

The third policy objective was arming the people. In many regions, village and district people's militia were formed. These have not only been defending their institutions and revolutionary gains, but they have also confronted the enemy's military offensives and campaigns in conjunction with regional and regular units of the People's Army.

The tasks of politicizing, organizing and arming the population was not carried out without obstacles and shortcomings. Naturally, the major obstacle was the colonial Dergue regime and its political designs. Although there was no strata of Eritrean society collaborating with colonial regime, the Dergue had not stopped its attempts at deception. Failing in this, it had resorted to preventing our people from listening to "Voice of the Masses" broadcasts and reading EPLF publications, further revealing its political bankruptcy. The obstruction caused by the colonialist regime is due to its fascist repressive measures more than its political campaigns. It had deprived the Eritrean people of the basic rights of assembly and speech, employed the Kebele institutions which serve as a security and police apparatus to restrict their freedom of movement and obstruct their efforts at organization, and imprisoned and executed active EPLF members. To prevent the youth from joining the national struggle it exposes them to corruptive influences and conscript them into its colonial army. In the rural areas, it carries out military incursions, acts of sabotage and aerial bombardment to destroy popular institutions, disrupt the peace and displace the population. During the years of drought, the Dergue took deliberate measures to ruin the already fragile economy and utilized food aid as a means of political control. Lastly, in an attempt at legitimacy, it forced our people to vote at gun point in a constitutional referendum which had no relevance to their case. Although these measures did not dampen the Eritrean people's aspiration for independence, they obstructed the EPLF's task of establishing and strengthening popular democratic institutions. Nevertheless our people have been able to preserve, adopt new forms of organization, set-up clandestine institutions and even work from within the Dergue's police-like institutions, such as the Kebeles.

The second obstacle was that created by the internal forces of reaction. As the Eritrean people's struggle matured and the old ideas and sectarianism flagged the elements that had an interest in fanning ethnic, religious and regional differences and who felt threatened by EPLF's policy of politicizing, organizing and arming the people dished out what they felt were the most appealing arguments and employed all the means at their disposal to sow distrust and mutual resentment so as to maintain the factional groupings they could freely manipulate. The weaker they go the more desperate they became in their efforts-especially abroad-to confuse the masses and prevent them from actively supporting the EPLF. These groups which cannot survive on their own, were trying vainly to prolong their existence with the support of foreign powers and by exploiting the economic and social problems of Eritrean refugees. The problem of internal reaction was a long term problem that disappeared in the process of nation-building and the growth of the active political participation of the masses. Seen in this light and taking into consideration the developments of the past which saw active mass participation and a rapid

growth of the people's confidence in the EPLF, the harm caused by the irresponsible campaigns of the internal reactionaries, was while undeniable, extremely limited.

The massive displacement of the Eritrean people was another factor that affected our political and organizational activities. In the 1977-78 period, when large areas of Eritrea were liberated and an open and democratic atmosphere prevailed popular institutions flourished in the rural areas as well as in the towns. This aroused the hope of Eritrean refugees to return home and participate in national reconstruction and popular participation received a tremendous boost. With the strategic withdrawal the active elements were forced to flee and emigrate. This adversely affected life and living condition in the areas retaken by the enemy, particularly the town. Unemployment and the lack of secure life became unbearable. Drought and instability wrought havoc on agricultural and livestock production and became additional burden on an already untenable situation.

Because it takes an extended period to change the military balance of forces, and since inside Eritrea, the question of survival became the primary concern while abroad ensuring sanctuary and social security, securing the means to support oneself and dependents was a necessity, the high level of participation in the struggle flagged through national aspirations and sentiments remained intact. Popular participation was also negatively affected by the Dergue's suppression and destruction and the reactionary forces' defeatist propaganda.

In the setting up and consolidation of mass organizations and popular institutions, the training of competent cadres and the devising of effective working methods are basic. The task, however, was not the responsibility only of the Department of Mass Administration, but also falls on other EPLF institutions. Although the Department of Mass Administration had taken the training of cadres and the continuous improvement of organizational forms and working methods as its main tasks, there were shortcomings in the capacity of its cadres. Another drawback was the failure of other EPLF departments and sections to always coordinate their specific tasks with the ongoing activities among the people.

Though not isolated from EPLF's overall political work among the masses, the efforts to promote the role of women were of special interest. Since the participation of all nationals in the process of liberating and developing Eritrea was an imperative task, the participation of women, who make up half of our society, must be given great attention. It is easy to accept this in principle and grasp its theoretical importance, but it is difficult to turn it into a reality. It is hard to persuade a backward male dominated society, fettered by chauvinist and superstitious beliefs that consider women as weak and ignorant, and relegates them to second class citizenship to accept that women are equal to men. But the EPLF incorporated women's rights and their

Assessment of EPLF's experience in the period between its 1st and 2nd Congress (Part II)

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participation in its political programs and worked seriously to implement it. The advances made by women in their politicization, training, the setting up of their own association, their substantial role in the armed struggle and the exemplary heroism they demonstrated, their important representation in the people's assemblies, their participation in agriculture and other productive activities, their active role in the fields of education and health, the upgrading of their administrative and leadership capabilities, in short their participation in all aspects of the Eritrean revolution are tangible and practical proofs of the correctness of the EPLF policy and the seriousness with which it was implemented. Even though, many shortcomings which can be traced to the backwardness of our society, shortage of time and limited experiences have been to be corrected, the participation of women, which the Eritrean people are proud of, had solved many problems and had simplified future tasks.