

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT TO PRESENT STUDY

From rebel movement to national government: The Tigrean People's Liberation Front

The 1974 revolution, which led to the overthrow of the imperial government of Emperor Haile Selassie, brought about the establishment of a military government in Ethiopia, which sought to create a socialist state. Under the autocratic leadership of its leader, Mengistu Haile Mariam, the government sought to implement major social and institutional changes, nationalise land and private industries, and quell political dissent. The years following the inauguration of the Derg government from 1977–1979 became known as the 'Red Terror' as the Government instigated a campaign of violence, torture and death against anyone suspected of political opposition in Addis Ababa, and urban and rural areas throughout Ethiopia. In spite of this, powerful opposition movements emerged in the north of the country, a region that had a long history of political struggle. Eritrea experienced a political struggle for independence following colonisation by the Italians. It subsequently was liberated by the British in 1941 and had a federal relationship with Ethiopia. However this was replaced by open annexation in 1962, marking the start of what became known as the thirty-year war. The Eritrean Liberation Front emerged in the early 1960's and later became known as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).

In 1975, in Eritrea's neighbouring province of Tigray, the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was founded as an opposition movement to Mengistu's Derg military dictatorship. Based on a socialist, Marxist-Leninist ideology, it developed strong grassroots support throughout Tigray as a result of community development, an emphasis on collective action, liberation education and mobilisation of a strong Tigrean identity. In the mid 1970's, the TPLF formed a strategic alliance with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), forming a powerful regional block. The Derg regime responded by developing immense military capacity. Under the slogan of "everything to the war front" in the late 1980's and early 1990's, the army was enlarged to at least half a million soldiers and the redirection of resources to the defence sector threatened the

country's economic, social and political stability.²² Yet in 1991, combined opposition forces of the EPRDF brought about the successful overthrow of the Government. The EPRDF at this time was under the command of four organisations, the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the Ethiopian Democratic Officers Revolutionary Movement (EDORM). But in reality, the EPRDF was not really a broad based movement with roots throughout the country but represented a support based in the north of the country, and in Tigray in particular. This was reflected in the seniority of the TPLF in the military and political hierarchy.²³

Following the overthrow of the Derg in 1991, an interesting situation emerged in Ethiopia that witnessed demobilisation from within two armed groups, the Derg and EPRDF. Approximately half a million Derg soldiers were totally demobilised. Meantime, a new national army of the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) was formed, under the new national government of the EPRDF. The new government released about 20,000 soldiers (mainly Tigrayans) between 1991–1995 as a means of restoring the ethnic balance of the defence forces and replaced them with members of other Ethiopian nationalities.²⁴ A detailed account of the impact of the demobilisation and reintegration of the Derg combatants can be found in Ayalew & Dercon . Approximately 3–4% of Derg soldiers were female, while both the TPLF and EPLF were composed of approximately a third of female fighters.

Bruchhaus & Mehreteab document the profile of the EPLF in 1993 at the time of demobilisation. There were 95,000 fighters, of whom 80% were from rural backgrounds, 64% Tigrinya from the highlands and 24% Tigre from the lowlands. Eighty percent had completed 1–5 years of schooling and in general, the educational level of the fighters was higher than that of civilians. A third, or 34% of the fighters were female. Their paper, entitled "Leaving the warm house: the impact of demobilisation in Eritrea" examined attitudes to demobilisation and found 64% wanted to stay in the army. Only 9% did not want to stay and 27% could see no other alternative to demobilisation, so accepted it as inevitable. They report that demobilisation was a difficult strategy and was a process of 'weaning' fighters off the military and encouraging them to be self-sufficient and to take life into their own hands. They quote a senior EPLF fighter who summed up the dilemma of demobilisation as "We have convinced them to be ready to die; why shouldn't we be able to convince them to work for themselves".²⁵ Demobilisation support consisted of credit and savings schemes, job placement, settlement and agricultural activities, income generation activities and psychosocial counselling. In addition, the

EPLF recognised that special support needed to be given to female ex-fighters and a special Gender Unit was established. This tried to find ways and means of enhancing the women's self help potential.²⁶ Similarly, the TPLF recognised the debt it owed to female fighters and similarly sought to prioritise the reintegration of females. It developed separate reintegration projects for women by establishing factories to employ female-ex-fighters, and offered education, training, credit and support. Interestingly, the Commission set up to demobilise and reintegrate ex-soldiers of the Derg army was accused of overlooking the needs of female ex-combatants

Female ex-combatants were part of the main reintegration programmes. The commission believed that economic reintegration was easier for female ex-combatants than for their male counterparts as they were holding positions such as musicians, secretaries, radio operators and cooks. Not everybody shares this view. The CRS (Catholic Relief Services, 1994) notes that the involvement of female ex-combatants (in reintegration programmes) was very low due to the insensitivity of the responsible agencies towards women.²⁷

Although women formed only a small percentage of the Derg army, between 13,350 and 17,800 thousand women would have been demobilised.²⁸ There is an interesting contradiction in this, in that within the same country, the needs of female ex-fighters were placed central within one demobilisation programme while being completely overlooked in the other. This study focuses on the recruitment, demobilisation and reintegration of TPLF female ex-combatants.

The role of female fighters in the TPLF

Within Ethiopia, the contribution of women as fighters to the liberation struggle against Mengistu's Derg regime is almost legendary. It is widely regarded that fighter women were strong, if not stronger, than the men. According to Tsegay Berhe "(Another) important factor for the success of the TPLF was the dynamic involvement of women. Women fighters' determination for combat had its apparent contribution to a more radical and military ardour of the liberation movement". Tsegay develops a very fine account of the role of female fighters in a report entitled "The Tigrean Women in the liberation struggle and its aftermath". According to Tsegay

The role of women was indispensable to the success of the TPLF led Tigrean movement. Women saw themselves as fighting for political

justice, development and social progress including gender equality. Gender emancipation was held as a vital political agenda of the TPLF- the front initiated certain important socio-economic reforms such as the ban on early marriage, equal land/property ownership rights, equal rights to divorce and fair share of common assets etc. Women's schools opened in Tigray with the aim of raising their political and social awareness....The Tigrean women witnessed greater experiences during the armed struggle that marked a departure from the past. Women's roles, social attitudes and political perceptions underwent considerable changes. They acquired new skills, diverse organisational capabilities and exemplary confidence hereto strangled by tradition. Women also enjoyed greater equality with men. Farm activities like ploughing, political roles such as community leadership, military skills ranging from combating to commanding regiments and social services like administering justice were now open to women. The TPLF produced the first prominent female technicians, drivers, electricians, 'barefoot' doctors, actresses, singers, and players of traditional instruments.

He also notes Young's point that the recruitment of women was essential as part of the overall human capital required to successfully launch a fight against the might of the Derg. However Tsegay argues this has done little to transform women's socio-economic status in the post-conflict period, and concludes "The pervasiveness of underlying social structures and the poor economic base of the Tigrean society largely militated against sustainable gender equality". A similar pattern was noted in Eritrea:

At the beginning of the armed struggle only a small number of women had joined the ELF, and they mainly performed auxiliary tasks. From 1974 onwards, when the EPLF came in and proclaimed equal representation of men and women, the situation changed slowly and the female population in the liberated and semi-liberated areas progressively got ready to both liberate their country and their own interests. We can see that the women joined in the hardest times of the liberation struggle, when the Ethiopian army was five to eight times stronger than the EPLF; whereas in the end, when victory was at hand, more young men decided to give a helping hand in the final blow.²⁹

The implication, according to Tsegay and Bruchhaus & Mehreteab is that, while women participated actively in combat, women did not equally share in the political and economic development of their new countries compared

to men. Yet within the TPLF and Tigrean society as a whole during the period of the liberation struggle, the participation of women was responsible for pushing for considerable political and social change with respect to women's rights beyond a purely narrow military agenda.

Pushing political and social change: The contribution of female combatants in the TPLF

Within the province of Tigray, strong women's associations emerged in tandem with the development of the rebel movement and the Tigrean movement had an explicit agenda of addressing women's equality. As mentioned, Tsegay notes that the TPLF saw the liberation of women as the basis for the liberation of society. Within Tigray, the TPLF set up a counter-government, and organised health and education and rehabilitation systems for the population. With respect to the position of women in society, the TPLF was responsible for initiating a number of reforms. These included:

- raising the minimum age of marriage;
- introducing a voluntary system of dowry and equal land and property ownership rights;
- introducing the right to equal divorce and fair share of common assets;
- introducing equitable access to education;
- endeavours to reduce women's workloads by introducing appropriate technology;
- introducing land reform in which land was distributed to women over 17 years old, which had the impact of discouraging early marriage; and
- introducing technical training in ploughing, targeted at single, divorced, widowed and separated women.

According to Tsegay, the TPLF most prided itself on mobilising women's political participation at the grassroots level through the formation of women's associations and female representation on community level and regional political bodies. *Baitos*, local administration councils were responsible for further reforms to customary law, including:

- the equal allocation of land to men and women;
- introducing women's rights to inheritance, divorce and equal share in the household property, which couples produced jointly;
- raising the minimum age of marriage from 15 years for girls to 18 years;
- that marriage be purely on the goodwill and choice of partners; and
- that there be equal rights and recognition of parental responsibility for children born in or out of wedlock.

However, many of the reforms were also controversial and raised bad feelings toward women, in which drought or losses at war were attributed to the changed new order, resulting in some modifications or difficulties in implementation. However, according to one author women were actively engaged "in making their own revolution within a revolution" and they resisted considerable social pressure in order to implement the reforms. Levels of women's active engagement politically and militarily is demonstrated in figures which show that in 1986, more than a quarter of local council members were women and a third of the fighters were women

A political agenda of female emancipation was supported actively by the practices and ideology of the TPLF that established special boarding schools for women to train them as fighters and political and social activists, and in administration and technical skills. Graduates became politically and socially influential in their villages. According to Tsegay, neither Ethiopian nor Tigrean women had any significant influence in public affairs in pre-revolutionary times. "Although the *risti* (land tenure) system was formally open to women by virtue of their kinship/village descent, in practical terms, pre-revolutionary women could not litigate on their own to secure their rights. It was only in the agency of men that they could state whatever demands or grievance they had. He argued that gender equality in Tigray, as elsewhere in Ethiopia, and indeed much of Africa, was largely sustained by the subtle mechanism of denying women access to inheritance, wealth, power, prestige. The reform of the TPLF within the confines of its regional territory challenged this, contributing to the creation of a new society for girls and women. The question that remained for the women who helped to shape this new reality is what were their experiences after the revolution?