

# The Myth of a stable Ethiopia under a Minority Regime

## Part I

The morale is to the material as three to one

Napoleon Bonaparte

The Way means inducing the people to have the same aim as the leadership, so that they will share death and share life, without fear of danger.

Sun Tzu

### The Myth of a Strong Ethiopian Armed Force

A myth underlying Western relations with Ethiopia regards that country's military as a reliable and stable partner in the Horn of Africa and has dominated U.S. and European policy for more than two decades. This narrative has of late been increasing in influence and impact as foreign allies have grown increasingly dependent on Ethiopia to help defeat the extremist Al Shabaab insurgency in Somalia. Ethiopian support for other African peacekeeping missions is needed from time to time as well. Yet, to quote a Feb. 2016 Stratfor analysis, *"...so far, the Islamist militants are clearly succeeding. Not only are they hitting AMISOM [African Union Mission in Somalia] at will, they are also specifically targeting aid shipments and personnel as a way to disrupt the counterinsurgency effort."*

The International Crisis Group's June 2016 report asserts that, *"Al-Shabaab continued to launch regular attacks."* This complaint is echoed in its preceding reports as well: *"Al-Shabaab kept up urban attacks and made limited territorial gains" [May 2016], "Al-Shabaab upped terrorist attacks and recaptured locations across south-central Somalia: attacked and recaptured several towns in Lower Shabelle, Bay and Jubaland regions, including 8 Feb temporary occupation of Marka and 16 Feb attack on Afgoye..."*, [March 2016], etc.

Inasmuch as Ethiopia comprises a major component of AMISOM and, more generally, is considered the West's most powerful and stable partner in Africa's Horn, we shall examine some salient features of Ethiopia's much-touted "strong army" and its future prospects for meeting the goals of major donors, such as the United States and Britain.

Clausewitz argued that, in order to be effective in war generally, and in military operations in particular, sufficient equilibrium must exist between the people, the army, and the government or the state as to overcome conflicting tensions, contradictions, and the ever-present "friction," i.e., inefficiency and obstacles. Some 2000 years earlier, Sun Tzu described a state of congruence between the aim of the government and the people as the Tao, or, "The Way," a prerequisite to victory in war. When leadership and the army share the same purpose, he taught, this, too, is Tao. On the other hand, substantial divergence between government, people, and army, spells disaster for the nation.

In today's Ethiopia, such a disaster has been in the making for years. A deep and widening fault line divides the unpopular regime, the people of Ethiopia, and the military's higher and lower ranks. These schisms afflict Ethiopia's armed forces with intractable contradictions that render them highly vulnerable to external and internal pressures.

It could be argued that the armed forces under the current regime are repeating similar blunders as the of the previous Communist regime that they replaced. Unlike the current armed forces under the TPLF/EPRDF regime, the armed forces under Col. Mengistu's regime found itself simultaneously fighting on multiple fronts, staving off Somali aggression while embroiled in protracted counter insurgency campaigns in all four corners of the country.

The historian Gebru Tareke argued in his book, "The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa," that the main cause of the previous army's defeat was a "lack of imagination" that manifested as strategic and tactical rigidity. The Marxist-Leninist ideology the regime espoused, economic and other attendant policies it pursued, its repressive measures, and the multiple fronts throughout the country alienated the people from the regime. These factors cost that government its critical civilian base of support needed to wage counterinsurgency war in many corners of the country, including the now-dominant Tigray and independent Eritrea.

The loss of popular backing, comprising the rear of the armed forces and representing one of Clausewitz's Trinitarian elements, combined with the low morale of the army due to the lengthy wars in Eritrea and Tigray to the north, betrayed the appearance of superiority of the Ethiopian defense forces under Col. Mengistu regime presented. The failed coup of 1989 that wiped out the armed forces' best strategic commanders and leaders, symptomatic of the contradictions besetting both Ethiopian society and the army, signaled the deteriorating conditions and failure to prosecute the war. Along with the will of the public to carry the burden of the war, argued Gebru and others scholars who studied that era's political and military developments, the repressive political system itself plummeted.<sup>1</sup>

The current TPLF/EPRDF regime, even though spared so far the multiple threats that the previous regime's armed forces managed to contain for many years, deploys armed forces that are also very vulnerable. To reuse the terms employed by Professor Terrence Lyons, scholar of conflict resolution, in his study, "Ethiopia: Assessing Risks to Stability," commissioned by the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2011, both the political system and the army are "brittle," i.e., fragile, although in the short term seemingly strong and stable. But mid- and long-term prospects, the professor projected, are a different story. Indeed, Ethiopia's armed forces are under increasing pressure from popular resistance and armed rebellions that are gaining strength every year.<sup>2</sup>

Policymakers relying on Ethiopia as a dependable military ally may find it difficult to grasp that this army is at serious risk of collapse, but similar conditions, even worse conditions, to those that undermined its predecessor are evident. In fact, abysmal conditions afflicting the armed forces under the current regime are numerous and structural. Intelligence, both open source and covert, collected in the past few years confirms the internal crisis within the armed forces. These include testimony, both written and oral, from defecting ground forces' officers of various ranks and specializations, NCOs, privates, Airforce pilots, and technicians. All attest that Ethiopia's ground and air forces are dispirited and demoralized institutions.

The spike in defections has become so high, according to reliable sources that include one recently broadcast on Ethiopian satellite TV and Radio (ESAT), that it's become a recurring topic in internal Ministry

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<sup>1</sup> Gebru Tareke, the Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa

<sup>2</sup> [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/110623\\_Lyons\\_Ethiopia\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110623_Lyons_Ethiopia_Web.pdf)

of Defense meetings of such significance as to require the attendance of the Minister of Defense, Siraj Fergessa, and Samora Yunis, the Armed Forces Chief of Staff. Indeed, chronic defections of significant proportions have afflicted all divisions, including army divisions under the Northern command deployed along the border with Eritrea.<sup>3</sup>

These losses translate directly into operational weakness. The Airforce, for example, already lacks institutional memory and pride in a tradition-based military culture due to the large number pilots and officers dismissed en masse after the fall of the previous regime. But compounding this deficiency are the scores of pilots and technicians who have defected since 2005, including dozens who were sent for advanced training to Belarus and Israel in 2006 and 2007, respectively. Such defections have not subsided, but continue to date, including two pilots and a senior technician who flew a fighter helicopter out of Ethiopia into a neighboring country in 2014. Most such defectors promptly join opposition movements such as Patriotic Ginbot 7 and others.

The visible increase in defections can generally be ascribed to marginalization and abuse of soldiers and airman by cadres and officers of the government. But there are several other reasons for this trend as well. An analysis must begin with the stark fact that Ethiopia's senior leadership is stealing approximately 2 billion dollars every year. This statistic is based on the amount of illicit financial outflows documented by a UN panel chaired by former South African president Thabo Mbeki and the fact that the means of embezzlement, over and under-invoicing of exports and imports, are controlled by a small circle of top officials.

Protecting such a source of wealth, especially in the face of extreme poverty suffered by the nation generally, requires tight control of the security forces. But the Tigrayan ethnic composition of those managing Ethiopia's corruption has such small representation within the general population at six percent that it's impossible to fill the ranks only with loyal fellow Tigrayans. This has resulted in a two-tier system in which the rank-and-file come from the majority ethnic groups, such as the Oromo and Amhara, while their leadership is comprised almost exclusively of Tigrayans, claiming to represent only a 6% of the population in Ethiopia.

As with any unrepresentative system requiring repression for its survival, injustice in Ethiopia's military is rife. Minority ethnic domination of the command structure and the corresponding pervasive corruption, favoritism, and promotions on the basis of ethnic origin instead of merit have resulted in poor morale and widespread, festering resentment within the senior military leadership. These conditions have created the dangerous divisions that today threaten the military's efficiency, and even survival.

In this installment, the structural weaknesses in Ethiopia's Armed Forces are examined. The following section will provide a more qualitative description of the problem, based on testimonials obtained from defectors and from intelligence obtained by opposition groups.

Several practices in particular undermine morale within the lower and middle ranks of the Armed Forces, including:

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<sup>3</sup> Worsening defections in the Ethiopian army  
ESAT News (April 12, 2016)

- Compulsory “donations” deducted from already-meager monthly salaries for The Meles Foundation, for the Abay Renaissance Dam, a notorious nexus of corruption, and various ersatz *Tehadiso* causes, national anniversaries and holidays. Politically-appointed Tigray and unit commanders decide the percentage to be deducted from the soldier’s salary without consultation.
- Members of the army are told by their commanders that they have a right not to contribute. But, in practice, those who refuse to cooperate are blacklisted. Offenders are refused important
- Benefits, such as the opportunity to be sent on peacekeeping missions, educational and advancement training programs. Those who opt out from donating are accused by their Tigrayan commanders of harboring a hidden political agenda.
- Perceptions within the Armed Forces’ rank and file, junior officers, and NCOs for the most part, are that, while Ethiopia’s people are starving (Ethiopia is currently suffering the largest famine in its history), senior military leadership are enriching themselves through massive corruption. There is no transparency or accountability for the donations while the construction of large, luxury mansions by the generals is well known.
- Members of the army are subjected to the infamous *gimgema*, in which people are made to confess, and one testifies against his comrade in the presence of several people. This process, according to defector debriefings, dispirits and humiliates those who undergo this process.
- Those who refuse to cooperate in the shakedowns are often subjected to military discipline, ranging from solitary confinement to torture.
- Verbal attacks by government cadres at performance assessment meetings, including abuse of senior non-Tigrayan personnel by nominally-subordinate Tigrayans. Organizational efficiency is severely weakened by this practice, as it discourages asking questions about day-to-day operations. It is well known that a low-level cadre can make a non-Tigrayan, even one superior in rank, disappear for simply forwarding a challenging question or constructive criticism.
- Despite claims by senior military leadership that the defense forces are committed in their allegiance to the regime, testimony from officers, the rank and file and air force pilots confirms the existence of a broad, underlying attitude that preserving the corrupt status quo is not worth the sacrifice of their lives. Thus, the army is not prepared to defend the country from any threat. Exasperation and fatigue are the common reaction to the regime’s persistent and unconvincing propaganda.
- The average Ethiopian soldier, generally from a non-Tigrayan ethnic groups, believes his leaders consider him cannon fodder while Tigrayan cadres and generals are protected from danger and exempt from hazardous duty.
- While the rank-and-file is fighting and dying in Somalia and on the border with Eritrea, TPLF cadres and generals pursue conspicuously lavish lifestyles in the capital’s posh suburbs. This was widely observed during the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war. Soldiers risking their lives and limbs fighting extremists in Somalia are painfully aware that their generals and commanders are busy dealing contraband goods, selling petrol and other supplies from the Somalia operation in the open markets of Mogadishu. Many question why they must risk their lives fighting an Al Shabaab with which their commanders are trading and profiting. Rumors abound that Ethiopia’s military leadership would secretly like the war there to continue for business reasons. Accusations circulate that Ethiopia’s generals pay Al Shabaab under the table to limit its operations to the Somali side of the shared border.

- Resentment is widespread within the rank-and-file members at being made to pay for their uniforms and shoes while their families back home are destitute. Housing is often of intolerably poor quality. On the other hand, their generals have built skyscrapers, enriched themselves on the black market, and are paid thousands of dollars-- as much as twenty five thousand dollars per month in the case of force commanders of the various peacekeeping missions.
- The deliberate mixing of politicized and fabricated intelligence with the genuine as a method of impressing foreign military partners.

Such conditions are feeding the flow of military talent and loyalty from the regime to Patriotic Ginbot 7 and other opposition armed groups.

It is now 25 years that a small ethnic minority, representing only 6% of the population, has dominated Ethiopia's military, security services, bureaucracy and economy. They remain at the helm of the command-and-control structure, from the Defense Chief of Staff down to Commands, Divisions, regiments, and even platoon leadership. Despite the need to maintain control over a much larger restive and resentful population and prosecute successfully a difficult counter-insurgency at the same time, the defense forces are not led by competent generals well-schooled in military science, nor do they exhibit leadership qualities. Academically, the TPLF generals tend to be grade school dropouts and the rank-and-file are well aware of this fact, engendering a lack of respect for their superiors.<sup>4</sup>

As well-known contemporary Counter insurgency theorists, who have studied both successful and unsuccessful counterinsurgencies argued in their studies applying brute force alone cannot possible win over the population. Counter insurgency is not about military force alone but winning the minds and hearts of the people, one of the three elements of Clausewitz's trinity, which the previous regime's blundered and the current minority regime continues on the path. Knowledge of guerrilla warfare, its methods and tactics which these TPLF generals, representing over 80% of the army and air force command, possess from their rebel days does not easily translate into skills at the strategic and theater levels, nor the ability to direct effectively conventional modern warfare requiring joint and combined warfare by infantry, mechanized and air forces.

One might expect such experienced guerilla warriors to understand counterinsurgency, but these ostensibly grizzled veterans appear to have forgotten the lessons of their own early experience: that it's less about military force than winning hearts and minds. And that atrocities manufacture more enemies than they kill (of course, a lot of training and civil operations fly out the window with each year's stolen two billion dollars). For the regime's counterinsurgency track record in the Ogaden in the East, Gondar in the Northwest, and Gambella region in Ethiopia's southwest is stained by horrific, internationally-condemned episodes of brutal persecution of the civilian population. It is no coincidence that these same areas have become fertile recruiting grounds for the armed freedom and democracy forces opposing the regime.<sup>5</sup>

The TPLF generals' 25 years' tenure as strategic commanders is a pale reflection of what Ethiopia enjoyed at these levels of leadership during the Emperor's, and even during the regime of Col. Mengistu .

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ginbot7.org/the-total-domination-of-the-ethiopian-army-by-ethnic-tigrean-officers/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/06/12/ethiopia-army-commits-executions-torture-and-rape-ogaden>

From the many illustrative accounts of this phenomenon, we can take, for example, this *description of an Ethiopian army colonel, translated by Bereket Kidane, from Tesfaye Gebreab's published memoir of the 1998-2000 Ethiopia – Eritrea border war titled The Writer's Memoir “የደረሰው ማስታወሻ”*:

*“ ..... Weyane took 10 divisions to the war front against Eritrea. Of those ten divisions, one was a fully mechanized division. There was also one brigade of commandos among them. When war broke out in 1998, Weyane's armed forces were ready to attack on four fronts, namely Burre, Zalambessa, Tsorona and Badme. The first round of the 1998 war was extremely screwed-up and gruesome. Looking back on it as a commander and a military professional, it was an extremely inept and embarrassingly flawed war plan from the beginning. It was badly planned. It is very sad that no one to date has been held accountable for the wasted treasure in blood and national resources that was expended on the war effort.”*

*“... we had anywhere from 250,000 to 300,000 of our soldiers killed on the war effort in Eritrea during the Haile Selassie and Dergue era. But if we compare that to the Weyane era, in just one year we had 98,700 of our soldiers killed and 194,300 wounded. These are figures I got from our Ministry of Defense in Ethiopia. The figures I retrieved from the records of Ordinance Command is that two-thirds of our heavy weaponry was destroyed during the first round of Ethio-Eritrean border war. The field generals of this nihilistic and meaningless war were Seare Mekonen, Samora Younis, Yohannes Gebremeskel, Tadesse Werede, Abraha , Quarter...”*

Most of these generals remain the most senior of the armed forces, including, Samora, the current chief of staff.

*“.....After the 1-week battle plan failed miserably and concluded with great military losses, the general who was in charge of the war, Tsadkan Gebretensae, called a meeting at Infara, the place that was serving as the Command and Control Center. General Tsadkan tried to call the meeting to order but he could not hide his emotions and broke down crying. All of the meeting participants cried with him. Infara was like a funeral home. Once Tsadkan regained his composure, he tried to comfort the meeting's participants. Everyone was crying. General Tsadkan said the following to them: “I have led many battles in my career. I have fought in many wars. I have seen a lot. I have never experienced this kind of utter failure. It is bad.” The reason the meeting was called was to assess the situation and find solutions to the problems. Meeting participants agreed that there were two basic problems: the challenging landscape and defective battle plans were equally to blame. The landscape is favorable to the enemy; the enemy is in a defensive position. Also, there was no adequate preparation on our part. We didn't size up the enemy and its strength correctly. We underestimated the enemy's capabilities. The enemy is using the landscape to his advantage and rotating forces and battle plans as he wishes. Without going into much detail, we concluded the meeting. Using that as a starting point, we collectively decided to discard the offensive battle plans for Zalambessa and Burre. In order to beef up our fighting capability, it was decided that a committee led by General Abebe Teklehaymanot would go on a shopping spree for the air and ground forces. Bereket Simon was to lead the conscription of massive number of troops. Aba*

*Dula was to supervise the training of the conscripts. The number of divisions was to increase from 12 to 30 in a short period of time. Until then, the troops would stay in a defensive position...”<sup>6</sup>*

Additionally, during the Ethio-Eritrea war of 1998-2000, the TPLF leadership had to swallow the bitter pill of admitting that its top leadership of the armed forces was nowhere up to the standard needed to lead conventional forces at the strategic and theater levels, and to wage wars requiring knowledge and experience in the science and art of warfare other than the guerilla methods and tactics the TPLF generals are said to understand due to their guerilla days as platoon and company commanders. Therefore, the best surviving Generals of the previous regime-- Generals Tesfaye Habetemarim, Airborne, General Behailu Kinde, infantry, General Negussie Adugna, artillery (later to die in battle during the Ethio-Eritrea war), and Gen. Techane Mesfin, Airforce, and thousands of heavy weaponry experts, combat engineers, air force pilots, and many high ranking and line officers who had been humiliated and reduced to being paupers for “serving the Derg Army” after the demise of the former regime in 1991 were called upon once again, almost begged by then-Chief of staff Tsadkan Gebretensay himself, to join preparations for the next round of war the TPLF was preparing against the Eritreans. This was done over the objections of TPLF generals, such as Samora Yunus, the current chief of staff, who did not like the idea of including former generals more educated, trained, and experienced in conventional warfare than he and all of his colleagues were and still are.

Another specific demoralizing issue is that soldiers who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in Ethiopia’s recent wars are not being buried, let alone with the honor and dignity such situations demand. Many corpses are left to rot and fall prey to carrion, disturbing and dispiriting not only their surviving comrades, but their families and local populations witnessing this degrading abandonment. The regime has refused to disclose the number of its soldiers killed during the war with Eritrea, as well as the ongoing fight in Somalia. One of the major resentments by the people of Ethiopia, and especially by members of the defense forces, of leaders of the government, the ethnic minority generals and high ranking officers is this indifference and disrespect exhibited to the fallen soldiers.<sup>7</sup>

These facts have been corroborated by testimony obtained from former members of the defense forces who have defected and joined armed opposition groups like Patriotic Ginbot 7, and from civilian witnesses, open sources and other channels of information.

Based on the preceding facts, it is possible to make the following assertions:

- The lower ranks of Ethiopia’s military, like the rest of the Ethiopian people, want to be free from tyranny and ethnic based marginalization. They are willing to serve in an environment where there is no ethnic favoritism, that’s free of corruption and where justice, including military justice, prevails. They are not, contrary to Western stereotype, content to live on food handouts alone.
- “The military is a dictatorship, not a democracy.” But it still needs benevolent, yet strict, leadership displaying values of honor, sacrifice, wisdom, etc. An army needs a leadership that is perceived by the lower ranks as courageous and just, strict yet, professional. The military

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.tesfanews.net/general-tsadkan-cried-1998-2000-eritrea-border-war/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://ethsat.com/tplf-abandoning-bodies-of-its-soldiers-everywhere-causing-psychological-trauma-on-people-in-somali-region-of-ethiopia/>

desires to be led by commanders and generals with the discipline and knowledge of military science expected of such positions.

- The military wants promotions, salary increments and other perks to be based on merit, not ethnicity.
- The military wants appropriate and sufficient logistical support, including, but not limited to, armaments, better food and uniforms that would help it carry out its duty as a national defense force.
- A military with eroded morale, disunited and led by incompetent generals who constitute a tiny minority, yet command and control 80% of the both the ground and air forces, will not be a protector of an extremely corrupt, ethnic oligarchy determined to exploit in flagrant fashion every aspect of the Ethiopian state and economy. Rather, it will undoubtedly mutiny and turn its guns on its oppressors when the time is ripe for a popular revolution.
- The ethnic based minority regime is neither capable nor willing to heed the demands of the military's lower ranks because this would spell the end of its senior leadership's control of the corruption.
- Ethiopia's senior political and military leadership lacks the popular support cited by Clausewitz as needed to sustain a successful counterinsurgency, especially on multiple fronts.

## Conclusion

The armed forces under the present regime is seriously deficient in the requisite morale, *esprit de corps*, cohesion, confidence and trust in its inept and extremely corrupt commanders. Such an army cannot be a cohesive and effective fighting force. It cannot sustain a drawn-out war with internal liberation movements and face a formidable external threats.

*"Morale is three times the materiel,"* Napoleon said, stressing the importance of will in any war. That genius of military strategy and tactics would later refer to the guerrilla warfare waged by the Spaniards on the Iberian Peninsula that pinned down some 300,000 members of his "Grande Armee" as his undoing.<sup>8</sup> Like Napoleon and so many other conventional armies down to the Ethiopian Army under the Derg which the present regime toppled, the current armed forces under the minority regime will be unable to contain the determined guerilla resistance movement across the county which the people of Ethiopia have begun to unleash in the countryside and is poised to spread to the cities. Moreover, the dirty war such a defense will require will elevate international scrutiny of the regime's excesses to an unsupportable level. This leaves Ethiopia's present government, like most conventional armies besieged by the "Spanish ulcer," vulnerable and susceptible to disintegration if confronted by any of several possible combinations of threats, as seems increasingly likely.

The conditions for this likely outcome are being created and exacerbated by Tigrayan generals and the minority regime's brutality, cruelty, unbridled plunder and illicit extraction of public resources at the expense of the soldier and the civilian population. Such practices, along with the mistreatment and humiliation of both constituencies as second class citizens has led to widespread alienation and represents a significant detachment of elements in the Clausewitzian trinity. The people of Ethiopia have long grown impatient and are highly likely to rise up in the near to moderate term, as already witnessed in the Oromo

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<sup>8</sup> General Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of war in the Modern World*



region and elsewhere, in smaller scales in various parts of Amhara region in particular Gonder. Indeed, this process clearly has already begun.

The next installment in this series will highlight the multifarious fault lines within the regime itself and the larger population at greatest risk of eruption in the putatively “stable” and “reliable” partner, Ethiopia.

(END)