

AFRICA NEWS

A Weekly Digest of African Affairs

HOW STRONG IS THE DERGUE?

Amidst the complex political tangle in Horn of Africa, few questions are more difficult to answer with any certainty than that of the strength of the government which presently rules Ethiopia from Addis Ababa. Run by a military committee (called 'the Dergue') that emerged in the revolution against Haile Selassie's feudal regime in 1974, the Addis government has had to cope with numerous armed insurrections and profound ideological struggles, as well as drought, famine, and all the chronic economic problems of oil-importing African states. The Dergue has survived all this, but some of its challengers carry on their battle.

Part II The Nationalist Challenge

The government's vulnerability stems in large part from conflicts with roots extending deep into regional history — conflicts largely resistant to, though affected by, larger geopolitical concerns. Best known are the disputes over Somali-speaking areas in the east and south, and the long fight for independence from Ethiopian rule by the former Italian colony of Eritrea in the north. Both conflicts continue, the Somali struggle now at a rather low ebb of guerrilla action, the Eritrean conflict focusing militarily on numerous unsuccessful Ethiopian efforts to oust the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), and secondarily the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), from strongholds in northern and western Eritrea.

Most observers agree that in spite of some military successes, the Addis Ababa government has in both arenas failed to convince large numbers of people that their future lies within Ethiopia. Instead, the brutality of the war has reinforced opposition to Ethiopian control and produced a massive refugee flow (as many as one million to Somalia, some 500,000 into Sudan). Less well-known, but

growing in importance, are the opposition movements in Tigre province and among the Oromo people in eastern and southern Ethiopia. In Tigre province, bordering Eritrea, the Tigre People's Liberation Front (TPLF) now claims to control 80% of the rural areas of the province, which has a population of some five million people. The Tigre area, though linked — as is the Amhara heartland — to ancient and medieval Ethiopian history, has a tradition of resistance to close Amhara control since the expansion of the Ethiopian empire under Menelik in the late 19th century.

The TPLF, which advocates self-determination for Tigre and equal national rights within an Ethiopian state, was founded in 1975. It has had to fight not only against the Addis government but against a conservative movement based in Tigre (the Ethiopian Democratic Union), and against the EPRP, which for a time established a rural base in the area. But now it appears to have won substantial support among the peasantry, and to have gained military strength from an alliance with the EPLF of Eritrea.

In recent months, say TPLF sources, Ethiopian government forces in the province have reached some 40,000 but they have only been able to regain control of a number of towns in major campaigns in April and August. And the government repression, the movement's leaders say, has won their cause new support among the peasantry.

Also little-known outside Ethiopia is the movement among the Oromo people, who constitute some forty per cent or more of the population in present-day Ethiopia and are also scattered over a wide area, from Wollo province in the north to around the Amhara heartland on the east, south and west. Oromos were active in the 1974 revolution, and prominent, for example, in the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON), an organization of civilian

revolutionaries that supported the Dergue until the two groups clashed in August, 1977.

With time, however, many among the Oromo came to see the new Ethiopian government as a reproduction of Haile Selassie's Amhara-dominated state in another guise. The Oromo peasantry in the south, which had been incorporated into the Ethiopian empire in the late 19th century, was released from feudal obligations that had imposed a crushing burden — and they still retain an independence, and capability to keep their agricultural surplus, which they did not have before. But the military government's exactions of conscripts for the army and militia, along with disputes over control in the peasants' associations, helped to maintain old grievances and build new ones. Several prominent members of the Dergue of Oromo region were purged in February, 1980, accused of ties with the Oromo Liberation Front, further increasing feelings that the Oromo were not represented.

The OLF has thus won a larger following for its advocacy of independence for Oromia, their term for the Oromo-inhabited areas. Though earlier it might have opted for inclusion in a revolutionary Ethiopia, the movement now bases its claims on the view that the Ethiopian empire established by Menelik has the same status as did European colonialism, and that the areas colonized have the right to independence.

Illustrative of Oromo grievances is the widely-praised literacy program itself. In its first stages, the program was directed primarily at the urban and small town population, disproportionately Amhara, while the rural phase is just getting under way, its success yet to be evaluated. And Oromo critics say in fact little teaching goes on in Oromigna; furthermore, the script used is the Amharic script. Oromo nationalists say the Latin script is more appropriate

for their language, and the OLF has developed its own set of literacy texts, in Latin script, used in areas they control.

Conflicting Claims To Legitimacy

The extent of OLF operations is hard to determine, but the movement says it has carried out guerrilla attacks in Arussi, to the southeast of Addis Ababa, and Western Shoa (where they claim a stronghold near Gedo), as well as in the provinces of Hararghe, Bale and Sidamo. In western Oromo areas (Gamu Goffa, Kaffa, Wollega), they claim political backing, but no armed actions.

In Bale and Sidamo, the Somali-backed Somali Abo Liberation Front (SALF), a rival group, had attempted to win support from Oromo people as well as Somalis. But the movement is now apparently in decline, the majority of its central committee having



YUSUF AND FRIENDS

Music majors at St. Augustine's College, Raleigh, join Yusuf And Friends, a dynamic jazz group based in Durham. The occasion was the closing program in St. Aug's Black History Month observance. L-R: Salim Ibn Malik, bassist; Ms. Renee Davis, a senior music major; Yusuf Salim, pianist; Eve Cornelious, vocal stylist; Hassan Ibn Dawud, percussionist; and Ms. Elaine Hobbs, a sophomore music major.

defected to the OLF, which has gained support from some sectors of the government of Somalia.

Ethiopia's leaders now appeal not only to traditional Ethiopian (their opponents say Amhara) nationalism, but also to Marxist-Leninist theory to support their legitimacy against insurgent movements calling for self-determination for oppressed nationalities. Lenin's legacy is am-

biguous, both in theory and in practice, but in the Soviet Union, where in some cases dissident nationalities were retained by force, their incorporation has been aided by significant economic development, as well as by education and political organization of the minority nationalities. In Ethiopia, questions remain as to whether the central government will be able to deliver sufficient

benefits to build such a bulwark against opposing movements, thus countering the historic legacy of Amhara domination.

The Dergue's opponents, however, have comparable problems in establishing a credible prospect for winning their goals. International and African support is minimal, since their objectives defy the established consensus that existing national boundaries are

sacrosanct. Eritreans, it is true, can point to the fact that their territory, too, was a colonial entity, incorporated forcibly into Ethiopia. And the Tigreans would apparently be satisfied with autonomy rather than independence, provided it was 'genuine.' The other opposition movements, however, must fight an even steeper uphill diplomatic battle. They also claim that the case of 'Ethiopian colonialism' is unique, but most African nations, with their complex mixtures of ethnic groups, are understandably reluctant to see a precedent established for creation of new states.

Ideologically, the EPLF and the TPLF base their claims for solidarity abroad not only on national rights but on their own efforts to build new socialist societies in the areas they control — efforts they claim are more genuine and successful than those of the Ethiopian government. And both movements, while opposing Soviet and Cuban aid to their opponent, have refrained from identifying those countries as 'strategic enemies.' The OLF and the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) seem to have less ideologically defined, populist and nationalist perspectives.

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