

National unity and formation of a broad National Democratic Front (Part III)

Written by Million Eyob

Friday, 23 November 2012 09:06 -

As has already been made clear, the inception of the EPLF was the result of the dominant faction of the ELF, the faction that followed the line of the Supreme Council. The attempts to stop the fighting between the two fronts (the ELF and the EPLF), create a favorable environment for negotiations and roster unity through joint activities which continued up to 1997, failed. In its first congress, the EPLF after assessing previous efforts made for unity with the ELF, adopted a policy on unity the proposal for a united front-worked out an action program and began to struggle for their implementation. Immediately after the congress, at a Zager meeting on April 1977, and in May at Hawashaite, the EPLF confirmed its desire for and clarified its stand on the unity of both organizations and the rallying of their democratic elements. However, the ELF leadership, and especially its dominant anti-unity faction, was only waiting for an opportunity to weaken and destroy the EPLF. It therefore, rejected the EPLF's practical and realistic stands as anti-unity and posing as the true champion of unity, it called for a precipitate merger to be realized through a scheduled congress. In order to create further obstacles, it also raised the case of the ex-foreign mission condemned by the EPLF. Worse still, it attacked the EPLF from behind and started armed clashes in many parts of the country, while the EPLF was engaged in the campaign to liberate Semhar. Unperturbed, the EPLF preserved in the liberation war to which it accorded priority refrained from activities that would give the ELF the pretext to attack strove to stop the internecine fighting by encouraging the mediation of the masses. As a result, serious unity negotiations continued and in October 1977, a mutual agreement was reached under Sudanese auspices.

On the basis of the October Agreement, a joint Supreme Political Leadership, as well as joint political and military committees was set up. It was agreed that committees on the economy, information, social and foreign affairs were to be established, and joint work programs in various fields were drawn up. The agreement reached under the pressure of the masses and the revolution's friends, was a bitter pill to swallow for the dominant faction in the ELF revolutionary council, which tried everything possible to thwart it. The faction created obstacles in the setting up of the joint committees, and the drawing up of work programs and when agreements were reached, it procrastinated in their implementation and obviated their provisions, finally paralyzing the joint work. Similarly it blocked implementation of the jointly drafted political agitation program. In regards to the joint military strategy, first it delayed its implementation by raising non-essential questions on the pretext of clarifying issues, and when specific operations were agreed upon, it resorted to lies and excuses to avoid shouldering its responsibility or abandoned its positions exposing the EPLF to danger. As usual it launched sporadic attacks to abort all meetings and agreements. In a period of three years, seven meetings of the joint political Supreme Council and nearly 20 meetings of various joint committees were held, but the goodwill and seriousness of the EPLF alone could not bring the desired results. And so on in the beginning of July 1980, the Revolutionary Commission secretly withdraws the ELF brigade garrisoned at north eastern Sahel front on the basis of the joint agreement, declaring, in effect, that the agreement was hence null and void.

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The Revolutionary Council's move was a calculated one. Since Soviet interference had changed the balance of forces and the EPLF, shifting from an offensive into a defensive position, had assembled almost all its forces in the north, the RC presumed that this situation provided it with ample opportunity further weaken and liquidate the EPLF. In the event, the RC not only attacked the EPLF's guerrilla and mobile units operating in extensive rural areas, but after amassing its forces, launched a large scale attack at Halhal reigniting the civil war. Numerous clashes ensued. But, the ELF leadership's plans were foiled and after the Revolutionary Councils' accusatory pleas and Sudanese intervention, a cease-fire agreement was signed on 22 November 1980.

But this only provided a respite. After taking time to mobilize its forces, the HC launched an attack on the EPLF in violation of the cease-fire agreement and was forced to retreat across the border into the Sudan by the EPLF counter offensive. The abrogation of the October agreement, thus failed to yield the desired results. And so to undermine the EPLF's dominance, the RC started to consort with the two factions of the Peoples Liberation Forces the PLF – Central Council (PLF-C,C) and the PLF- Revolutionary Committee (PLF-R,C) formed after the 1979 split in the Peoples Liberation Forces (PLF). Coincidentally, there was an Arab League initiative to unite the Eritrean Fronts. The HC pushed for a tripartite agreement that excluded the EPLF. Aware of the dangers, the EPLF reassessed its position of not negotiating with the PLF factions, and accepted the league's invitation to participate. The HC's attempts to incite the other parties into excluding the EPLF failed. The RC made one last attempt to torpedo the meeting by raising the diversionary issue of the EPLF's alliance with the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), but this too was rejected, and an understanding was reached for the talks to continue.

The basic understanding reached at Tunis was rejected by the dominant faction of the Revolutionary Council. Meanwhile, the contradictions inside the ELF which had been glossed over by the setting up of an alliance sharpened. Opposition from the disarmed rank and file fighters in the Sudan intensified and the position of the dominant faction became untenable. The external forces which had pinned their hopes on the RC, primarily Saudi Arabia, increased their involvement, and when a situation favorable for a putsch arose, in a meeting, convened as usual, as a result of numerous compromises, a relapse of liquidations and fragmentation occurred in the ELF R.C. Some elements were murdered and many others imprisoned. This brought the conflicts to their climax and led to the demise of the ELF.