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Development and Change in Post-Revolutionary Tigray

by JOHN YOUNG*

After a 14-year struggle the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) took control of the entire northern Ethiopian province of Tigray in 1989. But it was not until two years later, when the TPLF-led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) captured power in Addis Ababa, that plans to rehabilitate and develop the badly weakened provincial economy could proceed in an environment of peace. This meant that the TPLF in Tigray could for the first time begin to utilise the resources of the central state for its programmes. Since 1991 the post-revolutionary régime has been attempting to stabilise the rural economy, repair and strengthen the province's infrastructure, create a climate in which private investment can flourish, and begin the process of establishing an industrial base to meet the rising demands of off-farm labour.

This article largely contrasts conditions observed in Tigray during the first half of 1993 and those existing in December 1995 and 1996, when my primary objectives were to update my doctoral study of the history of the Tigrayan revolution for publication,[1] and to gauge – with the help of subsequent interviews in Ethiopia – some of the changes that had taken place in the province during that three-year interval.

TRANSITIONAL PROBLEMS

The early period after the war had ended was characterised by frustration, rather than fulfilment, for most Tigrayans. Peace was of course welcomed, but resources were slow to reach the province, political changes were sometimes unwanted, the crisis in the rural economy was not overcome, and the expected boom failed to materialise. One of the early effects of the EPRDF's victory was a loss

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[1] John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975–1991* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

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of some of Tigray's highly prized autonomy as it again assumed the status of a province – if not quite like the others – within Ethiopia. Although that country's 1991 Transitional Charter gave regional governments the right to negotiate directly with foreign aid donors, Tigray could no longer assume the functions of an independent state, and instead had to operate through cumbersome and at times obstructive central government agencies.

In spite of widely-held assumptions elsewhere in Ethiopia that the province was the beneficiary of enormous funds from an EPRDF Government dominated by Tigrayans, even emergency assistance for war-affected areas was slow to materialise. Budgetary restraints, structural readjustments, and lack of awareness in Addis Ababa of conditions in the province were part of the problem. There were also difficulties in moving from the central controls that characterised the régimes of Haile Selassie and the *Derg* to the more decentralised forms of administration favoured by the incoming EPRDF leaders. But an equally significant obstacle was posed by an entrenched, and largely Amhara-dominated central bureaucracy which used its power to block even authorised funds from reaching Tigray. The battle-cry there in 1992, according to an observer on the scene, was 'war with the bureaucrats', which many at the time felt the province was losing.[2]

There were other problems in the transition. The central government personnel who returned to Tigray brought with them the practices, values, and assumptions of the old bureaucracy which frequently conflicted with the popular democratic procedures developed by the TPLF and supported by the people. These conflicts came to the fore as attempts were made to integrate provincial and national ministries. In a not isolated case, officials sent to Tigray attempted to dispense with established practices of democratic decision-making in hospitals. As well, it was reported that many were more interested in their salaries than in their work, unlike dedicated TPLF cadres. The initial result, according to even the Ministry of Health, was a decline in standards of health care in spite of the arrival in Tigray of 47 doctors.[3] A similar situation was reported in the Ministry of Agriculture, whose returning staff did not readily adapt to their expected participation in popular decision-making, let alone walking long distances in order to reach people in the countryside, as had been the practice of TPLF extension workers.

[2] Deborah Hicks, 'Tigray and North Wollo Situation Report', UNDP, Addis Ababa, May 1992, p. 3.
[3] Ibid. p. 28.

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To make matters worse, the TPLF insisted on relying on war-time incentives for community health and other social services in a radically changed environment in which new opportunities were increasingly available. Workers made clear that they were no longer prepared to accept the conditions of the past by insisting that they should be paid, as well as trained, in order to upgrade their skills. An agreement of sorts had emerged during the course of the long revolutionary war, but with the end of the heroic or violent stage of the struggle many demanded, and the TPLF was eventually forced to accept, a revision in the terms of their contracts.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND THE EMERGING MIDDLE CLASS

With its basis of support in the countryside the TPLF Government was sometimes met with suspicion by those who lived and worked in the urban centres, particularly merchants and traders who had not come under the Front's administration until the final days of the revolution, and who feared its Marxist origins and rhetoric. Most business people were sceptical of the new régime and its policies, and this was reflected in their initial refusal to invest in the province. In large part the leaders of the TPLF, and the EPRDF generally, despite having distanced themselves from Marxism, were slow to recognise the implications of the decline in socialism and statist economic policies internationally, not least the need to move quickly to convince the business community of their new ideological focus and support for private investment.

Business scepticism was not overcome until after a campaign had been launched in 1994 to convince entrepreneurs of the TPLF's commitment to a capitalist economy. The evident security in the country, and the improved conditions in the rural areas, served to undermine, if not entirely overcome, the resistance of private investors, a number of whom began constructing hotels, restaurants, provisions stores, and other largely service-sector enterprises, particularly in the provincial capital of Mekelle, and to a lesser extent in the tourist and administrative centre of Axum. None the less, while the business community tends to view most senior TPLF leaders as broadly sympathetic to their interests, they frequently complain about those local and municipal officials who continue to throw up bureaucratic obstacles which hinder their activities.

The growth of private investment is interpreted as evidence of rising confidence in Tigray, although TPLF representatives acknowledge

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that capital is still being held back because of continuing fears of future government policies and other factors, including the limited scale of local markets and lack of infrastructure. It is, however, by no means certain whether the province could readily cope with much more investment at this stage since there are already signs of over-heating in some sectors of the economy. In particular, Tigray is experiencing rising inflation, extreme shortages of expertise, and a ready demand for unskilled construction workers, who in Mekelle earn eight Birr a day, double that received in Bahir Dar, capital of neighbouring and wealthier Amhara. Moreover, the industrial expansion favoured by the TPLF has thus far been limited by a lack of assured power supplies, and although hydro-electric projects are proceeding, it may be some years before they are able to meet rapidly increasing demands.

Such developments are changing the social composition of Tigrayan towns, most notably Mekelle, which has received an estimated half of all investments since 1991. Of particular significance is the emergence of an increasingly self-confident middle class – mainly based in business, trade, and the state bureaucracies – that is often suspicious of, and rarely close to, the TPLF. As a result, the Government has set up a series of forums to meet with business people, apparently acknowledging that its previously established associations of merchants were Front-controlled and thus no longer viable. In addition, meetings of prominent Tigrayans have been organised, in both Mekelle and Addis Ababa, to discuss their reasons for not returning to their home province. According to participants, such frank and instructive gatherings have served to bridge some of the gaps between the TPLF leadership and the intellectuals. However, they have also emphasised the continuing existence of divisions within the Tigrayan community, and it is by no means clear that many will readily leave their careers and uproot their families solely on the basis of nationalist exhortations. Moreover, while it is commonly assumed by the broader Ethiopian population that Tigrayans are uniformly united behind the TPLF leadership, these recent encounters indicate a level of tension between those who were active in the struggle within Tigray and those who resided outside the province.

The TPLF recognises the growing political strength of the middle class and intelligentsia, especially in the towns, and considers that these groups, and not the various factions or parties of the previous generation, are the most likely sources of an opposition, if one is to emerge. Abai Tsheye, a member of the EPRDF Politburo, acknowledged that 'this class is pressing us', and further noted that for 20

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years it had been TPLF policy to embrace the national bourgeoisie, but for much of that time the problem had been theoretical, while now it was real and complex.[4]

Although the service sector is making real progress, agro-industrial enterprises have largely been ignored by the typically small and cautious investors, much to the concern of the TPLF, which looks to industry to provide stable and well paid employment for the province's growing and land-starved population. After concluding that neither the private sector nor the state had the resources or mandate to launch a campaign to establish an industrial base in Tigray, and further that a poor peasantry could only produce meagre savings, several members of the TPLF Central Committee decided that a community-based organisation should be established in order to encourage industrial development, produce profits for further growth, and provide support for war veterans and their families.

The Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT) began to operate in mid-1995 with a not inconsiderable amount of capital drawn from (i) non-military equipment captured from the *Derg*, (ii) companies established during and after liberation by the TPLF, (iii) limited funds made available by the TPLF, (iv) financial contributions from supportive non-governmental organisations, (v) investment capital derived from joint ventures with private companies, and (vi) money borrowed from the state-owned Commercial Bank of Ethiopia against the Fund's assets.[5] The 32 directors have been elected by the TPLF's functional mass associations, and EFFORT is managed by seven sitting members from the Central Committee, all of whom have recently earned Master's degrees in Business Administration. Siye Abraha, a member of the EPRDF Politburo and former Minister of Defence, is the chairman, and as a holding company the other directors of the board have been appointed as chairmen of enterprises owned by the Fund. Recognising that the failure of many state-owned companies derives from their immunity to the demands and discipline of the market, those held by EFFORT operate as private enterprises.

Apart from assuming responsibilities for overseeing existing companies, most of which were in the field of transportation, EFFORT is constructing (i) textile and clothing workshops at Adwa, (ii) a leather tannery and product factory at Wukro, (iii) a marble quarry in Sheraro, and (iv) an industrial plant at Mekelle that is intended to

[4] Interview with Abai Tsheye, Mekelle, 22 December 1995.
[5] Interview with Arkebe Equbye, Mekelle, 22 December 1995.

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reduce the prohibitively high cost of cement which currently has to be brought in from Addis Ababa. In addition, it has (v) a 49 per cent stake in a pharmaceutical firm at Adigrat, the majority holder being a large Amhara private capitalist, and is (vi) the owner of a major construction company. One of the Fund's most important holdings is (vii) Guna, a sizeable and diversified enterprise which provides loans, seeds, and tractors to farmers in the commercially significant Humera area in the far west, as well as purchasing and transporting their crops to markets. With considerable resources, a flexible approach, a dynamic management team, and, at the very least, a friendly government, EFFORT figures highly in the province's development programme.

Added to this is the increasing involvement in the commercial sector of the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), initially established by the TPLF during the course of the armed struggle, and the Tigray Development Association (TDA), another NGO with a close relationship to the TPLF. In particular, REST has recently begun operating a bus service, while the TDA has become, *inter alia*, the owner of a travel agency based in Addis Ababa.

Although this 'model' of development is increasingly being taken up by EPRDF affiliates throughout Ethiopia, such an innovative approach has not escaped controversy. First, EFFORT faces the problem of conflicting operational objectives between development, profit generation, and social welfare. Secondly, it is sometimes charged that while many of its activities are taking place in sectors of the economy ignored by private companies, in other cases they have not been able to compete on an even playing field, not least since the issuing of government licences favours party-affiliated enterprises. In addition, NGOs such as REST and TDA are not subject to the same taxation as private companies, and thus have lower costs of operation. Thirdly, there is no disguising the alarm felt in various business circles by the scale of EFFORT's operations, which according to some estimates have been costed at over 1,000 million Birr (*circa* US$150 million) and certainly reach far beyond Tigray.

Concerns have inevitably been raised about future government and party plans for the economy, as well as the likelihood that conflicts may arise with EPLF-owned companies that are also operating in Ethiopia. In addition, some observers have expressed surprise that the régime in Addis Ababa has gained praise from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for its privatisation plans, despite the fact that a number of companies have subsequently been taken over by TPLF and other EPRDF affiliates. Moreover, experience elsewhere in the developing

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world suggests that industry, which typically takes on an increasingly capital-intensive hue in spite of the intentions of its planners, cannot alone absorb the growing numbers of peasants unable to support themselves on their existing land. Indeed, the regional government's approach seems designed less to industrialise Tigray than to reduce the pressures being exerted on land. With this in mind, Tigray's Industry Bureau is placing considerable emphasis on the promotion, development, and expansion of small and medium-scale enterprises, an approach that seems appropriate given the low level of industrial development in the province.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC DIFFERENTIATION

The growth of services and trade in the towns of Tigray has its echoes in the rural villages and administrative centres, as I found in 1996 after visiting the three rural districts of Adet and Adi Ahferom in south-central Tigray, and Sebeya in the far north-east of the province. As earlier discovered when studying the extent to which the TPLF had successively mobilised the peasants, these *woredas* had all been centres of the Tigrayan revolution. But they were also among the poorest and most isolated districts in the province, and thus can serve as a means to consider changing patterns of development and political attitudes. After first visiting Adet in 1993 my notes included the following assessment which might well have been applied to the other districts:

> The underdevelopment of Adet has not been overcome by the TPLF during its war-time administration of the *woreda*. In spite of structural change and active community works' programmes over the past 20 years poverty remains rampant. The government's commitment to self-sufficiency may well prove unrealisable in *woredas* like Adet. Even the import from outside the district of leaders of the local *woreda* council testifies to the inability of the area to produce an educated core capable of self-administration. The Orthodox Church still has an enormous and deeply conservative influence which is unchallenged by the TPLF. The problems posed by a lack of resources, extreme water shortages, too many people on too little land, much of which is degraded, appear overwhelming. As a result, although the struggle against the *Derg* and for self-determination has been successful, the struggle for development remains at a cross-roads.

My latest visit to these districts again raised doubts about their economic viability. As in the towns, stable economic and political conditions are serving to create an environment in which developments can take place, but other forces that could not be identified three years ago were changing the character of the society. Water shortages and a

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growing population in Adet have led to plans being made to physically move the *woreda* centre. Health and social conditions in all districts are being improved by the rehabilitation and construction of infrastructure, particularly roads.[6] Such projects are also providing employment and facilitating increased trade and the growth of small-scale commercial agriculture. However, according to local health officials, irrigation developments may produce increased levels of malaria and bilharzia.

There has been a significant reduction in the traditional migration of peasants to Eritrea, Addis Ababa, and southern Ethiopia in search of work. In particular, the decision to locate the textile industry in Adwa appears to be partly based on the large population of the *woreda*, while the choice of Adigrat as the site for a pharmaceutical factory is linked to the fact that the surrounding area suffers severe land shortages and exports more migrant workers than anywhere else in Tigray. Indeed, opportunities for off-farm employment were so great in the province at the time of my visit that peasants in places such as Sebeya were not taking up work on the road being constructed from Zalambessa because they could obtain higher wages elsewhere than the 105 Birr (*circa* $16.00) a month offered by the contractors. As a result, they have been relying on peasants from Tembien and other poor parts of Tigray where employment opportunities are limited. In addition, it must be noted that the off-farm work season when peasants are free to leave their land is short.

At the same time governmental programmes to provide peasants with subsidised agricultural inputs and credit are helping to raise abysmally low rural living standards. The presence of local consumers with money has in turn encouraged small traders and others to invest in shops that offer tea and/or basic provisions, and in some cases small hotels. During the revolution the TPLF nationalised rural land, but not capital, and the improved investment climate has encouraged wealthier peasants to respond to the new opportunities. For example, in early 1996 an entire commercial core was being constructed in Sebeya, which previously had only one tea shop. This centre, however, is unique, because in spite of land shortages and poor agricultural potential, its residents have long taken up employment across the Red Sea in the Gulf states, and this has provided a minority of Sebeya's

[6] Such construction work is invariably uneven in Tigray. For example, the main road from Adi Ahferom to Inticho, perhaps the worst in the province, was constructed entirely with voluntary labour, and the peasants in this area were talking openly during the course of my visit of holding demonstrations to press the TPLF to begin improvements immediately.

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residents with cash which in the present favourable circumstances can be invested locally.

There is evidence that the emergence of rural classes may not be far off. In spite of the TPLF's decision not to redistribute capital, restricted consumption and the limited availability of consumer goods during the revolution ensured that class differentiation had little opportunity to emerge. By creating equal land holdings within *tabias*, at the lowest level of administration, the TPLF's reforms solidified differences between *woredas*, the districts, and *zobas*, the regions, of which there are four in Tigray, which meant that areas with superior natural endowments and better opportunities maintained their advantages. But under conditions imposed by the revolution these measures did not undermine the general environment of equality and unity. However, by encouraging markets and building rural infrastructure, particularly irrigation projects and roads, the TPLF has since 1991 been fostering agricultural commercialisation which will largely benefit a minority of relatively wealthy peasants, and/or those strategically located and better able to supply markets with surplus production and cash crops.

Increasing economic differentiation and regional inequality is furthered by TPLF support for plantation agriculture in lowland areas, particularly in the far west of Tigray where there has been a noticeable rush for land. Schemes that allow farmers (either as individuals or in groups) to acquire land above their usual entitlement, *if* they possess sufficient resources to rent or purchase tractors and engage in capitalist farming, challenge the egalitarian spirit on which the TPLF's land reforms were based. Central government efforts to dismantle command structures and open up the national economy to competition in turn accentuate such local developments.

Even more influential in producing rural inequality is the growing number of poor peasants who have little or no holdings at all, the result of the TPLF's decision in the late 1980s not to carry out further major redistributions for fear that farm plots would quickly become uneconomic, given such a limited land base and the expansion in the size of so many households. However, what appears to be occurring is that the only way young people in the densely populated highlands can acquire land is through inheritance, thus both replicating elements of the former feudal system and reducing the size of plots. The growing number of poor peasants is also encouraging demands for a further redistribution of land. And while the TPLF has thus far firmly resisted such moves, some peasants claimed in 1996 that they were not investing in what they held already because of concerns that they might soon lose

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their land, and this in spite of the long-held TPLF principle that such improvements would qualify for compensation. The announcement in November 1996 that a further redistribution of land will indeed be carried out in neighbouring Amhara, will certainly serve to feed speculation and demands in Tigray.

Further, the very system of tenure introduced by the TPLF is now being reconsidered by many peasants. Although prohibited from buying and selling plots, they were guaranteed unrestricted use of the land and cautioned against unnecessary redistributions. Conditions thus bear some resemblance to those which would exist in a free market, with the exception that peasants are to some extent protected from the latter's insecurity and defaults, and further that the Government still retains the right to decide if, when, and how additional land redistributions are to be carried out. Thus, in spite of calls from some quarters for a free market in land, Tigrayan peasants in 1993 overwhelmingly supported the reforms made by the TPLF.

There is no doubt that views on land tenure have been undergoing significant changes, with some peasants in my limited sample in 1996 favouring entrenchment of the existing system, others preferring extended periods between redistributions and/or wanting 'privatised' land, while a minority hoped that a genuine free market would emerge. More surprising, a number of peasants spoke reprovingly about the TPLF's land redistributions, arguing that they were carried out too quickly because of war conditions, and had benefited those having relatives or friends among the distributors, the very criticisms previously voiced against the *Derg*'s reforms.

Alterations in attitudes to land appear to be based on a number of factors. In 1993 peasants held that with little work in the urban centres any weakening of the existing system of tenure would produce landlessness and force more to move to the towns and to lives of destitution. As a result, conditions would replicate, as several noted, the feudalism of the past. Indeed, the leadership of the EPRDF had earlier argued that the introduction of a market in land would compel the peasants 'to sell their land to a few wealthy individuals, leaving themselves landless and without any means of livelihood', and that 'This process would surely lead the peasants back to a similar situation to that of the feudal era, where a few landlords owned and controlled most of the land.'[7]

[7] 'Draft Economic Policy of the Transitional Government', in *EPRDF News Bulletin* (Addis Ababa), 30 September 1991.

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The fact is that landlessness had already become a serious problem by 1996, despite the continuing system of land tenure. Moreover, a growing urban economy, together with improved conditions in the rural areas and the effects of road building and dam construction, had created increasing opportunities for commercial agriculture and the establishment of small enterprises for a minority of peasants. However, existing forms of tenure, as well as the TPLF's prohibition against using limited stocks of land for non-farm commercial purposes, are sometimes seen as obstacles to further progress.

While government-initiated credit schemes and efforts to supply fertilisers and seeds at marginal costs are proving successful at reducing poverty and stabilising the rural economy, other programmes, such as Global 2000, are designed to help a few peasants who are in a position to engage seriously in commercial agriculture. While growing inegalitarianism in Tigray may not in itself prove to be destabilising, given the individualistic character of the society, this process could prove contentious if numbers of peasants fail to improve their material conditions quickly and substantially, and if they further perceive that this is a result of some systemic unfairness. The TPLF's mobilisation of the peasants was largely based on their sense of grievance, and they are undoubtedly even more conscious of perceived injustices now than when the revolution was launched 22 years ago.

In spite of its rural-focused efforts, the TPLF has long recognised that its land reforms cannot by themselves overcome the contradiction between an ever increasing population and limited fertile holdings which can only be marginally enlarged in the near future. As a result, in addition to environmental rehabilitation and a vast expansion of infrastructure in the rural areas (albeit from extremely low levels), the TPLF is pressing ahead with attempts to establish large-scale commercial agriculture in the lowlands, particularly in the Humera area. This is becoming a major destination of land-poor peasants from the highlands, as well as for returning refugees from the Sudan who are increasingly opting not to go back to their home villages, not least since they wish to use the REST-supplied grant of 1,500 Birr in order to rent holdings from larger landholders.

Most of these projects will not have much impact in the short run, and in any case they cannot begin to absorb the growing number of peasants without enough land to support themselves. Moreover, many of those who had to bear such a heavy burden throughout the long war are impatient with the pace of development. Indeed, as early as 1993 peasants from across Tigray could be heard criticising their govern-

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ment, sometimes accusing TPLF leaders of living in luxury in Addis Ababa and forgetting them, questioning what has been gained from years of struggle, and condemning the lack of resources available for improvements.

The TPLF response to these complaints was to argue that they represented an individualistic perspective, and that there have been important collective gains, notably in achieving peace and democracy, putting development programmes in local hands, and ensuring that Tigrayan concerns are heard at the national level. TPLF leaders also stress the great merits of local initiatives and urge peasants not to look to others for solutions to all their problems. However, it is clear that having been repeatedly told that their poverty was largely due to the state being controlled by previous régimes unsympathetic to their plight, peasants now look for support from a government led by those they consider to be 'their sons'. Obviously it will be very difficult in these circumstances to maintain the spirit of independence that was characteristic of, and produced by, years of revolutionary struggle.

Further evidence of peasant assertiveness can be seen in growing objections to uncompensated community work, the centre-piece of which has long been a soil and water conservation programme, the most prominent element being the terracing of the countryside. While both peasants and townspeople have helped to revive Tigray's ecologically damaged environment, and thus provide the basis to expand food supplies for an increasing population, they have also contributed to the TPLF's political objective of maintaining a high level of mobilisation among the people. Although peasants from across Tigray in 1993 were demanding the provision of food in return for their improvements to community land, the TPLF insisted that this constituted welfare and would create dependency. None the less, two years later pragmatism overcame conviction, and the TPLF had largely given in to the demands of the peasants. As a result, unpaid labour on the terracing programme has been reduced from three months a year to only 20 days, and money or food was being given for work on other community projects. However, in the case of micro-dams, whose construction has become a central focus of development efforts, it is intended that after peasants recognise their benefits they will pay for their ongoing maintenance and material costs.

Although such challenges to the TPLF underlines the self-confidence of peasants, they have at times unsettled those they are directed against. The leadership recognises that development is the criterion by which peasants are already evaluating the revolution and the Front.

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While other factors also figured in the decision, a number of prominent members of the TPLF in the central EPRDF administration were reassigned to Tigray in early 1995 in order to reinforce efforts to realise the objectives of its five-year development programme, and to tackle the increasing problem of corruption.[8] These transfers make clear the commitment of the TPLF leadership to the development of the province, as well as the importance attached to retaining the loyalty of the movement's rural base in an Ethiopia where the EPRDF Government is largely opposed by the intelligentsia and sometimes faces scepticism from peasants that are not Tigrayan.

POLITICAL REFORM

Another concern is to what extent the range of institutions created to meet the needs of the revolutionary war have to be modified with the advent of peace when the all-consuming objective is the pursuit of development. Complaints are made, mostly by urban residents, about controls over their movements and pressures to attend meetings, while Tigrayans who lived outside the province during the years of struggle are especially critical of the continuing regimentation of life under the TPLF, as well as the rôle of the mass organisations in resolving domestic disputes, and the right given to students to criticise their teachers and have them punished. It is unlikely that those who have not directly shared the experience of life in the liberated territories under the administration of the TPLF will readily adapt to such conditions.

Radically to alter these structures could upset the carefully constructed relationship between peasants and the TPLF, and would certainly reduce the rôle of the latter in directing and controlling the pace and direction of change. However, not to make adjustments risks alienating various groups returning to the province and those in the towns, particularly the emerging urban petty-bourgeoisie whose numbers are quickly expanding with the growth of the private economy and government services.

Indeed, as a result of these pressures and other largely economic concerns, there has been a loosening of TPLF control in both the urban and rural areas. The *kebelle* leaders continue to exhort members to vote

[8] Those reassigned included Sebhat Nega, Abai Tseheye, Siye Abraha, Abadi Zemo, Yemane Kidane, Teklowini Assefa, Hassen Shiffa, and Tewdros Hagos according to e-mail correspondence from Yusuf Reja, Chairman of the Tigray Development Association, Washington, DC, 26 June 1995. Such transfers are less surprising when it is appreciated that a number of TPLF leaders did not take up posts in the EPRDF administration in Addis Ababa after 1991, but stayed in Tigray where they sometimes held minor positions.

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for TPLF candidates, and although attendance at town council meetings is no longer compulsory, absences are recorded and may jeopardise employment prospects. The length of evaluations has been reduced, and state bureaucracies are assuming a more professional character, helped by the replacement of fighters in support positions by personnel trained in Addis Ababa.

In the absence of experience in the revolution, it seems fairly clear that future TPLF administrators are not likely to have the same level of commitment as the present generation. Indeed, interviews with young Tigrayans have revealed not only their poor prospects of employment, but also a remarkable level of ignorance about their recent history. This has led the regional government to establish a voluntary youth brigade that is intended to create a spirit of community service by providing basic training in building and by engaging in various infrastructural projects. Many Tigrayans are conscious of the distance that is emerging between themselves and their leaders, not least because of the increasing length of time needed for decisions to be made and implemented. They recognise that these problems are in part a product of development and the growing complexity of their society, but they resent what they feel to be undue attention given to urban interests, the ostentatious lifestyles of some among the leadership, and the construction of lavish office buildings.

One of the most significant changes to have taken place in the countryside has been the reduction in the number of *woredas* from 81 to 35. This late 1995 administrative reform was deemed necessary on grounds of cost and efficiency, but has been highly unpopular among peasants in outlying areas which have lost their status as *woredas* and the services that went with them, as well as the salaries of the 11-member executives which were important for the economic welfare of their communities. In Sebeya, for example, additional police had to be brought in to contain the resentment of local peasants, while in Adi Ahferom there was particular chagrin because the TPLF had initially won support in the area after capitalising on the unwillingness of the Imperial and *Derg* régimes to establish a district administration.

The growing problem of corruption, particularly in the award and construction of development projects, may well be exacerbated by the loss in oversight provided by *woreda* administrations that no longer exist. Moreover, economic efficiency, as measured in social terms, consists of both public and private gains, and what the Government has gained as regards reduced expenditures must be set against individual losses in terms of direct financial costs and the time spent in settling

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cases with distant bureaucracies. Of more lasting significance, the reforms have had the effect of diminishing the responsibility of *woreda* cadres in outlying areas, and increasing the authority of *tabia* officials who are local peasants and more likely to articulate their own concerns, even when these run counter to those of the TPLF.

Often at the centre of the debate over administration reform is *gem gum*, which derives it origins from a number of sources, including Maoism and the traditional means of evaluation employed by Tigrayan elders. Developed during the revolution as a means to ensure accountability and democratic decision-making in the army as well as in the TPLF's mass associations, the introduction of this institution into state bureaucracies throughout Tigray after liberation was solidly supported by both fighters and peasants. Defended by the political leaders who are themselves also subject to *gem gum*, it initially met considerable resistance from bureaucrats unwilling to have their performance evaluated by fellow employees and the community, and still faces opposition, particularly from newcomers to the province.

There is, however, a widespread feeling that an institution developed in a predominantly peasant milieu and in the army during a period of revolutionary struggle must be reformed, particularly if it is to be accepted in urban society and among the middle classes. Moreover, *gem gum* has sometimes suffered from a lack of consistency and a failure to link individual performance with wider objectives. There is considerable resistance from doctors, senior members of the judiciary, and other professionals about having their judgements challenged by those deemed not to have the requisite qualifications.

There is also a recognition of the need to reduce the time devoted to *gem gum* and thus make the process more efficient. In 1993, to give an example that is widely remembered, the regional government felt obliged to stop working during a lengthy evaluation. As Dr Solomon Inquai rhetorically queried three years later, 'How do you ask a businessman to come back in two months for a licence while the office closes down for an evaluation?'[9] With the exception of the churches and mosques, civil society in Tigray exerts few controls on the TPLF's system of government and administration, and *gem gum*, even with its dangers of manipulation and human rights abuse, is potentially a powerful means of accountability.

It would be a mistake to assume that the discontent referred to above indicates widespread dissatisfaction with the only political party that

[9] Interview with Dr Solomon Inquai, Mekelle, 1 January 1996.

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most Tigrayans have known for more than 20 years, and there are few demands, at least by peasants, for a genuine multi-party system. Nor is there much concern about human rights as understood in the West. Objections to existing programmes and conditions, or the desire for changes, are pursued and expressed through the TPLF mass associations, and alternatives to these channels are not being entertained. Nor is the province's insularity a matter of much concern. Democracy as understood by Tigrayan peasants has been virtually synonymous with the collectivist notion of national self-determination, something which has been won under the banner of the Front. However, the changing complexion of Tigrayan society, and in particular the growing economic and political importance of business and professional groups, means that loyalty to the TPLF will be evaluated increasingly critically by a more socially heterogeneous population.

THE CHURCH AND THE TPLF

Although the land-owning institutional basis of feudalism was destroyed early in the revolution, its legacy, particularly as epitomised by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, retains deep roots in rural Tigrayan society. Through reasons of pragmatism and weakness, as well as recognition of the authority of Church and its representatives, the TPLF has continued to be extremely circumspect as regards the religious beliefs of the peasants. Thus it is significant that while the Front has permitted priests to become members of most of the executives of rural councils, or *baitos*, they were never elected as chairmen, and their numbers steadily decrease as one advances from *woreda* to the provincial council.

However, the influence of the Church remains deep and pervasive in rural Tigray. Indicative of this is a celebrated incident in early 1992, when Muslims were physically prevented from building a mosque, even after acquiring the necessary permits from the civil authorities, because of opposition from the town's powerful Zion Mariam Church, whose leaders led a demonstration which quickly turned into a riot. Although the local TPLF administration announced that residents would be educated about religious rights, to date no such campaign has been mounted. Moreover, in 1996 there were still no plans to resume construction of the mosque despite a sense of grievance on the part of the town's Muslims. Nor is there reason to think this case of Church obstruction is unique: I heard the Bishop of Tigray speak out against

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the use of contraceptives immediately after a TPLF official from the Ministry of Health had made an impassioned speech advocating such a means of protection against the spread of AIDS.[10]

The TPLF had only limited success at reducing religious holidays and fasting during the revolution when its prestige was at a peak. As a result, there must be doubts as to the extent of its authority now in these and other matters influenced by traditional religious values, such as gender relations and the rôle of women. The fact that senior TPLF leaders, who once shunned the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, publicly kiss crosses held by priests will reassure religious leaders who now sing their praises. But such actions cause chagrin among those Front cadres committed to a thoroughgoing transformation of Tigrayan society. Confronting the Church clearly risks gaining the ire of its officials and upsetting religious-minded peasants, but ignoring its continuing promotion of reactionary values not only undermines the objectives for which the revolution was fought, but also places a major obstacle on the road to development.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The end of the revolutionary struggle in Tigray meant the emergence of new conditions and forces that from the vantage point of early 1997 can only be imperfectly understood. However, it is clear that the province is undergoing marked changes that are having a major impact on social and political life. In particular, certain developments are producing growing inequality between regions and districts, and increasing economic differentiation across Tigrayan society. Although the process to date is welcomed because it is generating more winners than losers, it is creating pockets of regional and sectional dissatisfaction in what is an inevitable result of the largely free-market model of development favoured by the TPLF. It must also be borne in mind that despite its small size, Tigray has always been, and remains today, a society where local and regional loyalties are very strong. The fact that a disproportionate amount of investment, even though it is largely private, has benefited selected areas – in particular Mekelle – is a cause of concern.

There are as yet no signs that dissatisfaction, at least in the countryside, is so widespread as to precipitate the emergence of organised opposition groups, much less political parties. However,

[10] Witnessed in Colliquot, 2 January 1993.

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growing peasant questioning of the existing system of land tenure strikes at the core of both the TPLF's development strategy and its own legitimacy. For the Government to either encourage and/or directly participate in debate on the subject will intensify feelings of insecurity on the part of landholders, and deepen the hopes of others for another land redistribution. There is no easy approach, much less a solution, to this conundrum, the more so because a decision in Tigray cannot be taken independently of considerations about its impact elsewhere in Ethiopia. The stated position of the TPLF has been to support a free market in land *when* the rural crisis was contained and a measure of stability existed in the countryside, it being assumed that such conditions would not be attained for many years. However, the TPLF may be forced to revise its projections, given the growth in landlessness, the insecurity of landholders, the rapidly increasing commercialisation, the announcement of a further redistribution of land in Amhara, and new thinking among the peasants.

The fact that the question of land tenure is coming to the fore in Tigray, in spite of attempts by the TPLF to ignore this problem, suggests that changes are taking place in the political environment. In conjunction with processes of development that are serving to divide rural communities, as well as the aforementioned *woreda* reforms, it points to decreasing TPLF control in the countryside. In addition, it emphasises the growing power and willingness of peasants to take the initiative about the very basis of their livelihood. And although this may make the task of the TPLF more difficult, it speaks strongly to the democratic character of recent developments among the peasantry that their long involvement in the revolutionary struggle had facilitated.

It is apparent that those who led a revolution of peasant cultivators, and who still define themselves as leaders of a party of the peasants, are now faced with the difficult task of responding to the demands of a rising and largely urban-based class of traders, merchants, and professionals, who for the most part do not have strong attachments to the TPLF. Although mutual suspicion characterised the first post-*Derg* years, the recent growth in the private sector suggests that the pragmatism of the TPLF and the self-interest of the petty-bourgeoisie have served to overcome at least their basic differences. None the less, their radically different histories and interests means there will be an uneasy relationship between them for some time, not least because of the business community's continuing fears about the long-term objectives of the TPLF and weak representation in the Government, as well as the latter's limited experience in either promoting and/or

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controlling the private sector. It can also be anticipated that in time the non-Front intelligentsia will promote their own political ambitions.

One of the biggest difficulties for the TPLF is that the effect of overseeing a society vastly more complex than that which it confronted in rural Tigray, and having to respond to the demands and concerns of ever pressing urban interests, may well weaken its intimate relationship with the peasants that has been the Front's inspiration and strength. The recently implemented administrative reforms, although readily defended on grounds of economy and efficiency, may prove to be incautious and ill-timed. The counterpart to urban suspicion is rural insecurity as the TPLF's traditional supporters in the countryside find levels of service and contacts with the Government decreasing, with key programmes undergoing not always welcome changes.

Peasants intuitively, and historians on the basis of their studies, know that the leaders of a revolutionary party come under enormous pressure to compromise with powerful urban elements when they move from the countryside to the towns and cities. The experience of the TPLF between 1975 and 1991 confirms the validity of Amílcar Cabral's contention that the petty-bourgeoisie must commit class suicide if they wish to cement their relationship with the peasantry in a revolutionary struggle – but unfortunately the Guinean leader did not live long enough to consider the prospect of a class resurrection after the attainment of power.

The material rewards available to those possessing state power are readily apparent, and in spite of years of revolutionary struggle, feudal values and pressures to enjoy the fruits of hard-fought endeavours remain present and pressing in Tigray. Cases of corruption among the lower ranks of the TPLF have been brought to light, but such dangers are probably less threatening than fears that the leadership will – like that of many past revolutionaries – fall prey to the attractions of affluence and the siren song of the rising urban business classes, a prospect even more likely given the Front's own active involvement in the world of commerce.

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