom he was politically linked through his father's prior well-established relations.⁴⁶ Jordan describes Hamid Idris Awate and his band as "a 'poor people's army' with no external source of funds."⁴⁷ In a bid to secure arms, for instance, he ambushed a BMA police patrol, in 1948, in Haicota where he seized three rifles and 600 rounds of ammunition.⁴⁸ Awate and his band are also bitterly remembered by certain groups of the Kunama for looting and attacking Kunama villages. Among many other raids, in June 1948, for instance, Awate and his fellow *shifitas* brutally attacked a village called

⁴² Connell and Killion, 288.

⁴³ Haile Selassie Weldu, "Hatsir Tarikh Hamid Idris Awate" [Short History of Hamid Idris Awate] (Unpublished Manuscript, Voice of the Masses, December 10, 1989), 06993, RDC, 1-2.

⁴⁴ Haile Selassie, 1.

⁴⁵ Alexander Naty, "Environment, Society and the State in South-western Eritrea," Bergen: Chr. Michelson Institute, (Working Paper 12), 2-3, <http://www.ehrea.org/WP2000.pdf> (accessed 29 July 2014).

⁴⁶ Jordan, 156-157; See also Haile Selassie.

⁴⁷ Jordan, 157.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Tanina in which four people were killed, while virtually the entire village was burned to ashes, and about 70 cattle were looted.⁴⁹ Such brutality in fact makes Awate a highly rejected and deeply controversial figure among the Kunama.⁵⁰

Towards the end of 1940s *shifita* attacks in general were in full bloom. The incidences rose to an average of 130 per month.⁵¹ The number of *shifita* gangs operating by 1950 was also estimated to about 2000.⁵² With the increasing number of bandits the British Administration established an anti-*shifita* police unit but to little avail.⁵³ Finally, on 16th of June 1951, the British Administration declared a general amnesty to surrender *shifita*. In effect, more than 1300 *shifita* surrendered. Hamid Idris Awate, however, refused to accept the proclaimed *shifita* amnesty and the story was announced in the headline of the *Eritrean Weekly News* issued on 16th of August. The repudiation of Awate was not taken lightly by the authorities of the BMA. Colonel Cracknell, Chief of Police, approached Awate in person in the western lowlands in order to negotiate his surrender. After ten days of intensive negotiations, Awate, agreed to surrender along with some of his followers.⁵⁴ The British-sponsored *shifita* amnesty seemed to have brought an end to the large-scale banditism in Eritrea.

According to police reports, Hamid Idris Awate was thereafter given six rifles, probably following his request to the Chief of Police, to guard his region against banditism. With a corresponding increase in unemployment and frustration with Ethiopian political policies, banditism recurred once again in the mid-1950s. Alarmed by this, Awate, on the 1st of March 1956, submitted a petition to the Department of Interior in Asmara with a proposal to recruit a volunteer guard of armed peasants to be under his command.⁵⁵ The Senior Divisional Officer (S.D.O.) of the Agordat Division, Ali Mohammed Nur Mehri, made an inquiry on the views of the Divisional Officers (D.O.) of Tesseney and Barentu on the case in point.

On 28th of March 1956, the D.O. of Tesseney, Hedad Kerar, responded with the following comment:

⁴⁹ Drawn from Alemseged, *Aynefelale ...*, 290-93; see also Alexander; Connel and Killion, 288-89.

⁵⁰ See notes of Alexander, 22.

⁵¹ Connell and Killion, 470-71.

⁵² *Ibid.*; see also Jordan, 146.

⁵³ Jordan, 135-136; Connell and Killion, 470.

⁵⁴ *Eritrean Weekly News*, 16 August 1951.

⁵⁵ Abdella Sayd Mussa, "Minutes of Meeting [between the security authorities and the residents of Haicota, Barentu, Cheru and Awhe]," April 9-14, 1962. 006807, RDC, Appendix 1.

Hamid Idris Awate is an ex-bandit who surrendered in 1951; he was given six rifles... that he would guard the area he lives at against banditism. Unfortunately, nothing is recorded in his credit so far.

He is a type [of person] who lives in past glory, the glory of banditism and the killing of unarmed peaceful peasants. He looks at himself as unparalleled hero and likes to show off and flattering.

His good proposal for the recruitment of volunteer armed peasant to suppress banditism is a matter which I believe is under study by the S.D.O. and if adopted would be great factor in lessening bandit activities.

Regarding his request to be on the head of the contemplated anti-bandit recruits, I do not recommend him for the simple justification that during his *shifita* career he was the patron of Baria [*sic* Nara] and dead merciless enemy of Cunama the fact that he developed an indelible lifelong enmity between these two [ethno-linguistic groups].

I suggest that Hamid Idris Awate be reminded that the rifles now in his charge are given to him for the sole purpose of chasing bandits and not as honorary merit.⁵⁶

On the other hand, the D.O. of Barentu, Abdu Ahmed, endorsed the petition by Awate and approvingly stated that the region was threatened by “armed Christian bandits who frequently came from the Ethiopian border.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, for unclear reasons, Awate’s petition was not granted.

After half a decade, the case of Hamid Idris Awate was reopened in July 1961. Following rumour regarding Hamid Idris Awate’s intention to resume ‘banditry’, the S.D.O. of Agordat passed an order to bring Awate from Firsit.⁵⁸ At first, Awate, fearing arrest, refused to comply with the police orders. It should be noted that this event came about shortly after the crucial meeting conducted by Syedna Mohammed Ibn Dawd in his village near Agordat, where he urged Awate to wage a *Jihad* against Ethiopia. In a document labelled “secret” written on 8th of September 1961, the D.O. of Tesseneay gave some useful information regarding the situation of Awate just before he resorted to take up arms and launch an insurrection against the government. The D.O. of Tesseneay noted that:

⁵⁶ Ibid., Appendix 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid, Appendix 4.

⁵⁸ “Eritrea: The Western provinces (Top Secret),” Report 577 (22 August 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

I have been requested by Supt. [*sic* Superintendent] of Police Agordat to approach Hamid Idris Awate and to inform him that Compol [i.e., Commissioner Police] wishes to see him and to discuss about his previous applications. A message was sent to Hamid to fix a date and place to meet me but Hamid refused alleging that he was busy on ploughing and did not want to abandon his cultivation. Again Sheikh Khat Gullui was sent to him in order to convince Hamid that the meeting was for his own benefit and he then agreed and fixed to meet me at Gherset Police post on 31st July 1961.

On the fixed date I have proceeded to Gherset Police p. [*sic* post] and met Hamid and explained to him of what the Supt. said i.e., that his previous petitions to the Government were taken into consideration and therefore they want [*sic* want] to discuss with him in detail about new organizations and their implementations which are all in his favour, but Hamid did not believe of what I have explained to him and was in a very fearful condition, though I have tried to convince him that nothing was against him, but he spoke continually of the Nazirs in terms of contempt and also he said that he knows the police are against him and they are intending to arrest him and I then requested him to wait me in Gherset for 3 days in order to refer this to the S.D.O. and Supt. of Police and I did so.

He was frightened as it was framed in his mind that the police might arrest him for Nazirs reasons and expressed that he has nothing to do with the bandits and nor he has intention to join them.

On 2/8/61 [i.e., 2nd of August 1961] the S.D.O. arrived Tessenei and we proceeded to Gherset where the S.D.O. interviewed Hamid and discussed with him alone.⁵⁹

The D.O. Officers “explained to him [i.e., Awate] that the government holds no grudges against him, and urged him to try his best and help with the capture of the gang which was acting in the vicinity of the town.”⁶⁰ Indeed, during this time there were numerous *shifita* operating around the Gash Barka region. In order to forestall banditism, the Government even proclaimed an anti-bandit decree on August 10, 1961, in which anyone suspected of banditry, would be subjected to imprisonment and confiscation of properties owned by him and his relatives.⁶¹ However, the request of the D.O. Officers was based on the assumption that Awate must have induced the

⁵⁹ Abdella Sayd Mussa, “Minutes of Meeting...,” Appendix, 6.

⁶⁰ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces (Top Secret),” Report 577 (22 August 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁶¹ *Zemen*, 10 August 1961.

activities of those *shifita* roaming around Tesseney.⁶² Thus, the daily movement of Awate became under strict and regular surveillance of government security agents.

On 18th of August 1961, Hamid Idris Awate wrote a letter to an anonymous person which was later discovered by police forces in the village of Faddin, near Cheru. When this became known to Ethiopian authorities lots of people in the vicinity of Cheru were arrested. Being perhaps the only available document ever acquired from Hamid Idris Awate, the letter gives insightful information as to when and why Awate decided to take the field. The report, from which the letter shown below was obtained, provides no addressee but considering the importance of it, it is here presented in its entirety.

...We are in good health, and hope the same for you. I wish to inform you that our country Eritrea is oppressed. Our flag was lowered and the Ethiopian flag was hoisted instead. Our lands were granted to foreigners, while the population of the country was left poor. Moreover, our mosques were ruined while new churches have been built. I made up my mind together with the whole population of Eritrea to unite and demand our rights. Please, if possible transfer my complaint to Mr. Ali and Jamal. I belong to the Khatmia faith.

Hamid Awate

7 Rabii El Awal 1381 (18.8.1961)⁶³

Being so suspicious of police intentions towards him and conditioned by the contemporary political upheaval, Awate eventually made up his mind to take up arms and initiate armed struggle, leaving his families and possessions behind and going to the mountains. Carrying a few old rifles, he set up a unit consisting of sixteen people including himself and his nephew under his command.⁶⁴ On September 1, they attacked an isolated police station in Mount Adal, between Agordat and Tesseney. The initial battle lasted for nearly seven hours, despite the fact that Awate and his band were barely armed.⁶⁵ On September 3, the news about Awate's rebellion was reported to the authorities, after Awate and his followers attacked a shop at

⁶² "Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Highway Robbers (Top Secret)," Report 569 (21 August 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁶³ "Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Miscellaneous (Top Secret)," Report 736 (16 December 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁶⁴ Umer Damer, Group interview, ...25 March 1989, transcript, RDC.

⁶⁵ Michael H. Woldemariam, "Why Rebels Collide: Factionalism and Fragmentation in African Insurgencies" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011), 97.

Hadamdame area. The shop belonged to *Sheikh* Adem Suleiman Dighe, a member of the Eritrean Assembly and close friend of Hamed Faraj, the President of the Eritrean Assembly, whom Awate regarded as pro-unionists and “traitors”.⁶⁶ According to police records, their number was estimated at 28 persons who were barely armed with old and obsolete Mannlicher-Carcano and Albini-Braendlin type of infantry rifles.⁶⁷

The news about Awate was not made public until 26th of September 1961, i.e. until a headline story on the government newspaper *Zemen* announced that Hamid Idris Awate resumed his bandit career.⁶⁸ This was perhaps the first time for Hamid Idris Awate to appear in newspapers after a decade of silence since the British-sponsored *shifita* amnesty of 1951. But this time Awate rebelled for a special political reason, i.e., to liberate Eritrea. As the news spread over the country, Awate’s popularity among the inhabitants of the region increased considerably in quite short period of time. In this regard, an Ethiopian Intelligence report noted that “[g]enerally speaking, the Moslem population of Eritrea has wholeheartedly welcomed the ‘*shifita*’ activity, in their belief that such an activity will bring back to them their ‘dignity and rights’ overlooked by the present rulers of the country.”⁶⁹

Alarmed by this news, government authorities proceeded to pursue the following official measures. Firstly, they increased the security measures in the vicinity of Tesseney. Secondly, relatives and close friends of Awate and his followers, including people who were suspected of extending assistance to Awate were imprisoned by local Police forces. Thirdly, small villages⁷⁰ as well as shop owners living in remote areas were ordered to move on to places controlled by the Police forces, so as to forestall people from accommodating and helping Awate and his men.⁷¹

⁶⁶ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – “Shifita” Activities (Top Secret),” Report 615 (12 September 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁶⁷ Abdella Sayd Mussa, “Minutes of Meeting...,” Appendix, 6.

⁶⁸ *Zemen*, 26 September 1961.

⁶⁹ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Political Ramifications of “Shifita” Problems (Top Secret),” Report 629 (25 September 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁷⁰ For instance, on 14th April 1962, Ahmed Hassano, S.D.O. Agordat Division passed an order for the complete evacuation of small villages such as Eshetik, Shashmo, Abdellela, and Hinjerai and to be amalgamated to Dembe within three days. See Abdella Sayd Mussa, “Minutes of Meeting...,” 18.

⁷¹ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – “Shifita” Problem (Top Secret),” Report 618 (13 September 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.



Figure 2. Hamid Idris Awate

Source: Eritrean Liberation Front /14/100, RDC.

Hamid Idris Awate, nevertheless, went ahead in fighting for the implementation of two crucial conditions: the reinstatement of the Eritrean flag and the restitution of the lands to their rightful owners.⁷² To demonstrate this, for instance, on September 10, 1961, Awate along with some eleven armed men compelled an Italian named Avesan Silvio, a tenant of a farm and owner of the Savoya Hotel in Agordat, to leave the concession in the Gurguji area, Barentu District. The farm belonged to Melake-Selam Dimetros, Vice-President of the Eritrean Assembly. Awate demanded that Silvio should abandon his farm within three days. Silvio insisted on paying money so as to remain in the farm, but Awate refused stating that their intention was not to rob money but to bring back the Eritrean flag and nullify the vast concession given to foreigners. He added that his group was known as ‘the Secret National Army of Liberation’ whose mission was to liberate Eritrea. Silvio then begged for a fortnight delay, which was granted by Awate. The latter ordered Silvio to tell all foreigners who owned land in the Gash and Barka area to leave immediately, or to expect bloody

⁷² “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Hamid Idris Awate: Shifta Activity (Top Secret),” Report 638 (4 October 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

reprisals. Returning to his home without being hurt, Silvio contacted Omer Mohammed Hassano, the Secretary of Law and Justice to the Eritrean Government, informing him of the aforementioned facts. The Secretary of Justice promised Silvio to come to Agordat in order to meet Awate and talk with the latter.⁷³

Preoccupied by these spontaneous but serious developments, Omer Mohammed Hassano was entrusted, following his own request, with a mission to approach Awate individually and reach an agreement. In fact, the appointment of Omer Mohammed Hassano as conciliator was not appreciated by some Assembly members and traditional leaders of the Beni Amer since he did not belong to them. As a result he had to face a wide-spread hostility and ill-will as many wished for his failure.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, he set out on his mission first by going to Agordat and then to Barentu on September 12, 1961. Finally, the Secretary of Law and Justice managed to hold a private meeting with Awate on the 20th of September at a mountain called Koteib, but to no avail.⁷⁵ Following this, the Eritrean Chief Executive⁷⁶, again attempted to entrust with the same mission to *Sheikh* Hamed Faraj, the President of the Eritrean Assembly. Nevertheless, the latter refused to carry out the mission, alleging that such an undertaking would endanger his life.⁷⁷

Ethiopian authorities viewed the rebels as “*Shifita*” or “*gang of highway robbers*”, whereas Awate and his followers labelled themselves as *The Army of Liberation*. They were often moving from place to place, flying the old Eritrean flag. One month after the start of the rebellion, Awate’s reputation among the general population grew remarkably. One official report witnesses that: “Awate wants to be considered by Eritreans not as a mere ‘*Shifita*’, but as the ‘Liberator of the Homeland’. In fact Awate has grown to be considered as a national hero, who has sacrificed everything to fight

⁷³ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – The “Shifita” Activities (Top Secret),” Report 622 (21 September 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC. See also “Eritrea: Shifita Activity (Top Secret),” Report 639 (5 October 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC; Abdella Sayd Mussa, “Minutes of Meeting...” 2.

⁷⁴ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Political Ramifications of “Shifita” Problems (Top Secret),” Report 629 (25 September 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁷⁵ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Hamid ...,” Report 638 (4 October 1961).

⁷⁶ Asfaha Woldemichael was the second Eritrean Chief Executive who held office from 1955 until Eritrea’s annexation in 1962. He was an ardent Unionist and the key figure in sabotaging the Ethio-Eritrean Federation.

⁷⁷ “Eritrea: The Shifita Problem – Official Steps (Top Secret),” Report 641 (5 October 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

for the freedom of his people, i.e., Eritrea.”⁷⁸ It was also reported that Awate was urging all Eritreans, Moslems as well as Christians, to join him in the national movement aimed at the liberation of Eritrea.⁷⁹

In the face of growing popularity of Awate, on September 24, 1961 the Secretary of Interior to the Eritrean Government urged all government officials in charge of the Western districts to put an end to the activities of this violent nascent nationalist movement, and threatening them should they fail to act accordingly. Prominent personalities such as the President of the Eritrean Assembly, the Secretary of Law and Justice to the Eritrean Government, the District Officer, as well as the District Commander were present.⁸⁰

A military conflict ensued. On September 26, 1961, the newspaper *Zemen* announced that Hamid Idris Awate clashed with police forces, in which one of his followers named Bereg Norai was captured and an Italian rifle with 14 cartridges and two swords were also seized by the police. After being interrogated, Bereg Norai claimed that they were fighting “for the sake of the Eritrean flag and for their homeland.”⁸¹ Among the early followers of Awate, Bereg Norai was the first to be taken captive by Ethiopian forces. The following battle, which was the third occurrence, happened almost after a lapse of one month. On October 24, 1961 the police forces clashed with Awate’s band somewhere around Cheru and consequently one of Awate’s relatives, Abdu Mohammed Faid, was captured and died of his injuries while on the way to Cheru. Thus, Abdu Mohammed Faid happens to be the first casualty among the nationalists since the armed struggle was launched.⁸²

On the morning of 29 October 1961, around 4:45 a.m. in Asmara a group of five people armed with firearms and explosive lethal weapons attempted to assassinate Melake-Selam Dimetros Ghebremariam, Vice-President of the Eritrean Assembly.

⁷⁸ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Hamid ...,” Report 638 (4 October 1961).

⁷⁹ “Eritrea: The Shifta Problem (Top Secret),” Report 650 (11 October 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁸⁰ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces: The Shifta Problem (Top Secret),” Report 660 (17 October 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁸¹ *Zemen*, 29 September 1961; See also “Eritrea: The Western Provinces: The Shifta Problem (Top Secret),” Report 656 (16 October 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁸² *Zemen*, 26 October 1961.

During the course of the commission two hand grenades were exploded.⁸³ Dimetros survived the incident somehow unscathed. One of the assailants, Gebremedhin Hailu, died from wounds inflicted by the bodyguards of Dimetros. Nevertheless, such act was seriously taken and it was thought to have been perpetrated, according to Ethiopian Intelligence reports, to achieve “the complete and final elimination, from the local political spheres, of one of the fiercest leaders of the Unionist Party, i.e. Dimetros,” and this one was regarded as “nothing but the ‘inaugural act’ of the total elimination of the Unionist leaders.”⁸⁴ The report pointed out that the general feeling of the Muslim population and some Christians was one of disappointment by the failure of the mission, although they were greatly impressed by the attempt.⁸⁵

On Sunday, 3 December 1961, Hamid Idris Awate accompanied by some twenty-five persons attacked and destroyed a farm in the Gurguji area, Barentu District, which belonged to a Greek tenant named Autimio. They cut down the banana trees and also ordered the labourers to do so. They burned a tractor, water pumps and several huts, an action that took them about an hour.⁸⁶ The original concessioner of the farm was in fact Melake-Selam Dimetros. Afterwards, Awate gathered the labourers in the farm, and by “pointing to the Eritrean flag, he told them that he and his people will give their lives in order to defend the flag. He added in the near future, more severe measures will be taken.”⁸⁷ A police force arrived on the spot and clashed with Awate’s group. As a result one policeman died and four injured, while one from Awate’s band called Mohammed Era Mussa, a Beni Amir from Adi Ibrahim village, was put under arrest along with his Albini-Braendlin rifle and 45 rounds of ammunition.⁸⁸ Mohammed Era Mussa was convicted and sentenced to death. In the final verdict of his court case passed on September 21, 1962, Mohammed Era Mussa gave a statement that Hamid Idris Awate proceeded to take action against the farm

⁸³ “Eritrea: Charges against those who attempted against Dimetros’s life (Top Secret),” Report 734 (9 December 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC. See also *Zemen*, 1st November, 1961.

⁸⁴ “Eritrea: Asmara – The failed attempt against M.S. Dimetros: Causes and Consequences (Top Secret),” Report 678 (31 October 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁸⁵ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Miscellaneous (Top Secret),” Report 718 (23 November 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁸⁶ The total devastation inflicted on the farm was estimated to Ethiopian Birr 37.955.25. See Eritrean Popular Police Force, “YAertra Ras Gez Hzbawi Police Tarik k 1882 Eske 1982” [History of the Eritrean Popular Police Force from 1890 to 1990], unpublished manuscript, April 1991, archives of the Eritrean Police Forces, Asmara, 34-39.

⁸⁷ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces...,” Report 736 (16 December 1961).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*; see also *Zemen*, 6 December 1961.

owner after the latter failed to comply with the ultimatum given by Awate to abandon the farm to its rightful owners three months ago.⁸⁹

On December 15 and 22, 1961 Awate and his groups cut the telephone line in Haicota and Cheru respectively. One of his early followers, Adem Mohammed Hamid “Gendifel”, recalls to have taken the wires to Kassala in order to sell in return for ammunition.⁹⁰ The Police later on discovered a slip of paper near the telephone poles, which reads as follows:

Down with Imperialism
Down with Hamid Faraj [i.e. the then President of the Eritrean Assembly]
Long Live ... the Liberation Front
Life or Death.⁹¹

In the succeeding two encounters, however, the guerrillas suffered heavy casualties. On 24 December 1961, a bunch of fighters clashed with the police who were chasing them in a place called Shllul in the Agordat district. As a result, one of the Awate’s followers, Omer Hamid, Ali Karay, who was reportedly leading a platoon comprising 7-12 people, was captured after suffering severe wounds. The police seized one Mannlicher-Carcano rifle with 38 rounds of ammo.⁹² The next one, which was the fifth in line, happened on the 9th of January 1962. Police forces from the capital accompanied by the commander of the police in Agordat encountered the guerrilla group led by Awate in Awaha Al-Gedam in the Cheru district. The police killed one and captured three while they lost the commander of Agordat police station. Awate too had suffered various injuries although he managed to escape along with the rest of the group.⁹³ During the succeeding couple of months Awate stayed away from combat against the police. This was probably the result of the wounds he had before and

⁸⁹ Eritrean Popular Police Force, “YAertra Ras Gez Hzbawi Police...”

⁹⁰ Adem Mohammed Hamid “Gendifel”, interview, ...07 January 1988.

⁹¹ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Miscellaneous (Top Secret),” Report 4 (5 January 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC.

⁹² *Zemen*, 30 December 1961.

⁹³ *Zemen*, 11 January 1962; *Zemen*, 19 January 1962; See also “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Miscellaneous (Top Secret),” Report 33 (12 February 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC.

partly because of the month of Ramadan which was observed between February 6th and March 8th, 1962.⁹⁴

At this time, Awate's guerrilla movement reached a point where they could no longer be crushed by the Police. Awate managed to win considerable popularity among the population of the region.⁹⁵ Confronted with this unpleasant reality, Police authorities resorted to arrest inhabitants of the region for no other reason than family ties and relationships. The anti-banditry Act promulgated in August 1961 was applied in order to realize these intentions. Accordingly, close relatives of Hamid Idris Awate and his followers were subjected to at least six months of incarceration. Moreover, following an order issued by the Tesseney District Court Awate's cattle was confiscated.⁹⁶

Furthermore, from 9-14 April 1962, an extensive public awareness campaign against the activities of Hamid Idris Awate was carried out by Government authorities such as the S.D.O of Agordat, Ahmed Hassano, Superintendent of Police, Major Goitom Ghebrezghi, and the D.O. of Tesseney by gathering hundreds of people in Haicota, Barentu, Cheru, and Awhe. The authorities warned the people that anyone found rendering assistance to Awate, be it materially or morally, or withholding information concerning his movement, would be subjected to imprisonment for six months.⁹⁷

Hamid Idris Awate had established connections with the Eritrean members in the SDF. He demanded that this group should participate in the armed struggle, bringing rifles and ammunitions from Sudan. As they were aware of the developments inside Eritrea they finally resigned from the SDF in order to join Awate. On February 1962, a group of fourteen people led by Adem Mohammed Hamid "Gendifel" united with Awate's band, marking the first group to join Hamid Idris Awate from the SDF. This was followed by another wave of participants headed by Seid Hussein, one of the founding members of the ELF in Cairo.⁹⁸ The participation of these former SDF

⁹⁴ It was later reported that Hamid Idris Awate spent the month of Ramadan in a place called Mai Shekli. See "Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Miscellaneous (Top Secret)," Report 104 (13 April 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC.

⁹⁵ "Eritrea: The Western Provinces (Top Secret)," Report 681 (31 October 1961), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/02, RDC.

⁹⁶ A total of 18 head of Camel, 47 head of cattle and 56 head of goats and sheep that belonged to Awate were sold on auction. Abdella Sayd Mussa, "Minutes of Meeting..." Appendix, 8-9.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-18.

⁹⁸ Adem Mohammed Hamid "Gendifel", interview, ...07 January 1988. According to him, the first group comprised of Mohammed Idris Haj, Mohammed Umer Abdela "Abu Tiyyara", Umer Damer, Mohammed Idris Badurai, Jime Adem, Abu Rejjala, Osman Congo, Osman Saleh, Mohammed Mai

soldiers, who had, for quite a long time, military experience and discipline, was an important asset that contributed so much to the sustainability of the armed struggle. Their presence added not only numerical change but also brought qualitative transformation to the group. They brought with them their uniforms and some supplies. Elated by their commitment, Awate urged them to “try to become an undying flame of the revolution and if that flame dies it would not be easy to reignite it in a short period of time.”⁹⁹

In April 4, 1962 Police forces for the seventh time encountered Awate’s bands in Bitama in the district of Tesseney. As a result one police man and two members from Awate’s group were killed. Awate was seen carrying a radio set leading the group which numbered about 35 men; all clad in military uniform and some carrying first aid kits.¹⁰⁰

According to Ethiopian Intelligence reports, Awate followed a stratagem of “scattering his men whenever the police force was on the verge of taking any drastic steps.”¹⁰¹ For the sake of organizational convenience, he split up the band into three different small elusive groups who would circulate around the major towns such as Haicota, Agordat and Keren and whose aim was to smuggle the required arms and ammunitions as well as to conduct subversive activities. Hamid Idris Awate did not live long after the battle of Bitama. He fell ill and died a natural death in April 18, 1962.¹⁰² He was considered to have died prematurely by those who were committed to pursuing his footsteps. Realizing the potential negative effects of Awate’s death on the nascent Eritrean armed struggle, his followers swore on the Koran to keep the matter secret and agreed to inform people, if they insisted on knowing his whereabouts, that Awate was abroad for political activities.¹⁰³

Betot, Hamid Ibrahim Tombur, Abu Sheneb, Umer Ezaz, Abdalla Ajak, and Adem Hamed. Awate then appointed Mohammed Idris Haj as a vice-commander. See Umer Damer, ... Group interview, ... 25 March 1989, transcript, RDC.

⁹⁹ Awet Tewelde Weldemichael, “The Eritrean and East Timorese Liberation Movements: Toward a Comparative Study of their Grand Strategies” (PhD diss., University of California, 1998), 171.

¹⁰⁰ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – The National Front of Liberation (Top Secret),” Report 116 (4 May 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC; See also *Zemen*, 7 April 1962. The two nationalists who died were Ali Delab and Ibrahim Ahmed Humed. One rifle with some 37 rounds of ammunition was found in the latter’s possession.

¹⁰¹ “Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Miscellaneous (Top Secret),” Report 122 (10 May 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC.

¹⁰² Drawn from Osman, “Ma’erakat Iritriyah...,” chapter one.

¹⁰³ Mohammed Umer Abdela “Abu Tiyara”, interview, ... 23 March 1989.

Subversive activities gained momentum in 1962 when on the 29th of April a group of five men (2 Moslems and 3 Christians)¹⁰⁴ conducted an armed attack on guards who were posted at the cashier's office of the Keren Administration. The assailants managed to escape, though they were later caught. On the next day, while searching for the perpetrators, police forces found out that the old Eritrean flag had been hoisted over the school building.¹⁰⁵ The Keren incident caused a great deal of sensation among people in the governmental circles because the incident proved that subversive activities were already underway in the cities.¹⁰⁶ Ethiopian intelligence report showed that toward the end of 1962, the size of the Eritrean fighters was "steadily increasing." The guerrillas were moving around:

"the region of Agordat, Keren, and the Coast. They appear[ed] in small groups, in order not to draw the attention of the police...[they were] carrying the Eritrean flag. They [were] all fully armed and equipped with radio transmitters, watches, field binoculars and tinned food.

The police forces seem to be practically unable to check the *shifita* [the Awate-led movement]. In an exchange of fire between the police ... [and the rebels] who laid an ambush in Blue Maria region, four policemen were killed and a fifth seriously injured."¹⁰⁷

The Agordat Operation

In July 1962, higher government officials led by Emperor Haile Selassie's personal representative in Eritrea, Lieutenant-General Abiye Abebe, as well as the Chief Executive of the Eritrean Government, Asfaha Weldemichael, and other Government authorities set out an extensive tour of the western lowlands of Eritrea. During their visit to Agordat on July 12, 1962, a meeting, which was attended by hundreds of people, was disrupted by a bomb explosion perpetrated by the insurgents.

According to the official government reports and newspaper, two hand grenades were thrown although only one blew up. The explosion killed eight people including Omer Mohammed Hassano, the Secretary of Law and Justice to the Eritrean Government

¹⁰⁴ To the author's knowledge, there is no available information regarding organizational affiliation of these five people.

¹⁰⁵ "Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Subversive Activities (Top Secret)," Report 128 (15 May 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC.

¹⁰⁶ "Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Subversive Activities (Top Secret)," Report 139 (24 May 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC.

¹⁰⁷ "Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Miscellaneous (Top Secret)," Report 227 (30 October 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC.

and *Sheikh* Saleh Mustofa, a religious scholar in the Barka region. About ninety-two people including some officials, namely Hamid Faraj (the President of the Eritrean Assembly), Qumlachew Belete (Assistant to the Imperial representative in Eritrea), Melake-Selam Dimetros, Vice-President of the Eritrean Assembly and both Chief Administrators of Keren and Agordat towns were also wounded. The perpetrators, nevertheless, were later on caught by the police and one of them was found to be the nephew of the victimized Secretary of Law and Justice to the Eritrean Government.¹⁰⁸ The incident was covered in international newspapers such as *The Times*.¹⁰⁹

The weapons used in this incident were acquired by Adem Melekin, one of the ELM members in Asmara who favoured armed resistance as the solution to the Eritrean problem even when the very organization he belonged failed to do so. During the months of May and June 1962, Adem Melekin travelled to Ethiopia and contacted associates to acquire weapons. He finally took the daring step of transporting two firearms, 25 hand grenades, 1000 rounds of ammo, and other equipment from Addis Ababa to Asmara. He managed to deliver all of it to the members of the ELF clandestine cells in Keren where it was used for a subversive operation carried out in Agordat. When this became known to Ethiopian security officials Adem Melekin was arrested in June 22, 1962. He stayed in prison for several months until the court set him free on lack of evidence in 1963. Thereafter he fled to Cairo where he lived for the next three decades.¹¹⁰

The Abrogation of the Federation and Its Aftermath

As it was described in the preceding chapter the Ethiopian Government was gradually dismantling the elements of the Federal Act one after another in spite of the fact that the Federation was supposed to remain intact in accordance with the UN resolution.

¹⁰⁸ “Regarding the two bombs thrown in Agordat, 12 July 1962 (Top Secret),” (20 July 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence/36/01, RDC. See also *Zemen*, 13 July 1962; *Zemen*, 14 July 1962; *Zemen*, 17 July 1962. Abdurrahman Mohammed Musa (ex-police) and Mohammed El-Hassan Hasseno (nephew of Omer Mohammed Hassano) were found to be responsible for the two hand grenade thrown in the gathering. On June 30, 1962, after a lapse of one year, the former was convicted to death while the latter was sentenced to imprisonment for twenty years since the bomb he threw did not explode. See *Hbret*, 3 August, 1963.

¹⁰⁹ *The Times*, 14 July 1962; *The Times*, 26 July 1962.

¹¹⁰ Drawn from Saleh Gadi, “Adem Melekin: A Brick in the Foundation of Eritrea,” http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/article_4061.shtml (last accessed September 25, 2009); see also Mohammed Umer Abdela “Abu Tiyara”, interview,... 23 March 1989.

Anze Matienzo, the then UN Commissioner for Eritrea clearly stated that it was only the General Assembly of the UN that was responsible for making any alterations in the Federal Act. However, if violated, he quoted, “the General Assembly could be seized of the matter.”¹¹¹ But with the removal of some symbols of a distinct Eritrean political identity – the official flag, insignia, languages etc – through the 1960 the federation continued to exist in name only for the next couple of years. On November 14, 1962 the building of the Eritrean Administration was surrounded by a considerable number of Ethiopian troops and the Eritrean Assembly members were made to convene under duress. Before this fateful day, four sessions, due to lack of quorum, were postponed. Some Assembly members, who were aware of Ethiopia’s plan to terminate Eritrea’s federal status, preferred to stay at home. But this time Assembly members gathered for the November 14 session after many of them were dragged from their homes.¹¹² Under these circumstances, the Chief Executive read a written document in Amharic that said: “The statement that I am going to read to you is the final issue of the Eritrean case, and there is nothing you can do other than accepting it as it is. We have rendered the Federation null and void. We are henceforth completely united with our motherland.”¹¹³ It was announced in the *Zemen* newspaper that the Assembly members “voted unanimously” to abolish the federation.¹¹⁴ But the truth is that Assembly members were not given the opportunity to exercise actual vote to determine whether or not the Federal status of Eritrea should be terminated.¹¹⁵ The decision to dissolve the federation was prepared from above with maximum secrecy, and it was implemented under a macabre military show of force by the Ethiopian forces in Asmara, the capital. One of the young Ethiopian military officers in Asmara at the time, Dawit Wolde Giorghis, gives an eye witness account of the massive military show of force exercised by his unit and others during the week the Assembly was scheduled to convene. Dawit recounts:

One week before the vote my battalion, the 34th, was ordered to march through the city and to camp outside until four days after the vote. I co-commanded one of the companies that ringed Asmara during that time. It was clear from our orders that we were there in case of any trouble from the Assembly or the people. In addition to our battalion, the entire police force, the air force and a detachment of infantry from

¹¹¹ “Final Report to the United Nations Commissioner to Eritrea,” In *General Assembly, Official Records: Seventh Session, Supplement Number 15 (A/2188)* (New York, 1952), 19-20, Para. 201.

¹¹² Anwar, 139-145.

¹¹³ Tekie, 46.

¹¹⁴ *Zemen*, 15 November 1962.

¹¹⁵ Tekie, 46-47; See also Anwar, 144.

another part of Ethiopia were all on hand, making their presence felt by marching through the streets and gradually being as visible as possible.¹¹⁶

In this manner, the federal status of Eritrea was terminated and Eritrea became a province of Ethiopia. The reaction of the inhabitants particularly the politically conscious Eritrean population was generally a feeling of dismay and anger.¹¹⁷ The UN, the supposedly guarantor of the provisions of the Federal Act, chose not to object. The US was aware of such violation of UN Resolution 390 A (V), but for the sake of their own strategic interest in Ethiopia they preferred to remain passive.¹¹⁸ On 21 November 1962, the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, in his telegram to the US embassy in Ethiopia stated that although the US realized that there were “factors relating nation’s security which bear on Ethiopian policy toward Eritrea” the decision pursued by the Ethiopian Government to dissolve the federation had “placed the US in [a] difficult position. While USG [United States Government] wishes [to] give full support measures designed [to] increase security of Ethiopia, Eritrean federation was action supported by US in UN, action which, at [that] time, was considered favourable to Ethiopia.”¹¹⁹ Rusk instructed the US ambassador to inform Haile Selassie that the United States found it inappropriate to officially “commend Ethiopia on [the] dissolution of federation or participate in formal observances of event, in view [of the] history [of the] federation and [the] general interest [of the] international community...”¹²⁰

The United States-Ethiopian strategic relationship was entrenched through the establishment of the U.S. Army communications station “Radio Marina” in Asmara, which was used as a communication centre for the Indian Ocean. As it was indicated in the previous chapter, the US took over this military base, which had formerly served as Italian naval radio station, as early as the 1940s. It survived during the war years and its strategic importance in the late 1940s became a decisive factor in the growth of US assistance for Ethiopia.¹²¹ Earlier on May 22, 1953, both countries

¹¹⁶ Dawit Wolde Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1989), 80-81.

¹¹⁷ See a cited assessment on how Eritreans felt about the termination of Eritrea’s federal status by an American Consul in Tekie, 47.

¹¹⁸ Tekie, 47-48.

¹¹⁹ “Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Ethiopia,” Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963 Volume XXI, Africa, Document 282, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v21/d282> (accessed 30 April 2014).

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Killion, 296.

signed a Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement which gave the US the right to maintain this important military base for a period of twenty-five years. Through its Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) established in the same year, the US, in turn, provided military hardware and training to Ethiopian Forces on a vast scale. According to the US National Security Council Report, the US Government granted a program of \$5-6 million per year assistance for the Ethiopian Army, whereby the country received the cumulative total of grant \$38 million from 1952 to 1960.¹²²

Even after 1960, millions of US dollars went into maintaining Ethiopian military forces. This enabled the country to sustain, according to Markakis, “the largest military establishment in Sub-Saharan Africa at that time.” In the mid-1960 Ethiopia had an army that “exceeded 40,000”¹²³ effective combat troops, plus supporting forces, modern artillery and small but efficient Air Force equipped with American jet fighters and fighter bombers.

Against such military strength of Ethiopia, the early ELF guerrillas adopted a hit-and-run style of unconventional warfare as a means to guarantee the supply of arms and continuation of the armed struggle. The guerrillas operated in much the same way as the Viet Cong in Vietnam, although on a far smaller scale. They hit isolated police posts in the countryside, seized weapons and then withdrew into the rugged hills that were outside the control of Ethiopian security apparatus. As noted above, about seven engagements occurred under the leadership of Awate. All of them were conducted in the form of hit-and-run guerrilla warfare. With limited resources, those who joined Awate also had to follow the same tactics. Thus, in 1963 alone several engagements occurred in HalHal, Anseba, Telaay, Jengeren, and Haicota.¹²⁴ For instance, on September 1963, the fighters in broad day light attacked by surprise a police station in Haicota. Sabbe recounts: “A bus with Sudanese tourists came from Asmara. They stopped it outside Haicota, left the passengers there, took their clothes and turbans and went with the bus inside. They were fifteen led by Adem Mohammed Hamid “Gendifel”. The bus stopped in front of police station. All of a sudden jumped out and

¹²² “National Security Council Report,” Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960 Volume XIV, Africa, Document 55, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v14/d55> (accessed 1 May 2014). In the name of security assistance, the US provided over 200 million dollars to the Emperor Haile Selassie I during their twenty years of stay in Eritrea. See Tekie, 51.

¹²³ John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last two Frontiers* (Oxford: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2011), 124.

¹²⁴ “The Eritrean Liberation Front,” ND, ELF/ 14/100, RDC.

captured the two guards. Then in fifteen minutes they captured the whole station and took about fifty guns including two Bren machine guns.”¹²⁵

Police posts between Keren and the western lowlands bordering Sudan became the domain of the liberation army. “Between late 1963 and early 1964, ELA units ambushed a large police convoy, killing 17 police officers (all Eritreans by origin) and capturing about 40 machine guns.”¹²⁶

Within the next couple of years the size of the liberation army grew from tens to hundreds of people who came from diverse backgrounds. However, the need to secure the supply of arms and ammunitions, and establish effective organizational structures remained the major challenges in the next chapter of ELF’s history, as we shall see it in the succeeding pages.

¹²⁵ Osman Saleh Sabbe, interview by Günter Schröder, Khartoum, Sudan, 4 April 1983, transcript, RDC.

¹²⁶ Awet, 203.

Chapter Three: Broadening the War: Organizational and Political Developments, 1964-1969

Introduction

This chapter covers the period from 1964 to 1969, during which the ELF grew tremendously from tens to thousands of guerrilla fighters. It examines the role of the ELF's leadership abroad, foreign assistance, and the course of its expansion and organization of the army during the first decade of its history. The impact of the organizational structures that the ELF established to administer the increasingly diverse fighters will be analyzed in this chapter. Furthermore, the chapter will address ELF's internal disputes over strategy and tactics that eventually led to the emergence of a reformist movement from within the liberation movement. Last but not least, major clandestine commando operations undertaken in 1969 will also be addressed.

The Role of the Leadership Abroad

As shown in the preceding chapter, the Cairo-based leadership of the ELF after its inception focused mainly on the field of diplomacy. They strived hard to promote the cause of the Eritrean people in the international arena in order to win financial and material support and sympathy from different countries, particularly in the Middle East. But the rebellion led by Hamid Idris Awate broke out before the leadership was ready to wage a war. Osman Saleh Sabbe has written:

Though the contacts between him [Awate] and Idris Mohammed Adem – due to previous personal acquaintance and to tribal and regional relations – continued in the form of messages exchanged through the Eritrean groups in the Sudanese army in Kassala, the border city, yet the announcement of armed rebellion was not preconceived. The idea that Awate should lead the armed struggle was there, being expert in guerrilla warfare which he experienced during the British occupation in addition to his experience as a sergeant in the Italian army. But he did not have enough weapons. He had his licensed 303 English gun and a few old Italian guns of his friends.¹

Idris Mohammed Adem, the Chairman of the Central Committee of the ELF, also recounts: “When we were outside we received a message that Awate had gone to the

¹ Osman Saleh Sabbe, *The Roots of the Eritrean Disagreements and How to solve them* (Beirut: NP, 1978) 40.

mountains. I send [*sic sent*] a message to Kassala asking: Why did Awate go out although we had not yet sent weapons inside? We learned that he had to go because the Ethiopians were coming after him.”² Hence, when Hamid Idris Awate, in November 1961, dispatched one of his early followers, Adem Mohammed, to Cairo requesting them for urgent assistance with weapons, the people in the leadership had nothing to offer. The leadership immediately sought to raise financial contributions from the Eritrean community in Saudi Arabia and endeavoured to collect as much money as possible in order to rescue the revolution with weapons which could be bought easily in the black market in Sudan.³ As a result of financial assistance made by Eritreans, Idris managed to deliver five rifles and over one thousand ammunitions to his compatriots in Sudan in mid May 1962.⁴

Much of the diplomatic efforts of the ELF during the early period were carried out by Idris Mohammed Adem and Osman Saleh Sabbe. Through their branches in Cairo and Mogadishu they distributed memorandums to many African countries, liberation movements in Asia and Africa, and the different academicians like lawyers. This was intended to publicize the Eritrean case in order to draw the attention of the international community. The memos and publications issued by the ELF’s branch in Somalia, known as the ESFA, in the early 1960s, however, hardly expound a unified and consistent line of argument in regard to the Eritrean question. Whenever they sought support from Muslim countries, for instance, the Eritrean case was rather portrayed as a religious problem, specifically that of a problem of the Muslims living in Eritrea and Ethiopia. Many of the letters and memoranda were titled as “Appeal of the Muslims of Ethiopia and Eritrea” and asked authorities of different countries, such as Somalia, to support them, either financially and/or materially, in the name of Islam. At the same time letters were written on the same subject but with a different tone and argument – like representing the Eritrean case as a struggle against colonialism – when addressed to the socialist countries, such as the Peoples Republic of China, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the USSR, the German Democratic Republic, and

² Idris Mohammed Adem, interview...

³ Idris Mohammed Adem to Osman Saleh Sabbe, 21 November 1961, translated from Arabic to Tigrinya by Abdella Kelifa Ali, translated/006, RDC.

⁴ Mohammed Umer Abdela “Abu Tiyara”, interview,... 23 March 1989.

the Socialist Republic of Czechoslovakia. Simultaneously, the US was also asked for some material contributions.⁵

Thus, the ELF, at this stage of its thinking, seemed to have adopted a pragmatic approach in its foreign relations. The tendency to use religion to appeal for political support emanated from Sabbe's background. The ESFA branch in Somalia was run by Osman Saleh Sabbe, who was previously known for his endeavour to promote the cause of Muslims in both Eritrea and Ethiopia through his own organization called *Al Urwa Al Wutqa* (The Firm Bond). Idris Mohammed Adem, the Chairman of the ELF, had a different perspective. He stated that when he went to Saudi Arabia in 1960 to visit the Eritrean Community in order to mobilize support for the contemplated organized violent opposition against Ethiopia, he encountered Sabbe for the first time. Sabbe asked if Idris Mohammed Adem would be interested to be part of the *Al Urwa Al Wutqa* Organization, and Idris recalled how he reacted: "I refused to be part of it because the matter of the Ethiopian Muslims concerns only them. I knew that the Muslims inside Ethiopia suffered a bad treatment but we did not want to mix this issue with the Eritrean question. The Eritrean question [was]...an international [case] whereas the question of the Ethiopian Muslims was a matter internal to Ethiopia. To combine or mix these issues could only have been detrimental for our cause."⁶

The ELF, having one of its offices in Mogadishu and the other in Cairo, endeavoured to guarantee the continuation of the fighting that was already going on in Eritrea. The ESFA was important in organizing and mobilizing Eritrean community in Somalia, Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Gulf States and collected contributions which were used to cover its publication costs as well as other demands from the field. The leadership in Cairo produced pamphlets which were distributed in the major cities and towns of Eritrea through clandestine network of ELF cells. The pamphlets were published in four languages: Tigrinya, Arabic, Italian and English. Pamphlets often recalled the history of the federal period and the policy of domination that Ethiopia had followed during that time and it called upon Eritreans to participate actively in the armed struggle for the liberation of Eritrea. Some of the pamphlets were directed to specific social groups, such as the police forces, while other leaflets reflected the general spirit of discontent against the local administration, mainly

⁵ See "Correspondence Letters of Osman Saleh Sabbe," Eritrean Liberation Front/14/99, RDC.

⁶ Idris Mohammed Adem, interview...

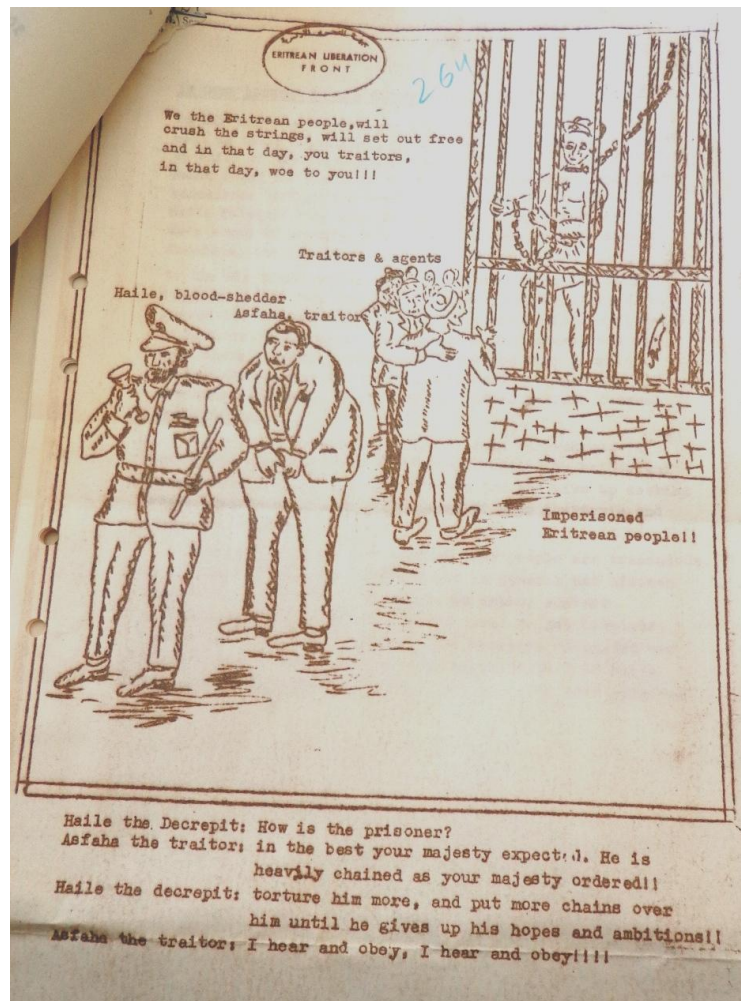


Figure 3. One of the earliest ELF's pamphlets, June 1961.
 Source: Ethiopian Military Intelligence /36/01, RDC.

against the Assembly. Death threats against the Chief Executive and the Vice President were often issued through the leaflets.⁷ Such threats were also sent through private letters. For instance, Melake Selam Dimetros, who escaped an assassination attempt in October 1961, received a threat that he would not be able to get a second chance to save his life.⁸ On May 26, 1962, Dimetros proceeded to Shambko in order to attend an important religious ceremony. The police being alarmed after receiving an anonymous letter of threat, forced Dimetros and his group to go back by mules through another route while the cars used previously returned empty using the regular road.⁹ In addition to pamphlets, anti Ethiopian propaganda published by a periodical

⁷ "Eritrea: Asmara – The General Situation (Top Secret)," Report 148 (31 May 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC.

⁸ "Eritrea: The Western Provinces – Subversive Activities (Top Secret)," Report 139 (24 May 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC.

⁹ "Eritrea: Miscellaneous (Top Secret)," Report 159 (18 June 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC.

called *EL Thawra* (The Revolution) in Cairo was also circulating among local inhabitants.¹⁰

In mid-1962, Sabbe joined Idris Mohammed Adem and Idris Osman Galadewos in Egypt after having run the ESFA in Somalia for almost a year. The congregation of these three leading figures in Cairo was important in determining the nature of leadership and organizational structure that ELF had developed in the subsequent years. Markakis noted:

This trio was to dominate the Eritrean nationalist movement for the next decade though not in concord. In fact, the struggle for personal power commenced immediately after Sabbe's arrival. An astute politician, he demanded the dissolution of the Executive Committee that was dominated by the other two, arguing plausibly that a liberation movement could not be led by students, and proposed an elaborate organizational structure to be established by a popular congress. Though this never materialized, Sabbe succeeded in setting aside the Executive Committee, leaving the nascent nationalist movement in the hands of the three leading figures who could operate without organizational restraint.¹¹

Therefore, in place of the initial Central Committee of the ELF formed in Cairo, a highest executive body made up of three self-appointed figures was established. These important figures that provided the early leadership for the organization came from different background. Idris Mohammed Adem was a former President of the Eritrean Assembly, Idris Osman Galadewos a lawyer by training, and Osman Saleh Sabbe a former school master. They established the highest executive body of the organization among themselves and called it as the *Mejlis Al AElla*, meaning Supreme Council, of the ELF organization. While Idris Mohammed Adem took the chairmanship, Osman Saleh Sabbe and Idris Osman Galadewos were assigned to take charge of foreign relations and military affairs respectively. In Michael's rendering of things:

The Cairo triumvirate was an interesting, if somewhat odd grouping of Eritrean dissidents. As his position as former President of the Eritrean Assembly suggests, Adem was the political heavyweight of the three, and had garnered popular appeal in the lowlands for his early opposition to Haile Selassie's subversion of the Federation. Galadewos, somewhat younger than his two associates, operated as the military brains behind Jebha's [or ELF's] early operations while Sabbe – the smooth talking, urbane scholar who would publish several Arabic texts on Eritrea – served as the intellectual and ideological force behind the movement, as well as its chief interlocutor in foreign capitals. More important than these differences in background and disposition was that while Adem, Galadewos, and Sabbe were all lowland Muslims, they represented very different ethnic constituencies: Adem was a Tigre, Beni Amir from Barka, Galadewos a Bilen from the Keren area, and Sabbe an ethnic

¹⁰ "Ethiopia/Eritrea: General Information (Top Secret)," Report 157 (12 June 1962), Ethiopian Military Intelligence /07/01, RDC.

¹¹ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 110.

Saho from the coastal area of Massawa-Hirgigo. Thus, from its earliest days, Jebha represented a coalition of Eritrea's Muslim tribes.¹²

The existence of this Supreme Council in the ELF was, however, critical in providing “the warriors in the armed wing with the image and legitimacy of an organized armed liberation movement and established external contacts to friendly countries to provide arms, funds and military training.”¹³

After the death of Hamid Idris Awate the succession question of the military command in the field was problematic. Mohammed Idris Haj who was appointed by Awate as a vice-commander died a natural death in 1963. The leadership was then transferred to Taher Salem, former leader of the secret association of Eritreans serving in the Sudanese forces.¹⁴ One of the pressing problems of the ELF as an organization at this point in time was the absence of well coordinated and structured communication networks between the leadership in Cairo and the army in Eritrea. Communication between these two components of the organization was not easy. Most of the time, the communication process was carried out through messengers. The process could take weeks, sometimes even months, to get to the destination. Generally, the communication structure during the first couple of years was neither efficient nor workable for the ELF to sustain itself as an effective organization. Having realized this, the Supreme Council decided to set up a working organizational structure that could eliminate the hurdles encountered. Osman Saleh Sabbe was assigned to complete this mission.

The first meeting between the armed wing of the ELF called *Eritrean Liberation Army (ELA)* and the Cairo-based leadership, the Supreme Council, took place in December 1962 in a place called Bergeshish in the Gash area.¹⁵ The Supreme Council, represented by Osman Saleh Sabbe met the ELA members, whose number was only forty-four. Among them only eighteen people were armed with rifles while the rest of the group carried swords. The participants agreed on two things: (1) to establish a military leadership in command of the field, comprising five people, and (2) to set up a Revolutionary Command (RC) based in Kassala, Sudan, which was

¹² Michael, 96.

¹³ With, 56.

¹⁴ Umer Damer, et al., Group interview, ...25 March 1989. Please, refer to chapter three regarding this secret organization.

¹⁵ Osman Saleh Sabbe, interview, ... 4 April 1983; Osman, *Roots of the Eritrean...*, 41; see also Osman, “Ma’erakat Iritriyah...,” chapter two.

intended to serve as a bridge between the Cairo-based leadership and the military commanders in Eritrea.¹⁶ The RC commenced its activity in January 1963 with six members.¹⁷ However, due to the hostile policy of the then Sudanese military government led by General Ibrahim Abboud, they had to conduct their activities and meetings secretly at night in private homes. When the existence of the RC became known to the Sudanese police, the ELF members were unable to carry out their activities smoothly in Kassala until General Abboud relinquished his power in favour of a civilian Cabinet in October 1964. Thereafter a regular office was opened.¹⁸



Figure 4. Bergeshish Meeting, 1962.

L-R: Mohammed Umer Abdela “Abu Tiyara”, Mohammed Kisha, Kubub Hajaj, Osman Saleh Sabbe, Atahir Idris, Osman Mohammed Idris (Abu Sheneb). *Source:* Research and Documentation Centre, Eritrea.

After the death of Hamid Idris Awate in 1962, the size of the liberation army grew steadily. Generally, the bulk of recruits came from the rural areas of the western

¹⁶ Drawn from Osman, “Ma’erakat Iritriyah...,” chapter two.

¹⁷ The six members were: Yosuf Adem Hamed (Secretary), Mohammed Adem Idris “Gezir”, Osman Mohammed Ali, Mahmud Mohammed Ali, Jaafer Mohammed, and Mohammed Ali Osman “Abu Rejela.”

¹⁸ Umer Damer, Mohammed Umer Abdela “Abu Tiyara”, Mahmud Mai Betot, Abdelkerim Ahmed, and Musa Ahmed Hashim, Group interview by Günter Schröder, Kassala, Sudan, 26 March 1989, transcript, RDC.

lowlands of Eritrea. But there were also young students and workers from the Eritrean plateau and from urban centres in Sudan and Egypt.¹⁹ According to the information obtained from ELF former fighters, the early participation of Christian highlanders, as combatants started in early 1963 when a group of seven people led by Ghebrehiwot, whose full name unknown to the author, joined the ELF.²⁰

The ELF during this time received the sympathy and support from different Arab countries. Sudan provided a safe haven for many Eritrean political refugees although the “Sudanese aid was limited and inconsistent as it depended on internal political developments and was influenced by the fact that the Ethiopians could retaliate by supporting the Southern Sudan rebels. Nevertheless, the Sudan provided the ELF with essential facilities such as staging bases, supply depots for smuggled arms, and shelter from the Ethiopian army.”²¹ The ELF was actively supported by the Syrian regime since 1963. Syria regarded the ELF as an “Arab liberation movement fighting a reactionary pro-Israeli regime.”²² Although the ELF was, in essence, not an “Arab liberation movement”, it had benefited immensely from Syrian funds, arms, and training for over the next fifteen years. Twenty ELF fighters got military training in Syria as early as 1963. Having finished training in 1964, they flew to Saudi Arabia using diplomatic passports and managed to smuggle the first twenty Soviet AK-47 automatic rifles, before they ferried across the Red Sea to Suakin, in north-eastern seaboard of Sudan. In 1960s alone, about 350 fighters were trained in Syria, Iraq, China, and Cuba.²³

In 1965, Syrian military aid for the ELF became obvious when the Sudanese government discovered at Khartoum Airport over 60 tons of arms: an assortment of Kalashnikov automatic rifles, rocket launchers, mortars, explosives and thousands of rounds of ammunitions. The arms were transported in two DC-6 aircraft from Syria. The ELF leaders attempted to smuggle the arms after they made a secret agreement with some high officials of the government of Sudan. However, the mission was

¹⁹ Bereket, 64.

²⁰ Umer Damer, et al., Group interview, ...26 March 1989. Ghebrehiwot together with his colleagues participated in an ambush carried out against the police in 1964 in Dembelas where he was wounded and taken to Tigray for further medical treatment. Later on he returned and joined his group.

²¹ Sherman, 74.

²² Ibid.

²³ Drawn from Osman, “Ma’erakat Iritriyah...,” chapter three.

intercepted and some of the arms were confiscated.²⁴ The Prime Minister of Sudan and other officials were arrested by the Sudanese police, and Sabbe was expelled from Sudan and banned from re-entering the country until 1975. Thereafter, Saudi Arabia, South Yemen, and Somalia provided the ELF the right of free passage through their territorial waters. Thus, with the help of funds from Saudi Arabia, ELF bought a small boat, through which they were able to transport arms to the Eritrean coast. ELF also received aid from Libya, Iraq, and China.²⁵

Expansion and Organization of the Army

Until 1965, the leadership in the field carried out three important military conferences that deserve mention in this context. These meetings were held with the intention of reorganizing the growing number of recruits in the army. In the first meeting held in Kurr in September 1963, the ELA was reorganized into four different platoons. Each platoon had about 40-50 members led by a chief commander and his deputy, as shown in the table below.

Table 2. Organization of the Eritrean Liberation Army, ELF, 1964

Platoon	Chief Commander	Vice Commander
1.	Omer Ezaz	Adem Mohammed Hamed “Gendefel”
2.	Omer Nasser Shum	Ahmed Welolo
3.	Mahmud Dinai	Kubub Hajaj
4.	Osman Mohammed Idris (Abu Sheneb)	Mohammed Ali Kisha

Source: Umer Damer, et al., Group interview, ... 26 March 1989.

By mid-1964 the Eritrean Liberation Army had about 250 members. In September 1964, a year after the initial convention, another meeting was carried out in Kurr and reorganized the army again into seven platoons led by the following commanders.

²⁴ According to Osman Denden, about 18 tons of total arms supplied by Syria were confiscated by the Sudanese government. Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

Table 3. Organization of the Eritrean Liberation Army, ELF, 1964

Platoon	Chief Commander	Vice Commander
1.	Omer Ezaz	Hamed Sherif
2.	Mahmud Dinai	Omar Kelifa
3.	Osman Mohammed Idris (Abu Sheneb)	Mohammed Ali Kisha
4.	Abdelkerim Ahmed	Osman Adem
5.	Mohammed Said Shamsi	Said Nur
6.	Kubub Hajaj	Dengus Arey
7.	Ibrahim Mohammed Ali	Ibrahim Mohammed Hassan

Source: Umer Damer, et al., Group interview, ...26 March 1989.

In 1965 more people, mostly young educated men and Eritrean workers from the neighbouring countries, joined the struggle. The size of the army, which was stationed at that time only in the western lowlands of the country, increased to about one thousand and as it became heterogeneous it created contradictions between the former fighters and the new recruits. This “had created a serious problem of organization and strategy”²⁶ which compelled the Supreme Council to look for other alternatives of organizational structure which could meet the logistical requirements of the growing number of combatants.

From 8-20 June 1965, the Supreme Council held a meeting with the commanders of the platoons in Kassala and decided to territorially organize the army of liberation based on the Algerian model of dividing the country into various zones of operation.²⁷ During the Algerian Revolution (1954-1962), Algeria was divided into six military zones, called *wilayas*, following the Ottoman-era administrative boundaries, where each *wilaya* was led by colonels of the *Armée de Libération Nationale* (ALN). The 8-year old guerrilla struggle eventually came to an end with a victory of Algerians that enabled them to gain independence from France.²⁸ The Algerian experience, for the ELF leaders, served as a contemporary tested revolutionary model that they could borrow from and implement according to the Eritrean conditions. Concerning this issue, Idris Osman Galadewos opines: “When we thought about spreading all over Eritrea, in front of us, there was the experience of Algeria, and of course at that time

²⁶ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 113.

²⁷ Drawn from Osman, “Ma’erakat Iritriyah...,” chapter two.

²⁸ *Ibid.*; Markakis, *National and Class...*, 113.

[we preferred to adopt] experience [of others] and for us the Algerian [Revolution] ...was a very great experience even though the negative sides of this experience was not fully studied by us. So we were [simply] copying ...the idea of zonal system.”²⁹

By applying this model the liberation army was divided initially into four military zones and later into five. The purpose of this organizational strategy was to achieve the following three objectives, namely: (1) to realize the expansion and consolidation of the armed struggle throughout the country, (2) to ensure wider public support, and (3) to weaken Ethiopian forces by stretching its military capacity all over Eritrea.³⁰ Hence, the initial four military zones which covered the then administrative regions of Eritrea (Western Province, Sahel, Senhit, Akele Guzai, Seae, Semhar, Dankalia and Hamassien) were as follows:

- a) **Zone One:** Operated in the Western Province (also commonly referred to as Barka), comprising the Gash and Barka area bordering Sudan; populated mainly by Muslim communities. The Beni Amer made up the bulk of the agro-pastoralist population, along with smaller groups of Nara, Hidareb, and Kunama. It was led by Mahmoud Dinai who was born to a Beni Amer, and former member of the Sudanese forces, who joined the struggle in 1962.³¹
- b) **Zone Two:** Represented the former provinces of Sahel and Senhit in the Northern Highlands of Eritrea; populated mainly by Muslim nomads and settled agriculturalists. The commander of this zone was Omer Hamed Ezaz. He was born into a Muslim Bilen Bet Tawqe family in Hal-Hal. He was formerly serving in the Sudanese forces and was among those early guerrillas that joined the forces of Hamid Idris Awate.³²
- c) **Zone Three:** Encompassed in the Central Plateau, namely the former provinces of Akele Guzai and Serae; inhabited predominantly by Tigrinya-speaking Christian settled farmers, Muslim Saho pastoralists, and the trader and weaver Muslim minority known as Jaberti. The commander was Abdelkerim Ahmed, a Saho by

²⁹ Idris Osman Galadewos, interview by Zemhret Yohannes, 17 June 1994, audiocassette, Acc. No. 06696, RDC.

³⁰ Drawn from ELF, “Iritriyah: Burkan Al-Qern Al-Afriqi” [Eritrea: Volcano of the Horn of Africa], Trans. by Abdela Kelifa. (Unpublished Manuscript, RDC, ND), chapter 2.

³¹ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 113; Connell and Killion, 354.

³² Markakis, *National and Class...*, 113; Connell and Killion, 406-407.

birth, who studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, where he was actively involved in the Eritrean Student Association. He organized ELF cells in the highlands and undertook military training with the first group of fighters who went to Syria in 1963.³³

- d) **Zone Four:** Active in the central and southern parts of the coastal plains, largely known as Semhar and Dankalia provinces respectively; aside from the two ports, Massawa and Assab, the region was inhabited predominantly by sparsely populated Muslim nomads. The commander of the zone was Mohammed Ali Omero, a Tigre-speaking from Hirgigo, who went to Cairo for further education after initially attending the Kekiya School in Hirgigo which had been run by Osman Saleh Sabbe. He was actively involved in the activities of the Eritrean Students Association and in 1961 he attacked the Ethiopian Embassy in Cairo and attempted to burn it together with other students, including Abdelkerim Ahmed, the commander of Zone 3. He was one of the earliest members of the ELF and was sent to Syria for military training with the first group.³⁴

Each zone had its own commander, his deputy, a political commissioner, and officers assigned to deal with security, logistics, and medical care. The commander was chosen from the cadres of the local area.³⁵ Most of the armed combatants of the zones were also recruited from their respective regions the zone operated in. This was intended to avoid any instances of resentment from the local people towards the combatants. According to Idris Osman Galadewos, the leadership abroad thought that local people would be relatively more cooperative and supportive to the ELF if a leader of a given zone and his armies were assigned to the region where they were hailed from. Additionally, the new military strategy was intended to facilitate the recruitment of fighters from the local area and also strengthen the combat capacity of the liberation army.³⁶

The new military strategy accorded each military zone a wide range of responsibility and considerable autonomy in performing its activities related to military operations,

³³ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 113-114; Connell and Killion, 27.

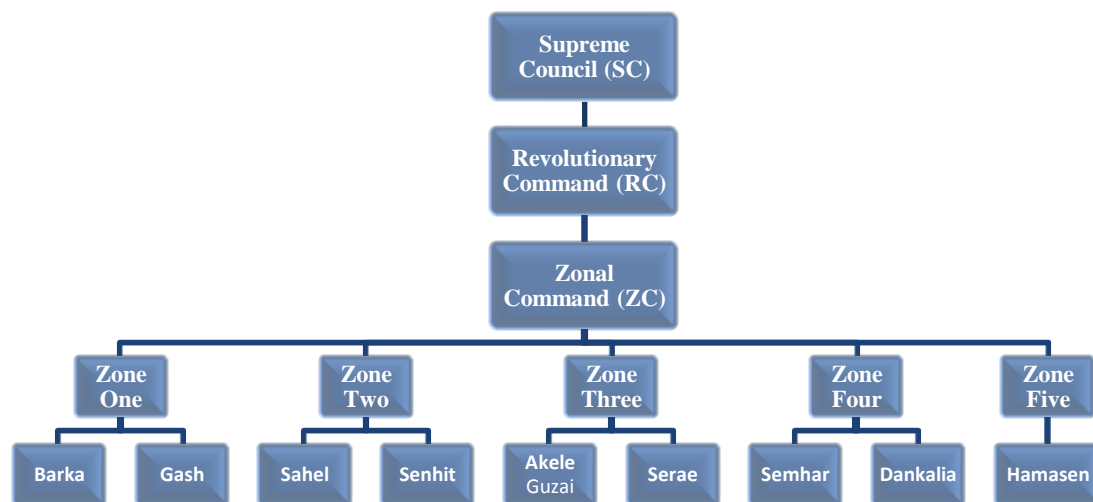
³⁴ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 114; Connell and Killion, 379-380.

³⁵ Ruth, 111; Markakis, *National and Class...*, 114.

³⁶ Idris Osman Galadewos, interview by Macarthur Cameron Kennedy, Kassala, Sudan, 12 January 1986, audiocassette, Acc. No. 05830, RDC; See also Redie, 189.

administrative and economic affairs. To support itself, each zone engaged in collecting taxes, revenues, and donations from the local population as well as private businesses in the zone.³⁷ The Kessala-based Revolutionary Command (RC), after being restructured, was left to continue its function as an intermediary between the Supreme Council and the Zone Commands (ZC). Osman Idris Galadewos was in charge of the RC.³⁸

Figure 5. The Structure of the ELF



Source: Redie, 198.

The newly introduced Algerian model of zonal division was subject to review after six months. Accordingly, the first conference of assessment was carried out between the RC and ZC from 15-27 December 1965. The conference was chaired by the Chief of the RC and it was attended only by twelve people – all Muslims. These comprised seven RC members, four Zone Commanders, and an officer from the military school. The major limitations among other things reported by the ZC were lack of military provisions and adequate training, lack of political education to commissioners who were entrusted to play an important role in raising political awareness of the armies in the zones, lack of regular communication between the RC and the Zones. Last but not least of the problems encountered by the zone commands was the transfer of combatants from one Zone to another without the knowledge of their immediate boss. The RC was sometimes transferring fighters from their original units to other Zones

³⁷ Sherman, Richard. *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), 74; Markasis, 114.

³⁸ Awet, 204-205.

without notifying the Zone Commanders. Such interference on the part of the RC was creating discontent and Zone Commanders were complaining about it.³⁹

The presence of the ELF was gradually felt almost all over the country. Its steady military growth gave the leadership of the ELF “the belief that they had the sole mandate of representing the Eritrean people.”⁴⁰ They were intolerant of any independent movement such as the ELM on the Eritrean soil. Although some initiatives aimed at uniting the two movements were conducted in 1964-65 by members of the two organizations in Sudan, the discordance dominated their relationship. The disagreement which was accompanied by a war of words since 1960 had alerted Ethiopia to tighten its security in the major cities and towns. Numerous surveillance operations were put in place by the Ethiopian security and intelligence agencies. In 1965, the ELM decided to launch an armed struggle, after it had realized the difficulty of carrying out its underground operations within the domain of Ethiopian strong security apparatus. According to Ruth, “the ELM leadership notified the ELF of its plans and received an ultimatum from ELF spokesman, Osman S. Sabbe, who pointed out that a liberation front already existed and told Nawud [i.e. leader of the ELM] that his organization should... [join the ELF] or face elimination.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, the ELM proceeded with its plans and dispatched its forces to the northern hills of Eritrea. The ELF resorted to resolve the discordance through coercive means. In May 1965, the ELM fighters faced attack from the ELF at Ela Tza’ada.⁴² Although there are conflicting reports on the number of casualties, the ELM nonetheless suffered heavy casualties.⁴³ This marked the total obliteration of the ELM as a viable political organization in Eritrea. As Markakis puts it, this was indeed “the first bloodshed in a long history of internecine violence that was to mark the course of the Eritrean revolution.”⁴⁴

³⁹ Drawn from Osman, “Ma’erakat Iritriyah...,” chapter six. The proceedings of meetings provided by Osman Denden presents clearly the unhealthy inter-zonal relationships, squabbling over territorial boundaries, and other practical problems that the different zones encountered after the Algerian model of zonal division was implemented.

⁴⁰ Redie, 184.

⁴¹ Ruth, 105.

⁴² Markakis, *National and Class...*, 109; Ruth, 105-6; Redie, 184-85.

⁴³ According to Ruth the number of casualties was estimated to forty, while Markakis writes they were six. The important point is to consider the consequence of this event which eventually eliminated ELM from the scene of the Eritrean liberation struggle. See Markakis, *National and Class...*, 109.

⁴⁴ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 109

As the liberation army spread all over the country, the encounter of the ELA with the Ethiopian troops increased. In 1965, between September and October, several battles at different places were recorded. On the 15th of September, a battle took place at Mihlab (Senhit Province), which lasted about seven hours. Both sides faced heavy casualties. According to the ELF reports, Ethiopian forces suffered over eighty dead and many wounded. The ELF lost about twenty-one fighters and four wounded. The corpses of the dead fighters were later hung in Keren market square. Gallows with about seventeen fighters hung were also witnessed by Swedish journalists at about the same time in Ghindae area. Nevertheless, the battles or ambushes undertaken by the ELA continued in Barentu, Debuk, Serae (three police posts at one time), Debre Sala (around Agordat), Areza and Siam (Serai Province), and Gerset. A train carrying Ethiopian troops from Agordat to Anfortota was destroyed after a detachment of the ELA ambushed it.⁴⁵ Before the battles mentioned above occurred, in June 16 of the same year, the liberation army attacked a vehicle that carried three officials. One of those officials who happened to be the superintendent of the police forces perished immediately while the rest suffered wounds. According to the ELF, individuals who were working for the Ethiopian authorities were also targeted for assassinations, particularly in Agordat and Keren regions.⁴⁶

On October 9-12, 1966, a second conference with the purpose of reviewing the military strategy between the RC and ZC took place. The meeting was attended by nineteen people, all of whom were Muslims with the exception of one. While the problems reported from the previous meeting were still prevailing, new problems emerged and the situation got worse. Due to the recurrent drought the zones were unable to collect taxes or donations from the local population. For instance, Zone Four reported that the total amount of money collected throughout the year was only 500 of local currency. As a result, all Zones, perhaps of varying degrees, faced shortage of food, clothing as well as medical supplies. For particular zones, like those of Zone Three and Zone Four the geographical location in which they operated also contributed a lot to their problems. Consequently, the RC had difficulty in maintaining regular contact with those distant zones and eventually resulted to

⁴⁵ "Great victory in Mihlab and Barentu" ELF 14/98, RDC.

⁴⁶ *Hbret*, 18 June 1965. The three officials were Administrator of Keren Province, *Qegnazmatch* Embaye Ghebre, Superintendent of the Police Forces of that province, Lieutenant Colonel Ghebrekidan Ghebru, and also an officer.

logistical disparity experienced by the different military Zones.⁴⁷ Awet in this regard notes that “Zones One and Two are easier to reach from Sudan while Zones Three (in the southern highlands), Four (in the western [*sic.* eastern]/coastal lowlands) and later Five (in the central highlands) were farther from the Revolutionary Command’s reach and under stronger control of the Ethiopian security apparatus... this physical difficulty did not dispel the distrust between the bulk of the fighters, on the one hand, and their leaders, on the other, as well as among the fighters themselves.”⁴⁸

In addition to logistical problems, the proceedings of the meeting also highlighted that the different zones were engaged in intense rivalry and competition for the control of resources and territory. Boundary squabbles became an incessant problem, especially between Zone One and Zone Two. The Zones, instead of working jointly, amicably with the spirit of promoting coexistence and coordinating their forces for the common goal, fell apart. The Zones refrained from helping one another in time of difficulty against their common enemy. Zone Four reported that when it was under common enemy attack they requested the neighbouring Zones for assistance, but surprisingly they failed to help Zone Four.⁴⁹ This had a detrimental impact on the unity of the Eritrean liberation forces.

The report also shows that there was lack of frequent and effective communication between the ZC and the RC. The absence of such important element allowed the ZC to conduct their activities autonomously and the RC which was supposed to serve as an intermediary organ between the SC and the field in Eritrea failed to effectively follow up the activities of the Zones inside Eritrea. Zone Commanders took drastic measures without the consent of the upper hierarchy of the organization. Zonal Commanders were “accused of oppressing the population and committing serious atrocities. In short, they were accused of engaging in all types of arbitrary measures that generated disharmony between them and the people under their control.”⁵⁰

Some Zonal Commanders even further aggravated the social tensions and relations between the different ethno-linguistic groups. For instance, when the Ethiopian

⁴⁷ Drawn from Osman, “Ma’erakat Iritriyah...,” chapter six.

⁴⁸ Awet, 208.

⁴⁹ Drawn from Osman, “Ma’erakat Iritriyah...,” chapter six.

⁵⁰ Redie, 189. Concerning this issue Galadewos speaks out in the proceedings of the 1966 meeting how he felt so sad when he learned about the maltreatment of the population by the ZC. He admonished all ZC to refrain from such acts. See Osman, “Ma’erakat Iritriyah...,” chapter six.

government recruited some Kunama militia, in 1965, against the independence struggle, Galadewos recounts, the militia attacked some villages in Jemal Hamed, and the Commander of Zone One, a Beni Amer, took the problem as a question of tribal dignity and attacked some of the Kunama villages and burned down houses. Such kind of activities, coupled with historical ethnic-based feuds, intensified the relationship among the society in the area.⁵¹ Meanwhile, the Commander of Zone Three, who was a Saho by origin, was appointing people who hailed only from the Saho ethno-linguistic group to key positions. The Christians inhabitants of this region were systematically alienated and the zone exclusively became Saho-dominated. Again when the long standing land dispute between the Tora, Saho pastoralists, and Tsenaidegele, Christian peasants, erupted in the region, the leadership of the zone sided with the Tora. The RC was aware of this situation, but it lacked the power to put an end to it. In short, the Zonal Commanders consolidated their power using all possible means at their disposal and within 2-3 years they became stronger than the RC.⁵² As Redie noted one of the major factors contributing to this kind of behaviour was “the absence of effective control from the leadership above. In practice, the zone division became a base for sub-national configurations, that is, they became the base for ethno-linguistic gathering. As a result, clan and tribal conflicts beset the liberation army, which, in turn, diluted the nationalist character of the national liberation movement.”⁵³

When dealing with internal problems experienced by the different zones, differences of opinion emerged among the members of the SC. While Idris Mohammed Adem defended the Beni Amer-dominated Zone One, Osman Saleh Sabbe became the patron of Zone Four and Idris Osman Galadewos of Zone Two. However, Zone Three remained without a patron from the political leaders abroad. Each one accused the other of defending the zone of one’s affiliation. As a result, the trios instead of creating effective collective leadership rather became divided along ethnic and regional lines. In a bid to safeguard their own position in the leadership, the SC members established personal links with the Zonal Commanders on the ground of their ethno-linguistic affiliation. This was fostered by providing the necessary

⁵¹ Idris Osman Galadewos, interview by Zemhret Yohannes, 17 June 1994, audiocassette, Acc. No. 06696, RDC; see also Alexander, 2-3.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Redie, 190.

logistics, weaponry, information, training abroad and other opportunities that were available.⁵⁴

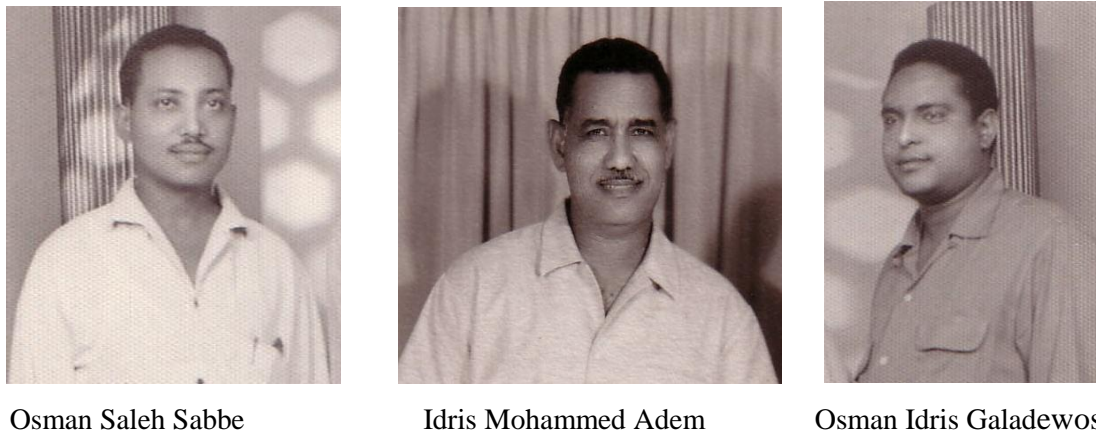


Figure 6. Members of the Supreme Council.

Source: Research and Documentation Centre, Eritrea.

The leadership of the front, therefore, failed to create a disciplined organization. They justified this by stating that they were more concerned with fund raising and securing arms to the liberation struggle. As Osman Saleh Sabbe, a leading fund raiser of the ELF in the Arab world, wrote straightforwardly, “the leadership of the front – myself one of them – committed a serious mistake by giving priority to the gun instead of the organization.”⁵⁵ Scholars have also pointed out that in addition to the absence of effective political leadership, lack of ideological unity and a clearly defined and elaborate political programme was among the major problems that beset the organization.⁵⁶

The sectarian nature of the ELF served Ethiopia as a means to enlist Eritrean support against the nationalist movement. Some Christian highland villages and some Kunama who were fed up with the atrocious treatment of the ELF fighters sought protection from Ethiopia. As a result, a special force known as Commando 101, comprising entirely of recruits from the Eritrean Christian community, was established. A training centre staffed by Israeli paramilitary and counter-insurgency trainers was set up in Dekemhare town, 40 km southeast of Asmara.⁵⁷ The first round

⁵⁴ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 115-116.

⁵⁵ Osman, *The Roots of the Eritrean...*, 42.

⁵⁶ Redie, 190; See also Bereket, 64-65.

⁵⁷ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 121.

of a six-months trained Commandos, numbering 300, graduated on September 3, 1964.⁵⁸ The training continued in consecutive rounds. With time the Commandos became a formidable fighting force dedicated to wiping out the Eritrean liberation army from Eritrean soil. To bolster their commitment the government made extensive campaign to install a belief that the ELF fighters were fighting to create 'an Islamic state' by stating that "...the nationalist movement was spawned in Arab circles, and its objective was to annex Eritrea to one of the Arab states in the region. 'The foreign countries which are inciting these outlaws covet the natural resources of Ethiopia,' was how Haile Selassie put it in a rare public mention of the subject."⁵⁹

After the October 1966 meeting, the leadership of the front decided to focus more on clandestine subversive operations using assassination squads with greater emphasis on cities and major towns in Eritrea and Ethiopia. It was thought that clandestine operations had an advantage over battles or guerrilla warfare; because militarily the former requires fewer arms, ammunition, and human power compared to the latter. Using few lethal weapons, therefore, the covert military operations, according to the ELF, were thought to achieve a three-fold purpose: (1) to create a widespread terror among the government circles; (2) to draw international attention and recognition; and (3) to eliminate key figures in the government circles. As a result, they outlined the tasks to be done by each Zone and instructions were given regarding where to conduct the operations. For the second half of the 1960s, each zone was assigned the following tasks: (a) to conduct ambushes on military centres in different towns; (b) to destroy power installations, government buildings, bridges (between Assab and Desse), roads, railway lines (such as Asmara-Massawa), telephone lines, public transportation buses on the Asmara and Addis Ababa highway; (c) to attack Addis Mercato, a large open-air marketplace in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; and (d) to assassinate Asrate Kassa, the then Governor-General of Eritrea.⁶⁰

With the growing number of highlanders, Galadewos took the initiative to establish a fifth zone in 1966, which was dominated by Christian community from the highland. Zone Five (referred to as the "Christian Zone") represented Hamassien, the northernmost province of the central highland, where Eritrea's capital, Asmara, is

⁵⁸ *Hbret*, 4 September 1964.

⁵⁹ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 121.

⁶⁰ Drawn from proceedings of a meeting in Osman, "Ma'erakat Iritriyah..." chapter six.

situated. Weldai Kahsai, a Christian highlander, was named its commander, and Hishal Osman became deputy commander.⁶¹ The Hamassien province to this day has been the most densely populated region and comprises the most modern economic capacity of the country. Thus in accordance with the logic of the zones, the fifth zone was supposed to collect revenue from the local population in Asmara. However, the RC deprived it from enjoying such a lucrative source of income. Instead, the RC took over the Capital, and assigned assassination squad (also known as *fedayin*) units to collect contributions and run other activities as per instructions provided by the RC. Consequently the fifth zone remained financially weak and dependent on the means of other zones.⁶²

Preoccupied by the formation of the “Christian Zone” and earlier military successes scored by the ELF military units, the Ethiopian government launched a full-fledged military offensive in March 1967. Dawit states that “[i]n 1964-1965 the death rate among [Ethiopian] soldiers was as low as 100 per year.”⁶³ But since 1965 the number of casualties on the Ethiopian side increased dramatically. Thus in 1967 Ethiopia was determined to wipe out the ELF insurgents. The offensive involved thousands of Ethiopian troops accompanied by aerial and heavy armour bombardment. The decentralization and poor coordination between the different ELF’s zones of operation now paid off handsomely for the Ethiopian government.⁶⁴ The ELF failed to coordinate their forces to exert a meaningful resistance. Ethiopian troops first dispersed the weak army in the “Christian zone” and then moved to west from the highlands sweeping through Gash Barka region of Zone One to the Senhit region from where the Second Zone operated. Unable to bear the brunt of coordinated bombing, the guerrillas were dispersed and retreated back far north. The death toll among the civilian Muslim inhabitants was heavy. In a bid to terrorize the local population, Ethiopian troops burned villages and massacred civilians, causing devastation and an exodus of more than 20,000 civilian refugees to the Sudan, marking the first of the many waves of refugees to flee to Sudan during the course of the next two decades of the armed conflict in Eritrea.⁶⁵ An Israeli who was an advisor to the Eritrea-based Second Division of the Ethiopian armed forces gives an eye

⁶¹ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 120.

⁶² Markakis, *National and Class...*, 120; Awet, 210.

⁶³ Dawit, 83.

⁶⁴ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 121-122.

⁶⁵ Michael, 102; See also Markakis, *National and Class...*, 122.

witness account in mid-1967 by saying: “The 2nd Division is very efficient in killing innocent people. They are alienating the Eritreans and deepening the hatred that already exists. Their commander took his senior aides to a spot near the Sudanese border and ordered them; ‘From here to the north—clean the area.’ Many innocent people were massacred and nothing of substance was achieved. There is simply no way the Ethiopian army will ever win the struggle over Eritrea by pursuing this line.”⁶⁶

In March 11, 1967, Ethiopia signed an extradition agreement with Sudan in order to end cross-border sanctuary for insurgents.⁶⁷ To make matters worse, Ethiopia’s military offensive coincided with the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967, causing the closure of the shipping lane in the Red Sea by the Israeli. “As Arab support temporarily dried up” the ELF faced an acute shortage of arms and ammunitions. As a result, “there was a notable loss of ELF momentum.”⁶⁸ Indeed, as the ELF Newsletter described it, “[t]he very continuation of the revolution was in danger...the leadership of the ELF... could not bring about any changes ..., [f]ighters in the field, who had little food and arms supplies, were being overwhelmed by desperation.”⁶⁹

The result of this was a string of defections, including some high level from the ELF to the Ethiopian Government. In mid May 1967, the commander of the ELF military training centre, Tsegai Gebremedhin, surrendered to Ethiopia.⁷⁰ Tsegai was an ex-soldier in the Sudanese forces. He joined the ELF in 1965 and became one of the few Christians who held some positions of authority.⁷¹ Prompted by this and other possible reasons, Asrate Kassa, the Governor-General of Eritrea, called for a public gathering which was attended by more than 3000 religious dignitaries and elderly people from all corners of the country.⁷² He announced a general amnesty to the

⁶⁶ Quoted in Awet, 176.

⁶⁷ *Hbret*, 15 March 1967.

⁶⁸ William Hall, “Airgram A-194 from the Embassy in Ethiopia to the Department of State, Addis Ababa, June 18, 1969,” Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976 Volume E–5, Part 1, Documents on Sub-Saharan Africa, 1969–1972, Document 270.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p1/d270> (accessed 5 May 2014).

⁶⁹ ELF, “Diary of the Revolution (1961-1981),” *The Eritrean Newsletter*. no. 44 (1981): 17-26.

⁷⁰ *Hbret*, 16 May 1967.

⁷¹ Christians who commanded high rank were rare. The notable ones were Woldai Gidey, who joined in 1964 and became a full member of the RC in Kassala, Sudan, and Welday kahsai, the Commander of the fifth zone.

⁷² *Hbret*, 20 June 1967.

insurgents and “commenced a programme stepped-up propaganda and mass appeals designed to foster the loyalty of the Eritrean people.”⁷³

Another important high level defection came in November 1967. The Commander of Zone Five, Welday Kahsai, and a contingent of nineteen Christian fighters from the fifth zone defected to the Ethiopian Embassy in Khartoum. The reason provided by Welday Kahsai was as follows. In September 6, 1967 while he was in Khartoum for medical treatment, a group of twenty one fighters defected to Ethiopia. Angered by this action, the deputy Commander of Zone Five, Osman Hishel, allegedly accused the rest of the unit of being responsible for the defection. Without the knowledge of the Commander of Zone Five, Osman Hishel summarily executed twenty five Christians, and thirteen Muslims. Shocked by the news, the Commander and others resorted to give themselves up to Ethiopia, through its Embassy in Khartoum.⁷⁴ In a bid to avoid public anger, the RC eventually suspended Osman Hishel from duty and the fifth Zone remained without Zone Commander.⁷⁵

Rectification Movement

As the ELF leadership became increasingly repressive and the negative effects of the Zonal divisions were already felt strongly by the fighters, conscious militants began to engage in internal debate. Consequently, several groups who aimed at “rectifying the problems” facing the ELF began to pop up. One of these movements was the Committee of Fighters. This group denounced the rampant actions of the zonal commanders and argued for a comprehensive national conference to be held in the field. Meanwhile, another Kassala-based reformist movement commonly known in Arabic as *Eslah*, meaning rectification, emerged.⁷⁶ This movement came into being at a time when internal debate among the fighters for concrete reform was already underway. Their purpose, as expressed in their communiqué, was to convene a national conference in order to debate and rectify the mistakes of the liberation struggle. They intended to bring fundamental structural changes to the organization. When the external leadership and its supporters in the field learnt that the *Eslah*

⁷³ “Airgram A-194 from the Embassy...”

⁷⁴ *Hbret*, 7 November 1967.

⁷⁵ Awet, 211.

⁷⁶ Redie, 190-191.

movement had already drafted a political programme and internal regulations, they considered it a coup attempt and devised a strategy to hamper its progress. Consequently, the *Eslah* movement did not succeed to achieve its mission.⁷⁷

Furthermore, there was another movement known as the *Keser*, or the “oppressed tribes” in Zone One, comprising seven ethnic and tribal groups, namely, the Kunama, Nara, Algeden, Sebdrat, Bisha, Bitama, and Hafara. The *Keser* group resisted the domination of the Beni Amer in Zone One, and consequently an established committee representing all these seven groups denounced the discriminatory policy followed by the commander of Zone One. They raised the demands to either establish their own zone that would exclusively represent them, or abolish the zonal system and reunite the armies in the different zones.⁷⁸

All these rectification efforts, as Redie summed up, “triggered a struggle between two political forces and trends. These were the old/new, conservative/radical, traditional/modern set of political trends. The old generation embodied in the SC represented the first element of this dichotomy, while the young generation espousing the ideals and strategies of the new political movement represented the second element of the dichotomy.”⁷⁹

Despite the political polarization between the leadership abroad and the young reformists in the field, endeavours to unify the army continued. Such efforts to achieve the complete unity of all zones were carried out by field-based fighters without involving the leadership abroad. Thus several meetings were convened. The first of these rectification meetings was held from 16-19 June 1968 in a place known as Aredaib, Eritrea. The meeting was attended by all zonal commanders and their respective political commissars. Since representatives from the military training centre and supporting units were absent, they agreed to postpone the meeting to 30 July 1968 in order to discuss further on the prevailing problems and possible solutions. Administration of the meetings was given to Commander of Zone Two. Among other things, the meeting attendees also agreed on the following issues: (a)

⁷⁷ Ali Mohammed Saleh Shum Ali, *Tezekrotat Ertrawi Tegadalay: Temekroy ab Hagerawi Qalsi Ertra* [Memories of an Eritrean Fighter: My Experience in the Eritrean Nationalist Struggle] (Asmara, Eritrea: NP, 2007), 118-119.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

⁷⁹ Redie, 191-192.

Zone One, Two, and Four which were better off than the rest of the zones agreed to support financially the weaker units like Zone Three, Five, as well as other supporting units; and (b) fearing possible interference from the SC, they agreed to do their best to refrain from having any contact with members of the SC before the scheduled meeting.⁸⁰

When the news became known to the members of the SC, the leadership attempted to prevent the next meeting from being held. The meeting attendees gathered as per the plan but the commanders of Zone One and Two were absent for unclear reasons. Thus, for lack of a quorum they postponed the meeting again to September 1, 1968 and requested Zone One and Two to provide the reasons for their absence. Except the commanders of Zone One and Two, all representatives appeared on the agreed date of meeting. However, the meeting attendees again postponed the session for one more time to September 10 in order to give a third chance to the absentees. Besides, to avoid further disruption of the meeting, they agreed again to refrain from conducting any military engagements during the interval days.⁸¹

The third attempt for a collective meeting also failed. The commanders of Zone One and Two did not appear in the planned meeting. The plot against these rectification meetings by the higher leadership became clear. The commander of Zone One sent a message stating that he received instructions from the RC to receive members of the SC in Sawa, a place in the far western part of Eritrea near the border with Sudan.⁸² Meanwhile, Zone Two, a few days before the planned meeting, engaged in a military offensive against police commandos in Hal Hal, in the northwestern Eritrea. The battle, which went for about twelve hours, claimed the life of 54 fighters, including the commander of the Zone, Omer Mohammed Ezaz, who was initially entrusted to organize the rectification meetings.⁸³

The absence of the first two zones was considered a conspiracy to disrupt the planned meetings for unity. After experiencing procrastination for three months, representatives of Zone Three, Four, and Five as well as other smaller units convened

⁸⁰ ELF-ELA, "Awaj Qutsri 1: Nab Melae Hzbi Ertran Serawit Tegadlo Harnet Ertran" [Declaration No. 1: To all Eritrean People and Armies of the Eritrean Liberation Front], September 1968, 02122, RDC.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ *Hbret*, 10 September 1968.

in Anseba, Eritrea. Held from 11-17 September, the Anseba conference stipulated the following five points: (1) to abolish zonal divisions and establish a unified army; (2) to establish a provisional leadership inside Eritrea; (3) to form a committee entrusted to collect the properties of the ELF, both inside and abroad; (4) to set up a commission of inquiry responsible to conduct a study regarding past experiences and crimes committed by different elements and finally to present its findings to the future permanent leadership for further resolutions; and (5) to issue a declaration regarding all the understandings reached at the Anseba Conference.⁸⁴

The Anseba Conference marked the unification of three of the five zonal commanders and soon began to carry out their activities under the newly established provisional leadership. On 25 November 1968, the provisional leadership dispatched three⁸⁵ of its members to meet the RC in Kassala, Sudan. They met Osman Idris Galadewos, one of the SC members, and explained their objectives, programmes of the Tripartite Unity and their intention to campaign among the Eritrean community in Sudan. The reaction of Galadewos was obvious. He informed them that the SC was preparing for a congress, and urged them to remain patient. But the delegates responded that they were not entitled to act on behalf of the leadership and their responsibility was to raise awareness among Eritreans regarding the developments in the field. According to their plan, they visited cities and towns in Sudan.⁸⁶

In Sudan, there were about 17 ELF branch offices in different cities and towns that were affected by the winds of change. On 20 February 1969 a meeting between the different branches was held in Halfa, Sudan. The aim was to discuss political developments in the field. Failing to reach a common understanding, the meeting attendees were basically divided between those who favoured the continuation of the old organizational structure and those who defended the rectification movement. This was followed by another important conference on March 1969 in Gedaref, Sudan. An agreement was reached to dissolve the RC and establish a Central Committee responsible for administering all ELF branches in Sudan. Furthermore, the Central

⁸⁴ ELF-ELA, "Awaj Qutsri 1..."

⁸⁵ The three despatched members were Mohammed Ali Omaro (Commander of Zone Four), Issaias Afwerki (the political Commissar of Zone Five and current President of Eritrea), Mohammed Umer Abdela "Abu Tiyara", a former soldier serving in the Sudanese forces and one of the earliest nationalists who joined the Eritrean armed struggle in 1962. See Ali Mohammed, 122.

⁸⁶ Ali Mohammed, 122-123.

Committee also became responsible to make sure that fighters, who were referred from the field to Sudan for further medication, got equal treatment regardless of the military unit they belonged to. Thus it was basically entrusted to play its part in diminishing the widening gap between the zonal commanders.⁸⁷

The newly established Central Committee had thirteen members. It proceeded to approach Galadewos, the only available SC member in Khartoum at that time, and briefed him all the agreements reached at the Gedaref Conference, and eventually requested him to pass an order to the members of the old RC to cede their authority to the new Central Committee. After discussions, ups and downs, Galadewos agreed to comply with their demand. Thus the Central Committee took the position and authority of the RC and this was made public through a communiqué issued on 16 March 1969.⁸⁸

In mid-1969, Zone One and Zone Two in the field decided to join the Tripartite Unity. The step taken by these two zones seemed to have been influenced by the developments witnessed among the ELF branches in the Sudan. Anyhow, the unity of the two zones with the Tripartite Unity was important in creating a unified command in the field, and this was materialized through a meeting held in Adobha, Eritrea, from 10-25 August 1969. The Adobha Conference was attended by 102 delegates. Among other things, the conference called for: (1) the establishment of a provisional General Command to replace the old command based abroad; (2) the convening of a national congress within one year and formation of a Preparatory Committee for that purpose; (3) the formation of a commission of inquiry into past crimes of the ELF on the people and the fighters; (4) the formation of a committee to take charge of the properties of the organization; and (5) a declaration of the resolutions passed in the conference.⁸⁹

The General Command, also known as *Al-Qiyadah Al-'Ama*, had 38 members: 18 from the Tripartite Unity and 20 from the Zone One and Two. In terms of zonal representation on the General Command, the Tripartite Unity held fewer seats than the rest of the Zones. This was believed to have facilitated its domination by the

⁸⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 125-126; 153-155.

⁸⁹ ELF-ELA, "Awaj Gubae Adobha" [Adobha Declaration], 25 August 1969, 05808, RDC.

conservative supporters of Idris Mohammed Adem.⁹⁰ In any case, the 38-man interim leadership was entrusted to supervise and lead the overall activities of the front inside Eritrea until a permanent body was elected at the anticipated national congress. A delegation from the field was sent to the ELF's branches in Sudan, and conducted meetings with the Central Committee that assumed the position of the old RC after the Gedaref meeting. They informed them about the positive outcomes of the Adobha Conference and requested them to turn over their authority and property to the General Command. They also called them to join the united armies in the field. The Central Committee accepted their request and almost all members headed to the field.⁹¹ It was at this point of time that the RC was officially disbanded from the organizational structure of the ELF.

With regard to the Supreme Council abroad, the highest organ of the ELF, the General Command decided to sustain the SC in power and its political activities abroad until the convention of the national congress. This was primarily intended to maintain the flow of financial and military aid from foreign countries. A finance organ entrusted with collecting and running funds obtained by the SC was established in the field.⁹² In October 1969 the General Command invited the SC to have a meeting within three months time. On this issue, the SC was divided into two: Sabbe refused while Idris Mohammed Adem and Galadewos agreed to comply with the General Command's request. According to Sabbe, his refusal was motivated because he wanted to consult the others first.⁹³ To assess the ongoing developments and activities of the ELF, Sabbe organized a meeting on November 15-18, 1969 in a PLO camp in Amman, Jordan, with different members of the ELF foreign branch offices.⁹⁴ The meeting was carried out at the time when the protracted fight among the trios of the SC for the control of the organization had reached its climax. As a manifestation of this, Idris Mohammed Adem and Galadewos did not take part in the meeting. In their absence, Sabbe, in a bid to secure his own power base, reorganized the supreme leadership abroad and formed his own General Secretariat. With Sabbe as its Secretary General,

⁹⁰ Connel and Killion, 337.

⁹¹ Ali Mohammed, 159.

⁹² Markakis, *National and Class...*, 125.

⁹³ Osman Saleh Sabbe, interview, ... 4 April 1983.

⁹⁴ "Awaj Gubae Qedamay Abyate Tshfetat Tegadlo Harnet Ertra" [A Declaration on the First Conference of the ELF Branch Offices Abroad], 18 November 1969, translated from Arabic to Tigrinya by Abdella Kelifa Ali, translated/029, RDC.

he excluded the two key members of the old SC and other deputies who were loyal to them. This raised a strong opposition from the Chairman of the SC, Idris Mohammed Adem, Galadewos, and others. Idris Mohammed Adem, in order to avoid such threat to his power, chose to stand on the side of the General Command and declared that he would accept its authority. By making reference to the understandings reached in the Adobha Conference, he and Galadewos together with other two deputies issued a statement arguing that the SC had no political power to amend or re-establish itself before the anticipated national conference was held. Thus, they labelled the newly established General Secretariat by Sabbe as void and illegal.⁹⁵

In the field, a committee primarily in charge of blending the armies in the different zones was set up. Since December 1969, the process was carried out first in Orota, then in Tahrán, and finally in Kokolay, Eritrea, and it continued for the next three months. All in all, there were about 3000 ELF guerrillas fighters. About 23 companies, with 133 fighters each, were established.⁹⁶ The committee in charge of merging the guerrilla forces, however, encountered serious obstacles during the implementation process. Some members of the General Command from the Zone Four were not happy with the way the blending process was carried out. As a result, they resorted to maintain their old distinct zonal identity and autonomy, and began to communicate with Sabbe. The conservative majority of the General Command, after learning about these developments, incarcerated six of its members, all of them belonging to the fourth zone. People who objected to the decision faced imprisonment. Many others who were perceived as a threat to the General Command were also subjected to physical elimination.⁹⁷ The General Command officially suspended the SC from its activities abroad after it failed to come to the field as requested. This was a big blow to the SC members, who were highly respected as founders of the ELF. Thus they were determined to do everything to ensure the continuity of their power. Sabbe considered it a ‘coup’ and resorted to express his opposition openly. He cut off the flow of funds from abroad and set up an office in

⁹⁵ Supreme Council of the ELF, “Agedasi Awaj Kab LaEleway Bayto Tegadlo Harnet Ertra” [An Important Declaration from the Supreme Council of the ELF], November 1969, translated from Arabic to Tigrinya by Abdella Kelifa Ali, translated/028, RDC.

⁹⁶ Ibrahim Idris Totil, interview by Zemhret Yohannes, Asmara, Eritrea, 2004, audiocassette, Acc. No. 07758, RDC.

⁹⁷ For examples of brutal actions pursued by the General Command, please, refer to the next chapter.

Khartoum where it welcomed and recruited dissidents who fled from the field.⁹⁸ Therefore, the political developments both in the field and abroad were generally favourable to bring the divisive trend in the organization to a climax.

In the end, the modest outcomes that were achieved through the Adobha Conference appeared to have satisfied no one. The fragile unity of the different zone armies was short-lived. At the beginning of the second decade, therefore, a serious fracture emerged. This split, as we shall see it in the next chapter, had a lasting impact on the history of the organization.

Clandestine Operations

While the ELF was engulfed in factional strife at the turn of the first decade, its forces managed to conduct spectacular clandestine subversive operations which enabled them to win international publicity. The ELF guerrilla attacks were concentrated on Ethiopian economic and military installations. William Hall, the American Ambassador to Ethiopia, reported that in mid-1969 the ELF had “demonstrated its ability to strike selected targets using sophisticated guerrilla tactics more impressive than any used before.”⁹⁹ As Araia noted the strength of the insurgents towards the end of the 1960s was strongly felt by the Ethiopian authorities in Eritrea. “Many of the communication facilities, especially, the roads, railways, and telecommunication lines, were no longer safe for uninterrupted commercial use. Some areas, especially the northern and western border areas of Eritrea were not under the control of the Ethiopian authorities. Some economic programmes and trade in this area were greatly slowed down for the affairs of the Ethiopian government to function at all.”¹⁰⁰

In a bid to draw some international publicity, the ELF also resorted to the field of hijacking and destroying Ethiopian civil aircraft. On March 11, 1969, an explosion ripped through an Ethiopian commercial plane Boeing 707 jet parked at Frankfurt, Germany, injuring several German workers who were cleaning the plane at the time of the explosion. Two days later, the ELF claimed responsibility for the damage on the Ethiopian plane. The statement said: “the ELF placed the explosives in the plane

⁹⁸ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 126; Awet, 241.

⁹⁹ See Hall.

¹⁰⁰ Araia, 179.

as an act of revenge from the Ethiopian Airlines which participates in transporting Ethiopian soldiers into Eritrea where they have used to wage savage war of extermination against Eritrean innocent villages as reprisal for the defeats they suffer at the hands of the Eritrean Liberation Army...¹⁰¹ The statement added that the ELF commandos activities on Ethiopian planes was not going to cease so long as the planes continue to transport Ethiopian soldiers to Eritrea.

On 18 June 1969, another Ethiopian Airline Commercial jet Boeing 707 was attacked at Karachi, Pakistan. Three ELF commandos, armed with guns and lethal weapons infiltrated the premises of Karachi airport and damaged the plane badly. The three perpetrators were captured and imprisoned for eleven months after claiming that they had done it to achieve international publicity to the Eritrean cause.¹⁰² In addition to this, upon the anticipated visit of Emperor Haile Selassie to Italy in June, a plan to attack the Ethiopian Embassy in Italy was halted prematurely. The planned assailant was an Eritrean student in Cairo, who was recruited for the commando mission. On the 18th of June, he blew himself up while he was preparing explosives in his room in Rome.¹⁰³ On 13 September, another Ethiopian Airlines DC-6, which was bound to fly from Addis Ababa to Djibouti through Dire Dawa, was hijacked by three armed men from the ELF and forcibly taken to Aden. On landing, one of the three was shot by Ethiopian security guards on the aircraft and the rest were captured by the police. The last in these series of events was carried out on December 12 on another Ethiopian Boeing 707 in Madrid, Spain, by two armed members of the ELF. Shortly after the plane took off, the two men, in an unsuccessful bid of hijacking, were shot by a plainclothes Ethiopian security guard on the aircraft. A third suspect who was

¹⁰¹ ELF, "Eritrean Liberation Front Declares its Responsibility of the Explosion of Ethiopian Plane in Frankfurt," 13 March 1969, ELF/14/100, RDC.

¹⁰² The three fighters who committed the attack were Ali Said Abdella, Mohammed Idris Tlul, and Fesehaye Abraha. The success of the mission should also be attributed partly to the role played by Osman Saleh Sabbe, member of the SC, who took the daring step to transport the deadly weapons from Syria to Pakistan using his diplomatic passport. See "Eritrawyan Commando Ab Karachi" [Eritrean Commandos in Karachi], *Hwyet*, no. 8 (1996): 4-12; *Hadas Eritrea*, 30 August 2005; *Eritrean Profile*, 31 August 2005.

¹⁰³ Drawn from Osman, "Ma'erakat Iritriyah..." chapter five.



A destroyed road leading into Massawa,
between Nefasit and Embatkala.



Damaged railroad leading to Agordat,
between Hagaz and Dae'rotay.

Figure 7. Some of the destroyed roads and railroads in the late 1960s.

Source: Eritrean Popular Police Force, "YAertra Ras Gez Hzbawi Police Tarik..." 52.



Figure 8. A scene of a derailed train in Ashadira on its way to Agordat, 1970.

Source: Research and Documentation Centre, Eritrea. An ELF fighter who participated in the operation recounts that the fighters first loosened the railroad spikes the night before the event. As the train headed towards the bridge, they stopped it first and discharged all its passengers and train driver only to let the train be derailed as shown in the pictures. The story was drawn from: Tesfay Tekle, interview by Zemhret Yohannes, ND, NP, audiocassette, RDC.

believed to have been connected with the above-mentioned attempts was arrested by the Spanish police at Madrid airport with explosives.¹⁰⁴

All the above-mentioned military operations contributed a lot in gaining wider international publicity. Nevertheless, the internal factional strife was the stumbling block for ELF's political progress. The next chapter of its history is the history of fragmentation and internecine warfare.

¹⁰⁴ Drawn from Osman, "Ma'erakat Iritriyah..." chapter five; Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia* (London, England: Julian Friedmann Publishers, 1975), 198-199; "Aeroplane Hijackings by Eritreans 1969-1971," http://www.eritrios.net/1970s/aeroplane_hijackings_by_eritrean.htm (accessed 25 February 2014).

Chapter Four: Fragmentation and Civil War: 1970-1974

Introduction

In the previous chapters we have seen the process through which the ELF emerged and expanded country-wide. By introducing a new military strategy that divided Eritrea into five zones of operation, the ELF was able to grow and spread itself widely through the first decade. However, the social landscape of Eritrea, which was then divided along ethnic, religious, and regional lines, on the one hand, and the failure of the leadership to properly manage the strategy, and create an all-embracing, disciplined, accountable and effectively centralized organization, on the other, affected the implementation of the strategy negatively. As a result, Zonal commanders became more powerful than their superiors and often reacted with brutality to perceived threats. Ethnic and religious sectarianism and intense rivalry developed within and between the different zones, which even led to zone commanders failing to help each other during time of war, thereby weakening the organization severely. Consequently, ELF failed to consolidate its gains. The growing discontent and grievances among the increasingly diverse fighters, however, gave rise to the emergence of rebellious forces who sought to reform the organization from within. Their effort succeeded in bringing the armies under a single interim leadership called the General Command. The unity of the armies in the field, however, did not succeed in bringing unity at the top. Members of the old Supreme Council became divided and suspicious of each other. Thus, the unity of the armies gained at the Adobha Conference only achieved limited and temporary success. What happened in the beginning of the subsequent decade was a serious disintegration that reduced the size of the ELF's army considerably.

This chapter examines the proliferation of different independent politico-military organizations from the 'mother organization' and how the ELF reacted and legitimated its measures through resolutions passed during its first organizational congress. Furthermore, the subsequent civil war that went on for over two years and the underlying reasons that brought it to a halt shall be briefly addressed.

Disintegration and Reorganization

When Sabbe officially abolished the old Supreme Council and in its place formed a General Secretariat in Amman, Jordan, the rest of the members of SC and their associates aligned to stand against Sabbe's coalition. Thus the former SC was split into two. This is to say: Idris Mohammed Adem and Galadewos versus Sabbe.¹

Inside the field, the interim General Command lost control of the critical internal political situation. It became increasingly brutal and intolerant to any sort of opposition or perceived threats. Many dreadful incidents happened that eventually exacerbated the political situation and accelerated the pace of the fragmentation in the ELF. Mentioning two incidents suffice to show the notoriety of the General Command. The first example concerns the incident that happened over the newly arrived Christian fighters who joined in hundreds from Addis Ababa and other parts of Ethiopia in the late 1960s. The ELF dubbed their unit in Arabic as *Seryet Addis* ('Forces of Addis'), to signify their place of origin. The ELF detained the group apparently on suspicion of being agents of Ethiopia's secret police and security services. Many of them experienced brutal interrogation, and considerable of them were killed in early 1970.² As a result, it was reported that between September 1969 and August 1970, about two hundred and eighty-one guerrilla fighters surrendered to the Ethiopian government.³ Moreover, on the orders of the General Command, two prominent ELF Christian cadres in Sudan called Kidane Kiflu and Welday Gidey, who were known for their radical and reformist ideas, were knifed to death in Kassala, Sudan, by ELF officials after failing to kidnap them forcibly across the border into Eritrea.⁴

The impact of these events was generally disastrous. The brutality and persecution instilled fear and panic among fighters and became too much to bear. For many Christian fighters the viciousness of the General Command became evidence that the General Command was not in a position to welcome the participation of the Christian fighters in any significant degree. In other words, the fighters had come to the point

¹ Tesfay Tekle, interview by Michael Weldeghiorghis, Massawa, Eritrea, 17 December 2013.

² Markakis, 126.

³ Shumet Sishagne, *Unionists and Separatists: The Vagaries of the Ethio-Eritrean Relation, 1941-1991* (Hollywood, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2007), 151.

⁴ Markakis, 126-1267; Shumet, 142; Awet, 241; Tesfay Tekle, interview by Zemhret...

where they could no longer stay in the organization. The breakdown of the fragile unity, therefore, was an inevitable fact. Fighters from ex-Zone Four, including their Commander, defected en masse from ELF ranks and fled to Sudan. Many other fighters also went to Sudan through excuses of sickness, leave, mission, etc and regrouped there.⁵ Others, who were earlier campaigning for the formation of a united army and structure, and for convening of the congress at Adobha, left the organization in a bid for self preservation and moved to places out of the reach of the General Command. As a result, three different splinter groups emerged in the Eritrean political arena.

In early 1970, one splinter group, predominantly composed of Muslims from the Massawa-Hirgigo area, gathered in the Sudanese border town of Kassala. Over 300 of these fighters were flown from Sudan to Aden, Yemen, using charter Air. The transportation was carried out in successive flights. From Aden, they were ferried to the coastal area of Southern Dankalia, where they were joined by several hundred other fighters from the Semhar region led by Mohammed Ali Omaro, former Commander of Zone Four, and Romedan Mohammed Nur.⁶ The master mind behind all this coordination and organization was Osman Saleh Sabbe who had already been preparing for such an eventuality by forming his own Beirut-based General Secretariat in opposition to the General Command.⁷ From 24 June to 3 July 1970, they convened a founding conference at a place called Sedho-Ela, Southern Dankalia, and formed the *Popular Liberation Forces* (PLF-I). The meeting elected a nine-man leadership with Mohammed Ali Omaro as a chairman, Mesfin Hagos, Mohammed Umer Abdela “Abu Tiyara”, Alamin Mohammed Seid, and few other members. The leadership, however, failed to reach a consensus regarding the place where the principal base area should be. Consequently, the majority remained in South Dankalia while a smaller group set off for the northern Sahel. Nevertheless, the split was soon rectified through a joint meeting held in Embahra in July 1970 and unification of the two sub-factions took place. The leadership formed earlier in Sedho-Ela was replaced by a new five-man⁸ command, led by Romedan Mohammed Nur, who was sent to the

⁵ Eritrean People’s Liberation Forces, “The Historical Background of the Eritrean Civil War,” 14 December 1972, 00431, RDC; Tesfay Tekle, interview by Michael...

⁶ Osman Saleh Sabbe, interview,... 4 April 1983; Connell and Killion, 207-208.

⁷ Shumet, 153.

⁸ The five elected members of the leadership were: Romedan Mohammed Nur, Ahmed Hilal, Abubakar Mohammed Hassan, Saleh Tetew, and Abubeker Mohammed Jemi’e. See Alamin Mohammed Seid,

People's Republic of China, in 1967, for a guerrilla warfare training, along with Isaias Afwerki and three others.⁹

In March 1970, another faction, primarily composed of Christian highlanders, split off and set out for the Ala area in the eastern part of the highlands of Eritrea. They established the *Eritrean Freedom Party* (Selfi Natsinet Ertra) through a conference carried out in Tekhli between 13 to 15 August 1971. The meeting elected a five-man¹⁰ leadership led by Isaias Afwerki, the former political commissar of Zone Five and member of the General Command. The name of the splinter group was later changed into the *Popular Liberation Forces* (PLF-II). Due to the prevailing ethnic, religious and regional schism, some Tigrinya-speaking Christian fighters, such as Mesfin Hagos who received military training in Syria in 1967-68, abandoned PLF-I and joined the Christian dominated PLF-II.¹¹

Meanwhile, in November 1970, another Beni Amer faction from the Barka region split off from the ELF and held its first meeting that gave rise to a third splinter group known as the Obel. The name of this opposition group was derived from the seasonal stream in the northern Barka, where the founding meeting was held. The Obel group was led by four members of the General Command, mainly Beni Amer.¹² They announced that they would no longer be bound by the General Command and released the six members of the General Command who had been in prison for more than a year.¹³ They were prompted by “a complex mix of personal ambitions and tribalist sentiment”¹⁴ which, according to Sabbe, resulted from their dissatisfaction with the domination of the second region (specifically the Bilen) and of Saho group. Thus, “they thought of themselves as being the main force of the front but losing ground.”¹⁵

Sewra Ertra: Msguamn Mnqulqualn. Mesrh Wshtawi Mfhfahat Sewra Ertra (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1994), 58.

⁹ Ibid., 36-39, 57-58. The five trainees in China were Romedan Mohammed Nur, Isaias Afwerki, Ahmed Adem Omer, Ahmed Mohammed Ibrahim, and Mohammed Ibrahim Mohammed Said. In the correspondence letters of ELF with the Chinese Embassy in Damascus, Isaias Afwerki did not appear in the initial list of five candidates for the guerrilla warfare training. The list rather included a person called Gelia Michael. See Idris Mohammed Adem to the People's Republic of China, 14 January 1967, ELF/16/116, RDC.

¹⁰ These were: Isaias Afwerki, Mesfin Hagos, Asmerom Gherezghiher, Tewelde Eyob, and Solomon Weldemariam. Alamin, 58.

¹¹ Osman Saleh Sabbe, interview, ... 4 April 1983.

¹² These four founding members were Adem Saleh, head of the Military Committee of the General Command, Ahmed Adem Omer, Osman Ajeb and Mohammed Ahmed Idris. See Alamin, 41.

¹³ Ibid. For information about the six victims, please, refer to the previous chapter.

¹⁴ Connell and Killion, 403.

¹⁵ Osman Saleh Sabbe, interview, ... 4 April 1983.

Unlike the other two splinter groups, the Obel attempted to engage in dialogue and attended successive military conference with the General Command of the ELF. The official announcement of the Obel's secession from the ELF was published at the end of December 1971.¹⁶

Fighters from the ELF were not only defecting to join the splinter groups, but also deserting to the enemy. As mentioned earlier about two hundred and eighty-one guerrillas had surrendered to the Ethiopian government from September 1969 to August 1970.¹⁷ A majority of the ELF fighters, however, remained loyal to the old organization and continued to operate under the leadership of the General Command. By the end of 1971, therefore, the Eritrean nationalist political arena contained four independent political groups: PLF-I, PLF-2, the Obel, and the ELF proper presided by the interim General Command. Each splinter group attempted to portray itself as democratic and progressive group, offering an alternative viable organization to the ELF.¹⁸

The national congress which was supposed to be held no later than September 1970 was suspended for more than two years. Realizing the repercussion of the ongoing fragmentation and depletion of its forces, ELF's General Command attempted to rectify the problem by calling a general meeting to prepare the necessary ground for the implementation of the national congress. Invitations were sent only to the PLF-I and PLF-II since the Obelites did not officially pronounce their breakaway at this particular time. But none of them accepted the invitation. The meeting, which became known as the Awate Camp Military Conference, was held from 26 February to 13 March, 1971. About 300 fighters representing different sectors attended the meeting. According to the ELF, the Conference was undertaken "to take practical steps to narrow the schism and end division through the long awaited national congress."¹⁹ The conference decided (1) to enlarge the size of the Preparatory Committee for the forthcoming national congress; and (2) to keep the General Command in power until the anticipated conference was held. In a bid to solve the problem with the splinter

¹⁶ Alamin, 41.

¹⁷ Shumet, 151.

¹⁸ Ali Mohammed, 172.

¹⁹ ELF, *The Eritrean Revolution: 16 years of Armed Struggle, September 1, 1961- September 1, 1977* (Beirut: ELF Information Centre, 1977), 44.

groups through dialogue, a contact committee was formed and approached the ‘dissidents’, but to no avail.²⁰

In spite of the tense political situation, the ELF managed to conduct its first Congress from October 14 to November 12, 1971 at Arr in northern Eritrea. The Congress was attended by over 500 delegates representing the fighters in the field, the former Supreme Council, the Eritrean refugees in Sudan, friendly States as well as journalists from abroad. The splinter groups refused to attend the conference on the ground that they had no guarantee for their security so long as the very members of the General Command that put its critics behind bars were still in power.²¹



Figure 9. The First Congress of the ELF, Arr, November 1971. A Syrian journalist is shown holding a camera.

Source: Research and Documentation Centre, Eritrea.

The Congress adopted a new political and military programme intended to serve the ELF as guiding principle to achieve its national objectives. It proclaimed that the Eritrean Revolution was a national democratic revolution and clearly defined the aims

²⁰ Markakis, 124; ELF, *The Eritrean Revolution...*, 44.

²¹ With, 63.

and objectives of the Eritrean independence struggle under the auspices of the ELF.²² The Congress replaced the provisional General Command with a thirteen-man *Revolutionary Council* led by Idris Mohammed Adem, former chairman of the revoked SC. While Herui Tedla, the only Christian of the thirteen, assumed the position of vice-chairman and head of political affairs, Abdella Idris and Azen Yassin took charge of military affairs and foreign relations respectively. Additionally, the Congress elected an eighteen-man executive body and Ibrahim Idris Totil was named chairman.²³

The Congress condemned the schism and lines of division pursued by splinter groups. The first statement of the resolution affirmed that “the experience of the Eritrean revolution demonstrates that the Eritrean field cannot accommodate more than one organization and leadership.”²⁴ The Congress thus called on the ‘dissident’ fighters, particularly from the PLF-I and the Obelites: (1) to abide by the political and military programmes adopted by the congress; and (2) to return to their respective units in the liberation army within a specific time frame. The Congress further warned the dissidents, saying, “If they fail to do so, the ELF had the right to solve the disunity by applying the necessary military means.”²⁵ With regard to the PLF-II (the Ala group), taking into consideration its social constituency and sensitivity, the congress decided to handle the issue with extra caution and decided to solve it through dialogue. Pool pointed out that “sensitive to the legacy of the killing of the Christian fighters, the Ala group was not initially a target.”²⁶ Thus, apart from the others, a special appeal was sent to the PLF-II. But they refused and moved to the more inaccessible hills of Ala.²⁷ The resolution passed by the Congress was a serious ultimatum, implying a declaration of war on the breakaway factions. Indeed it set the stage for the civil war that followed.

Programmatically, the ELF recognized the equality of all ethno-linguistic groups, and adopted Tigrinya and Arabic as the official languages in conducting all activities in

²² ELF, “The Eritrean Revolution: A Programmatic Declaration. Approved by the First National Congress Held Inside the Liberated Areas, 14 October-12 November 1971,” 02129, RDC.

²³ Markakis, 130.

²⁴ ELF, “Qedamay Hagerawi Gubae: Poletikawi Wsanietat” [The First National Congress: Political Decisions], 12 November 1971, 05811, RDC.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Cited in Redie, 196.

²⁷ Shumet, 154.

the ELF. It should be noted that Tigrinya and Arabic had been Eritrea's two official languages when the UN-sponsored Federation was implemented in 1952. In order to enhance the popular base of the struggle, the congress decided to form mass organizations for workers, peasants, students, and women with the right to establish their independent programmes through congresses.²⁸

In November 1971, the PLF-II (the Ala group), issued its first manifesto that clearly elaborated the reasons for their breakaway and stated their objectives and programmes. The manifesto denounced the sectarian nature of the ELF and its Islamic orientation and misrepresentation of the Eritrean armed struggle as an 'Arab' cause fought by 'Muslims' against a 'Christian country', Ethiopia. The ELF was criticized for having rallied "in the name of Islam rather than in the name of the Eritrean people."²⁹ The document further defined its status by stating that:

We are freedom fighters and not prophets of Christianity...our conviction is that... when Eritrean Muslims are oppressed, it is the oppression of the Eritrean people; and when Eritrean Christians are oppressed, it is also the oppression of the Eritrean people. We do not recognize that oppression discriminates on the basis of religion... We reiterate that we are fighting against oppression and for the unity of our people, without any recourse to religion... [Thus] we are Eritreans not Arabs!... When we line up with the struggle with our Arab comrades, it is only because of our revolutionary conviction and dictates of our strategic relationship, and not because we are Arabs or Muslims.³⁰

The manifesto illustrated the determination of the PLF-II to eradicate all forms of social, economic and gender-based inequalities alongside the struggle to achieve political independence.³¹

Sabbe and his group, who denounced the ELF's first Congress, were determined to challenge the leadership of the ELF. He began to coordinate the activities of the splinter groups. Unlike the PLF-II who enjoyed the patronage from Sabbe, the act of breaking away presented the rest of the splinter groups with serious logistical challenges. It should be recalled that, at the outset, they did not have an external patron who could provide them with the necessary arms and other supplies. Above all, ELF's ultimatum and threat of extermination posed the greatest danger to their

²⁸ ELF, "The Eritrean Revolution...".

²⁹ Peoples Liberation Forces [i.e. PLF-II], "Neh'nan Elamanan" [We and our Objectives], November 1971, 02104, RDC. An English version of the document is also available online at <http://eritrios.net/1970s/Nihnan%20Elamanan,%20English%201971.pdf> (last accessed 28 June 2014).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

survival. In the face of such a critical challenge, they sought to resolve their commonly shared problem through the formation of a united front. Shumet Sishagne, an Ethiopian scholar, describes the symbiotic relationship that existed between the three splinter groups as follows: “Each of these groups had something to offer to the other. Sabby’s group [PLF-I], although depleted in numbers, was well funded by sympathetic Arab countries. Issayas’ group [PLF-II], although poorly equipped, could boast of a potential recruiting ground in the highlands and the urban centres. The Obel faction, although few in numbers, was the only force which could claim support in western Eritrea and as such was potentially important for any future expansion towards this area.”³²

After preliminary meetings carried out in 1971, Sabbe sponsored the alliance of the three factions through an agreement signed in Beirut in February 1972. Among other things, they agreed: (1) first to consider their difference as secondary issue, since it could be solved through a broader meeting in the field; (2) to divide all external supplies equally among the three groups; (3) to retain their organizational independence until a united conference was held no later than a year; and (4) that Sabbe to take charge of the Foreign Mission through his General Secretariat.³³ Accordingly, in October 1972, a meeting of the three splinter groups was held at Gehteb, on the Sudanese border. They formed an interim transitional joint military administration, whereby they were put under a centralized leadership while simultaneously retaining their organizational names.³⁴

The alliance of the splinter groups was viewed as a serious threat to the ‘mother organization’, the ELF. The Revolutionary Council of the ELF (hereafter referred to as ELF-RC), on 22 February 1972, three months from its first Congress, passed a resolution that approved a war of liquidation on the splinter groups, especially the PLF-I (Sabbe’s group) and Obel group. With regard to the PLF-I, as mentioned earlier, their case was treated as special case, owing to regional and sectarian sensitivities. When the war began the ELF attempted to persuade PLF-II to remain

³² Shumet, 156.

³³ Alamin, 41-43. The delegations of the three factions were as follows. From PLF-I: Romedan Mohammed Nur, and Ali Said Abdallah (one of the three people who destroyed Ethiopian commercial jet in Karachi, Pakistan in 1969); from PLF-II: Isaias Afwerki and Mesfin Hagos; and from Obel group: Osman Ajeb, Saleh Shattre.

³⁴ Redie, 193.

neutral since the military operation was not directed against them. But the “PLF-II was not convinced, rather, it interpreted the appeal as the ELF’s tactic to liquidate the different factions one by one.”³⁵

The initial civil war began in February 1972 with an attack on the Obel forces. Some twenty Obelites, including leaders, were encircled and placed under the control of the ELF in a place called Bisha, west of Agordat. The rest of Obel forces who were stationed in the upper Barka region surrendered without any trouble. The ELF fighters then proceeded to eliminate the PLF-I and between March 3 and May 11, 1972 alone, they conducted about sixteen engagements at different places of the Sahel region, the principal base of the PLF-I. Within those ten weeks time alone, an estimated death toll of over 190 and over 270 casualties on both sides was claimed by the PLF-I. According to the PLF Foreign Mission, the Eritrean armed struggle had never experienced such human catastrophe when fighting against Ethiopian troops over the past two years.³⁶

The ELF’s declaration of war, nonetheless, accelerated the unification of PLF-I and PLF-II. In August 1973, a complete merger was enacted which formed the *Eritrean People’s Liberation Forces* (EPLF). Whereas some Obel members who remained behind joined the EPLF, others opted to flee to the Sudan.³⁷ In the first half of 1970s, the ELF was pretty much occupied with ensuring that the political adversaries were liquidated or at least driven out of Eritrea.

The civil war came to an end in December 1974. There are several explanations concerning the factors that contributed to the end of the civil war. Prominent among these was the pressure exerted by the civilian Eritrean population to bring it to a halt. This popular initiative for cessation of hostilities between the organizations came about when the war escalated in the highlands. While the ELF had little influence in the highlands, the EPLF had already established a base at Solomuna in Sahel, directly below Zagher village, on the slope of the Eritrean plateau. In August 1974, two twin villages, Woki and Zagher became the site of a series of pitched battles between the

³⁵ Ibid, 196.

³⁶ PLF Foreign Mission, “Hadhd Wge: Ztekhayedelu Botatn Eletaten Zebreh Megletsi” [Civil War: An Explanation to the Dates and Places where it Happened], 2 June 1972, translated from Arabic to Tigrinya by Abdella Kelifa Ali, translated/042, RDC.

³⁷ Ruth, 116.

ELF based in Zagher and the EPLF in Woki. In the following month, the local population from the environs intervened, and pleaded to fighters to negotiate a cease-fire. The efforts of the villagers for a peaceful settlement attracted other people from the highlands anxious to put more pressure for the civil war to be brought to a halt. In October, about 30,000 civilians, mostly from the capital, marched to the Zagher village, urging both liberation movements to initiate negotiation and put an end to the civil war. On October 13, 1974, a formal ELF-EPLF cease-fire was signed, marking the end of the first civil war between these two organizations.³⁸

A second contributing factor to the end of the civil war was the strategy adopted by the EPLF and its ability to counteract the offensive from the ELF. The EPLF during the war employed “a defensive posture and refused to attack, but at the same time proved to be militarily and politically a formidable opponent.”³⁹ The ELF, for its part, realized that “it could not conclude the civil war to its benefit.”⁴⁰

In connection to this, the internal political situation and the revolution in Ethiopia was a stimulating factor for the case in point. From 1972-73, a series of developments led to the fall of the regime of Haile Selassie, Ethiopia’s last emperor. Although structural problems and inequalities, such as unequal landholding systems, form the major root causes, the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution was sparked by a number of conjectural factors. Chief among these were: “military inability to quash the Eritrean guerrillas; corrupt officers profiteering from war; low salaries; the lack of adequate food and water supplies exacerbated by the drought of 1972-1973; and the ineptness of the aging emperor.”⁴¹ Through a “creeping coup” a committee made up of middle and lower ranking officers, the *Dergue*, assumed power in Ethiopia on 12 September 1974. The deposed Emperor was arrested and the *Dergue* declared the transfer of government power to a Provisional Military Advisory Committee, the PMAC. In November, the Chairman of the *Dergue*, General Aman Andom, himself of Eritrean origin, took initiatives to bring about a negotiated political settlement to the war in Eritrea. He conducted mass meetings in Asmara and Keren while calling for Ethiopian unity. Aman basically proposed the introduction of administrative reforms, the provision of general amnesty to fighters, and most importantly, in October, he

³⁸ Connell, 150-152, 555-556; Awet, 304-305; Redie, 197.

³⁹ Bereket, 67.

⁴⁰ Redie, 197; Alamin, 70.

⁴¹ Ruth, 117.

came up with the idea of a federal solution to Eritrea. Both liberation movements rejected his proposal and reaffirmed their commitment to full independence.⁴² However, the fall of Haile Selassie and the *Dergue's* policy towards the Eritrean question demanded the urgent end of the war between the opposing and rival liberation movements.⁴³

As we shall see in the next chapter, it is important to underline the fact that the end of the civil war and the official truce negotiated in Woki-Zagher enabled both liberation movements to concentrate and deploy their forces fully against their common enemy without being distracted in internecine warfare. This was clear in early 1975 when they embarked a joint offensive on Asmara in an attempt to seize the city. The forthcoming chapter will address the political and military development of the ELF between 1975 and 1981.

⁴² Connell and Killion, 67-68; Dawit, 86-87.

⁴³ ELF, *The Eritrean Revolution...*, 45.

Chapter Five: The ELF: From Territorial Expansion to Historical Expulsion, 1975-1981

Introduction

In this final chapter an attempt is made to trace important historical developments that shaped the course of ELF history from 1975 to 1981. These developments include both military and political aspects that characterized the internal and external dynamics of the movement. In examining these issues, special attention will be given to finding answers as to why the ELF could not forge the set of aims of unity and efficiency as a movement, and why and how it finally collapsed.

Military and Political Developments, 1975-1978

Three outstanding developments distinguish the period under examination, 1975-78. These are: (1) the ability of the Eritrean nationalists to capture most of the Eritrean territory towards the end of 1977, (2) the mobilization and massive participation of youth by the ELF, and (3) the complex efforts undertaken to unify the various factions.¹ On 31 January 1975, after the end of the internecine war between ELF and EPLF, both movements, taking the opportunity offered by the enemy's weakness (the Ethiopian state forces), launched an offensive on Asmara in an attempt to control the city. A couple of weeks later, the ELF freed over one thousand political prisoners from Asmara and Adi Quala prisons.² After a few weeks of fighting the Eritrean forces were repelled from the city. The *Dergue* concluded that the offensive was made possible because of the collaboration of the local people. The security and military forces directly took measures to retaliate on the residents of the capital and the surrounding villages. This was perhaps the first time that the Eritrean plateau was attacked at large. The situation of the youth in particular became increasingly difficult. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, an Ethiopian official who served as Deputy Chief of Relief and Rehabilitation and later as Deputy Foreign Minister, wrote that in Asmara, "...civilians, young and old, were indiscriminately massacred, either in the crossfire

¹ Redie, 198.

² ELF, "Diary of the Revolution..."

during the battle or as suspected rebel collaborators. The army's excesses drove thousands to the guerrillas, and those that were left behind seriously questioned their allegiance to the Ethiopian Revolution. Henceforth, many highland Eritreans, particularly young people, either went out in the field to join the guerrillas or became clandestinely involved in the movements."³

The flow of young educated Eritreans, men and women, to the field altered the ELF both in terms of quantitative and qualitative aspect. The EPLF, too, experienced a dramatic growth in the number of new recruits in the armed struggle. Before mid-1974, the number of active fighters in both rebel camps was estimated at 2000-2500; but in early 1975, the estimates increased to 6000-15,000 and by the middle of 1976, the number of insurgents reached around 30,000-45,000.⁴ The figures appear inflated, though; it included barely trained militia forces and frontline combatants. For the first time, the ELF army was organized at battalion and brigade levels.⁵

The numerical change also brought about a qualitative change in the ELF's organizational composition. Most of the new recruits were composed of urban, educated – secondary-school graduates and University students – and former members of Ethiopian Police and Commandos. They also brought important technically skilled people, such as clerks, mechanics, drivers, accountants, doctors etc.⁶ Moreover, a considerable proportion of the ELF rank-and-file came to be composed of Christians.⁷ All this contributed to bring about profound ideological, organizational, and political changes.

In May 1975, the ELF held its Second National Congress and confirmed the ceasefire with the EPLF through a resolution that called for “a democratic dialogue for ending secondary contradictions.”⁸ The Congress removed Idris Mohammed Adem from the chairmanship of the Revolutionary Council and replaced him with Ahmed

³ Dawit, 88.

⁴ Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea, 1962-1978. War and Revolution in the Horn of Africa* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 71-72.

⁵ Tesfay Tekle, interview by Michael Weldeghiorghis,...

⁶ Zemhret Yohannes, interview by Michael Weldeghiorghis, Asmara, Eritrea, 30 January 2014.

⁷ Markakis, “Nationalist Revolution...,” 63.

⁸ ELF. *The Eritrean Revolution...*, 45; With, 77.

Mohammed Nasser, a young man who was trained in Syria and Ibrahim Totil was elected for the post of Vice Chairman.⁹

In the following months, the ELF-RC, through its Chairman, Ahmed Mohammed Nasser, opened negotiation with Osman Saleh Sabbe, who was in charge of the EPLF's Foreign Mission. Sabbe went forward to try and realize the 'unity' of the two fronts without consulting the forces in the field. The negotiations were conducted in July and August of 1975 in Beirut and Baghdad. On 8 September, a unity agreement was finally concluded in Khartoum, by which a unifying congress was to be held within a short period of time. As a manifestation of a major step in the effort to unify the two liberation movements, a joint delegation led by Ahmed Mohammed Nasser and Osman Saleh Sabbe, visited their Arab supporters in the Middle East – an experience happening for the first time in the history of the Eritrean armed struggle.¹⁰ However, the understanding reached in Sudan angered the *field-based* EPLF forces, and they immediately held a meeting in North Bahri district. The meeting was a large affair attended by nearly a hundred delegates. The EPLF stated that Sabbe: "...illegally and in an unprincipled manner and without authorization or warrant, and because of external pressure, held several meetings with the leadership of the ELF and adopted several joint resolutions with it...The Foreign Mission considered itself the sole lawful agent to represent the EPLF in Khartoum meeting without having a power of attorney from the EPLF. Therefore, ...[EPLF's] position on the resolutions and recommendations of Khartoum meeting... [was] point-blank rejection."¹¹

The ELF sought the formation of a "national democratic front" by merging all nationalist organizations through a congress. Whereas, the EPLF argued that unification of the two organizations "should come gradually and by stages and by means of numerous programs of action, [that would eventually lead] to the emergence of one democratic and revolutionary organization."¹²

Since late 1974, the relation between the Foreign Mission abroad and the EPLF field-based leadership was continuously deteriorating. The question of the distribution of funds belonging to the movement was a major source of disagreement, despite the fact

⁹ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 139.

¹⁰ Erlich, 88.

¹¹ EPLF (The Field), "Resolutions of the Bahri North Meeting," 12 November 1975, 09937, RDC.

¹² Ibid.

that they nominally had created a clear functional division of power. Sabbe's prime job was to collect funds from abroad, while the leadership in the field took charge of leading the fighters.¹³ But this time, Sabbe, by signing an agreement with the ELF-RC on behalf of the EPLF, singlehandedly, generated a further organizational split. Consequently, the EPLF repudiated the agreement reached in Khartoum and broke off their relations with the Foreign Mission in March 1976.¹⁴

By mobilizing some fighters, Sabbe resorted to establishing his own organization known as the *Eritrean Liberation Front–People's Liberation Forces*, the ELF-PLF. Delighted with this new turn of events, the ELF-RC recognized the ELF-PLF as an independent third organization in the Eritrean political arena. They also allowed Sabbe to set up a camp in the northwestern part of Eritrea where he managed to mobilize some two thousand fighters by early 1977.¹⁵ The movement, however, never became a major competing force. For tactical reasons, it was thought that the ELF kept Sabbe as a factor to be manipulated in the contest with the EPLF.¹⁶ But the relations of ELF-RC with Sabbe generated a lot of controversy among the rank-and-file of the ELF, as we shall see later in a separate section.

While negotiations for unity proceeded, the ELF and EPLF also stepped up their war efforts against the *Dergue*. In response, the *Dergue* launched an operation code-named "Raza", in which more than 100,000 peasants from Shoa, Gojjam, Tigray, and Gondar were recruited to serve as a militia to supplement the weary soldiers of the regular army fighting at the Eritrean front.¹⁷ Tens of thousands of these peasants were ordered to march into Eritrea. The rationale behind such a plan was by intimidation of numbers to threaten the nationalist movements, deter their activities and send a message that the entire population of Ethiopia was determined to defeat them. But these peasants were barely trained and ill-equipped with virtually no logistical support. They set out the march in crowds, singing war songs, like in the old days. The result was disastrous. Before reaching Eritrea, heavy damages were inflicted on the peasant militia by the ELF, EPLF, and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Founded in 1975, the TPLF was an ethno-nationalist movement in Ethiopia

¹³ Erlich, 88.

¹⁴ Ibid., 89.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Markakis, *National and Class...*, 140.

¹⁷ Dawit, 89.

that revolted against the *Dergue* regime, demanding self-rule for the province of Tigray (bordering Eritrea) within the wider Ethiopian state.¹⁸ As a result of this combined attack, the peasants suffered a horrifying carnage, in which more than 25,000 of them were killed,¹⁹ about 700 were captured by the ELF and the rest dispersed haphazardly to save their lives.²⁰

After the fiasco of the peasant march, the *Dergue* announced a nine-point peace plan. Accordingly, the plan “affirmed that the right of self-determination of nationalities can be guaranteed through regional autonomy which takes due account of objective realities prevailing in Ethiopia...”²¹ However, the plan was rejected straightforward by the ELF and the EPLF, and both movements continued their military operations throughout 1976.

In January 1977, the EPLF held its First Organizational Congress in Sahel. The Congress adopted an 11-point political program that envisaged the establishment of an independent, secular, and egalitarian state in Eritrea. The Congress elected a 43-member Central Committee and an executive body known as the Political Bureau, made up of 13 top members of the Central Committee. The Congress reinstated Romedan Mohammed Nur and Issaias Afwerki as Secretary-general and deputy respectively.²² The Congress adopted a new insignia and passed a resolution to rename the EPLF from *Force* to *Front*. Although the EPLF started to reorganize in 1973, it had never referred to itself as a “front” until its first congress. The change of name seemed to indicate EPLF’s intention to portray itself as the ‘true and only representative of the Eritrean people’: a concept argued by the ELF before the end of the civil war in late 1974.²³

Meanwhile, the ELF and EPLF launched a joint offensive on the city of Asmara and other parts of Eritrea starting from the second half of 1976. The seizure of towns and villages proceeded at an unprecedented pace. ELF managed to capture a string of towns in the western lowlands such as Tesseney, Aligeder, Geluj, and Omhajer. An

¹⁸ See Erlich, 73-74, 76.

¹⁹ Dawit, 88-90.

²⁰ Ahferom Tewolde, interview by Michael Weldeghiorghis, Asmara, Eritrea, 28-29 January 2014.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

²² Both of them had been comrades since their trip to China for training in 1967.

²³ Erlich, 91; Markakis, *National and Class...*, 142-144; Ruth, 116.

offensive to capture Barentu was launched, but was repelled.²⁴ In conjunction with this, on July 13, 1977, an all-out war broke out between Ethiopia and Somalia over the disputed region of Ogaden, an arid region in southeastern Ethiopia.²⁵ As a result of Somali invasion, a significant proportion of Ethiopian troops were relocated to face the Somali forces. The reduced size of government troops helped the nationalist momentum in Eritrea.²⁶ As a result, between August and September 1977, the ELF took control of Mendefera, Adi Quala and Agordat. As the war continued, ELF also captured the small coastal town of Beilul and other fishing villages, such as Berasole and Edi on the southeastern seaboard of Eritrea. The EPLF, on the other hand, occupied towns on the northern slopes (in the Sahel and Keren provinces) and jointly with the ELF moved their forces into the central highlands. By the end of the year, about ninety percent of the total landmass of Eritrea fell under the control of the nationalist movements. Only Asmara, Adi-Qeyeh, Barentu and the port cities of Massawa and Assab remained in the Ethiopian government's control.²⁷

When victory of the Eritrean nationalists seemed within grasp, a series of negotiations for unity resumed between the ELF and EPLF. On October 20, 1977, through the mediation of Sudanese President, Jaafar Nimeiry, the two rival fronts signed an agreement in Khartoum in order to revitalize the idea of creating a united national democratic front. Ahmed Mohammed Nasser, Chairman of the ELF-RC, and Isaias Afwerki, representing the EPLF, agreed to establish a joint supreme political leadership and joint committees on military, information, economic, social, and foreign affairs while both fronts retain their organizational independence until the final merger process would culminate in unification.²⁸ In this effort, Sabbe's organization was left out and the ELF withdrew its earlier recognition of ELF-PLF as an official third independent organization. ELF's tactical relation with them was short-lived. The ELF and EPLF finally called Sabbe's group to join one of the two fronts; but Sabbe, who was determined to regain his own political legitimacy, refused to comply with their request and insisted on unity on the basis of equality among the

²⁴ ELF, "Iritriyah: Burkan..."

²⁵ Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), 191-192.

²⁶ Dawit, 92.

²⁷ ELF, "Iritriyah: Burkan..."; Dawit, 92; Markakis, *National and Class...*, 141-142.

²⁸ ELF and EPLF, "b Elet 20/10/1977 bT.Ha.Eien H.G.Ha.Eie Zwetse Agedasi nay Habar Awaj," [A Joint Declaration Issued by the ELF and EPLF on 20 October 1977], 02260, RDC.

three organizations.²⁹ In retrospect, his choices appeared to have been motivated by personal and ideological rivalries. The history of Sabbe's political career shows that he was a kind of divisive and enigmatic person. He was always determined to create and assure his own power base when ever there was fluid situation in the Eritrean political arena.

The continuous tension between the ELF and EPLF delayed the implementation of the understanding reached in Khartoum. It was not until March 1978 that the joint supreme political leadership and the five joint committees of a National Democratic Front were set up. In May, the joint supreme political leadership convened in Keren and decided to resume their military cooperation and to establish a four-man preparatory committee responsible for undertaking the necessary preparations for the anticipated national congress. The committee was to report its activities to the joint supreme political leadership in not later than six months. Moreover, both fronts agreed to end recriminations and avoid the use of pejorative adjectives such as '*Amma*'³⁰ or '*counter-revolutionary*' in order to refer each other. In this meeting, Sabbe's ELF-PLF was again ostracized by the other two movements and its members were asked to join either the ELF or EPLF. Yet Sabbe, despite their repeated calls, still refused to disband his organization.³¹

Internal Dissent in the ELF

During the second half of 1977, the ELF underwent serious internal dissent and turmoil. The problem started among Christian fighters who were dissatisfied with the leadership. Its origins were in fact thought to be found in the removal of Herui Tedla from the Revolutionary Council in 1975. Herui was the only Christian of the thirteen members of the ELF-RC from 1971-74. During this period, ELF rank-and-file was surging with new recruits and a significant proportion of them were Christians. Before the second congress was convened, new recruits in ELF demanded equal representation, but the leadership refused to grant them voting rights equal to those of

²⁹ Alamin, 108-109.

³⁰ The term *Amma* was a shortened name for the General Command, also known in Arabic as *Al-Qiyadah Al-'Ama*, formed in 1969. As far as the author's knowledge, the term literally has no pejorative meaning but when the propaganda machine of one side stressed on the negative aspects of the *Al-Qiyadah Al-'Ama*, it may have sounded pejorative.

³¹ Alamin, 99-109; Erlich, 95-96.

old members, who were mostly Muslims.³² Instead, they were provided with only a quarter of the posts in that congress.³³ As a result of the limited votes, the outcome of the elections at the congress was affected considerably. For instance, of the forty-one members elected in the ELF-RC in 1975, only twelve were Christians, despite the fact that they were the majority within the ELF. Due to this, Herui was voted out of the front's leadership. In response, he refused to accept the results of the elections. Consequently, he resorted to mobilize support from the rank-and-file fighters by accusing the leadership of deliberately suppressing Christian aspirations. Together with some Christian members of the ELF-RC, Herui formed a clandestine Marxist or Marxist-oriented group known in Tigrinya as *Ma Gu*.³⁴ Thus, the ELF leadership was once again confronted with a reformist group, mostly Christian radicals or rather rebels.

In 1976, the Christian members began to criticize the organization “for its practice of patronage politics, corrupt leadership, lack of ideological clarity and its undermining of the EPLF [by making divisive agreement with Sabbe].”³⁵ Their initial demands did not appear to seek secession from the ELF; rather seemed to democratize the organization from within. They called for organizational reforms and also demanded for a fresh congress to be held in order to debate on a broad range of policy issues. Chief among these was the relationship between ELF and EPLF and the question of uniting the fronts. Meanwhile, fighters were secretly mobilized through the distribution and circulation of pamphlets.³⁶

The open insubordination began in the second half of 1976, when ELF-RC officially recognized the Foreign Mission (ELF-PLF) as a third organization within the Eritrean nationalist fold. This recognition generated opposition among many sectors of the organization, which eventually led to the repudiation of the decision to recognize the ELF-PLF. They argued that the Foreign Mission was part of the EPLF organization, and Sabbe was nothing more than an individual who took charge of foreign affairs. Hence, to recognize Sabbe as a separate organization and conducting a unity

³² Michael, 118.

³³ Markakis, “Nationalist Revolution...,” 63.

³⁴ Ahferom Tewolde, interview...

³⁵ Ruth, 120.

³⁶ Ahferom Tewolde, interview...; Abdella Kelifa Ali, interview by Michael Weldeghiorghis, Asmara, Eritrea, 24 January 2014; see also Michael, 119-120.

agreement with him was unacceptable to many ELF fighters. They urged the ELF-RC to withdraw the resolution and declare unity only with the EPLF fighters in the field.³⁷ The ELF-RC, however, refused to do so. Dissatisfied with the leadership and uncertain of its genuine desire to resolve the unity with the EPLF, they decided to split from the ELF and declared themselves the ‘Democratic Movement’.³⁸ On the contrary, the leadership of the ELF responded by dubbing them pejoratively as *Falul*, a Tigrinya word for anarchist. The Falul were about 2000 in number.³⁹

By the summer of 1977, the disunity was aggravated and splits occurred widely among the different ELF military units that operated in Barka (Brigade 149), Senhit (Brigade 262), highlands (Brigade 161), Sahel, and other regions.⁴⁰ Falul elements mushroomed everywhere. With few alternatives, the ELF-RC decided to disarm the Falul splinter group by launching an attack first on the Falul-dominated Brigade 149, inflicting many casualties. In response, the Falul assassinated two members of the ELF-RC in an ambush carried out in Dankalia – Abdul Kadir Ramadan and Ali Mohammed Ibrahim.⁴¹

An-all-out war ensued. Being outnumbered, loosely organized and so decentralized, Falul members were unable to coordinate any meaningful resistance. Facing complete defeat, members of the dissenters (Falul) haphazardly dispersed. Largely out of desperation, about twelve hundred of its members joined the EPLF, while some fled to Sudan and a few others surrendered to Ethiopia. More than a dozen of senior cadres associated with Falul were put behind bars by the ELF-RC. Those who fled to Sudan continued their activities referring to themselves as the Eritrean Democratic Movement.⁴²

In a similar fashion to Falul, another clandestine movement arose among Muslim conservatives in 1978. The group, though had no official name, was labelled by the ELF leadership as *Yameen*, (Arabic for “right”). They were led by Said Hussein, one of the founding members of the ELF in Cairo, who had the bad luck of being caught by Ethiopian security forces in 1963 and spent more than a decade of his life in

³⁷ Ahferom Tewolde, interview...

³⁸ Markakis, “Nationalist Revolution...,” 64.

³⁹ Ahferom Tewolde, interview...

⁴⁰ Ibid.; See also Abdella Kelifa Ali, interview.

⁴¹ Michael, 120.

⁴² Ahferom Tewolde, interview...; See also Abdella Kelifa Ali, interview; and Michael, 120-121.

prison. He was finally freed in 1975, when the ELF undertook a spectacular operation, opening the gates of two prisons in Asmara and Adi Quala, and set free over a thousand political prisoners.⁴³ Upon his return to ELF ranks, the movement had already undergone transformation in many aspects. The removal of the former Cairo triumvirate from the ELF's leadership, the declining tendency of Pan-Arabism, and the domination of the front's rank-and-file by Christians combined with the appearance of the Christian-dominated Falul movement, seem to have urged Said Hussein and his associates to form of an Islamist clandestine reformist movement.⁴⁴

Said Hussein, a Saho by origin, won the support of his ethnic compatriot Osman Saleh Sabbe, who was by now in conflict with the ELF and the EPLF.⁴⁵ He began to secretly train some fighters somewhere around Amba Soira, the highest mountain in the southern section of Eritrea's central plateau bordering Ethiopia. When the news about this training reached the ELF-RC, they were compelled to go to Sudan and flew to Yemen. From there they were ferried across the Red Sea and arrived at Dankalia,⁴⁶ in the same way as the PLF-I did in 1970 (See the previous chapter). According to Ahmed Mohammed Nasser, the chairman of the ELF-RC, the operation was not a small affair: "The reactionary groups dropped north of Assab and had been in the possession of thousands of individual arms, 36 wireless communication sets and supplies that would suffice them for months in addition to the great sums of money they brought with them in order to bribe the citizens."⁴⁷ Being able to infiltrate Yameen, the ELF security forces exterminated the latter brutally in mid-1978. The chairman of the ELF-RC later on declared unceremoniously, "We foiled the reactionary project by resolutely liquidating these elements on May 22, 1978."⁴⁸

The examples of Falul and Yameen are instructive of how ELF-RC was just as intolerant of dissidence as the earlier leadership had been. As we may recall, in 1965 the ELF also resolved the disagreement with the ELM through violence and liquidation. In early 1972, in response to secession of the PLF-I, PLF-II, and the Obel,

⁴³ Michael, 121.

⁴⁴ Michael, 121.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "Ten Fighters Executed in Dankalia ELF 1978," <http://www.ehrea.org/ExecutedDankalia.htm> (accessed July 24, 2014).

⁴⁷ Ahmed Mohammed Nasser, interview in *ELF Information Bulletin*, vol. 3, no. 1, June-August 1978, which can be found at <http://www.ehrea.org/responses.htm> (accessed July 15, 2014).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

the ELF-RC passed a resolution that announced a ‘war of extermination’, which eventually escalated into intense armed conflict between those different nationalist folds. After 1975, the ELF-RC adopted a moderate rhetorical approach – ‘democratic dialogue’ – to resolve secondary contradictions, in reality violence as a means of resolving disunity had never been rescinded by the incumbent leadership. As Ahferom, a former ELF fighter, expounds, the resort to violence by the ELF to any perceived opponent was due to the failure of the leadership to entertain an alternative solutions beforehand.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the ELF-RC’s conviction that “the Eritrean field cannot accommodate more than one organization”⁵⁰ also had its own part to play in influencing their actions. Since its emergence, the ELF leadership continued to espouse such convictions even up to the period under examination. For instance, in its report concerning the unity agreement of October 20, 1977, with the EPLF, the ELF-RC stated clearly that the above-mentioned conviction was one of the reasons behind their unity initiatives undertaken with Sabbe and the EPLF.⁵¹ With this sort of ideological mindset, there was no room at all for adversaries from within. Thus, the Falul and Yameen episodes showed the ELF-RC’s perception of violence as a strategy to suppress opposition.

Military Dislodgement and Downfall of the ELF, 1979-1981

The Ethio-Somali war, which started on July 13, 1977, came to an end with the victory of Ethiopia on March 23, 1978. Somali forces were driven out of the Ogaden region, thanks to Soviet and Cuban backing for Ethiopia which by now had joined the Soviet fold. The *Dergue* vowed that “our victory in the east shall be repeated in the north.”⁵² Inspired by the Somali defeat, the *Dergue* hurriedly turned its attention to Eritrea and intensified its military preparations to recapture the towns occupied by the Eritrean nationalists. By late April 1978, about a 100,000 combat-ready militia and

⁴⁹ Ahferom Tewolde, interview...

⁵⁰ ELF-Executive Committee, “Kab Salsay Ksab Raba’y Sreu Akhieba Gedlawi Baito Bguday Hagerawi Smret Zgebernayo Tsae’rtat Tsebsab,” [Report Concerning National Unity Efforts Carried out by the ELF-RC During the 3rd and 4th Regular Meeting], 1977, 02582, RDC.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Gebru, 209-210. Regarding the role of external interference in the war, Gebru Tareke noted, “[w]ith the arrival of eighteen thousand Cuban artillerymen, tank crews, and pilots who undertook many of the dangerous combat tasks during the counteroffensive, and about fifteen hundred Soviet military experts, who brought with them a vast quantity of arms, the Somali stood absolutely no chance of success. That Cuban-Soviet assistance was instrumental in both their defeat and their expulsion is therefore incontrovertible.” Gebru, 210.

regular troops – equipped with automatic rifles, mortars, antitank guns and RPG-7 shoulder-launched rockets – were mobilized along the Eritrean border and in the besieged Asmara.⁵³

In the face of the Soviet-backed Ethiopian offensive, the rival fronts failed to coordinate their counter-attack. Ethiopia's recapture of Eritrean towns was undertaken with dramatic speed and decisiveness. The *Dergue* struck the ELF first. On July 23, 1978, Tesseney was the first town to be reoccupied. By August, Segeneyti, Digsu, and Agordat were recaptured, and the ELF siege of Barentu was broken. The ELF was driven out of urban centres in the highlands and swiftly withdrew to the western lowlands, which had been its military base ever since its inception. The EPLF, after abandoning its siege of Massawa, meanwhile, declared what it called "strategic withdrawal", meaning to undertake orderly and organized retreat while removing useful equipments to sustain it before heading back to the mountainous terrain of Sahel, where armoured vehicle and long-range artillery could be neutralized.⁵⁴

The withdrawal of the ELF coupled with the internal dissention had considerably affected the internal stability of the movement. According to Ibrahim Idris Totil, the vice chairman of the ELF-RC, the leadership was becoming increasingly divided, and gradually irreconcilable differences emerged between key figures – for instance between Abdella Idris and Melake Tekle. Disagreement was paramount during meetings. In addition, the ELF-RC suffered from the withdrawal of aid from the government of Iraq, who was the prime supporter of the movement. Iraq used to provide the ELF as much as \$ 250,000 every year alongside the provision of military training and hardware. But the suppression of the Yameen strained the relations with the Iraqi government. In 1979, the latter cut off supplies and demanded the release of the Yameen members.⁵⁵ Despite internal instability, however, the ELF leadership continued its efforts to revitalize the unification process between the two fronts. But these efforts were also hindered by sporadic skirmishes between the ELF and EPLF fighters at different places, and each front accused the other of alleged wrongful acts.

⁵³ Erlich, 113; see also John Markakis, "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 26, 1 (1988), 66; Ahferom Tewelde, interview...

⁵⁴ Erlich, 114-115; Markakis, "Nationalist Revolution...", 65-66.

⁵⁵ Ibrahim Idris Totil, interview by Zemhret Yohannes, Asmara, Eritrea, 2004, audiocassette, Acc. No. 07768, RDC; Ahmed Mohammed Nasser, interview by ELF Information Office, in *Gedli Hzbi Ertra*, no. 50 (May 1980): 15-16.

Because of this, the agenda of many of the supposed unity meetings focused on issues related to conflicts. Hence, the unity efforts were not progressing as smoothly as they were supposed to be.⁵⁶

Between 1979 and 1980, the *Dergue* launched successive offensives in an attempt to dislodge the EPLF from the Sahel. The joint military forces of the ELF and EPLF managed to stifle all attempts of Ethiopian troops to seize the base area. In order to further neutralize the Ethiopian army attacks and strengthen the defences in the northern Sahel, the ELF agreed to assign two of their brigades to northern Sahel in the EPLF's base area.⁵⁷ Accordingly, in mid-1979, the ELF fighters took their position alongside with EPLF combatants in the area.⁵⁸ As a result, the Sahel hills proved to be an impenetrable shield for the Eritrean nationalists and caused great dismay to Ethiopian troops.

In February 1980 the USSR, concerned about the possible collapse of the Ethiopian state, invited the ELF for talks.⁵⁹ The first meeting was in fact held in June 1978. Regarding these first talks, declassified documents of the USSR and East Germany on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa demonstrate that: "The objective... [was] to find an appropriate solution for Eritrea within the framework of the Ethiopian state... The policy of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union was]... aimed at the unity of Ethiopia...[and] to convince Ahmed Nasser [Chairman of the ELF-RC] that the future development of the Eritrean people can only evolve in a unified Ethiopian state."⁶⁰

Friendly countries and liberation movements like Syria and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) were exerting diplomatic pressure on the ELF leadership to reconsider the Soviet initiative for dialogue.⁶¹ Having accepted the second invitation from Moscow, the ELF held a confidential meeting with the officials of the Soviet Union. Ahmed Mohammed Nasser summarized the core issues discussed as follows: "[1] Evaluation of the development in Ethiopia under the *Dergue*; [2] Prospects of

⁵⁶ Ibrahim Idris Totil, interview by Zemhret..., Acc. No. 07768.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Alamin, 120.

⁵⁹ Markakis, "Nationalist Revolution...", 66-67.

⁶⁰ "Memorandum of Conversation between [Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED)] Comrade Friedel Trappen and Soviet Comrade R. A. Ulyanovsky in the CC of the CPSU, 11 May 1978," trans. Christian F. Ostermann, <http://www.banadir.com/77/40.shtml> (accessed August 8, 2014).

⁶¹ Ibrahim Idris Totil, interview by Zemhret..., Acc. No. 07768.

democratic settlement to the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia; [and 3] who would represent Eritrea in any negotiation with the *Dergue*?” He further expounded that “[w]ith regard to settling the conflict, we were reiterating the same positions declared publicly by the ELF, i.e., that the Eritrean revolution... [was] ready to sit for negotiation with Ethiopia with a view to reach a democratic solution that satisfies the legitimate rights and aspiration of the Eritrean people for national independence and found a base for a good friendly neighbourhood with Ethiopia. Concerning the representation in any negotiation, we were keeping firmly to the principle that a united delegation that represents all Eritrean political organizations must represent Eritrea in any negotiation.”⁶² In February 1980, in a separate meeting, the East Germans also invited the EPLF to Berlin for talks.⁶³

The results of these separate meetings, however, were not encouraging. Rather, it can be said that the Moscow-Berlin initiatives served to reinforce the already existing mutual suspicion and fuel rumours between the two nationalist fronts. The ELF accused its rival of conducting secret talks with the Ethiopian delegation led by Berhanu Bayeh and East Germans in Berlin at the expense of their nationalist compatriots. On the other hand, the EPLF accused the ELF of accepting regional autonomy at the cost of relinquishing national independence, although the ELF categorically rejected the claim. Under these circumstances, negotiations for the unification of the two fronts were still apparently ongoing. In May 1980, in Aden, the ELF agreed to finalize the revitalization of the October 20 agreement with EPLF.⁶⁴

According to Totil, within the ELF leadership itself there were forces that thought the union with the EPLF would only be to the benefit of the latter. These individual leaders envisioned themselves as a minority in the anticipated unification of the two fronts. They even envisaged it as a dangerous trap that could threaten their very future existence.⁶⁵ Despite deep distrust on both sides, preparations for a complete merger of forces were already underway. The date of implementation was set to 20 June 1980. For the initial stage, they agreed to start the process of amalgamation at the EPLF’s

⁶² Awate Team, “An Interview with An Eritrean Icon: Ahmed M. Nasser,” <http://awate.com/an-interview-with-an-eritrean-icon-ahmed-m-nasser/> (accessed July 24, 2014).

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibrahim Idris Totil, interview by Zemhret Yohannes, Asmara, Eritrea, 2004, audiocassette, Acc. No. 07769, RDC.

base area, the Sahel, with four brigades: two brigades from each side. The same was to take place in the ELF base area. For the initial stage, the ELF designated two brigades that were earlier stationed in the northern Sahel. However, before that fateful day, a derailing episode occurred in Dankalia.⁶⁶

On June 6, without the knowledge of ELF's political leadership,⁶⁷ the ELF forces attacked a military contingent of the EPLF at a place called Ingel in northern Dankalia. There is a strong conviction among former ELF members that the attack was a sabotage action perpetrated by those forces who opposed unity.⁶⁸ Ingel had been a coastal territory disputed by the two fronts and both wanted to hold control over it. According to Ibrahim Idris Totil, Ingel, which was claimed as an important source of income, was initially under the control the ELF. But in 1978-79 the EPLF forcefully occupied it, and the ELF urged them to hand over the area to the units of the ELF. But the EPLF refused to give it back. "The case of Ingel was like a *non-healing wound* in the ELF," recalled Totil. The issue was often raised during successive meetings of the joint supreme political leadership during 1979-80, but to no avail. Finally, the ELF compromised to administer the area jointly with the EPLF. But this was never put into practice.⁶⁹

The attack on Ingel was a big blow to the unification process, especially because it happened at the time when final implementation was about to happen. The attack was interpreted on the EPLF side as a deliberate action to derail the unity process. Angry EPLF leaders resorted to retaliate on the ELF units in Dankalia. The conflict continued for several days and the EPLF managed to drive their rival out of Dankalia into the Akele Guzai region in a short time. On 27 June, ELF leaders eventually ordered their two brigades to withdraw from the joint defence in the northern Sahel. According to Ibrahim Idris Totil, the decision was taken to bring the war to a halt. It was assumed that the withdrawal of their units from the EPLF base area would compel their rival front to relocate its forces from Dankalia into the Sahel in order to avoid eviction from their well-entrenched positions by the Ethiopian army.⁷⁰ The

⁶⁶ Ibrahim Idris Totil, interview by Zemhret..., Acc. No. 07768.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibrahim Idris Totil, interview by Zemhret..., Acc. No. 07768; see also Zemhret Yohannes, interview...

⁶⁹ Ibrahim Idris Totil, interview by Zemhret..., Acc. No. 07768.

⁷⁰ Ibrahim Idris Totil, interview by Zemhret..., Acc. No. 07769.

outcome of this was, however, a devastating development for the oldest Eritrean nationalist organization. On 28 August 1980, the EPLF launched a full-scale offensive on the ELF on the pretext that their rival had deserted the joint defence without informing the EPLF.⁷¹

An all-out ELF-EPLF civil war ensued. The conflict went on for about one year. To make certain the total removal of the ELF from the Eritrean field, the EPLF obtained the assistance of the TPLF. As mentioned previously, the TPLF was an Ethiopian insurgent movement that launched an armed struggle in 1975 against the *Dergue* regime, demanding ‘self-determination’ for the province of Tigray within the wider Ethiopian polity. During its initial stage, the movement was assisted, trained and armed by the EPLF; and soon became an effective guerrilla force in western Tigray. While forging good relations with the EPLF, the TPLF relations since its inception with the ELF were “fragile all along, sometimes even turning violent,” as Aregawi Berhe, one of the founders of the TPLF recounts.⁷² They had never been in good terms; and when a new round in the Eritrean internecine warfare began, the TPLF joined its mentor in mid-1981 in a full-scale attack against the ELF.

The ELF, whose strength was already depleted by the reversal in 1978, proved unable to overcome its rivals. In August 1981, the remaining ELF fighters were driven over the border into Sudan, where they were disarmed and interned by the Sudanese army.⁷³ About 7000 fighters along with 3000 dependents, 150 vehicles, and nearly 15000 assortments of weapons, including artillery crossed into Sudan.⁷⁴ The military collapse of the ELF gave rise to political disarray that soon ended in disintegration of the movement into three major opposing groups: (1) ELF Executive Committee (ELF-EC) led by Abdella Idris, military commander, which represented increasingly sectarian Muslim elements; (2) ELF-RC led by Ahmed Mohammed Nasser and Habte Tesfamariam, which was referred as the secular wing of the ELF; and (3) the *Saghem*, that wanted to continue the struggle alongside with the EPLF.⁷⁵ This episode marked

⁷¹ Ahferom Tewolde, interview...; Redie, 201.

⁷² For more information regarding TPLF relations with EPLF and ELF, see Aregawi Berhe, *A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (1975-1991): Revolt, Ideology, and Mobilization in Ethiopia* (Los Angeles: Tsehai Publishers, 2009), 204-210.

⁷³ Markakis, “Nationalist Revolution...,” 67.

⁷⁴ Connell and Killion, 216.

⁷⁵ Ahferom Tewolde, interview...; Zemhret Yohannes, interview...; see also Connell and Killion, 217.

the end of the ELF as a unified, military front inside Eritrea, and also set the stage for the hegemony of the EPLF in the final decades of the Eritrean war for independence.

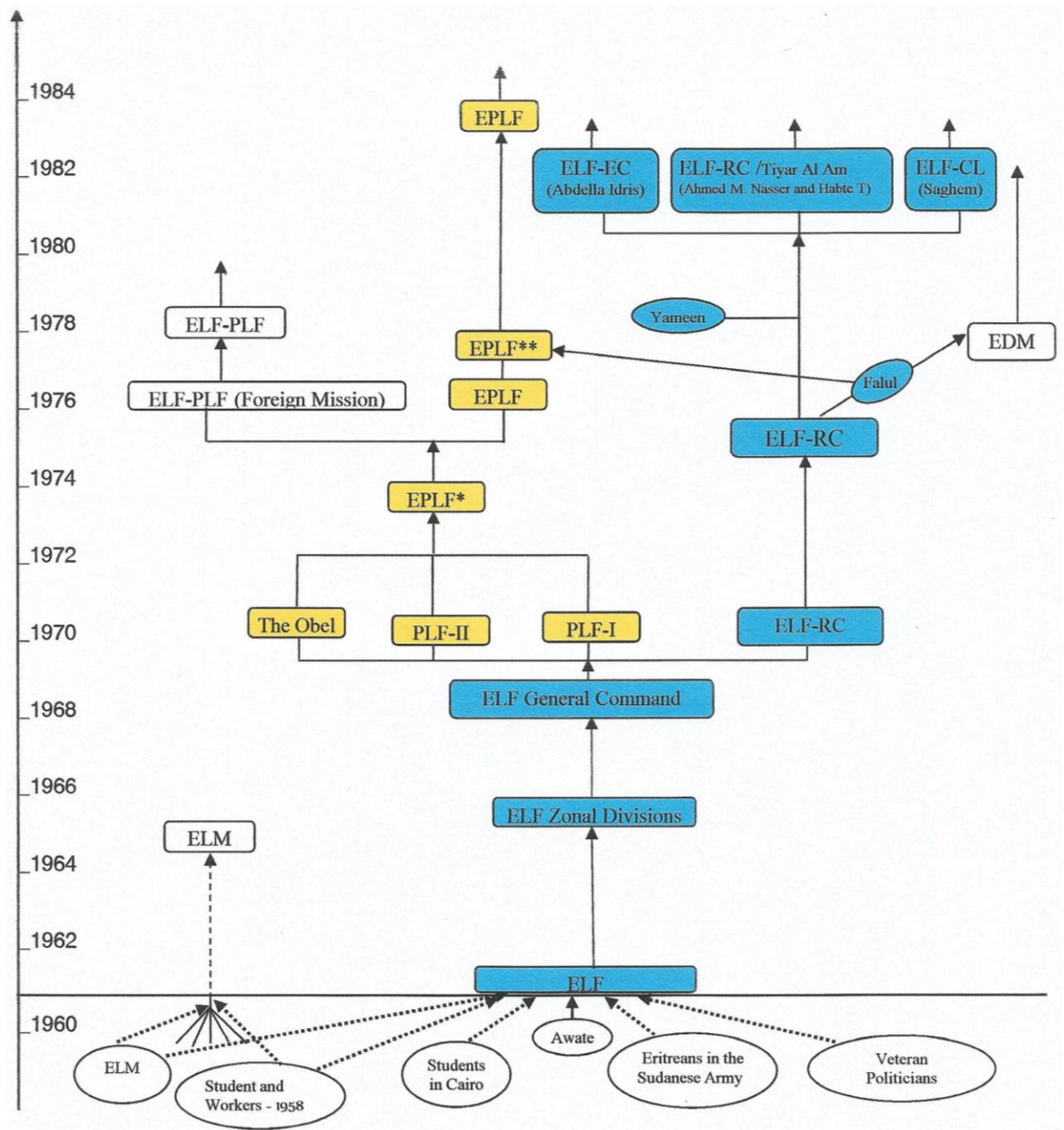


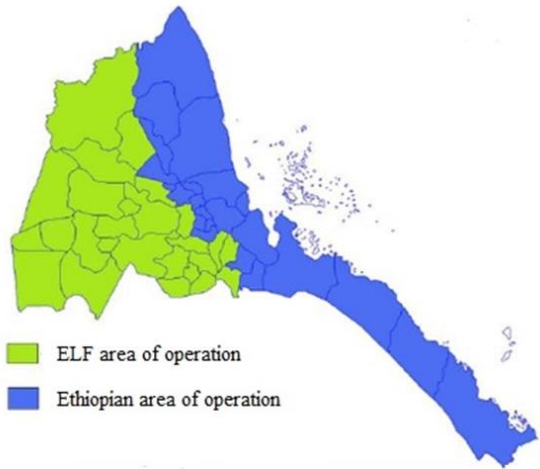
Figure 10. Family Tree of the Eritrean Liberation Front and other Political Organizations, 1961-1982

Source: The author, in collaboration with a former ELF fighter, Kiflom Tesfamariam.

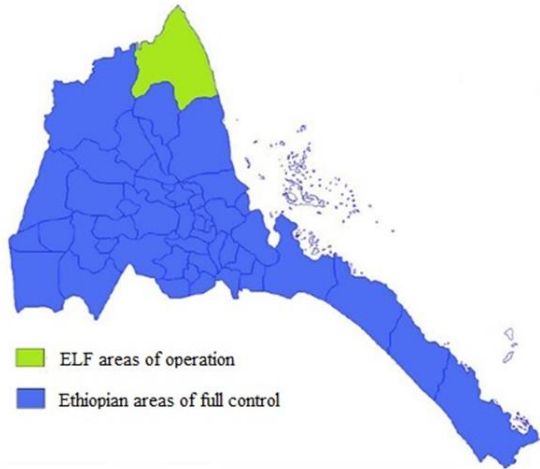
*Eritrean People’s Liberation Forces

** Eritrean People’s Liberation Front

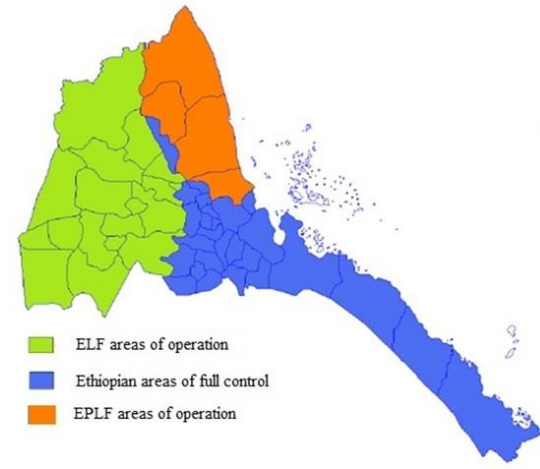
Map 3. ELF Areas of Operation, by District



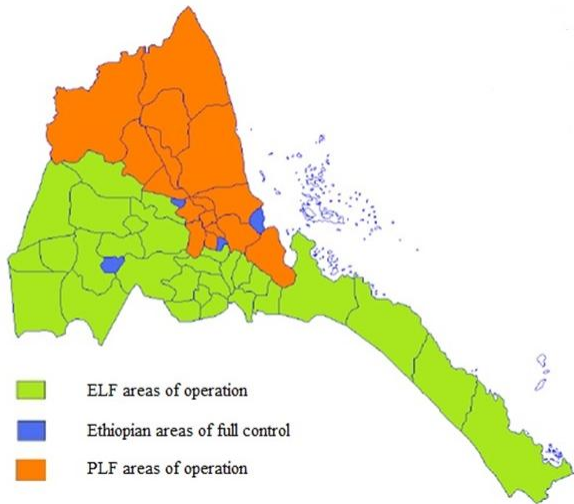
March 1967



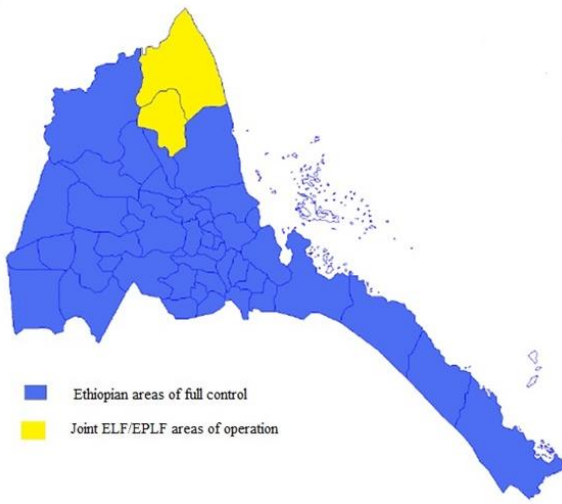
November 1967



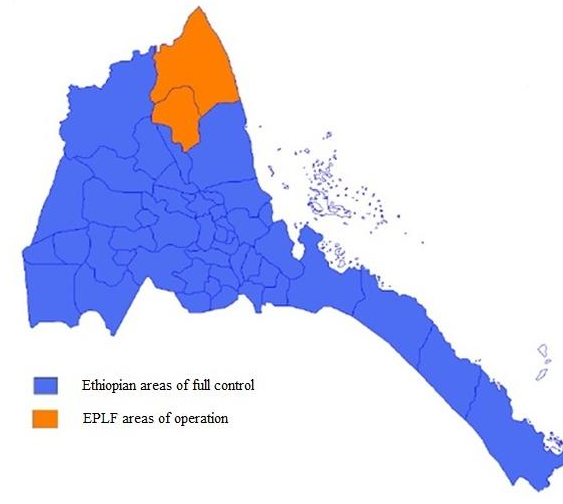
January 1974



March 1975



January 1981



March 1982

Source: Adopted from Michael, 105-130.

Conclusions

The emergence of the ELF was a direct response to Ethiopia's failure to respect Eritrea's autonomy under the Federation. The Eritreans felt betrayed when Emperor Haile Selassie I proceeded unilaterally to dismantle the federal arrangement, in violation of international principles and of the federal scheme mandated by the UN, and Eritreans' plea for help fell on deaf ears. Among the Muslim communities, the fear of being incorporated into the Christian-dominated Ethiopia was paramount. Such feeling was further strengthened when Ethiopia officially prohibited Eritreans the use of Tigrinya and Arabic as official languages in schools and business affairs. The ban of such rights was met with serious protests from both Christians and Muslims. But for the latter, the prohibition of the right to use Arabic in education, especially, was an issue allowing no compromise. The ELM which took a bold step to challenge Ethiopia through peaceful means also failed to satisfy the desire of Eritreans, particularly those who were of the conviction of using violent strategy as a means to terminate Ethiopian domination. The Cairo-based students finally took the initiative to form the ELF. The starting of the armed struggle inside Eritrea was, however, a challenging issue. In collaboration with Kassala-based Eritreans, they managed to infiltrate into Eritrea to lay the groundwork for its implementation. Disgruntled local religious scholars secretly campaigned for violent rebellion among the Beni Amer Muslim communities in the western lowlands of Eritrea. As a result, Hamid Idris Awate, a veteran outlaw who was known for his notoriety in ethnic-based feuds in the region in the 1940s, took the daring step to launch armed resistance for the independence of Eritrea in September 1961. It should be noted that Awate this time went to the field with a handful of followers for a nationalist political agenda. This was clearly phrased in his two important demands: the restitution of the land and the flag. While the former was a concrete demand based on local grievances, the latter had a symbolic value – national identity. Awate died eight months after the start of the rebellion. However, the participation of Eritrean soldiers in the Sudanese Army was exceptionally important in sustaining the momentum of the rebellion. They conducted several guerrilla activities in different parts of the western lowlands of Eritrea. Higher government officials, especially those who were considered ardent supporters of Ethiopia, were subjected to continual harassment and assassination attempts by the insurgent movement. When the

subversive activities were already underway in cities, the eventual annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia became an inevitable fact. Thus, in 14 November 1962 the federal arrangement was abrogated and Eritrea ceased to exist as an autonomous state.

In the following years, the size of the Eritrean nationalists increased steadily from tens to hundreds of people, who came from diverse backgrounds. The need to secure the supply of arms and ammunitions and to establish effective organizational structures were the major challenges. As a result, the ELF introduced a new military strategy that divided Eritrea into five zones of operation and this enabled the movement to grow and spread itself widely throughout the first decade. However, the social landscape of Eritrea, which was divided along ethnic, religious, and regional lines, on the one hand, and the failure of the leadership to properly manage the strategy and create an all-embracing, disciplined, accountable and effectively centralized organization, on the other, affected the implementation of the strategy of the struggle negatively. Consequently, zonal commanders became more powerful than their superiors and often reacted with brutality to perceived threats. Ethnic and religious sectarianism and intense rivalry developed within and between the different military zones, which even led to failure to help each other during time of war, thereby weakening the organization severely. Consequently, the ELF failed to consolidate its gains.

The growing discontent and grievances among the increasingly diverse fighters gave rise to the emergence of rebellious forces who sought to reform the organization from within. Their effort succeeded in bringing the armies under a single interim leadership called the General Command. The unity of the armies in the field, however, did not succeed in bringing unity at the top. Members of the Supreme Council became divided and suspicious of each other. Thus, the unity of the armies gained at the 1969 Adobha Conference only achieved limited and temporary success. At the turn of its first decade, the ELF encountered a process of serious disintegration that reduced the size of its army considerably. Consequently, three small organizations emerged and reorganized to become what later on emerged as the EPLF.

The leadership of the ELF reacted violently to splinter groups. An-all-out fratricidal war ensued, which only came to a halt through a ceasefire agreement in late 1974. The cessation of hostilities was the result of internal and external factors to the ELF: the former being the realization of the ELF that they could not finish their opponents through military means; the

latter being the increased popular pressure and the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia that created the urgency of unity between Eritrean nationalists. Having subsequently turned their guns against the common enemy, both movements by 1977 managed to control a considerable proportion of the Eritrean territory. However, the territorial gains made by the nationalists were short-lived; primarily due to continuous tensions, rivalry and lack of genuine cooperation. In addition, a surge of Ethiopian troops and advanced military hardware in the late 1970s changed the balance of power and consequently the Eritrean movements lost their military superiority to the Ethiopian troops. Hence, the former were forced to retreat in the second half of 1978, in which the ELF's military strength was sapped.

The period between the two inter-Eritrean 'civil wars', 1975-81, was characterized by constant, but ultimately fruitless negotiations for unity. Internally, the ELF was also torn apart by dissention and debilitating internecine conflict. Lack of responsible, coherent, and cohesive leadership seemed to characterize the movement, ever since the early period of its history. Power struggle was a key problem. While the internal problems were simmering, the competition between the two biggest rival fronts was re-emerging. The cumulative sum of all these internal factors, coupled with the emerging military superiority of the EPLF in the second civil war, led to the virtual total defeat of the ELF, with its units pushed into Sudan by its rival offspring organization. Thereafter followed the proliferation of different opposing fissiparous organizations out of the oldest Eritrean nationalist movement, in which each splinter group resorted to advocate for the 'real' ELF. The demise of the ELF undoubtedly secured the supremacy of the EPLF in the final decade of the Eritrean armed struggle.

In the final analysis, we can identify a number of major reasons for the eclipse of the ELF by the EPLF, something that eventually led to the demise of the former. First, the ELF was a movement formed at a time when highland Christian support for the union was still relatively strong. The same was not true among lowland Muslims. ELF came to reflect this divide. Not only was its leadership dominated by Muslims, but so was its rank-and-file. At a later stage, when the independence movement came to take on a wider character, the ELF proved unable to move beyond this sectarian divide, although it tried. In addition to its inability to break out from being perceived as a Muslim movement, the ELF power had become weakened by power struggle, disunity among the leadership, the infighting of the ELF, the rise of the EPLF

and the taking over of the mantle of progress and secularity by this organization. Those were among the major reasons that worked against the ELF in the long term.

Finally, it is important to note that the history of the ELF was flooded with splits and factionalism; this was the key sociological dynamics of the movement, emerging from regional, ethnic and religious diversity coupled with elite, or elitist, behaviour of certain individuals and small groups. Research on this leadership and social organizational dynamics of the ELF could certainly give us interesting results that would enhance our understanding of why the splits were happening the way they did.

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