

PLF Crisis 1973 memory, MenkaE

The PLF leadership crisis 1973

This incident was one small happening which led to a large one, fighters purging each other thus the killings of the "Menkae" and possibly the "Yemeen" branded fighters of the so called movements. I prefer sending the persons interviews than analyzing it because the fighters I interviewed told me of their personal experiences and were not in the exact places when the happenings occurred.

Interview with Ex Ambassador Haile Menkerios 24.10.04

When did you join the struggle?

I went to meda early 1973.

Why did you go?

You have to understand there was a lot of idealism, student movement, and it was not only I but also many students. It was a duty, which we happily accepted. We knew that harsh life was expecting us. We decided that we should be examples to all Eritreans for such a commitment. I was in graduate school then. We were the first ones going from here. We were about 5 who started but only I and another friend went to meda.

We went through Yemen to meda since we had contact with meda. Aboi Welde Ab was in Cairo in the PLF- Peoples Liberation Forces- office. The ELF and PLF were in civil war then. Going to Sudan was falling into the hands of the ELF and the main office of PLF was in Democratic republic of Yemen - Aden. There was another office in Beirut too, in these 3 countries.

In Cairo office was Taha Mohammed Nur, Osman Sabbe himself in Beirut and fighters in Yemen who had direct contact with meda. And anyone joining meda goes through Yemen in those days.

So we went to Cairo and then to Yemen. From there we took a small boat, a fisherman's dhow across the Red Sea to the Eritrea-Sudan border to Sahel, and at nighttime.

While in the US, we had contact with meda through members as Tsegai Khasai had come, and also Mahmoud Sherifo and Gebre Medhin Gidey who were in Kessela. We had contact with them from end of 1970 and 71, and after they went to meda we had contact through Aboi Welde Ab and Taha.

All the fighters split from ELF. Some went to Ala, others in small groups to the Sudan when killing started. Those PLF1 mostly Red Sea people, were taken by Sabbe to Aden and then to meda. Sherifo had stayed in Kessela and we corresponded with him. Then Gebre Medhin went to Cairo.

When I joined the front, there was no regular military training. We were joining in small numbers, 2 or 3 in one time. At daytime those not trained were called out to the riverbanks and we got some military exercise as we went along and at nights we slept in hills.

Then a large group of about 30 came from inside Eritrea and we had a 2-week training together in a place called Arag, in Sahel.

We heard of the civil fightings of Gereger and that the Sudanese had told the Eritreans to get inside Eritrean border.

When we reached Eritrea, there were fighters waiting for us since supplies and weapons too were brought with us. They told us of having heard shooting in Gereger when coming to us that our forces must have moved camp. The civil strife continued when we were there for 6 months.

There was registration of new comers, written in notebooks, not properly as was later used. One to be fighter is already known of, coming to Yemen. For those joining from inside Eritrea, the town agents gathered them in Bahri. The person's name and background is known then and proceed to Sahel.

The PLF 1 (Shabia) were about 150 man strong and PLF 2 (Selfi) about 120 and Obel 20-30 men. All sides had their circles; it was not totally integrated then. We new ones and the 30 other new ones and some coming in few numbers had made training for 2 weeks, numbering to about 50. This is a large number of forces that reformation (tekhlit) was made, and a new haili formed.

Then, I and Mehari Girmatsion from the USSR were told that we should go abroad and organize students, workers etc organizations and to return to Europe. I did not want the job after come determined to fight in the field. It was better to send a veteran fighter who had many experiences because we cannot be called fighters in only 6 months time.

While we were at the riverside, there had been a long time competition between Selomon W Mariam and two leadership members, Tewelde Eyob and Asmerom Gherezghiher. Selomon was an active person who used to make cliques of his own; he was a city man with connections with civil organizations, not much a military man.

Tewelde Eyob was the strongest of the three and Asmerom was not much educated or active but they were regarded militarily leadership by the fighters. As the country had feudal society, people depended more on persons from their region.

Selomon was rumoured on being a regionalist and had sometime spoken the Akele Guzai being more numerous. We were surprised that such backward thoughts were in meda, even Eritrea was seeming little for us let alone think in region, and we did not know who was from where.

All soldiers slept in hilltops while the leadership rested in riverbank guarded making it not easy for the enemy to enter. Water was so important it had to be well guarded surrounding the area lest the enemy control the water areas. We were expecting to be sent abroad.

We had come to understand the confrontations of Selomon on one side and Tewelde and Asmerom on the other side. One day, Selomon came to us and said that from now on he will eat in our group. The first female fighters Dehab and Werku were already with us.

As we were distributed radios, Selomon took our radio. I asked him why he did not use the leadership's radio than ours because we wanted to hear news too. He answered no, theirs is the mesafinti (feudal) radio, and I was shocked that the leadership had such disagreements.

In the daytime next day, I talked to some officers saying we are seeing a not strong leadership. We had the criticism and self-criticism customs. That Selomon openly calls the others feudalistic, how could a weak leadership continue, meaning the whole front is not strongly led.

They told me I should say to Selomon himself and I answered that the leadership makes us criticizes for the loss of needles and they should together do their own criticizes. I cannot go to Isayas and tell him Selomon calls him a feudalist.

This was the start of the whole situation that expanded into other matters. This called for a meeting of 12 persons, the leadership and some cadres. Isayas wondered why the meeting was called. I was then asked what happened. I repeated what had happened and said I think the fighters see you as a solid leadership and matters should come into agreements.

These fighters had long time relationships and said it was Selomon who was feudalist and was regionalist tendencies too. They talked of past experiences what had happened and the majority were against Selomon.

Isayas then said that he cannot continue acting like their priest and the issue must be resolved among these people once and for all. When he said that, the issue became wider. We were there to reconcile and the some of the accused cadres and leadership now became the accusers. We said to them that they could not solve the problem as they were seen accusing each other and it should be examined.

Selomon is accused of being regionalist, and you who should be in between are becoming accusers. We were 7 together. I suggested that those who knew them all should hold a large cadre discussion. This radio incident was the opener of the conflict history.

Then 52 members from all hailis-units and veterans gathered. They told us to run it and we saw there was a deeper division amongst them, Akele Guzai and Hamassien divisions. As the front's strongholds were in Ala and Semanawi Bahri-Hamassien, it was the people from there who joined in most numbers. Many from Serae and other regions joined ELF because ELF was in those areas.

Joining the front for many was not an ideology question, but proximity to join. Many who joined were specifically from Karneshim and Tsena Degle areas because they lived in these areas.

Selomon had his gangs of supports and Tewelde/Asmerom had their own gang. It was much later we learnt that Asmerom was from Debarua, Serae. It is common that people connect to their near folks and feudal traditions are not overcome yet.

The worst situation came from the educated fighters who did not like the way the leadership run the front, saying the leadership are backward and are attacking Selomon by regionalism. That the leadership should be thoroughly changed, and we should be guided by scientific socialism, saying this was a national democratic revolution, socialist in character to lead to communism.

These fighters were strongly leftist, with many opinions, which we believed in too. They claimed that the leadership is feudal and Isayas was with these men that it should be changed. Our aims should be changed making it a socialist revolution. The leftists sided with Selomon claiming the leadership wanted to kill him, to get alliance from the Hamassien side were more in number and stronger, and gain support from his side. And Selomon became their ally.

In this meeting of the 52 members, the leftists were attacked saying they are using Solomon's regionalism to remove him later and take power because they themselves are regionalists. The leftists wanted to use the cracks on the leadership. They wanted larger fighters meetings and that the educated should lead etc. This led to the movement known as the 'Menkae movement'.

Then Musie T Mikel from the leftists said these people use the front as their personal power who 'pee and make faeces' as they wished. Musie was not at loss to use words. They suppress people and charge anyone as they wish be it in regionalism or other to kill him.

Since we were the ones who gathered this meeting, we had called fighters who could make changes from the leadership and Musie and co were one of these. We invited them specifically too. When Musie used these words, there was Tsegai Keshi, a haili leader, who was against Selomon, though he was Hamassien too. He was a very forward and honest but uneducated man and no talker.

He got so angry saying 'now you say this leadership pees and makes faeces!' and hit Musie on the head with his rifle butt. This should not have happened and we demanded that Tsegai be imprisoned. Mehari Girmatsion, a third and I man were the responsible for holding this meeting. As it was according to PLF rules, I myself imprisoned Tsegai. He did not shoot at his comrade but hit him and putting a guard on him, he was sentenced to punishment.

That became the end of meetings and the leftists said did we not say so, that they pee and have faeces on us. And they took over and Musie used that. Musie was a smart guy. Thinking about it later, there was nothing bad about it, it was true.

The traditional leadership did not have capacity to lead, although they started the military wing. Tewelde Eyob was a good military leader. Isayas was the only politically capable person. Basically many fighters had come from the rural areas and the conflict situation had come untimely, otherwise their opinions were not disagreeable. And that they attacked the leadership. The timing and way they conducted was not right.

So they went and said that the leadership should go down and be replaced, we shall have a scientific socialism and we know about it. And the other side disagreed that Yohannes etc - the leftists- should rule and we thought it was opportunistic talking only about the leadership.

Their mistake was their arguing on the leadership than reshape the line, and nobody who knew of it did not oppose changing our ways. The situation started growing widely and that Musie was hit, as if we too sanctioned it.

What we wanted was taking the right road, recognize the weakness of the traditional leadership and demanded a congress be made and new leadership to be elected. We did not have a programme or constitution and we had the 3 united fronts working in their own rules that the congress becomes our lead.

But there came confusion in the front and the leadership was not obeyed and at that time the Ethiopians came on us in Sahel, the 13-day war. Instead of guerrilla warfare we were forced to fight holding positions.

Petros Selomon and Sebhat Efreem were with the leftists-Menkae at the beginning and were thus imprisoned, and that is the first time I saw imprisoning of them, as they had wanted to imprison the leadership.

Now all of a sudden, Selomon recognized that these people at the end would break his post and take it, and turned against them. The front had now split into three groups. One was the Menkae who claimed that the leadership was old with no knowledge and should be changed to scientific socialism etc.

The second was Selomon's group whose region Hamassien was numerous as they were in the ridge to the front, the Semenawi Bahri. When one joined the front one who knows him join too and the geographical location attracted it.

These big numbers were the supporters of Selomon. These were against Isayas and the Menkae, even though they sided with the Menkae at the beginning. They had claimed Selomon was to be killed, but they did not want to glorify Selomon. They started saying Selomon is no different from the others in the leadership and they should be changed.

When Selomon realized this he came to opposition to them and had to come back to the leadership mould again. Now the leadership and their supporters built a united front.

Selomon was earlier attacking the Akele Guzai, then changed and supported the Menkae and again attacked both sides. He was a good and active organizer of people, and started imprisoning fighters. The third group said the leadership was feudalistic but should be changed systematically. This would widen the split between the Hamassien and Akele Guzai.

So it was an uneasy alliance. There were Serae too but we did not know them, being too few. We started talking to Isayas and others that these two groups are dangerous. We cannot complain on Selomon and the feudalists as we are surrounded wholly by it.

It is a secondary issue, which will get better with education and time; we cannot oppose all these peasants. There must be an alliance and this extreme leftism will crush us so we have to create a solid organisation. We cannot teach communism with the mostly peasants and we started organising.

This is what eventually created the Party inside the front. Wedi Selomon and others realized where it was leading and changed sides. Yohannes-Menkae was a man of fists, just like Isayas. But Isayas was a good military leader who maintained the balance and was aware of the social traditions. He knew where power was to be taken.

We had united with PLF 1 while the situation was going on and these were in between and eventually took sides of the third group. And some of their leadership, particularly Romadan had a big roll. He had balanced opinions and free from regionalism and religion and far sighted, and Ibrahim Afa, Ali Said etc were with him.

There had to be a structure because it was a united front and a secret socialist party was created and

it went on getting bigger and took over. When the Menkae became imprisoned, it can be said that the rest dispersed.

The Menkae did not have a big support and there was much persecution by Selomon. Our position was that we opposed Selomon's group and the extreme leftism that came, and being in between was considered biased and was dangerous and that's why we organized and Isayas and Romadan were key in organising it.

And that became the totally dominant force throughout being the instrument of control and leadership at the beginning. There were no more Menkae or Yemin. As time went by, the leadership role got less and instrument of control got bigger.

Petros and Sebhat had been with the Menkae and when imprisoning started, they changed positions saying the Menkae were trying to take power not for the better of the revolution. Now that we know them, it is us who shall charge them and did so. They were instrumental in organising it and also the secret Party.

The Menkae were imprisoned for a long time and in 1979 when there was no more support for them, a military committee was formed, the military tribunal. The party was formed in 1975 and by 1979 it was totally dominating.

The Menkae were charged and killed in secret and I did not know. Nobody was told when the killings were done and they were alive in the congress of 1976. Some were freed in 1978 as Werku was freed and was brought to us. Maybe they were killed and we heard it much later to justify their case, we did not know.

That is when I heard and it was not officially. Those who knew the whole secret are not more than 5 or 7. Because I was in the Zena (news) group, it was basically the centre of ideology and materials to read. It was after 1976 that the political office of the Party was formed.

When the girls Abeba, Werku and Maasho were freed 1976 and brought to us that we shall indoctrinate them. I tried to explain to them that both sides were incorrect, Selomon being Feudal and the Menkae being extremist. Selomon was at his highest.

I told them we cannot erase feudalism now and we cannot fight it head on, but with education and time. But this extremism is dangerous for the front and lead to its collapse. Dehab and Aberash were not freed and imprisoned with the rest because they did not repent and believed their cause was just.

The leadership were few and the issue was taken at that level and supposedly trusted by the fighters to do the right thing. The Executive Committee, the Politburo was formed then and made the decision; I was member of the Central Committee. Things like that were secret as it was a military front.

There were two parallel organisations in the front. The Party was secret and had its political office, i.e. the Politburo, and they also had a Central Committee. And the front had its politburo and Central Committee.

I was member of the latter, the mass organisation, and never in the secret Party's committee. They did not trust the educated fearing they would topple them. Some of the secret politburo members were Isayas, Romadan, Ibrahim Afa, Ali Said Abdella, Haile Duru, and Alamin. Mesfin Hagos was there at one time. This led to absolute authority of the leader.

Q. In the 'Destructive Movement of 1973' supposedly by Isayas, it states that the first female fighters of EPLF were having problems of upbringings and origins, and that they were spoiled. Was that the fact you saw?

This is just false accusation. They were with my ganta from the start until they were imprisoned. We were not interested on others origins and were thinking in international socialist ways. They were not in leading positions either. They were idealists like all of us. Once they were convinced their group were right and did not want to go against their comrades. Werku and Maasho in our ganta, Dehab and Aberash in another ganta.

GHEDLI
Vol.1 No 2
Jan – Feb 1974
Sweden Branch
FITWERARI COUNTERS COLONIALISM AND IMPERIALISM

This monthly journal is published for the first time inside the contested territory by the Eritrean Liberation Front-People's Liberation Forces (ELF-PLF) * and Eritrean Liberation Forces. There is no doubt that the publication of this monthly journal is a turning point in the development of the struggle against Ethiopian subjugation and U.S. Imperialistic domination.

The main goal of Fitwerari is to acquaint the peoples of Eritrea with the fundamental character of the struggle, the principles and political line derived there from. Thereby enabling the masses to grasp progressive principles and correct political line which consequently would promote unity amongst the masses and enable them to condemn unequivocally and fight courageously in crushing U.S. Imperialism and their loyal servants Ethiopian Feudalists.

The peoples of Eritrea for a long time have resisted Amharan Feudalism and U.S. Imperialism first through peaceful means and later in a higher development of their struggle have taken up arms. The peoples of Eritrea are waging a protracted warfare and in conducting this warfare they have to develop correct national strategy and political line free of religious, clan and egoistic considerations. To satisfy this demand a vanguard party is essential. The organ of this party is FITWERARI.

The function of a Vanguard within a front is to advance forward, lead, guide and destroy the enemy. The party that wages the struggle to counter these oppressions is known as the Vanguard Party.

In brief we called this journal Fitwerari to state out clearly our principles and political lines; to formulate the correct path of the Eritrean struggle, and to serve as a mouthpiece and echo of the gallant combatants and the people at large who are annihilating the enemy.

Hitherto the word Fitwerari was used as a rank in the Feudal hierarchy. But we use it in a literal sense of fighting and leading as the vanguard and not at all in the reactionary context as a rank in the feudal hierarchy. Our readers should note when we speak of Fitwerari that it is with a new revolutionary context and it should be understood with that spirit.

* The Eritrean Liberation Front-People's Liberation Forces (ELF-PLF) indicates to the PLF otherwise known as EPLF.

August 29, 1973
Pavia, ITALY

THE PAVIA DECLARATION

This is a joint declaration of Eritreans for Liberation in Europe (EFLE), Eritreans for Liberation in North America (EFLNA) and the General Union of Eritrean Students (GUES-CAIRO) concluded at the Fourth Annual Congress of EFLE held in Pavia Italy from: August 25-29, 1973. The declaration is hereafter referred to as the "Pavia Declaration."

We, the representatives of EFLE, EFLNA, and GUES-Cairo meeting at the Fourth Annual Congress of EFLE in Pavia, Italy, from 25-29 August 1973, would like to take this opportunity

to declare the common guiding principles of our organizations and affirm our genuine desire and determination to coordinate our activities and work towards principled unity of all progressive Eritrean organisations engaged in ensuring the continuation and intensification of the heroic struggle of the Eritrean masses for a true national liberation headed and guided by the Eritrean Liberation front-Peoples Liberation Forces, the only genuine Vanguard of the Eritrean struggle for national independence.

Thus, the EFLE, EFLNA and GUES-CAIRO, reaffirm their complete adherence of the following principles

A) OUR PRINCIPLES

(1) the right of the Eritrean people for national liberation is a just struggle that every progressive Eritrean should support. We firmly believe that in this vital struggle of the Eritrean people for national liberation, there should not be, and cannot be any neutral position. We are either not against or for the genuine emancipation of our masses. We are therefore, neither spectators nor sympathizers of the Eritrean struggle but active and committed members whose activities and commitments are geared towards the realization of the final Victory of the Eritrean workers and peasants, the motive forces of the Eritrean Revolution.

(2) We recognize that the struggle of the Eritrean people for freedom and independence is part of the struggle of the oppressed peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America against colonialism, Imperialist, Zionism, and national reaction. We, therefore, believe that the content and guiding principles of the Eritrean revolutionary struggle should be anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, anti-zionist and against domestic reaction.

The Eritrean revolutionary struggle should be mass-based i.e. popular, democratic, secular and with internationalist outlook.

(3) We strongly condemn the so-called "revolutionary council" of the Eritrean Liberation Front for its anti-people, counter-revolutionary and fascist program, of a "liquidation" of the Eritrean revolutionary Vanguard and terrorizing the masses who are fighting for freedom and independence.

(4) We further condemn the activities of the handful lackeys of the so-called "revolutionary council" who arrogantly call themselves General Union of Eritrean Students (GUES-BAGDAD). We call upon the misled members of this defiant organization to reject GUES- Baghdad and its reactionary policy and leadership and join hand with us in the interest of the Eritrean revolutionary struggle.

(5) We recognize the Eritrean Liberation Front-People's Liberation Forces (ELF-PLF) as the only front that represents the interest of the Eritrean masses for genuine national liberation. We hail the ELF-PLF as the Vanguard of the Eritrean revolutionary struggle. We fully endorse the programs and activities of the ELF-PLF and reaffirm our commitment to its ideals.

(6) We pledge to work towards the mobilization and unity of all progressive Eritreans and Eritrean organizations on the basis of the above-mentioned principles in order to strengthen the Eritrean revolution and its Vanguard the ELF-PLF for the final victory of the Eritrean masses.

The EFLE, EFLNA and GUES-CAIRO declare that the following continue to be the aims of these sisterly organizations:

(1) To mobilize all progressive Eritrean and Eritrean organizations under the above mentioned principles for the purpose of working towards the final Victory of the Eritrean revolution lead by the mass-based ELF-PLF.

(2) To intensify our political, financial and material support to the ELF-PLF, and above all support the struggle correctly by joining the heroic fighters in the armed and political struggle.

(3) To intensify political education among members in order to widen our world outlook for the interest of our revolution, which is anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, anti-zionist and against

domestic reaction.

(4) To affirm our full support for the heroic struggle of the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America and other progressive and democratic movements in the Capitalist countries in their common struggle against imperialism. We pledge to work hand in hand with all progressive organizations wherever we are.

(5) We will intensify our activities regarding the task of propagating the cause of the Eritrean revolutionary struggle to all progressive groups, organizations and countries.

G) The EFLE, EFLNA and GUES-CAIRO solemnly declare that they shall consistently adhere to the principles and aims inspired by the revolutionary struggle of the Eritrean people under the leadership of the ELF-PLF, we have accordingly agreed to take the following measures:

(1) To achieve full solidarity and eventual unity among our three sisterly organizations and to initiate effective and concrete democratic measures against all forces that attempt to subvert and jeopardise the ELF-PLF, the Vanguard of the Eritrean revolutionary struggle.

(2) To offer determined support to the intensification of our revolutionary struggle by continuing our efforts towards the coordination of our activities in political education and other activities necessary for strengthening our commitment of the ELF-PLF.

(3) To set up a committee of the three (one from each organization) that would study the form that the merge of our three organizations will be taking. The committee should decide the time and place of its meeting and present the final agreement to its respective organizations for approval.

(4) Until the formation of such worldwide federation is attained the three sisterly organizations have agreed to work very closely and try to coordinate the activities as much as possible.

Long Live the Heroic Struggle of the Eritrean masses for National Liberation.

Long Live the ELF-PLF the Vanguard of the Eritrean Revolutionary Struggle.

Long live the struggle of the oppressed peoples of the world.

Down with Ethiopian colonialism, U.S. Imperialism, Israeli Zionism and Domestic Reaction.

Victory, to the Eritrean Masses

Long Live the Spirit of the Pavia Declaration.

E N D