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### Manqa: The Internal Crisis

Book: Guerrillas to Government. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front.

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The institutional framework for attaining full unification provided a forum for a root-and-branch criticism of the nascent political organization. The major focus of the critics was the undemocratic nature of the front, the lack of rights of fighters and the failings of the leadership in a wide range of areas: administration, supply, health and military. At the heart of the opposition were university and secondary school educated who had joined the Ala group after a conscious recruitment campaign aimed at them by the Ala leadership.(23). Much of the criticism of the leadership was concentrated on Issayas Afeworki, and pulled into the opposition orbit two of the original members of the Ala group: Solomon Woldemariam and Tewolde Eyob.(24) It is a mark of the sensitivity of this challenge to the leadership that the episode has never been publicly acknowledged. While many have used the internal challenge as a means of criticizing the EPLF, an account of it is important because of its impact on the organizational development of the front and, in particular, in enhancing the solidarity of the leadership.

The opposition force was called the manqa, after the Tigrinya word for bat, and derived from the opposition's habit of mobilizing support through discussions and propaganda conducted with fighters at night. The Destructive Movement portrayed the campaign graphically:

On every occasion, in every valley and hill-top, at the highest pitch of their voices they began spreading news that there was no democracy and the rights of the freedom fighters were violated.

In October 1973, two leading dissidents, Mussie Tesfaimikael and Afeworki Kiflu, issued a statement. The former took the opportunity of the meeting held on 3 October, and called by the committee of studies established in April 1973 to examine administrative integration, to raise a wide-ranging attack on the leadership. The resolution of the crisis in favour of the latter was a formative influence in shaping the nature of the relationship between the leadership and the fighters. In this regard, it was a victory of a centralist conception of democracy rather than a populist one. It was a victory for the approach advocated by Issayas Afeworki and his allies in the PLF. It also set the tone for the way in which Eritrean society was mobilized by the leadership both during the armed struggle and after liberation. In the short term, it enhanced the power of the ELF in the plateau as the PLF withdrew its forces there, allowing the ELF to extend its secret organisations in Asmara and the other towns. Together with the civil war between the ELF and the PLF, this deep and divisive crisis strengthened the military position of the Ethiopian army in Eritrea, which only the fall of the imperial regime in 1974 undermined.

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The Destructive Movement, the official EPLF account of the crisis, although in some ways self-serving, provides a fascinating insight into the early nature of the EPLF which, a decade later, was in control of much of Eritrea. It also provides a clear portrayal of Issayas Afeworki's early conception of democracy. He was a major target of the opposition attack and a defender of the leadership. A useful supplement to this document, al-Amin's account covers rather similar ground. Al-Amin was a leading cadre of the PLF and on the committee to investigate the criticisms made by the manqa. Oddly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, Al-Amin names Mussie, Yohannes Sebhatu and Afeworki Kiflu as the most prominent members of the dissidents, but leaves Tewolde Eyob and Solomon Woldemariam, founder leaders of the Ala group, unnamed.

Although the later EPLF gained the admiration of many foreign observers for its efficiency and the egalitarian relations between the fighters, the criticisms made by the manqa directly attacked both. In the military sphere, criticism was made of poor co-ordination and intelligence, resulting in PLF forces attacking each other; of inadequacies of supply to units in the highlands and on battle fronts in the north; and of the organisation and co-ordination of movements of men and supplies from the base areas to the highlands. The style of leadership, particularly that of Afeworki, was heavily criticized. The opposition argued that physical force was used against fighters who voiced criticism of the leadership and against the civilian population. Surprisingly, and in contrast to other documents, statements and pamphlets issued later by the EPLF, individuals were named. From a contemporary standpoint, it must be an embarrassment that leading members of the post-independence government were accused of assault and that members of the PFDJ central committee were hit. This kind of rumbustious brawling, as some of it turned out to be, was later corrected by a more forceful internal policing. The manqa crisis, then, ultimately created a stronger framework of control over internal dissidence and Ethiopian and ELF infiltration.

The accusations of beatings and hittings were generally proven and admitted. The 'mistakes' admitted in the military sphere were 'subsequently corrected'. The argument of principle about the nature of democracy was won by Afeworki through a combination of alliance politics with the PLF leadership, the regard for Issayas on the part of the highland units and a general disregard for democratic accountability in the context of the battle against the ELF and the Ethiopians. In particular, the PLF leadership was either scornful of the ideological debate or sympathetic to Afeworki and mobilized key cadres against the manqa. Markakis, in his otherwise authoritative account of the EPLF, was partly inaccurate when he wrote of illiterate PLF fighters having no taste for obscure Marxist-Leninist theory. As the EPLF official account makes clear, the manqa opposition forces had garnered some support from PLF fighters.

The manqa argued that the rectification of mistakes was best achieved through increasing the democratic accountability of the leadership and power-sharing. Their solution was to establish a 'people's administration' through the establishment of a 'supervisory body'. In essence, it called for an institutional check of a permanent nature. In his response,

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Issayas Afeworki stressed the necessity of a guiding role for the leadership and controlled participation through discussion:

The duty of the leadership is to try to understand the real and potential problems of the people it leads and find lasting solutions for them. Any leadership must be very careful not to make hasty decisions. Decisions made by the leadership should then be conveyed to the lower strata of society. Here, the decisions are debated and finally approved or rejected. The leadership would be informed of the results of the process and make necessary amendments ... Popular administration does not mean that all the people will administer. Leadership of the people means representing the wish of the people.

This paragraph is again resonant with the language of Mao and the Chinese Communist party (of learning from the people, of solving the problems of the people (25), but like the criticism it was couched in very practical terms.

Afeworki went on to list the attributes of 'a democratic system of administration in a revolutionary organisation'. These included an elected legal organ, which established political doctrines and administrative structures, instructed the departments and supervised departmental relations. The leadership would appoint department heads and take decisions on which the departments could express their views, to which the leadership would then react. Individuals could only claim rights to participate, express opinions, vote and stand for election on the basis of their acceptance of five basic principles: the organisation is above the individual, majority decision-making, the existence of differences in ranks, the subordination of departments to the leadership, and a common leadership but separate areas of responsibility. Accountability of the leadership was confined to critical comments by departments arising from implementing policies. The leadership, however, formulated policy and made appointments to departments. The criticism levelled at the internal dissidents and challengers to the authority of the leadership is again similar in language to the writings of Mao in *On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party*, with its attack on ultra-democracy, petty-bourgeois individualism and subjectivism .(26)

This internal struggle within the EPLF was a protracted one, beginning in September 1973 and only resolved with the appointment of a jury at the end of May 1974 and the approval of the verdict of execution in August of the same year. One account lists those executed as Yohannes Sebatu (27) director of publications and information; Mussie Tesfamikael, political commissar and unit commander; Habte-Selassie Kidane, political commissar; Haile Hahtsun, doctor; Afeworki Kiflu and six other fighters. (28) The intensity of the internal agitation was such that older members of the leadership took sides, both trained political cadres and new recruits were mobilized and the PLF had to pull its forces out of the highlands to the Sahel base area. The defeat of the populist line was organized through a set of committees. By this time all wings of the EPLF were committed to fighter committees elected and selected by the leadership of the PLF and the Ala group, and both were so committed to unity that they could not brook further internal dissension. Their main task was to restore the military and political capacity of the new unified front, the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Forces, to deal with the ongoing

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civil war against the ELF and to confront the Ethiopian army, a series of developments we shall examine in Chapter 5 on the military expansion of the EPLF from the Ethiopian revolution to liberation. Here we shall retain a focus on the establishment of administrative and control structures of the EPLF. Without these it would have been impossible to maintain the dynamics of its development as it responded to changes in its external environment beyond its control.

It is clear from the section of the report written by Issayas that a major impetus to developing the PLF into the successful military organisation that it became was the criticisms raised by the manqa. Implicit in the defence and vindication of the leadership and the detailed criticisms lay the plan for the organizational future. Much of it was implemented and laid the basis for the political, administrative and military strategies for the following years. The special edition of Vanguard, reviewing the developments of 1975, makes a clear, if somewhat indirect, reference to the means by which the internal opposition was quelled. The major stress was placed on rigorous political education for the 'mass' of the fighters, on democratic centralism and criticism and self-criticism as means of rectifying past mistakes from which 'anarchistic elements' and 'opportunistic agents' benefited.(29) With the large civilian flight from the vengeful Ethiopian regime in the mid-1970s, the absorption of new recruits had to be managed in a 'more controlled and supervised fashion'.(30) No doubt the kernel of these strategies was there, laid by the training period in China. To expand activities in the highland areas a clear set of goals was established. These included recruiting new men, organizing in the towns, particularly among the students, establishing an information department and intensifying propaganda activities, politicizing and organizing the peasantry and mobilizing the different Eritrean nationalities, in particular the Sahho and Dankali Afar.

The report also proposed reducing dependence on supplies coming through Sudan by a strategy of self-reliance based on developing closer relations with rural producers, enhancing food storage and beginning to farm. In order to improve military skills, it was proposed to establish military camps for new trainees, upgrade political education and translate political education material into Arabic. In aiming to politicize the rural population, priority was given to those closest to the EPLF's military positions through providing them with health care and education. Specific forces based on Chinese and Vietnamese experiences, armed propaganda squads and barefoot doctors, were to be allocated these tasks. Priority was also given to the tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees in the Sudan.

This comprehensive strategic framework aimed at increasing the number of fighters, developing links with the civilian population and enhancing its military capacity enabled the front to absorb the large numbers which joined it between 1974 and 1978. During these four years the EPLF took advantage of a series of dramatic events: the Ethiopian revolution, the joint EPLF-ELF assault on Asmara and the bloody Ethiopian reprisals, the liberation of the towns and the 'strategic' withdrawal from them in 1977-8. Organizing the towns and expanding the network of secret cells there both facilitated urban military operations and provided a conduit for civilians and supplies into the

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EPLF. Providing health care for peasants and pastoralists in areas which had no medical facilities generated significant rural support, in a way that politicization through political education with its unfamiliar Marxist/Maoist class analysis did not. In addition, it insulated the growing numbers in the base areas from local epidemics. Similarly, the expansion of veterinary care for the animals of the rural population enhanced the popularity of the front. For both pastoralist and peasant their camels, oxen, sheep and goats were critical for their livelihoods. Such welfare provision also provided ease of entry into both the pastoralist camps and the villages. We shall return in the following two chapters to this crucial period between 1974 and 1978.

Only in 1973 were joint administrative departments established and the health centres and hospitals of the three forces combined. Administrative functions and responsibilities were not clearly defined: the discharge of the sick and wounded from hospital was shared between Issayas Afeworki, leader of the Ala group, and Ahmad Hilal of the PLF, the secretary of the executive and also the head of the health department. Supplies for both the highlands and Sahel were not easy to come by. They were affected by meagre financial resources as well as by restrictions placed on them by the Sudanese government and interruptions caused by Ethiopian army and the ELF attacks. In the highlands, although money was provided to purchase supplies from the towns and the local population, the poverty of the latter was a serious constraint. The front, at that period, was also subject to infiltration because it lacked a sophisticated intelligence department and had only a handful of secret cells through which fighters could be recruited and assisted to Sahel.

Mishandling civilians was admitted but the manqa accusation of compulsion and mistreatment was disavowed. The organisation of Eritrean civil society both in the villages and the towns was not far advanced. As Issayas Afeworki put it in the Destructive Movement: 'the situation of civil war is so unideal that we can hardly leave our positions to enjoy a bit of peace. Those civilians within our reach are taught of our objectives but for the moment we cannot organize them.' Extending outwards into Eritrean society (the theme of the following chapter) was a function of its internal organizational coherence and autonomy that was based on three characteristics: the continuity of leadership cadres, the ideological framework for absorbing recruits into the front and the internal system of discipline and controls.

#### Leadership and the Expansion of the Second Tier

A strict democratic centralism was the core organizing principle of the front. Within the EPLF, personalities have great significance, as we have seen in the discussion of the dissident problem. For outsiders, however, the particular weight of individuals within the political bureau is hard to assess. The predominance of Issayas Afeworki from the foundation of the EPLF is marked. Other than those martyred during the armed struggle, the leaders elected at the unification meeting of the Ala and PLF groups remained more or less intact until the first congress of the EPLF in 1977. The two key figures in the unification process were Ramadan Muhammad Nur and Issayas Afeworki. They had

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been part of a small study circle in the mid- 1960s in Kassala, which also included Haile Woldetensai, Ali Sayyid Abdallah and Al-Amin Muhammad Said. (31) Both Ramadan and Issayas had been part of the ELF batch trained in China in 1967 and had returned as political commissars, respectively, for the fourth and fifth zones, from which they were elected to attend the Aradib meeting representing the reformist position against the ELF leadership. Both were again elected to the provisional leadership of the three dissident zones in 1968. (32) Ramadan's politico-military origins in the fourth zone, his role as one of the founders of the PLF, together with his admiration of the Chinese and Vietnamese guerrilla strategies shared with Issayas, were important factors in facilitating unity.

Ramadan had also been elected at the Ambahara meeting of the PLF to the leadership, which sought agreement on co-ordination with the Ala group. His influence was a decisive factor in providing the latter with arms received from Sabbe. He was also reported to have played a key role in the departure of Mesfin Hagos from the PLF to the Ala group. As well as being radical, educated and politically formed, he was from the Muslim Tigre and, thus, a fine complement to Issayas Afeworki's Ala group, which was systematically portrayed by the ELF as Christian highland chauvinists.

The formal establishment of the EPLF took place at its first congress in January 1977, and democratic centralism was institutionalized in the selection of delegates and election of leadership. Ramadan Muhammad Nur was elected secretary-general and Issayas Afeworki assistant secretary-general. The national democratic programme was also adopted although it had been formulated much earlier. (33) Units of the EPLF and the mass organisations elected 315 members to attend the congress, with one-third from the mass organisations. Congress elected a central committee of 37 with six alternates, and its members had to have had two years' experience in the armed struggle. The central committee elected the political bureau of 13, the qualification for which was five years in the armed struggle. The specification of numbers of years fighting distinguished between two political generations of recruits. For the central committee, there was provision for those who had joined before the mass influx following the Ethiopian army response to the EPLF/ELF attack on Asmara in January 1975, and for the political bureau those who had joined before January 1972. These latter were founder fighters of the PLF and the Ala group or those who joined in the first one and a half years after the split from the ELF, a period of considerable hardship.

PB members were Issayas Afeworki, Haile Woldetensai, Mesfin Hagos, Petros Solomon, Sebat Ephraim, Berhane Gerezgiher, Okba Abraha, Ramadan Muhammad Nur, Mahmud Sharifo, Ali Sayyid Abdallah, Ibrahim Afa, Al-Amin Muhammad Said and Sa'id Barre. Most had backgrounds as University and secondary school students (34) followed by military training in Syria, China and Cuba. All but three had left from the ELF. Petros Solomon and Sebat Ephraim were involved in the manqa agitation, illustrative of the capacity of the older core leadership to absorb the second generation radicals. Of different social and political backgrounds and educational and cultural experiences, they had more or less absorbed some combination of radical socialist nationalism, Marxist-Leninism and classical guerrilla war tactics and strategy. They

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were a contrast to the early ELF leaders of the nationalist struggle who had found their political language in Egypt, their tactics in Algeria and their skills in the Eritrean police or the Sudanese army.

The leadership of the EPLF, in internal discussions or negotiations with the ELF, generally combined a united number of people. There were those around Ramadan Muhammad Nur from the Massawa--Harqiqo area, mixed Tigre and sections of the Sahho, and those around Issayas Afeworki. They were bonded together through victory over the manqa, complex relations within Osman Salih Sabbe, cosmopolitan military training in guerrilla war and opposition to the unreconstructed ELF, and a presence, if at times temporary, in the highlands and proximity to supply routes across the Red Sea. The determined Afeworki had in his circle Haile Woldetensai and Mesfin Hagos of the 'old' fighters, and Petros Solomon and Sebat Ephraim of the post-1973 but pre-1975 fighters. From the PLF fighters were Ramadan Muhammad Nur, Ali Sayyid, Ibrahim Afa, and Al-Amin Muhammad Said. Not all of those who had field commands had had any kind of overseas military training: Petros Solomon and Sebat Ephraim gained their military training in the field. Others like PLF cadre Ramadan Awlaya had military training in Syria and continued in the EPLA; he became a successful commander of heavy artillery units in battles through the 1980s. Veteran fighters like Al-Amin and Sa'id Barre moved to responsibilities for foreign affairs, particularly with Arab governments in the Gulf.

The main administrative command structures under the PB were committees for military and political affairs and departments of economics, health, social welfare and mass administration. A group of four from the PB constituted the standing committee which was responsible for day-to-day decision-making and included the secretary-general and assistant and the secretaries of the military and political committees. Many of the PB acted as military commanders through to liberation, and some shifted between political and military work. After the 1977 congress Sebat Ephraim was responsible for mass administration, a crucial instrument in the expansion of the organisation of and control over Eritrean society in the liberated, semi-liberated and occupied areas. After the second congress he was responsible for military affairs and led the army into Asmara in 1991. Petros Solomon was in charge of the eastern front in 1977-8 and later was in charge of security. Ali Sayyid and Ibrahim Afa (35) were front commanders and Mesfin Hagos was commander of one of the four divisions on liberation.

There was a greater degree of continuity of PLF founder members, whereas of the original founders of the Ala group only Issayas and Haile Woldetensai were elected to the PB. In the second tier of the leadership, the central committee, were other PLF founder members: Al-Amin Sarraj, Ramadan Osman Awlaya and Musa Rabi'a. Of the early members of the Ala group were Asmarom Gerezgiher and Adhanom Gebremariam. There would appear to have been a marked bonding within the leadership between those who made the transition from the PLF and Ala into the EPLF and those who joined during the process of merger and the period of civil war.

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There is one qualification to the rosy picture of a dominant leadership after the defeat of the manqa, and it arises from the emergence of a grouping identified as the yamin or rightist opposition. Mention has to be made of this group because, like the manqa, it was an opposition movement that remained publicly sensitive after independence. No clear account of it has been given and yet all fighters know about it to one degree or another. The motivation and membership of this grouping is more shrouded in mystery than the former. It has been portrayed as regionally particularist, rooted in an Akalai Guzai sub-highland regionalism, by one well-informed Eritrean writer who has linked it to Solomon Woldemariam's attempt to take advantage of the manqa disturbance. (36) The present author's sources suggest that it was not a coordinated opposition and could not be accurately characterized as a movement. The tag of 'rightist' was an obscurantist device to cover a motley of educated critics who were in key positions but who were not associated with the manqa. It was a collection of individuals from different highland provinces, some of whom were frontline fighters while others were from the internal security organisation. The dissent began in 1976, and a dozen or more were executed in 1980. The great majority were imprisoned and subsequently reincorporated into the front. Some of those involved were exposed in public criticism sessions and accused of criticizing the leadership of the front for neglecting areas from which they originated and attempting to recruit others on a particularistic basis. Several of the individuals who have been identified with this rightist tendency and were imprisoned were from Hamasin province.

Whatever the highland province origin, that these networks of opposition emerged on some claimed form of highland particularism provided a further impetus for centralisation and organizational and ideological discipline based on open, public criticism and self-criticism sessions. Solomon Woldemariam, a non-ideological opponent of Issayas, was at the centre of one ineffective network of opposition, and despite that was forgiven and somewhat protected, unlike Tewolde Eyob, until his individualistic activities proved too much. He was captured fleeing to Sudan in 1980 and some years later executed. The devil of early Eritrean nationalist division had been one of Muslim against Christian Tigrinya, and divisions between Tigrinyans on the basis of provincial primordialism was a horrific spectre for the leadership and had to be quashed. Although this challenge did not mobilize on anything like the scale of the manqa it was the last challenge to the consolidated leadership of the EPLF.

At the EPLF's second congress in 1987, the PB was reduced to nine Members (37) and the position of assistant secretary-general was abolished. The secretary-general gained more format powers over day-to-day decisions and appointments assisted by a secretariat. A general staff was also created under the secretary-general, who acted as commander-in-chief Issayas Afeworki replaced Ramadan Muhammad Nur as secretary-general and it was to him that these extensive powers accrued. PB members retained considerable spheres for individual initiatives within their areas of responsibility.

The central committee was expanded to 71, with seven alternates, and the congress to above a thousand. There was, then, a shrinking core of the top leadership and an

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expansion of the second tier. This restructuring reflected the increasing responsibilities of Issayas Afeworki, the marginalization of Ramadan Muhammad Nur, a narrowing of the numbers at the apex of the EPLF and an expansion of the second tier into a number which reflected the expanding functions and members of the front. The broader leadership of 71 became an unwieldy body for decision-making and more one of ratification of the decisions of the core leadership. A combination of leadership dominance, collective decision-making and scope for individual initiative within front guidelines was a salient characteristic of the EPLF mirrored at all levels of the front.

The 1987 congress also marked the incorporation of the ELF central leadership, or Sagem group. Although most of the Sagem fighters were highlanders, and thus augmented the already dominant fighters from the Tigrinya speakers, associated with them was Ibrahim Totil, a veteran ELF leader from the Nara community of south-western Eritrea. The Nara community had long been linked to the ELF, and the inclusion of Totil and other ex-ELF Nara fighters was of symbolic value for the EPLF in the eyes of Eritreans who made ethnic calculations.

Footnotes.

23 See Ammar, Eritrea.

24. It has been argued that the motivation of these two early leaders was an Akalai Guzai regionalism opposed to the power of those from Hamasin. See Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle*, p. 117. Although Akalai Guzai regionalism seems rather far-fetched and a leadership struggle between founders of the Ala group makes more sense, this split has been characterized as a 'rightist' challenge to Afeworki's position. The DM mentions 'a person called Solomon.

25. In an interview with *Eritrea Now*, January 1980, Afeworki made clear that he had little taste for then contemporary Chinese leaders. 'We content ourselves with what other Chinese have taught us in making their revolution.

26. *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 1, Peking, 1975.

27. Sebhatu had been a leading student agitator at Haile Selassie University in Addis Ababa and founder member of the Marxist Crocodile Society He was expelled from the University in 1965 and suspended indefinitely in 1969. R.R. Balsvik, *Haile Selassie's students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution 1952-1977* (African Studies Center, Michigan State University, Michigan, 1985), pp. 118, 154, 258.

28. The other fighters named were Hberash Melke, Dehab Tesfatzion, Workuha, Hebrahtu Woldu, Alazar TesfaMchael, Michael Russom, AbietoTazaz and Semere Guadad. 'Unita Nazionale e Nazionalismo Eritreo', *Africa*, no. 4/5, Sept-Oct. 1977, p. 153. Haile Hahtsun is presumably Haile Mahtsoun, who was not executed but imprisoned for some time. Opposition sources give higher figures for those executed. Considerable numbers were disciplined and imprisoned.

29. al-Tali'a (Arabic for Vanguard), 13 January 1976, pp. 2-3.

30 Ibid.

31. Connell, *Against All Odds* pp. 79, 287.

32. Al-Amin, al-Thawra, pp. 22-3.

33. As stated explicitly in *The DM*, published in 1974.

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34. Ties of friendship and shared political activism prior to joining the struggle linked several of these together. Issayas and Haile Woldetensai were student organizers in the Prince Makonnen Secondary School at Asmara in the mid- 1960s, students together at University in Addis Ababa and joined the ELF at the end of 1966. Sibhat Ephraim and Berhane Gerezgiher were students in Addis and left together to join the EPLF in 1972, as did Okba Abraha and Petros Solomon.

35. Ibrahim Afa died in 1985. His death has become a matter of controversy. ELF sources imply a power struggle between him and Issayas Afeworki. Other explanations include an organizational difference over the role of the military committee, of which he was the head, to be abolished at the 1987 congress, while the reader of a draft of this book suggests an additional disagreement over military strategy. Controversy and suspicion arise from the two-year gap between Ibrahim Afa's death and its announcement. The detail involved in assessing the circuitous interpretations of Ibrahim Afa's death will be left to an Eritrean Agatha Christie.

36. See Lyob, *The Eritrean Struggle*, pp. 116-17. The author is related by marriage to a former EPLF internal security and central committee member and, one assumes, well-connected. Yet the paragraphs on these pages and the explanatory endnotes, particularly no. 34, are obfuscating in the extreme. Given the sensitivity of internal dissent issues, perhaps the obscure prose is intentional.

37. Ibrahim Afa was killed by Ethiopian artillery (and not at the behest of Issayas Afeworki, as a false but continuing ELF-inspired rumour has it) and Mesfin Hagos, Berhane Gerezgiher, Okba Abraha and Sa'id Barre were not elected.

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