The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference of July 1991:
its origins, history and significance

Sarah Vaughan
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Price: £ 4.00 or US $ 8.00
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ABSTRACT
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When the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) entered Addis Ababa on 28 May 1991, it had pledged to convene within one month an all-inclusive conference of Ethiopian political groupings. The conference would agree the basis for, and establish, a Transitional Government, which would rule until democratic elections could take place. This initiative was hailed as a fundamental break with an autocratic Ethiopian political tradition.

This dissertation aims to consider aspects of the history and policy of a number of the major actors, in an attempt to understand why the Transitional Government was established in this way. In doing so, it assesses in some detail the interrelations between the major opposition groups, and traces the formulation of a series of transitional proposals in the final period of the Dergue régime, with particular reference to the dominant issue of unity. The paper provides a detailed review of the period immediately prior to the conference, in order to illuminate how, and with what perspectives, the various participants became involved.

Two themes frame the paper, emerging both from the historical analysis given, and also amongst conference themes discussed.

The first is the issue of self determination of nationalities, widely viewed as a perennial cause of conflict in Ethiopia. Representation on the basis of nationality was a key dynamic of the convention of the conference. Its significance in 1991 is considered alongside the ideology of the TPLF/EPRDF which had long pronounced it the primary contradiction facing the country.

The second theme is that of the correct relation between a political organisation and the population. Debate on this issue affected the nature of political mobilisation, coalition-building, and the form of democracy sought by different groups.

In conclusion, the significance of the conference is considered in the context of difficulties arising from these two themes.
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INTRODUCTION

In the early hours of 21 May 1991 Mengistu Haile Mariam, President of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, left Addis Ababa by aeroplane, with his normal security entourage, to visit a military camp in the south-west of the country. En route, the plane was diverted to Nairobi, from where the President went into exile in Zimbabwe. The same day the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) claimed that:

"The forces that he had amassed on the Ambo front [55 kilometres from Addis Ababa] to defend the capital - the 3rd "Revolutionary" Army of which he had great confidence - evaporated like dew under a hot sun as a result of EPRDF’s assault [...] a few hours after the Eritrean People's Liberation Front [had] devastated the Derg's 2nd "Revolutionary" Army, liberating the town of Dekemhare [36 kilometres from Asmara], and started to advance forward." (Statement by the Supreme Council of EPRDF, 21 May 1991)

Prime Minister Tesfaye Dinka left for London to attend talks with the EPRDF, Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), scheduled to start on 27 May. By then the movements' forces had captured Asmara and stood encircling Addis Ababa's Bole and Lidetta airports. No conference took place.

Instead the government delegation left the talks, and on the following day the EPRDF forces entered Addis Ababa "to re-establish peace and order" (Meles Zenawi, Press Conference, London, 28 May 1991). A joint statement of the three movements confirmed their agreement:

"to hold a follow-up conference not later than July 1 to discuss the details of the transition period in general and the formation of a broad-based provisional government in particular [...] In the meantime, the EPRDF will assume state responsibility in Addis Ababa pending the formation of a broad-based provisional government at the proposed conference." (Joint Statement by EPRDF, EPLF and OLF, London, 28 May 1991)

Observed by representatives from more than 15 countries, representatives of 27 Ethiopian political organisations and groupings participated in the conference which was convened at
Africa Hall from the 1st to the 5th of July 1991. They adopted a Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia, and discussed a draft "Principles of Co-operation between the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and the Provisional Government of Eritrea". The latter was constituted by the EPLF, which attended the conference as an observer. At the time of writing, Ethiopia continues to be governed under the Transitional Charter.

The early 1990s were marked by a series of "National Reconciliation Conferences" in a number of different African states: in February 1990 in Benin, in June 1991 in Congo, in July 1991 in Togo, and, perhaps most interestingly of all, in Mali in April 1991. In the latter instance an equilibrium was forged between different ethnic or national groups within the country, designed to bring a halt to years of fighting. The relatively scanty literature on all of these conferences suggests that they were episodes of high drama. The National Conference emerges as a dynamic moment during which the nation held its breath to see which of a number of configurations would result; an experience "[qui] donne le vertige à quelques-uns qui ont le sentiment de basculer dans une révolution" (Eboussi Boulaga, 1993:73).

The Transitional Conference in Addis Ababa was not such a moment. High drama there was in abundance. The sharp intake of breath was an international one: at the abrupt collapse of the largest army in black Africa, and one of its more resilient régimes; at the de facto emergence of a new state in Eritrea; at the potential disintegration of yet another of the states of the Horn; at the extraordinarily "magnanimous" invitation of the victors... But spontaneity was conspicuous by its absence.

By the time the conference opened, the "Eritrean Question" had been settled by force of arms: in effect the conference had only to acknowledge this fact. In Ethiopia, agreement had been reached between the victor, the EPRDF, and the only other force of military significance, the OLF. This had been cemented with the consensus of almost all the participating delegates. The outcome was not in doubt.

By taking the July conference as a point of convergence, this paper seeks to trace the development of some of the dynamics at work at this time. In doing so it seeks to reconcile
two minimally compatible activities: a relatively chronological narration of events, and the identification and elaboration of key themes. The paper is presented in four chapters.

Chapter One traces some of the major tendencies of Ethiopian opposition to Mengistu, in several cases as far back as their origins in the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It considers the impact of their interrelation one with another, in an attempt to understand the perspectives from which the policy of transition came to be implemented.

Chapter Two describes the events of May and June 1991 which established the interim EPRDF Provisional Administration, and the consensus on which the conference was based. It also reviews the evolution of the EPRDF's proposals for the establishment of a transitional arrangement.

Chapter Three describes the participants of the conference, and the manner in which they came to be involved. Separate sections deal with three distinct groups of actors not dealt with in Chapter One, giving some comment on the perspectives which they brought to the proceedings.

The final chapter, which discusses conference themes, takes up issues raised in Chapter One. A brief review of the manner in which the question of Eritrea was discussed reflects prevailing concern with the issue of secession. A consideration of the themes of nationality and coalition-building takes up the discussion in the earlier chapter of the dynamics between the EPRDF/TPLF, and the EPRP and OLF respectively.

It is perhaps necessary to state that the paper does not consider in detail the events which led to the establishment of the Provisional Government of Eritrea, and the relations between the struggle of the EPLF, and other Eritrean movements, and the various forces in Ethiopia. By July 1991 this had become a highly complex, but fundamentally separate story. It is clear that the traumatic war in Eritrea, as well as the trauma of its separation from Ethiopia, had a profound impact on the process of constituting a Transitional Government in Ethiopia, and some reference is made to this. However, in terms of the political framework within which almost all of the participants of the Ethiopian transition operated, the Eritreans were "no
longer part of the equation" (Meles Zenawi, interview).

Throughout the research the author has been drawn back repeatedly to a consideration of the policies and interests of the protagonist: the EPRDF. The organisation is necessarily the major focus of study.

It is also necessary to state that this paper draws very heavily on interviews with participants, and with a number of observers, of the July conference. All of these interviews were carried out between June and September 1994. The intervening period has not been a happy one for all of the original members of the Transitional Government. Of the 27 organisations which held seats in the Council of Representatives at the start of the period, 8 have subsequently withdrawn from the government, and key representatives of a number of these, as well as of organisations which continue to participate, have left Ethiopia. Given that the bulk of the research was carried out in Addis Ababa, this fact alone placed a number of potential sources beyond the scope of the study. Necessarily limited steps have been taken to attempt to overcome this, either by means of distance interviews - as in the case of the OLF - or through less formal means.

The research faced another problem in Addis Ababa, which is perhaps an interesting reflection on the nature of Ethiopian state structures, and the situation at the time when the conference took place. Documentation of and related to the Transitional Conference, and the period of the EPRDF Provisional Administration in May 1991, is scanty - something which contrasts in a remarkable way with the voluminous documentation for which the bureaucracy of the Dergue was renowned. Such recordings and documents as do exist were found to be unavailable from any standard government sources. Repeated enquiries with the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ethiopian TV and News Agencies produced little or nothing. In all instances the response was the same: "go to the EPRDF: they were organising everything at that time". The impression is of a vast bureaucracy which, with the removal of the Dergue, went into suspended animation, until such time as the proper mechanisms were re-activated.
CHAPTER ONE

DYNAMICS AMONGST THE OPPOSITION TO MENGISTU

1.1 THE EPRDF: APPROACHES TO ALLIANCE-FORMATION

When fighters of the EPRDF entered Addis Ababa in May 1991, they did so under the joint military command of the four organisations which then comprised the front: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), and the Ethiopian Democratic Officers' Revolutionary Movement (EDORM). The EPRDF was established in early 1989, in an agreement which formalised the 8-year de facto working alliance between the TPLF and the EPDM. Sebhat Nega (interview) reports that the official establishment of the EPRDF was postponed for some years in the hope that it might be founded with more than these two organisations. In the event, this was not possible:

"By the time EPRDF was established the urgency of the formation of the front was considerable: at the Rome talks [which opened in November 1989] the Dergue claimed that the TPLF, as a Tigrayan movement, had no right to discuss the situation of the whole of Ethiopia; at the same time we were expanding the movement outside Tigray into the Amhara region. Diplomatically and politically the formal creation of the Front was urgent." (Sebhat Nega, interview)

In 1990, at the first congress of the OPDO, which had reportedly been in existence for two years at this stage, the organisation elected to join the EPRDF, with the EDORM established as a member during the same year. Whilst a number of other nationality-based organisations were regarded in 1991 as closely associated with the EPRDF\(^1\), observers agree that the Front was not a broad-based movement with roots throughout the country, but represented a support-base in the north, particularly in Tigray, and to a lesser extent in Wollo and Gondar.

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\(^1\) Relations between the TPLF and the Afar Liberation Front (ALF) had been close for some time, notwithstanding persistent reports of the former's attempts to establish an alternative Afar movement. Meanwhile, delegates of organisations claiming to represent the Benishangul and Gambella peoples, inhabiting the areas bordering Sudan, attended the first congress of the EPRDF in January 1991.
regions. This impression was reinforced by the considerable seniority of the TPLF, which had been established in February 1975, vis-à-vis the other movements, and by the fact that the establishment and development of each of the other three partners had been at least facilitated by the Tigrayan 'parent' organisation.

Further detail regarding the establishment of the TPLF is given in the following section.

The EPDM was formed by the so-called Belessa Group, a faction of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) which developed between 1978 and 1980. As a result of one of a number of crises within the EPRP, the 11 leaders of a faction based largely in Tigray, which began calling for a congress to review policy and change the leadership, were reportedly killed by those they challenged. Bereket reports (interview) that a group of some 112 EPRP cadres then left Gojjam and Gondar for Tigray, planning either to continue the struggle from there, if it were possible to reach some accommodation with the TPLF, or, if not, to seek safe passage through to Sudan. On arrival in the TPLF-held areas they were given practical facilitation and, after a 5-month discussion, a core of 37 elected to form the EPDM and work alongside the TPLF who, whilst giving them every support reportedly 'never interfered in the internal matters of the organisation' (Bereket, interview). The first congress of the EPDM was convened on 20 November 1980.

The OPDO was formed from amongst Oromo prisoners of war held by the TPLF in Tigray, and Oromos who had at one time or another joined the EPDM. Popular assessment viewed the establishment of the OPDO as a 'last resort', taken by the TPLF when, after years of attempts, it finally recognised its inability to co-operate with the OLF. Senior EPRDF sources report, however, that the TPLF had always had the intention to collaborate with a 'democratic' Oromo organisation - it was simply a question of when and how it could be done (Sebhat Nega, etc., interviews). There is some indication that the poor relations between the EPLF and the TPLF during the mid-eighties inhibited the development of an Oromo TPLF ally. The EPLF was reportedly reluctant to release its considerable number of Oromo POWs south into Tigray, preferring to deliver them, via Sudan, to the OLF, with whom it maintained close relations. The rapprochement between the EPLF and the TPLF in late 1988, and, more importantly, the dramatic escalation and expansion of military
activities of the TPLF/EPDM around this time, meant that the allies subsequently took considerable numbers of POWs - most of them Oromo.

Little is known about the smaller EDORM, although it seems that the capture by the TPLF of senior military personnel during the battle for Enda Selassie in February 1989 was significant in its development.

As far back as the late 1970s, TPLF propaganda had called for the establishment of a united coalition of forces against the government. Their policy envisaged two scenarios: either a tactical alliance or "united front" of organisations opposing the government and the military involvement of the Soviet Union; or alternatively a "united democratic front", or strategic alliance, between likeminded organisations who would not only oppose the régime but positively struggle for the realisation of a common vision of what would replace it:

"The TPLF, leading the people of Tigray on the correct path of armed struggle, unerringly extends its call for a broad United Democratic Front to all democratic forces of the Empire state, for a joint action against the common enemy. [...] Through united action of all democratic forces, the fascist junta's crumbling régime will certainly be annihilated faster and this can foster the alliance of the oppressed and exploited nations and nationalities of the Empire State [...] through a united struggle" (TPLF, Tigray in Struggle, 1 (2), July 1981)

What is interesting is that it took such a long time for any such alliance to come about, and that when it did it reflected more a process of replication of one existing organisation, the TPLF, than a union of existing actors from the spectrum of Ethiopian opposition groups. Before going further into a consideration of the moment of transition itself, it seems useful to trace the inter-relations between the TPLF/EPRDF and a number of the more important groups, particularly the EPRP and the OLF. Such a consideration, together with a review of the strategy employed by the Dergue and the reactions it elicited in the period of the last several years of the régime may be helpful in a number of ways: in situating these groupings in relation to the subsequent transition, and in identifying the main tenets of the political strategy, and ideological goals of the EPRDF.

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2 People's Voice, 11 (4), claimed in the latter part of 1989 that "Prisoners of war now number more than 40,000", p.21
1.2 THE TPLF VERSUS THE EPRP: NATIONALITY VERSUS CLASS

The TPLF and the EPRP both grew out of the Ethiopian student movement of the 1960s and early 1970s which first gained a public profile when it erupted onto the streets of Addis Ababa in 1965 with the slogan 'land to the tiller'. Medhane Tadesse (1994:1) notes that:

"The revolutionary fervour of some students was not to be satisfied by the above slogan. In their attempt to integrate the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism with the Ethiopian situation they touched the most sensitive issue: the question of nationalities".

The publication early in the academic year of 1969/70 in Struggle, the paper of the University Students' Union of Addis Ababa, of an article by student Wallelign Mekonnen is cited by many observers (Medhane Taddesse, 1994; interviewees Sebhat Nega, Bereket, etc.) as key in crystallising the divisions between student factions. It dealt head on with the 'solution to the national question': the right to self-determination.

The reasons why the nationality debate gained more than average interest from Tigrayan members of the student community, who were reportedly well represented in radical circles at that time, range from the historical ("A permanent grievance against Amhara connivance became the hallmark of Tigray provincialism ever since [...] the heir to Emperor Yohannes (1872-89), the only Tigrai emperor of Abyssinia in modern times, was dispossessed by Menelik of Shoa in 1889" Markakis, 1987:248), and the economic ("The people of Tigrai were inclined to link the misfortune of their homeland to its political emasculation, and to blame Amhara domination for their misery. [...] under the ancien régime there was little investment in the Abyssinian provinces and none at all in Tigray", Markakis 1987:251) to the cultural ("Tigray's distinct language reinforced its self-consciousness." "The imposition of Amharigna and the proscription of Tigrigna [in the 1940s] [...] created serious difficulty and even greater resentment", Markakis, 1987:248, 251). All factors were seen to have had a concrete and negative impact by a radicalising Tigrayan student body. In a context where "students with the same regional background tended to find accommodations together, and this was reported to have led to ethnic cohesion and the development [of the use] of some provincial languages" (Medhane Tadesse, 1994:4) the urge to organise on the basis of
nationality was strong. In 1972 the Tigray University Students’ Union was formed, and the Tigray National Organisation soon began active recruitment and mobilisation in Tigray region. The students who left Addis Ababa for Tigray after the dramatic events of 1974, emerged in early 1975 as the Tigray People’s Liberation Front, struggling for self-determination:

"[self-determination] could result in anything from autonomy, federation, confederation, up to and including independence" (TPLF, People’s Voice, April 1981, quoted by Markakis, 1987:254)

"Even though the right to self-determination incorporates the right to secede, the struggle of the Tigrean people led by the TPLF does not take secession as the only solution for the national domination under which it is forced to live. Being part of a democratic multi-national Ethiopia based on equality, where there are no oppressor and oppressed nations; where the right of every nation without distinction is constitutionally and in practice safeguarded, where democracy and social justice prevail, and where the fundamental human rights of the peoples are not violated, is also acceptable to the people of Tigray." (TPLF, 1982)

The acute contradiction which rapidly developed between the TPLF, and that much larger faction of the student movement which was at the time organising the EPRP, has been obscured by a tendency of some of the literature to dismiss the debates which took place within the student movement ("its divisions incongruously reflected the squabbles of impotent student politicians", Clapham, 1988:52), and by the concentration of much of it upon a more central conflict. The divisions between the newly established Dergue government and the EPRP (and other movements) which culminated in the slaughter of a generation\(^3\) of intellectuals sharply drew attention. In doing so, it generated a form of analysis which, bolstered by government propaganda against "secessionists" and "bandits" who were seeking the fragmentation of the Ethiopian state, cast the mould in which the wars in Ethiopia and Eritrea have been generally understood ever since. Thus for instance Clapham concludes that:

"In terms of their common Marxist frame of reference, they [the Dergue and the EPRP] could reach agreement on two broad themes. The first was that the repression

\(^3\) cf. the title of Kifle Tadesse's undated book on the subject in Amharic, Ya Tiwld, The Generation, Silver Spring Publishers.
of nationalities within imperial Ethiopia could be ascribed to the class basis of the régime... The second was that 'nationalities' should be recognised, and should be accorded a right to 'self-determination'... Where they differed was over the issue of whether 'self-determination' should include a specific right to secession." (1988:198)

There is, of course, some debate as to whether the TPLF was a secessionist organisation. Whilst the declaration of objectives set out above remains the official one, some reports indicate that for a period of some nine months during 1976 the organisation's second constitution set out the single aim of establishing an independent Tigray⁴. What is officially acknowledged is that "narrow nationalist tendencies" within the organisation caused considerable internal debate, and resulted in the publication of a paper on the subject on the 10th anniversary of the founding of the TPLF (Sebhat Nega, interview).

The divisions which brought the TPLF and the EPRP into internecine conflict in eastern Tigray in March 1978, however, operated at a much more fundamental level than that of the issue of secession. In considering the dynamics at work with the establishment of a Transitional Government dominated by the EPRDF therefore, it seems useful to re-focus upon the bitter division which developed between the two organisations.

The EPRP held its founding congress, after two years of preparatory work, on 2-9 April 1972 (Medhane Tadesse, 1994:3, citing Kiflu Tadesse). Far from Clapham's experience under the Dergue ("it is extremely difficult to find anyone who acknowledges membership", 1988:54), it is now difficult to find students of that generation who do not claim to have been members of the EPRP - many current members of the EPRDF included. Large numbers of students and other intellectuals became passionately involved in a manner akin to "religious fervour" (Bereket, etc., interviews). The EPRP infiltrated the Labour Unions, the Teacher's Association, and University bodies, and "proclaimed itself a proletarian vanguard party on the basis of its class position" (Markakis, 1987:242).

In the early months of its establishment in Tigray, the TPLF sent two delegations to seek

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⁴ Interestingly this document is also reported to have stated that the organisation's ideology drew not only on Marxism-Leninism, but also on "the thoughts of Mao".
support from its better established neighbours: one, including Sebhat Nega and Yemani Kidane, to the EPLF in Eritrea, and the other, led by Seyoum Mesfin, to the EPRP at Asimba in eastern Tigray (Sebhat Nega, interview). At the time of this meeting, the TPLF was reportedly concerned by rumours which it felt that the EPRP had been spreading, particularly during its short period of training with the EPLF in Eritrea before it had established its base in Tigray in April 1975. A TPLF 'elder statesman', Suhul, was accused of 'feudalist connections', and the organisation of having relations with Mengesha Seyoum's 'reactionary' Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU), and, more generally, of 'narrow nationalism'.

Informant after informant stressed that the division between the two organisations was at a fundamental ideological level - at the level of analysis of the Ethiopian situation: whether the primary contradiction crippling Ethiopia was that of class or that of nationality. In retrospect, it is clear that this division on the nature of the contradiction and how it should be resolved runs as a deep undercurrent throughout Ethiopian politics of the past two decades - at a much more profound level than the shifting alliances of unity and anti-unity forces. It is worth quoting Markakis' commentary at some length (1987:254):

"Though it recognised the fact of national subjection, the EPRP saw it as a derivative of class rule, and maintained that both class and national oppression could be eliminated through the joint struggle of all nationalities against the ruling classes. What mattered was not the nationality but the class nature of the movement that waged the struggle. Citing Mao's dictum that in certain historical situations the national contradiction can become the principal one, the TPLF argued that although national subjection derives from class domination, it is not necessarily resolved by class struggle. The Tigray nationalists maintained that fear and suspicion between the Amhara and other nations in Ethiopia had reached a point where national sentiment submerged class consciousness and made a joint struggle impossible. 'The correct solution to the problem is national struggle which will have a class character against Amhara chauvinism and American imperialism' (Woyeen, 1/2/76). The EPRP asserted that national struggle is a bourgeois concept and cannot be directed against social oppression. Yes it can, retorted the TPLF, if it has a mass popular base."

As I hope to show, these twin issues of the struggle of nationalities and work at the mass base remain intrinsically intertwined in TPLF/EPRDF rhetoric. Meanwhile, however, this crucial ideological disagreement with the EPRP had, as Markakis is quick to point out, an
immediate political impact in terms of the relationship between the two organisations.

In accordance with its avowed policy of seeking to form either strategic or tactical alliances, the TPLF saw the EPRP - at that time by far the most powerful opposition organisation - as the one body with which it might establish a full United Democratic Front. Such an arrangement would establish an alliance of independent organisations allowing for both individual and common congress and leadership structures. This contrasted with its perception of possible relations with other organisations with whom at best a tactical alliance against the Dergue was possible (Sebhat Nega, interview)\(^5\). Successive delegations, however, were reportedly greeted by the EPRP with the suggestion that the TPLF, being a front rather than a party, should hold discussions with the EPRA, the military wing of the EPRP, as to how it might organise itself as a logistical unit to fight under the vanguard political leadership of the EPRP.

"[The TPLF] demanded to be recognised as the vanguard organisation in Tigray, and asked the EPRP to go elsewhere to struggle against the Dergue. In turn, the EPRP defended its right to operate everywhere in Ethiopia." (Markakis, 1987:255)

The bloody results are well documented (Markakis, 1987:256-7; Medhane Tadesse, 1994). What is less well documented is the relationship between the TPLF and the EPRP after the latter was forced out of Tigray in March 1978. Given that the EPRP, together with other members of the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF) - namely The All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (Meison) and the Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance (EPDA) - formed the only significant group not to have participated in the July 1991 conference, it seems all the more important to do this, as is attempted below, and in Section 1.4.

After the organisation's expulsion from Tigray, many EPRP members made their way to Sudan, often via Eritrea. The remaining force moved to a number of bases in various parts

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5 The importance which the TPLF attached to the development of relations with the EPRP seems to have been considerable, with a further meeting in October 1975 attended at the most senior level by Suhul, Abaye, and Ghidiey Zeratsion, and follow up in 1976 carried out by Meles and Asfeha.
of Gondar and Gojjam, and engaged in the precarious process of rebuilding. The movement was wracked by a number of organisational crises, one of which, in 1979/80, resulted in the faction which went on to form the EPDM. In 1984 the organisation reviewed its programme, and, from 1985, although it is claimed that much of the original Marxist Leninist outlook remained intact, shifted its policy towards other organisations. The essential change was that the organisation came to see the removal of the Dergue as the fundamental problem facing Ethiopia. It called for co-operation amongst all anti-Dergue forces, and for the establishment of a broad-based, rather than a worker/party government. In a final policy shift which brought about the departure of a number of key leaders, it called for distribution of land to the tiller, and an end to the nationalisation policy of the Dergue. Around this period, individual contacts were initiated with members of the EDU (whose leader Mengesha Seyoum was at this stage in the USA). The two groups began an alliance of tactical co-operation in areas of Gondar and Gojjam, which persisted until 1989/90 when, with some expansion on the part of the EPRP, fighting broke out between the two, and the EDU was pushed to Sudan.7

On the face of it, this might have been a moment at which a rapprochement between the EPRP and the TPLF could have been considered. In fact the EPRP was reportedly in a continual state of fighting for its survival, of simply attempting to recover from the decimation inflicted by the Dergue’s Red Terror campaign. Organisationally, it had few cadres, and was not in a position to send its leaders to conduct external negotiations, with different groups in the field acting on their own initiative. Secondly, the TPLF was consolidating its operations with the EPDM and starting to expand its territorial base. After a period of some stagnation, its organisational conference in 1983, and the formation of the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray in 1984, undoubtedly injected a new determination into the various aspects of its work (Sebhat Nega, Seyoum Mesfin, interviews). At an ideological level the two organisations were moving in diametrically opposite directions.

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6 Including, notably, Melaku Tegegn.

7 TPLF sources claim that the EPRP and the EDU had planned to co-operate against the TPLF in 1978, a plan which failed when the TPLF attacked the EDU in the west before being sandwiched between the two organisations.
The decision of the TPLF leadership to work within a framework of national mobilisation may be interpreted at a number of levels. As a tactic it seems more than likely that, given the history of the region over the previous hundred years, nationality was easily selected a more effective rallying mechanism than any other - particularly in the face of the centralist propaganda of the Dergue. Having adopted such a tactic, it became essential for the TPLF to attain an undisputed and exclusive power-base in Tigray before going into alliance with others against the Dergue. Only thus could the regional force avoid becoming "a minor cog in a large multinational movement" - what Markakis (1987:255) calls "the real bone of contention" between the TPLF and the EPRP. This may explain not only the ferocity with which the TPLF expelled competitors from Tigray, but, more significantly, the considerable delay before the creation of the EPRDF which took place only after the capture of the whole of the region⁸.

Whether or not the national contradiction had indeed escalated to the point where no other form of mobilisation for struggle was viable, national liberation alone was never enough to nourish the attempt to remove the Dergue. It is unlikely that the TPLF would have accepted Gellner’s analysis of "The Contingency of Nationalism" (1964: chapter VIII). However there is evidence to indicate that they long understood that "men do not in general become nationalists through sentiment or sentimentality, atavistic or not, well-based or myth-founded: they become nationalists through genuine, objective, practical necessity, however obscurely recognised" (Gellner, 1964:160). What is documented of their practice suggests that the TPLF leaders had, from an early stage, a strong sense of the need to deliver economic improvement to the population if they were to secure its support. Given their decision to operate in Tigray, their population was overwhelmingly a peasant one, and their work to be carried out in the rural areas.

For all that the ideological framework within which the TPLF and the EPRP operated may have been similar, this fact alone brought a sharp divergence between the strategies which

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⁸ At the time that the EPRDF was formed, the TPLF had not only captured the few remaining Dergue garrisons in Tigray, but had also expelled the successive threats not only of the EPRP but also of the early and highly nationalist Tigray Liberation Front (TLF), of the EDU, and of the EDU’s shadowy splinter group, Teranafit ('Centralist').
they followed. The EPRP's decision to operate mainly in the urban areas has long been criticised at many levels: that its reliance on a miniscule urban proletariat was misguided; that its decision to operate within easy reach of the government proved catastrophic; and so on. Internal criticism of the EPRP came at an even more fundamental level, and was instrumental in the establishment of the TPLF's main ally, the EPDM, as a splinter group of the EPRP:

"One of the explanations we got [for the emphasis upon urban work], of course not from our leaders but from our own minds, was that the EPRP had no confidence in the peasantry. The EPRP leaders saw them as foolish because they dropped their demands for national equality, for democratic rights, and for political participation after they got their land..." (Bereket, interview)

The nature of the relationship which should be established between a political organisation and 'the people' (and the consequences of this relationship for the nature of political competition) remains one of the key issues which has bedevilled the transitional period in Ethiopia. TPLF/EPRDF propaganda has been for many years, and remains, almost obsessively packed with references to popular participation, grassroots democracy, and the closeness of the alliance between people and party. If popular participation is measured in terms of the percentage of the population which is engaged in programmes of socio-economic development, then the baato system established under the TPLF in Tigray has undoubtedly scored high. Unsurprisingly, however, the TPLF's strong views and practice on this issue brought them into dispute with other opposition groups in the country - including other nationally based organisations, of which the most notable is the OLF.
1.3 THE TPLF AND THE OLF

In 1962, the Metcha-Tulema Self Help Association was formed through the merger of two pre-existing organisations from distinct geographical Oromo-inhabited areas. The objectives of the organisation were the construction of schools and clinics, churches and mosques, and the provision of legal assistance to members. Within three years the organisation had three million registered members and operated from eight regional offices (Asafa Jalata, undated:ch.VIII passim). By 1966, the pre-occupation of the association with the issue of land distribution (Markakis, 1987:260, Asafa Jalata, undated) had become a cause of some disquiet to the imperial government. The defiance of a ban on a meeting in Arssi region, and the explosion of a grenade in an Addis Ababa cinema, provided the pretext for the arrest of Tadesse Biru, and the execution of other leaders of the movement. When in 1967 the government dissolved Metcha-Tulema, Oromo resistance rapidly found other forms. In 1969 an Oromiffa student paper Kana Bekta? (Did You Know?) was established, and in October, a militant faction which had been trained under Sheikh Hussein Sura was imprisoned in Mogadishu, attempting to return to Ethiopia to launch the armed struggle. From 1971 the militants were able to maintain contact with two clandestine study circles, Oromia and Bakalcha Oromo, which were established in Addis Ababa, and when in 1973 Hussein returned to Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian People’s Liberation Front was formed. In July 1974, a few months before the final fall of Haile Selassie, the movement’s first organisational meeting adopted a formal programme, and renamed the organisation the Oromo Liberation Front.

By the beginning of the Ethio-Somali war in 1977, relations were poor between the OLF and the government in Mogadishu, which had invested heavily in the establishment of the alternative Somali Abo Liberation Front, SALF. As a result “Somalia offered neither assistance nor access to the sea, and the OLF gained little from the temporary breakdown of Ethiopian control in the east” (Markakis, 1987:263). As a result, the movement turned westwards for support, and in 1978 opened an office in Khartoum. This brought them into closer contact with both the EPLF and the TPLF, which also had offices in Khartoum, and in 1979 the first OLF unit went to Eritrea with the former, for training.
Contact with the TPLF began around the same time, although actual co-operation between the two organisations came considerably more slowly than that between the OLF and the EPLF. Lencho Letta comments that:

"Co-operation with the EPLF - which was mostly at a military level - was always easier than with the TPLF. Our claim [that the independence of Oromia was a colonial issue] was parallel to that of the EPLF in Eritrea. As a result, political issues were never such a fundamental problem between us." (interview)

The OLF was established to fight for the independence of Oromia, which they claimed comprised those regions inhabited by Oromo populations, who were in turn reckoned to constitute more than half of the population of Ethiopia (Gadaa Melba, 1988). These regions were regarded by the Oromo nationalists as having been colonised during the period of rapid southward expansion of the Abyssinian state from 1870 to 1900, under Menelik II. This conquest was regarded as having been effected with the connivance of foreign imperial powers, notably Britain, France, and Italy (Asafa Jalata, undated), and the Oromo nationalists embraced the anti-imperialist rhetoric of the Ethiopian student movement. In addition to the justifications advanced from this history, the OLF leadership believed strongly that a colonial categorisation of their struggle was essential if the international legal principle of self-determination were to be recognised as applicable (Lencho Letta, interview). Although the TPLF disagreed with this analysis, "it was not an issue to prevent co-operation against a common enemy between the two organisations" (Seyoum Mesfin, interview).

The OLF claim differed from that of the EPLF in that it admitted a second possibility. If the mould of the Ethiopian state could be transformed to the extent that real self-determination of nationalities could be achieved within its framework, "the OLF was prepared to leave the door open to the possibility of co-existence" (Lencho Letta, interview). Whilst the relative weight which this scenario carried as a goal of the organisation fluctuated, it did nevertheless open the door to co-operation with other nationally based organisations fighting the Dergue.

The first concrete breakthrough in relations between the TPLF and the OLF came in 1983. A series of meetings was held between the TPLF and the OLF, the Western Somali
Liberation Front (WSLF), and the ALF, which resulted in the issue of a number of press releases and statements. Amongst these was a joint statement issued in Khartoum by the TPLF and the OLF which announced their decision to co-operate at a tactical level. Following this, the first TPLF unit left for the OLF operational area in Asosa in October/November 1984, the delegation led initially by Kinfe (Seyoum Mesfin, interview: "from this you can see how much importance we attached to military co-operation with the OLF"). Sources from both organisations report that the military training units remained with the OLF for approximately one year, but that the relationship was an uneasy one: "even then things were not smooth; it was a practical test of our attitudes towards one another" (Lencho Letta, interview).

From the point of view of the TPLF, political differences soon crystallised into disagreements over military strategy, hastening the collapse of relations, and the withdrawal of the TPLF contingent. At the level of military strategy, the TPLF disapproved of what they reported as increasing clashes between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the OLF. The TPLF claim that they tried to convince the latter that helping the Sudanese government maintain a buffer zone along the border with Ethiopia was "not their war"; that they should move out of the lowland border areas around their headquarters at Asosa where the population is Benishangul rather than Oromo, and into the highlands of Wellega "in order to be in touch with their own population." (Seyoum Mesfin, interview). The criticisms launched by the TPLF hinged on the Maoist theme of the correct relationship between a liberation movement and the rural people, and the need to be closely integrated with the population.

"The problem of the OLF was that it was basically a foreign-based leadership. Whether you found the OLF leaders in Europe, North America, Mogadishu, or Khartoum it made no difference: they were totally alienated from the day to day realities at home. We have been trying our best to invite them to visit our base area, to map out common aims and strategies, but continuously we have always been frustrated. The OLF was not at all an action-oriented organisation." (Seyoum Mesfin, interview)

The recriminations continued to focus on the nature of the OLF leadership, and culminated in the publication by the TPLF in 1986 of a paper which denounced it as "incapable of
leading the Oromo struggle" (Lencho Letta, interview). The withdrawal of the main contingent was followed by the removal of the smaller number of TPLF cadres who had remained with the OLF to give training in medical fields, mine laying, staff work, and so on.

In the subsequent period OLF anger was exacerbated by what was seen to be TPLF activism in an attempt to recruit Oromos from Sudan, Somalia, and the Middle East, and to intrude onto nationalist Oromo territory. Here the geopolitical disadvantages of the Oromo nationalist claim upon the vast area of Oromia become apparent. As noted above, by the time that the TPLF extended its activities outside Tigray, the consolidation of its control over the province was complete. The establishment of such uncontested authority over the rural areas of the vast region of Oromia, by contrast, was never a possibility for the OLF. The military advantages of strong consolidation in a manageable geographical area, with relatively easy access, for instance through Sudan, had always to be weighed against the political need to be seen to operate throughout the whole of the region which the OLF aimed to liberate. The bloody nature of the split within the OLF which created the IFLO in 1978, and the aggressive activities of the latter in the east of the country, left the OLF painfully aware of the potential of threats to their claim to represent all Oromos. The geographical difficulties of the liberation of Oromia were always profoundly exacerbated by the poor relations between the OLF and the Somali government, relations which some reports suggest were not enhanced in this period by the activities of the TPLF office in Mogadishu.

Concrete progress towards the establishment of an Oromo organisation from amongst Oromos who included POWs held by the TPLF in Tigray, was apparent from 1988. The bitter divisions between the OLF and the TPLF were only formalised by the establishment in 1990 of the OPDO.

By 1990 when the TPLF formed its Oromo wing, relations between us had completely broken down, and accusations and counter-accusations had become public.

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9 “After the OLF’s first congress in Chercher, and following changes made to the leadership, Abdul Karim Ibrahim (Sheik Jarra), the military commander, refused to recognise its authority and left the OLF” (Markakis, 1987: 263). Other sources report that the departure of the faction involved the assassination of Baro Tumisa and other leaders (Asafa Jalaca, undated).
The main issue which could not be resolved was that of the relationship between the two organisations: who can speak for whom; who is the legitimate spokesperson for whom [...] We in the OLF wanted to pursue a policy of 'equal entitlement' for the two organisations to represent their two different national constituencies. But, especially after the formation of the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray, they projected themselves as the only feasible alternative." (Lencho Letta, interview)

What this and the previous section have attempted to depict is the impact of two major aspects of TPLF policy on its relations with two other organisations. One observer has commented that:

"The success of the TPLF, and this is where they have been brilliant, is that they understood that they were Tigrayans talking to Tigrayans, and that they were Tigrayans talking to peasants."

This "understanding" brought the TPLF into conflict. It opposed the EPRP, by insisting that "national subjection is not necessarily resolved by class struggle" (Markakis, above); but equally it opposed the OLF by insisting that "since national subjugation derives from class struggle, it must have a mass popular base". Both the ideological contradictions, and their political consequences, are instructive in considering the perspectives of the EPRDF as it operated in designing the Transitional Period. On the basis of nationality, the TPLF refused to accept any but its own vanguard role in Tigray; but on the basis of peasant mobilisation, it refused to accept the vanguard role of the OLF in Oromo areas, working instead on other mechanisms for expansion.

Before moving to the transition, however, it is necessary to complete the history of the Mengistu period.
1.4 THE DERGUE'S DIPLOMATIC OFFENSIVE: SPLITTING THE OPPOSITION

As the war escalated from 1988, with large parts of Eritrea under the control of the EPLF, and almost all of Tigray taken by the TPLF, the Ethiopian government took a number of initiatives. During late 1988 there was a gradual move towards relaxation of the economy, in relation to private and foreign investment, tax reform, and agricultural pricing policy (cf. Mengistu Haile Mariam, Report to the Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee of the WPE, Addis Ababa, 9 November 1988). Secondly, Foreign Minister Berhanu Baye, and Kassa Kebede. Mengistu’s envoy, embarked upon an intensified programme of foreign visits, apparently reflecting both the government’s determination to take the initiative in the "peace offensive", and also its concern regarding the impending expiry in 1991 of the Ethio-Soviet agreement governing military supplies.

After the swift evacuation of the garrisons at Humera, Enda Selassie, and the Tigrayan capital Mekelle on 27 February 1989, speculation grew that the army might be attempting "to force Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam’s hand" (Africa Confidential, 17 March 1989), and on 16 May, a few hours after the President had left for a visit to East Germany, sections of the military attempted a coup. The attempt failed.

By the time the dust settled the talk on all sides was of peace. It had emerged that ex-US-President Carter had met Mengistu on 20 April (SWB, 22 April 1989), and held a secret meeting with the EPLF leader Issaias Afewerki in Khartoum on 24 April (ION, 29 April 1989), shortly before the latter visited the USA. On 5 June 1989 the Ethiopian Herald reported the Ethiopian Shengo’s unanimous approval of a six-point proposal for peace talks "without preconditions". The following day, Mengistu stated that "there is nobody in Ethiopia from myself down who is mandated to negotiate with anybody on secession". The EPLF swiftly accused the government of sending contradictory signals: there was a flurry of statements from all sides.

The EPLF and the government finally met for talks in Atlanta from 7 to 19 September, under Carter’s chairmanship, with follow up in Nairobi from 20 to 29 November. Meanwhile talks
with the TPLF had opened in Rome on 4 November. In all there were five rounds of talks between the EPLF and the government, and three between the government and the TPLF. None progressed beyond technical issues.

With hindsight, the position of the TPLF is clearly articulated:

"When we accepted the proposal coming from friends to negotiate with the Dergue régime, we were very clear that the way out for resolving the conflict was not through negotiations with the régime [cf. People's Voice, 11 (2/3):7]. But we wanted to challenge the Dergue. We wanted to show to the Ethiopian people and to the international community that the war was imposed - on the people, and on the democratic forces - only by the régime." (Seyoum Mesfin, interview)

The propaganda of the movement focused on two issues: the need to be seen to be working for peace; and the need to demonstrate that it was now working within what it considered a pan-Ethiopian framework, to change, rather than dismantle, the Ethiopian state:

"The peace talks in 1989, from our point of view, were specifically designed to pass a certain message to those within the Dergue who might have misconceptions about our agenda - especially with regard to the unity of the country. When the hard-line members of the Dergue recognised that this was a game that we were playing, they cut it short." (Meles Zenawi, interview)

It is not surprising that the TPLF/EPRDF employed every possibility of communicating its policies on unity and nationality. As already noted, the formal creation of the EPRDF had been left very late. During 1988 and 1989, intensive discussions were conducted inside Tigray to persuade the population that it was necessary to "extend the struggle to other nationalities without arrogance or chauvinism" (author's notes, November 1988). The strongly nationalistic sentiments with which this propaganda shift was greeted by the rural population took some time to quieten, and the local complications engendered by the TPLF's nationality strategy mirrored their difficulty in shaking off the 'secessionist' label, nationally and internationally. If "nationalist movements are adventures in invention" (Andreas Eshete, 1992:10), the TPLF was more inventive than most.

In early February 1990, as the second round of talks was underway, the EPLF launched an
assault on Massawa, and by the 19th the port was reported to be in their hands (ION, 10 March 1990:3). This key military defeat marked a turning point in the diplomatic offensive. Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea were in the grip of a severe famine, after the widespread failure of the 1989 harvest. International donor agencies and governments, alarmed by the logistical implications of the military developments, pressed for negotiated agreements on the delivery of food 'across the lines', which brought them into official contact with the movements for the first time.

The government's response to the loss of Massawa was marked by a change in the tone of its communications, and an official announcement that the government recognised that certain policy errors had pushed what it called "genuine political forces" into the arms of what it defined as "anti-unity forces". From then on the government sought to distinguish between these so called anti-unity forces (by which it meant the EPLF, the TPLF, and the OLF) and unity forces. The further intensified diplomatic offensive, headed by Kassa Kebede, contacted opposition organisations and groupings, as well as lobbying international donor organisations and governments. Armed with strong propaganda materials\(^\text{10}\), and reportedly supported by senior members of the hierarchy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, who made simultaneous visits to religious groups in Washington DC, this series of tours ignited strong emotions, and a "One Ethiopia" co-ordinating support group was formed. The Dergue declared itself in the process of transforming the Workers' Party of Ethiopia into the Democratic Unity Party of Ethiopia, and, whilst it wanted to retain a single party, professed itself even ready to countenance a transitional coalition under its umbrella - provided the unity of the country was not compromised.

Contacts at a number of levels seem to have been maintained by the government. Whilst negotiating officially with both the EPLF and the TPLF, the Dergue also pursued a relatively open policy of courting individuals and groups with a prominent history during the régime of Haile Selassie. In addition to Mengesha Seyoum's EDU, circles associated with

\(^{10}\) Yosef Tesfaye (interview) mentions the persistent claim that the OLF had entered an Amhara area, via Sudan and, with the support of the EPLF and TPLF, had executed those living in the area. A video, purporting to show the vicious abuses carried out by these organisations, was circulated widely in North America. Around this time the government also recruited the services of a top political lobbying agency in Washington DC.
Dejazmatchat ('Imperial Governors') Zewde Gebre Selassie and Zewde Gebre Hiwot became involved in the discussions about a transitional arrangement\(^\text{11}\). These groups shared with the EPDA, led by Dereje Deressa, the advantage of being apparently well financed, and were, above all, vehemently opposed to the break up of the Ethiopian Empire state.

Meanwhile, reports suggest that there was also contact with the EPRP. Because of the past strength and current reputation of this organisation\(^\text{12}\), it was given the task of preparing and making plans for the establishment of a pro-unity coalition. The powerful significance of the EPRP in North America was considered to be essential in mobilising younger Ethiopians to the side of the régime. This work resulted in the convention of the so-called Toronto Conference which was held with the participation of the EPDA, the EDU, Meison, the EPRP, and a range of individuals. The name of the EPRP was deployed as an umbrella of some substance under which individuals and organisations could gather, whilst the funds required were provided almost exclusively from the royalist circles, with over US Dollars 80,000 provided by the EDU (Yosef Tesfaye, interview).

The decision to exclude the so-called anti-unity forces from this forum was not without its critics inside and close to the EPRP. Meison initially refused to participate, claiming that it was essential to have the participation of all forces in order to attain peace, and being itself closely involved in negotiations with the EPRDF at this time. Within the EPRP also there was one tendency which favoured building on the limited contacts which had been held with the EPRDF in North America. The new emphasis of the EPRDF upon its 'Ethiopianess', its publication of a revised document on the nationality question, and its drive to create a pan-Ethiopian Marxist Leninist party, were indicative of new possibilities to those members of the EPRP based outside the country. Their analysis of the development of the EPRP within Ethiopia also prompted the pursuit of overseas contacts with the EPRDF. The collapse of relations with the EDU had left the EPRP relatively isolated. On the other hand,

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\(^{11}\) The latter had reportedly been involved in negotiations between different organisations in Sudan, and was considered to have useful experience as a conciliator.

\(^{12}\) EPRP's strong image abroad belied its tiny active membership, which Yosef Tesfaye reports numbered as few as 7 in North America, 7 in Sudan, and 3 in Europe at this time.
the EPRP in the field had finally been able to consolidate its base in Gojjam, and the kidnapping of a group of Italians from Pawe had brought international attention, and sufficient funding to establish a radio station.

During this period, a division seems to have opened up between those members of the EPRP who were active in Ethiopia, and some of those operating outside the country. In North America, where many erstwhile members of the organisation were in exile in the mid-to-late-eighties, the EPRP found fertile ground for political and propaganda work. The presence in Washington of cadres, if not leaders, from almost all the Ethiopian opposition movements meant that the EPRP was able to establish a relatively strong contact with these groups in the USA. This contrasted with the attitude of those elements of the EPRP operating in Sudan and in the field, who retained their animosity towards other groups, the TPLF amongst them. There is some indication that the presence at the Toronto Conference of representatives from the field may have hardened the official position of the EPRP, which saw the party’s interest as lying in joining the Dergue. Scarred by its experience with the TPLF, it knew that it would not be in a position to play a leadership role if it joined the EPRDF. On the other hand co-operation with the Dergue might enable it to seize the opportunity of leading the struggle, and resume the vanguard role of which it believed the Dergue to be incapable.

The statements made by the conference heightened the contradiction between the EPRP and the EPRDF, and following it the polemical statements of both organisations escalated. For many years the TPLF/EPRDF had been characterising the EPRP as a petit bourgeois revolutionary force - wavering but not counter-revolutionary. The EPRP for its part claimed that the TPLF/EPRDF was a disingenuous force, not seriously interested in allying with anyone, but having simply changed its rhetoric the better to dominate others. The voluminous exchange of paper gained substance when the EPRDF advance moved southwards in the early months of 1991, coming into closer proximity with the EPRP base areas at Chilga in Gondar, and Metekal in Gojjam. At this point military skirmishing intensified, initially around Aykel and Azezo, as the EPRDF prepared to take Gondar, and subsequently

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13 There were persistent reports of a communication link between the Toronto Conference and the Dergue, through Tesfaye Dinka, and at its conclusion a document, signed by Mersha (EPRP), Mengesha (EDU), Dereje (EPDA), and Zewde, was sent to Addis Ababa.
further south. EPRP members in North America supported the possibility of negotiating the EPRDF’s passage through EPRP areas. Others insisted that this would amount to a total surrender. Eventually EPRDF forces surrounded the EPRA in the border areas between the Sudan and Gojjam and Gondar, and, after three days of fighting during which the force was cut into two, reported it ‘destroyed’. According to EPRDF sources, a small EPRP detachment which attempted to follow the Nile along the border with Wellega, to make contact with the Dergue near Addis Ababa, was subsequently cut off.

Meanwhile, in the USA, the founding conference of the COEDF was held in Maryland from 15 to 17 April (COEDF Statement, 22 April 1991), with the participation of the EDU, the EPRP, the EPDA, Meison, and the Tigray People’s Democratic Movement (TPDM). The objectives of the COEDF were:

"To seek peaceful and political solutions to the outstanding problems of the country... To present a broad-based, nationwide political alternative, encompassing various sectors of the society and committed to the unity of the Ethiopian peoples..." (COEDF Statement, 22 April 1991)

On 19 April, Mengistu broadcast a long and rambling address to the nation, which was rapidly followed by an emergency session of the National Shengo, or parliament, which opened on 22 April:

"The National Shengo has decided ....: to set up a common peace forum with all opposition parties and unity forces and seek a way to form a transitional system; ... to give a total amnesty; to implement a ceasefire; to continue the peace talks ...; to set up a peace commission, which will monitor and supervise the implementation of these decisions."

"The National Shengo ... makes the following call in order to put a halt to the atrocious war to dismantle the unity of our motherland: all able bodied young men, 18 years and above, as well as farmers, government employees, workers in production and service sectors, and in general all Ethiopian nationals, should be mobilised more than ever before... the third emergency congress of the National Shengo strongly notifies all genuine Ethiopians that it is time to fight ... to defend against the enemy’s forceful imposition of their will." (SWB, 24 April 1991)

Whilst the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (SWB 9 May 1991), Islamic Council (SWB 9 May
1991), and Mekane Yesus Church (SWB 8 May 1991) singled out the peaceful and political resolutions of the Shengo for support, the COEDF's statement on 24 April expressed its support for "setting up a transitional government with opposition groups and unity forces, cease-fire, and other resolutions which help action to be taken" (emphasis added) (Voice of Ethiopia. 27 April 1991, SWB, 29 April 1991).

After the flight of Mengistu, most of the member organisations of the COEDF condemned the 'peace process' which now moved to talks in London. All were apparently under some pressure from the US Administration to participate in the conference in July 1991, and indeed the EDU left the COEDF to do so. Without more detailed information regarding the events of this period, it is difficult to assess the decisions taken by the EPRP, particularly relating to what the EPRDF insist was their "declaration of war" (Statement. 17 April 1991). This apparent refusal to reject violence, was the reason given for their exclusion from participation in the conference. These facts are hotly disputed.

What is interesting is to attempt to understand why the COEDF, which until that point had condemned the process, issued a statement 4 days before the conference, announcing its willingness to participate (Statement, 27 June 1991), but claimed that the EPRDF had attached conditions which effectively prohibited it from doing so (Statement, 28 June 1991). Immediately prior to this the North American section of the EPRP had reportedly issued a statement insisting that, on whatever terms, the organisation should at least participate in the meeting (Yosef Tesfaye, interview). One explanation for the organisation's apparent volte face might be that it concealed an attempt to bridge the deep divisions then felt within the EPRP.

Another problem which the EPRP, in line with a range of those interviewed, seems to have faced, is that of poor intelligence regarding the EPRDF. Lack of detailed information, combined with the exclusive emphasis upon the issue of the unity of the country, which has been described in this section, undermined analysis of the EPRDF in Addis Ababa, both at a military and at a political level. Research gives little indication that an assessment of the kind of ideological and political factors dealt with in the foregoing two sections of this paper was available to many of those in the capital at the time of the collapse of the Mengistu
régime. It is the contention of the author that its absence during May and June 1991, had a profound influence on the establishment of a Transitional Government in July.

14 Of those informants who were in Addis Ababa at this time for instance, only Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam (interview) professed himself aware of the nature and intentions of the EPRDF.
CHAPTER TWO

MOVING INTO TRANSITION

The idea that things happened too quickly and that everyone, including the EPRDF, was taken off guard by the collapse of the régime was repeatedly put forward by informants - whether in Addis Ababa at the time, or outside Ethiopia. Whilst this is denied by EPRDF sources, who suggest that in fact the end of the war was delayed by the initiative of the London talks, there was clearly a tension at work:

"Side by side with these discussions [with the Dergue], the war was going on - a little bit faster than the political preparation, and there was a continual conflict between speedily concluding the war and preparing the political basis for a new arrangement. At times we bent in the direction of giving time for the political work... until finally we felt that we couldn’t continue to slow down. The war had its own dynamic, its own logic.

And so we decided, some time immediately after the EPRDF congress, some time in January [1991] - that the war should end before the beginning of the rainy season, and planned our operations accordingly. The EPLF had also come to the same conclusion from their own angle, and we were co-ordinating with them." (Meles Zenawi, interview)
2.1 THE EPRDF'S POLICY ON A TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

The idea that Ethiopia would need a Transitional Period after the defeat of the Mengistu régime was reportedly discussed within the TPLF over a long period (Sebhat Nega, interview). In 1989, however, concrete proposals were advanced with a new seriousness. "The foreign relations section of the organisation was strengthened in terms of manpower, budget, and so on, and Meles and other members of the leadership travelled frequently between 1988 and 1991" (Seyoum Mesfin, interview).

The 3rd Congress of the TPLF, held in March 1989, adopted an 8-point "Proposal for a peaceful solution to the situation in Ethiopia" (TPLF (1989), also published in People's Voice, 11 (2/3)). The proposal was for the establishment of a provisional government "constituted from all political organisations" to be established on the conditions of: a cease fire; freedom of political work for all parties; the release of political prisoners; and the removal of the Dergue's security apparatus and foreign military forces. The provisional arrangement would respect the choice of the Eritrean people regarding their fate, and would prepare a constitution; in accordance with this last a government would be elected to replace the provisional one.

The proposal was adopted by the newly-established EPRDF later in the year (EPRDF (October 1989), A Democratic Alternative for Ethiopia), and a further-elaborated Programme for a Smooth and Peaceful Transition of Power in Ethiopia (EPRDF, 1990a) was published on 10 March 1990. Paul Henze (1990) comments that "there is a striking difference between the programme of 1989, and that issued in March 1990". Substantial changes include: the need for a referendum in Eritrea (Article 3b); the limitation of the provisional arrangement to a period of no more than two years (Article 4a); the need for the provisional government to effect economic reforms, help victims of war, and rebuild the war-torn economy (Article 4c); and the need for international supervision of all elections (Article 5e). The document confirmed the EPRDF's intention to remove the government by force if it refused to accept and participate in this programme (Article 1b).

In retrospect these alterations mark a significant change in the rhetoric of the organisation,
to the extent that the later paper may be seen as the real precursor of the conference under study. The organisation which, in so far as it was considered to be democratic, had always been regarded as advocating and practising an extreme form of "direct democracy", based on mass gatherings of the population at the grassroots, now began to overlay its statements with the language of something very different: a western-style "liberal democracy". The shift undoubtedly reflects an adroit assessment of the form of democratisation for which international pressure on Africa was mounting. It also reflects the recognition that Ethiopians needed to move away from the one-party system of the past. However, there remains a level at which, after this development, the rhetoric and practice of the organisation were unreconciled 15.

The decision to attempt to form an "all-inclusive" Transitional Government is justified by EPRDF sources with a myriad of ideological statements, fundamentally boiling down to the assertion that it reflects the intrinsically democratic nature of the organisation. The precise nature of this democracy has not been publicly analysed in theoretical terms. Closely tied to these claims however, but touching the bedrock of realpolitik, is the EPRDF statement that "it would have been ridiculous for one organisation, operating in only a part of the country, to have formed a government".

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15 A concrete example of this emerged during a conversation with Sebhat Nega in November 1991, regarding electoral practice in Tigray. In a fundamental transformation, the TPLF-established system of local election of baito representatives by mass gatherings at village level was to be replaced, under the Transitional Government, by universal suffrage to elect all levels of administrators, including the regional assembly.
2.2 THE LONDON TALKS

When the US initiative for a conference in London was put forward during April 1991, the final phase of the co-ordinated military operations of the EPLF and EPRDF was underway. The EPRDF report that they had "mixed feelings" about the move:

"on the one hand we were not sure whether this was linked to the slogan of the unity forces of saving the establishment [...] on the other hand, we felt there was a change in direction, and in any case we had already progressed far enough that nobody could save the establishment. By the time we went to London, the war had ended, for all intents and purposes. We had not liberated Addis Ababa, but that was a political rather than a military decision. We didn’t want to embarrass anybody and we wanted to have at least the facade of the negotiations going on. Without Addis Ababa the Dergue would not have been able to negotiate." (Meles Zenawi, interview)

Both the EPLF and the EPRDF insisted that the OLF should also be represented. Although it is disputed, some sources suggest that during the final years of the war, the OLF made substantial military gains in Wellega, apparently profiting from the concentration of Dergue forces in the north of the country. By the time of the London Peace Talks in 1991, it finally became possible to argue - on whatever grounds - that they should be represented. The US Administration reportedly preferred to involve only the protagonists: the EPLF in Eritrea, and the EPRDF in Ethiopia. However at their insistence the invitation was issued and the OLF participated (Seyoum Mesfin, Meles Zenawi, interviews). Zegeye Asfaw (interview) reports that the OLF was at this time under pressure from the Oromo community not to lose the opportunity to do so.

All informants who were party to the London talks confirm that no conference took place: "no two of the parties met face to face. Herman Cohen’s bilateral discussions concentrated on the government and the EPLF" (Lencho Letta, interview). This was certainly in accordance with the primary focus of international concern: the impending secession of Eritrea. Both the EPRDF and the OLF express regret that the government delegation then withdrew from the conference.

"The OLF had been led to believe that there would be a four party conference. At the time there was much allegorical use of the phrase 'soft landing': the phasing out
of one system, and the gradual phasing in of a new one. In the event, the
government just left, and a new one was in power." (Lencho Letta, interview)

The OLF press release issued on 29 May, at the conclusion of the conference expresses its
concern at the US decision "to invite one of the contending parties [...] to assume state
responsibility" (OLF, Statement at the conclusion of the London talks, 29 May 1991). The
assurances of the US Administration that it would apply all possible pressure to bring about
democracy in Ethiopia, and its conviction that the proposed follow-up conference was
"largely a result of the pressure of donor countries" persuaded the OLF to stay on board
(Lenko Letta, interview). This analysis, of course, contrasts sharply with the report of the
EPRDF:

"The mediators in London at the beginning thought that it would be advisable for the
EPRDF to form the Transitional Government - not the one-month provisional
government, but a transitional government for three or four years. We did not accept
that because we had our own strategy of a transition. We wanted to establish a
broad-based and representative government, that's why we said that EPRDF
organisations would only form a one-month provisional administration, and that
within one month we would call a broad transitional government. This was agreed
between ourselves and the EPLF and OLF." (Seyoum Mesfin, interview)

Herman Cohen's report of the meeting is also interesting:

"On the 27th, acting president Tesfay Gebre-Kidan told us the Ethiopian army had
virtually disintegrated, and that he and senior government officials were extremely
concerned about their ability to provide for law and order. The acting president said
that the government intended to broadcast a call for a unilateral cease-fire and an
appeal to the citizens of Addis to accept the EPRDF when they entered the capital.
The EPRDF decided to move into the city that night. The United States strongly
agreed with that decision, because the EPRDF was now left as the only disciplined
force capable of keeping order in the capital. At that point the Addis régime
effectively ceased to exist and their delegation in London dropped out of the talks.
The final part of the London meeting began with the United States no longer in a
mediation role between the government and the insurgents, but in a de facto advisory
role for the three opposition groups about to inherit all military and political power.
Our London meeting thus ended without the appointment of a transitional
government as we had envisaged." (US Assistant Secretary of State for African
Affairs, Herman Cohen, Statement on 18 June 1991)
Instead, as mentioned in the introduction, the three organisations issued a joint statement confirming their agreement to hold a follow-up conference not later than 1 July (Joint Statement by EPRDF, EPLF, and OLF, London, 28 May 1991). After the talks had ended, the three organisations agreed to meet again, two weeks later, in Addis Ababa.
2.3 DRAFTING THE CHARTER: CEMENTING A CONSENSUS

Amongst a rich store of popular rumours from this period is a vivid image of Meles Zenawi and Lencho Letta, at the head of their advancing troops, sitting together in a tukul at Senafe in front of a blank sheet of paper on which they concocted the Transitional Charter. In fact talks between the leadership of the two organisations took place in Addis Ababa several weeks after the London talks, and, by the time they met, the page was far from blank. According to OLF sources, the EPLF was also heavily involved in the process which resulted in the draft document, and the three organisations spent some time hammering out the details.

In the OLF’s analysis, the period after the London talks was characterised by a fundamental break with the past:

"Until then the situation had been the traditional one in Ethiopia. The EPRDF had one political programme, the EPRP had theirs, and so on: each group proclaimed its stand and announced "all you who agree, march behind me". But after the London talks the three distinct groups - EPLF, TPLF, and OLF - worked very hard to put together a covenant. So coming up with this sketchy framework was a departure from the past." (Lencho Letta, interview)

From the EPRDF perspective, the negotiations which drafted the Charter followed a full review of its own Transitional Programme: "the document which we came up with was essentially identical to our Transitional Programme, but included some further details. In the process of working out the details, we went one stage further by discussing it with the OLF" (Meles Zenawi, interview). Other EPRDF sources set out the organisation’s interest in involving the OLF yet more starkly:

"The vacillating character of other organisations was incompatible with the charter. It was important that they considered themselves participants in the drafting of the document." (Bereket, interview)

In passing, it is worth noting the view of a number of informants (Beyene Petros, Tesfaye Habisso, etc.) that OLF nationalism represented "an extreme position". A deep-seated fear of 'the Oromo threat' as the powder-keg upon which the Ethiopian state is poised, rises
quickly at times of political change or instability - so quickly as to suggest its cultivation as a useful rallying point by successive governments. The presence of the Oromo Teferi Banti as second-in-command of the Dergue in 1974, and of significant numbers of Oromos within Meison, was sufficient to paint the new government at that time an Oromo one (Clapham, 1988:215; Ottaway, 1978:8). By late 1991 commentary in anti-government sections of the Ethiopian private press referred to the Tigrayan-led EPRDF as the lesser of two evils facing the country.

The close involvement of the OLF in the preparation of the charter was thus of considerable significance at a number of levels - none of which were unhelpful to the EPRDF.

Once the draft had been agreed upon, it was discussed with most of those organisations who - in response to approaches by the EPRDF, and a subsequent official announcement - were coming forward to participate in the conference. The OLF was not involved in this process: "we left that to the hosts" (Lencho Letta, interview).

"So we had to spend whole days and nights discussing with these organisations. In this room I can’t tell you how many times I spent in discussion with all these leaders and groups. And the same was true for Meles, the same was true for Tamrat, Tewolde, and many comrades. We had our division of labour, for instance myself being assigned to this or that group, Meles to discuss with this or that group .... But we had a very planned objective to put to these groups: whether or not they are committed to democratic change." (Seyoum Mesfin, interview)

This process of pre-conference consensus-building was particularly important in relation to those groups which came forward from Addis Ababa during May 1991, to whom the EPRDF and its leadership were little known. The experience of the Hadiya nationality representatives is common to a number of such groupings:

"We had a serious discussion with Seyoum Mesfin, in which he explained the intentions of the EPRDF, and how they approached the problem. After that the Executive Committee of Hadiya National Democratic Organisation (HNDO) met Tewolde Wolde Mikhael at the State Building. He had a handwritten draft of the Charter from which he read out the main chapter headlines. I was learning. It was a magnanimous and positive gesture: the EPRDF was unchallenged but now they were calling to a conference others who had not contributed. We were cautiously
impressed: what are they up to? what is cooking? That was the first step. In the absence of other information we decided to take things step by step." (Beyene Petros, interview)

Both the EPRDF (Seyoum Mesfin, interview) and almost all other conference participants interviewed, confirm that they and their organisations held detailed discussions on the draft text of the charter during the period immediately before the conference. That the process was not applied universally, however, also seems clear. The university representatives, for instance, claim that far from having discussed a draft charter, they were even unaware that the conference would establish a new government, and knew only that it was "to discuss issues of peace and democratisation" (Mekonnen Bishaw, interview).
CHAPTER THREE

GATHERING THE PARTICIPANTS

"The issue was to have all the various opinions represented, and so we wanted to have as many opinion-makers as possible represented in the process. This had two dimensions - geographical spread and also differing opinions: ... not only nationalities, it was all sorts of opinion formers that we tried to include." (Meles Zenawi, interview)

"I met Issaias [Afewerki] at that time. He said to me "I expected to see you at the conference: why were you not there?" I told him "Either you have to belong to an ethnic group or you have to belong to an armed political group to participate". Issaias was very disapproving of the conference from this point of view: "How can this be an Ethiopian conference when there are so many talented people who do not participate?" (Mesfin Wolde Mariam, interview)

"We picked organisations from all over - two from here, two from there. One day Hailom telephoned from Awassa to say that he had just come across another one..." (Sebhat Nega, interview)

This section considers the different kinds of individuals and organisations who participated in the conference. As little has yet been written in English about the conference preparation, the section draws particularly heavily on oral sources, with some support from the various newsletters and press articles published at the time. For a variety of reasons (not least the subsequent evolution of the Transitional Period) it was not possible to interview all of the participants and the material presented is not 'complete' in that sense. However, it is felt that a representative picture may, nevertheless, be drawn. A full list of participating organisations may be found as an appendix.
3.1 THE UNIVERSITY: PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

The Ethiopian student movement was the cradle of almost all of the major Ethiopian opposition forces during the 1970s and 1980s. Following the crushing of the EPRP and Meison in the urban areas with the Red Terror campaign of 1977, however, the University was rarely regarded as a centre of opposition to the régime. A 10-day wave of student strikes and demonstrations from 21 May 1990, in response to the execution of 12 army generals involved in the coup attempt of the previous year, was described by Africa Watch as "[Ethiopia's] first significant open civilian opposition for fifteen years" (Africa Watch, 1990b:1).

On April 3 1991, however, the university seized international attention when a paper entitled "An Ethiopian Peace Initiative" was presented by Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam at the XIth International Conference on Ethiopian Studies (AAPS Newsletter, 1991). According to the author (interview), the paper had been written a year previously, during a sabbatical teaching period in New York, and had been presented on two previous occasions: to the Ethiopian community in Geneva in January 1991, and on return to Addis Ababa to the Political Science Faculty of the University. On this third occasion, however, it excited considerably more interest, and a meeting which was called on the following day to discuss more fully and elaborate upon the ideas presented, attracted around 200 people. As a result, a Peace and Reconciliation Committee was established, and an 11-person executive committee mandated to draft and deliver to Mengistu Haile Mariam a call for the resignation of the government (Addis Ababa home service, SWB 15 April 1991).

The paper presented identified the fundamental problem of Ethiopia as:

"the absence of a civil government, which in effect means the absence of the rule of law, the absence of free expression of ideas, the absence of any sort of political association. This is a deliberate policy designed to preserve the monopoly of power for each of the contending groups. In this regard, therefore, there is no difference between the groups contending for power. Consequently any solution must be sought outside the framework of the present contenders for power." (AAPS Newsletter, 1991:3)
The paper advocated the establishment of a council of Ethiopian elders, or **shimagelle**, "elected by the people from every region, and authorized to appoint a trusteeship government under their control" ([AAPS Newsletter](https://example.com), 1991:5); it called upon the contending parties to lay down their arms.

Much ink has been spilt - not least by the paper's author - detailing theories of a so-called "Ghion conspiracy". The tapes recorded in 1993 by Mengistu in exile in Harare accuse Mesfin Wolde Mariam of involvement in a CIA/TPLF plot, and reportedly indicate that the communication of the Peace and Reconciliation Committee provided a cover for the delivery of "a substantial sum of CIA money". On the other hand, the stress of Mesfin Wolde Mariam's paper upon the unity of Ethiopia, and its timing, led others to see it as an attempt to save the establishment, part of what the EPRDF [Bulletin](https://example.com) described as the "Death Cry of the Chauvinists" (1991, 1 (4):1). There is no convincing evidence of any such conspiracy, and it seems unlikely that a text so patently detached from the interests of all of the "contending parties" originated close to any one of them. Observers at the time, however, found the activities of the Peace and Reconciliation Committee remarkable in that the régime did not intervene to prevent them - something which would have been unthinkable even months earlier.

If the "Ethiopian Peace Initiative" echoed the views of anyone, it was perhaps those of ex-President Carter, chair of several of the peace talks between the Dergue and the EPLF and TPLF. Indeed it seems that circles associated with the Peace and Reconciliation Committee were hopeful that international intervention might resolve the situation. On 22 May, the day after Mengistu left the country, Voice of Ethiopia broadcast the text of an appeal sent by the "students of higher institutions of learning ... to the UN Security Council member states":

"it is the danger facing the unity and sovereignty [sic] of our country which has forced us to take this action [...] You the superpowers of the world, have the international responsibility to save Ethiopia and its people" (SWB, 24 May 1991).

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16 **Named after the Ghion Hotel in Addis Ababa where the various conspirators were reported to have met.**
The university and the institutes of higher education were invited by the EPRDF Provisional Government during May to elect and send representatives to the July conference. The meeting which did so was dominated by the staff of the University, and two members from the University were nominated (Mekonnen Bishaw, interview): the then-Chair of the Sociology Faculty, who had been a member of the Peace and Reconciliation Executive Committee, and a member of the Medical Faculty, not then known for his political involvement.

The decision to involve the university in the process of formation of a Transitional Government seems anomalous, given the character of the other conference participants. In so deciding, the leadership of the EPRDF, themselves originally having come from the student movement, chose to tread cautiously around the considerable reputation of the institution.

"The university has historically been playing the role [of opinion former]. To a certain extent [its inclusion] was a hang-up from the past. We didn't at that stage recognise the fundamental transformation that had taken place in that university. On the one hand it was a hang-up from the past; on the other hand we wanted to have all views represented." (Meles Zenawi, interview)
3.2 RETURNING EXILES

So far this paper has dealt with the major organisations which were active within the country. There were, however, a number of organisations which returned from the US in order to participate. Foremost amongst these were an Islamic group based in Los Angeles, the Ethiopian Democratic Coalition led by Nebiyu Samuel, the Ethiopian Democratic Union led by Mengesha Seyoum, and the Ethiopian National Democratic Organisation led by Kifile Wodajo.

At the time that the EPRDF entered Addis Ababa the EDU was a member of the COEDF, vehemently opposed to the 'peace process', with a long and bloody history of confrontation with the TPLF in Tigray. However, the combination of discreet pressure from the US Administration and the energetic overtures of the EPRDF, through its foreign spokesperson Berhane Gebre Christos in the USA during May/June, brought the organisation's Chairman, Mengesha Seyoum, to Addis Ababa.

The bitterness of the history between the two organisations brought one of the sharpest exchanges of the conference proceedings, from Siye Abraha of the EPRDF. The delicacy of the balancing act performed at the conference is clear:

"The very idea of the transition assumes that the people have not had the chance to evaluate whose ideas are correct, and that they should be given a chance to do so. For that, you have to have all opinions, including some that we would consider totally obnoxious. [...] So yes, it was difficult morally, but it was very important politically. Sometimes the feelings, the sentiments, come to the fore, but they are disciplined by political conviction." (Meles Zenawi, interview)

The participation of EDU in the conference proceedings was understandably cautious. Equally cautious, but more active, was the participation of ENDO, a coalition of three US-based organisations, formed 6 or 8 months prior to the conference (Kifile Wodajo, interview). Its liberal democratic programme stressed the reconstruction of a democratic order in Ethiopia, through the establishment of democratic institutions of governance. Although the organisation was not a member of the COEDF, and did not participate in the Toronto Conference or the follow-up in Maryland, it was perceived by the EPRDF as part of this
grouping (Seyoum Mesfin, interview). During the London Talks, the organisation issued a statement confirming its willingness to participate in the transitional arrangement if it could be demonstrated to be democratic and all-inclusive. This latter requirement brought the organisation into close discussion with both the EPRDF and the COEDF regarding the precise implications of the EPRDF’s precondition that all participants refrain from military activity, explicitly renouncing violent means. As a result of its concern the organisation is reported to have made some research into the issue of all-inclusive participation, a study which confirmed that, with the controversial exception of the COEDF, all groups who expressed an interest in participating in the conference were able to do so (Kilfe Wodajo, interview).

The considerable seriousness with which the organisation approached the formal arrangements for the constitution of a transitional government epitomises a trend amongst a number of the organisations present. ‘The organisation viewed the transitional period as, more than anything else, essential in order to transit out of the precise and sophisticated constitutional arrangements of the Dergue (Government of the People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1987). The establishment of representative institutions required the passage of legislation regarding press and information, the establishment of constitutional and electoral mechanisms, an independent judiciary, and so on. For organisations coming from abroad, the urgency of attention to these issues was considerable, especially in view of the spectre of the disintegration of Ethiopia, which was perceived from outside as particularly vivid, and which undoubtedly served to polarise opinion within the exiled community. The apparent threat, which indicated to some an opportunity for continued opposition to the process, galvanised others into immediate engagement in the transition.

The form and character which the conference proceedings took was, for organisations such as ENDO, an important vindication of their decision to participate. The incorporation into the Transitional Charter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the UN (Article 1), the presence of international observers, and the openness of the conference proceedings were critical:

"We were most interested in the level of freedom which would be given in Ethiopia."
The conduct of the conference dispelled any misgivings which we might have entertained on this issue: it was above all a confidence-building forum." (Kifle Wodajo, interview)
3.3 NATIONALITY-BASED ORGANISATIONS

"Small and distinctive groups with a hint of the picturesque." (Clapham, 1988:200)

"... another landmark decision made by the EPRDF leadership at that time was to encourage social and nationality groups and political parties that if they could organise themselves within that month's period of time, and announce their political programmes in public, they could also participate. And when this was made public a lot of groups mushroomed, and said that they had been in existence for five years, or ten years, or fifteen years, and so on. So most of the groups that participated from within the country were those who had organised themselves within Addis during this period." (Seyoum Mesfin, interview)

Aside from the OLF and the EPRDF member organisations, nationality interests were represented at the conference by 16 bodies, of which half were 'liberation fronts' with a pre-existing record of political and military activity in Ethiopia. These latter were the Afar Liberation Front, Horiale (Ogaden Liberation Front), the Gambella People's Liberation Movement, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia, the Oromo Abo Liberation Movement, the Sidama Liberation Movement, the Western Somali Liberation Front, and the United Oromo People's Liberation Front. "It was easier for us to invite these groups because we had been one way or another in communication with them, so it was not at all difficult to trace them and to invite their leaders to participate. We sent our representatives to Khartoum and Mogadishu as necessary to invite them. All they requested was logistical assistance, and this we provided" (Seyoum Mesfin, interview). Markakis (1993) describes the spectacular volte face with which veteran leaders of the struggle of the WSLF and SALF against the Ethiopian state, agreed to be flown from Mogadishu to participate.

It is important to mention, however, that the communication which these groups had with the EPRDF was by no means the only dynamic amongst them. The various Oromo groups had a complex history of interrelations - of which the most bitter was probably that between the OLF and the IFLO. In May 1991, however, the IFLO, the OLF, and the other non-EPRDF Oromo movements met in Khartoum. "Despite our differences, we were confident that we could handle the situation politically" (Lencho Letta, interview).

Those nationalities whose representation was organised in the period immediately prior to the
conference included the Adere, the Gurage, the Hadiya, the Issa and Gurgura, the Kambatta, the Omotic group, and the Welaita people. Whilst all groups were required to have organised or constituted themselves with some degree of formality, this had been accomplished to varying degrees by the time that the conference was convened.

One group which claimed to have gone further than most to constitute as representative a body as possible is the Gurage People’s Democratic Organisation (GPDO). On 5 June around 20 “respected elder members” of the Gurage community met under the chairmanship of General Wolde Selassie to discuss the open invitation to join the process which had been communicated by the ERPDF (Haile Wolde Mikhael, interview). Opinion was divided between those who preferred to wait and see how the fragile situation would evolve, and those who felt that, particularly since many other national groups were reported to be joining it, it would be useless to remain outside the process and watch the opportunity go by. A technical committee of three persons was set up to draft a political programme, which was submitted to a meeting of around 200 representatives (including at least 10 persons from each of the 17 Gurage communities) held on 19 June. A second meeting of 221 delegates on 25 June approved the redrafted programme, and authorised the establishment of an administrative and political body. The programme was then submitted to Tamrat Layne of the EPRDF, and a draft of the Charter to be considered at the conference discussed. The GPDO delegation was informed that 2 seats at the conference had been allocated to the organisation. Immediately before the conference, the organisation’s programme was ratified and representatives were elected by a gathering of 4,000 people held at Christmas Hall at the University.

Its representatives suggest that the process by which the GPDO was established was more comprehensive than that adopted by other nationalities, in its attempt to obtain a relatively representative, if still not democratic, mandate from the Gurage community. If this is true, it may reflect the highly ordered degree of stratification and segmentation of this community. However, it seems that the establishment of other bodies - such as the Kambatta People’s Congress (KPC), and the HNDO - followed a roughly similar process, during the frantically short period of June 1991.
Common to many of these organisations, like a number of the other movements described, was the tracing of their roots back to the local, nationally-based Self-Help Organisations or idir which had flourished and been active in local development under the imperial régime, but which had been largely suppressed under the Dergue. This pedigree formed the basis of the claim of a number to have been in existence for some time, even to have been working against the Dergue "in a discreet way" (Beyene Petros, interview). The tendency to refer back to these traditional mechanisms reflects the extent to which the networks which are commonly referred to as characterising 'civil society' had been eradicated by the Mengistu government in favour of state structures: the mass associations, the peasant or service co-operatives, and employment in the massively expanded state civil service.

The proscription announced by the EPRDF Provisional Government on the participation in the conference of members of the former régime's Workers' Party of Ethiopia in turn limited the selection of representatives available to the embryonic bodies. Whilst many of them professed a "strong peasant support base" (Beyene Petros, interview), their representatives were drawn from the urban elite: individuals with a history of opposition to, or detachment from, the previous government.
3.4 THE "BALANCE" OF PARTICIPATION

"Those who blamed us for losing Eritrea, didn’t even want to participate in the process." (Meles Zenawi, interview)

"The conference was comprised for the most part of weak individuals who could be manipulated by the EPRDF." (Mesfin Wolde Mariam, interview)

From amongst Ethiopian groupings (the same cannot be said for Eritrean groups), it is generally accepted that with the marked exception of the COEDF, all those who expressed an interest in participating in the conference were able to do so. This had its limitations, which voices such as that of Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam were quick to point out. When the discussion focused on the thorny issue of representation in the Council of Representatives, some participants (foremost amongst them the University representative, Professor Asrat) argued that vacant seats should be left for "sections of the society" not represented here - mentioning in particular "professional associations which are not present". The three representatives of "the workers" immediately took exception to these remarks, and in the subsequent formation of the Council they remained the only group represented on a professional basis.

The participation of "workers’ representatives" has drawn some negative comment, along with that of the university. The OLF, for instance, opposed the allocation of seats to these two groups:

"some organisations were very impractical. The university, for example: it was not a political entity, and as far as we were concerned did not have any political views. Also the so-called ‘workers’ representatives’. The labour unions, and the WPE, within which workers had been organised, had been disbanded - so where were they coming from? Although we, together with the EPLF, expressed our views about the number and nature of the participants, the decision was made by the EPRDF. We did not want paper organisations to be present. In the event we had our own concerns about certain allocations of seats." (Lencho Letta, interview)

In short the absence of the COEDF, and the proscription of former WPE members meant that the conference, coming so soon after the decisive military victory of a nationality-based coalition, was left dominated by nationality-based organisations, albeit represented by
different individuals of differing political views.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONFERENCE THEMES

This section draws upon the video recording of those parts of the conference which were broadcast on Ethiopian TV. The final text of the Charter, as it was adopted by the conference and subsequently published in the Negarit Gazette, is attached as an appendix to this paper.

The discussion did not follow the format of the Charter. Deliberations focused first on the details of the structure of the Transitional Government to be arranged, and an amendment was adopted according to which the President, Prime Minister, Vice Chairman and Secretary of the Council of Representatives were to be elected from different nationalities. Considerable debate focused upon the establishment of an independent judiciary, and whether its jurisdiction would extend to the implementation of the Charter itself.

"The Charter does not give an explicit answer to [this question]: which institution has ultimate authority to decide what the Charter requires? It will not do to say that this authority too belongs to the transitional government or its council of representatives, thereby granting legislative and judicial powers to the same institution. For in that case [...] it cannot be said that we have rights against government; instead what we have would be privileges offered at the government's grace or convenience." (Andreas Eshete, 1992)

If the charter is not explicit on the question of jurisdiction, the conference was clearer. The EPRDF opposed suggestions that a "body of lawyers" be appointed for this purpose. "The Charter is a political framework, and its implementation is overseen by the political body - the Council" (Kifle Wodajo, interview).

Meanwhile the conference agreed that the Council should establish a system for ensuring that the mass media was without discrimination, and workers' representatives secured an assurance, against some opposition, that their specific situation would be addressed by means of new labour legislation. A lengthy discussion took place as to whether principles of economic policy and economic rights - something not put forward by the EPRDF - should
be included in the Charter, but the issue was postponed for discussion by the Council. Debate then turned to other aspects of the content of the Transitional Programme which the government would adopt.

Perhaps most surprising, given subsequent sharp debate, is the extremely limited discussion of the principle of dividing the country along nationality lines, at least in those parts of the conference which were broadcast. In response to a single request for clarification from Tesfaye Habisso, the conference chairman simply confirmed that:

"the provision is that the regions will be drawn on the basis of nationalities, and that each will administer itself, and use its own language. There are existing studies, by the Institute of Nationalities, which may be useful, but the issue is complex and will require time for clarification." (Meles Zenawi, trans. Aseffa Gezahegn)

The discussion quickly diverted to the practical possibility of holding regional elections within three months, and to the ever-controversial issue of secession. Agreement on this last point required flexibility of an extreme gymnastic nature from a number of organisations. When ENDO, for instance, expressed reservations, EPRDF representatives objected:

"This is a cornerstone of the Charter. If ENDO has reservations on this point, it has reservations on the core of the Charter. Under these circumstances I cannot accept that ENDO accepts and participates in the adoption of the Charter." (Siye Abraha, trans. Aseffa Gezahegn)

ENDO insisted upon its acceptance of the Charter, despite the position set out in its programme. As for other organisations, "We didn't much like it, but at the end of the day, what we were agreeing to was only a transitional arrangement" (Haile Wolde Mikhael, interview). The well publicised view of the EPRDF, and what was perceived as the still stronger position of the OLF on this issue, surely served to concentrate the minds.

At this point Issaias Afewerki and EPLF colleagues joined the floor, and the discussion moved to Eritrea.
4.1 ERITREA: FROM WAR TO PEACE

"The Eritreans did not come here to ask their independence: even if they did, in fact it is already decided. De-facto they already have their freedom" (Aseffa Chebo, trans. Aseffa Gezahegn)

It is difficult to over-emphasise the impact which the end of the war had on the conference. The emotion which the attainment of peace brought to the fore coloured all of the discussions which took place, from the opening address, to the closing remarks of participants and observers. It was, most significantly, the single issue upon which the resolution of the Eritrean question turned.

The long and enormously complex history of negotiations between the EPLF and other Eritrean movements, and various Ethiopian bodies is not the subject of this paper. However, by the time of the conference, two things had been agreed between the EPLF and the EPRDF.

The first was that the EPLF would be the only Eritrean organisation present at the conference, and it only as an observer. In this respect, the US preference to bring only one Eritrean organisation to the London talks was a useful precedent. It quickly drew the fire of the ELF and other groups. By the time of the conference they had been effectively marginalised.

The second was that the conference should be presented with a draft paper outlining "Principles of Co-operation between the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and the Provisional Government of Eritrea" for discussion and approval. The principles were drafted as follows:

*1. The Transitional Government of Ethiopia recognises the right of the Eritrean people to determine its political future by an internationally supervised referendum.

2. The Provisional Government of Eritrea has deferred the referendum for two years.
3. The Provisional Government of Eritrea recognises the vital importance of the port of Assab to Ethiopia’s economic welfare and development. Consequently it has deemed it necessary to make Assab a free port to Ethiopia.

4. [...] need to actively co-operate in a common defence against aggression, destabilisation and sabotage.

5. [...] each side shall solemnly undertake to desist from engaging in any activities which may endanger peace and security in the territory of the other; [...] to enter into a mutual defence agreement.

6. [...] joint consultative committees on issues related to security, economic activities and the movement of peoples, goods, and services.

7. [...] to encourage the free flow of ideas and to promote exchange in cultural and other activities.

8. The two sides have agreed to establish a High Level Eritrean Delegation in Addis Ababa to facilitate co-operation between them." (draft paper submitted to Transitional Conference, 1-5 July 1991)

As discussion progressed, it emerged that this was too much for many delegates to swallow. The conference chairman’s introduction to the document was direct: "it is time to stop playing hide and seek; it is time that we called a state a state - out of conviction and because of the objective reality, not out of pressure" (Meles Zenawi, trans. Aseffa Gezahgen). After a lengthy discussion, during which the irritation of a tense EPLF delegation became increasingly pronounced, the tone had softened considerably:

"No-one has said that Eritrea is an independent state: it cannot be until after the referendum. We are not being asked to recognise the independence of Eritrea: we are recognising only the referendum." (Meles Zenawi, trans. Aseffa Gezahgen)

At this stage the significance of the fact that the conference had already endorsed the right of self-determination of nationalities in Ethiopia, up to and including secession, had been clearly impressed upon the delegates by OLF Chairman Galasa. Neither this, nor the starkly presented choice between war and peace was enough to unite delegates. Whilst some speakers were happy to endorse all eight points of the draft paper, those who were reluctant to endorse the initial basic principle, focused their concern on the more technical issues presented in the later points: it became clear that support for the document as a whole could
not be overwhelming.

The debate was brought to an abrupt halt, and delegates were apparently asked to vote upon the first three points only: whether they would endorse them as a "statement of intent, and recognition of the statements of intent of the Provisional Government of Eritrea". This proposal was accepted with the abstention of four organisations (amongst them ENDO and EDU), and a vote against from the representative of the University, Professor Asrat. Whilst the precise details of what had been agreed, and the status of the 'agreement', remained opaque, the argument had been won. The fact that, unlike the Charter, no details of the decision on Eritrea were later published in the Negarit Gazette, elicited no little subsequent curiosity.
4.2 RECASTING THE MOULD: NATIONALITY

"There is a torrent of conjectures on the motives and consequences of recognizing the right to self-determination: to promote ethnic and regional equality; to end the supremacy of the north or centre; to advance northern hegemony over an ethnically divided south; to make Eritrean self-determination more palatable; to rein in those tempted to exit from the Ethiopian orbit upon the eclipse of the empire; to encourage Ethiopia’s cultural drift toward the rest of Africa; to offer a consolation prize to a population to whom central government has little to offer besides power; to reconstruct the Tower of Babel." (Andreas Eshete, 1992:8)

"The conference had a strong symbolic significance in the history of the country: representatives of different nationalities were able to step up and express their views - whether rightly or wrongly - as Ethiopians, without having to transform themselves into different personalities." (Lencho Letta, interview)

Professor Andreas’s analysis considers the nature of the right of self determination of nationalities which is recognised in the charter, and comments that whilst "few if any cultural communities in Ethiopia are homogeneous" (1992:9), "the charter does not offer a principled resolution to the inevitable conflict between individual and collective rights" (p.8), and in any case "the rights of different peoples to self-determination can conflict". In the context of this paper, a more fundamental question is "just who has a right to self determination[?]" (p.10). The rapid response of many of the conference delegates can be interpreted as 'We do! for we are now the representatives of national groups, which we hereby proclaim to be self-determination groups.'

If it is indeed "states that create nations"17, the Ethiopian state created nationalities the extent of whose nationalism, and the nature of whose reaction to that state, varied widely. The movements which had operated amongst Tigrayan and Oromo communities had had a long time to learn that "solidarity is often possible only if a community acts as if it already has a well defined identity". Their struggle for self-determination was long established and highly evolved. At the very least, this meant that those who engaged in the transition were not doing so on an equal footing. But it is possible to go further. Andreas Eshete suggests

17 "Whereas earlier it was considered self-evident that 'a nation is a community which normally tends to produce a state of its own', as Max Weber put it (1947:176), experience in Africa supports Ernest Baker's dictum that 'it is states that create nations'" (Markakis, 1987:272).
that "it is only successful mobilization of a group for its own freedom [which] reveals its collective self-identity" (p.11). If this is the case, it is not clear that drawing lines on a map, in accordance with the learned pronouncements of the Institute of Nationalities or any other body, would be breaking with the past at anything other than a linguistic and cultural level. Indeed worse than this: if national groups are - perhaps more than other groups - self-inventing entities, demarcating them for the purpose of governance is likely only to infringe upon their freedoms: "well-intentioned efforts to set others free may limit their freedom" (p.11). The unappealing notion of magnanimity of the victors is again to the fore.

But what of the Maoist analysis that "the national contradiction remained the principal one in Ethiopia"? On the question of nationality, more than any other issue, with the exception of Eritrea, the conference participants have been accused of "going beyond the mandate of a transitional arrangement" (Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam, interview). In response to a question on this issue, Meles Zenawi states as follows:

"From a purely legal point of view, what we were trying to do [at the conference] was to stop the war, and start the process of peaceful competition, peaceful expression of political opinion, and so forth. The key cause of the war all over the country was the issue of nationalities. Any solution that did not address them, did not address the issue of peace and war. [...] People were fighting for the right to use their language, to use their culture, to administer themselves. So without guaranteeing these rights is was not possible to stop the war, or prevent another one coming up.

The other dimension is that of democratisation of society. When you open up, how are people going to express themselves? People were already expressing themselves even at that early stage before the conference in terms of nationalities: that is manifested in the way they organised themselves. There were so many nationality-based organisations. That is a representation of a certain sentiment." (Meles Zenawi, interview)

Neither of these statements seems entirely satisfactory. On the issue of the war, not all nationalities, or all parts of the country did resist an undoubtedly "ethnocratic state" (Ali Mazrui, 1978, quoted by Markakis, 1994). The number of Oromo groups which operated in areas of considerable oppression, conspicuously failed to engender a widespread sense of nationalism amongst their populations. And in the case of many of the liberation fronts
fighting around Ethiopia’s periphery, it is not clear that such “dissident nationalism” (Markakis, 1987) reflected the conviction of their populations that they were oppressed as a consequence primarily of their non-Amhara nationality. If the TPLF was able to argue this more convincingly in the case of Tigray, it took more than 10 years to forge a popular consensus, and that consensus, as already argued, was underpinned by something more concrete: programmes which brought economic advantage to rural areas.

If such programmes were a key reason for the success of the TPLF in mobilising peasant support, they suggest that nationality was less the primary contradiction in Ethiopia, than the most effective means of mobilising the population to combat “uneven development” (Gellner, 1964). The notion of the pre-existing nation has been replaced as the parent of nationalism by the struggle against economic oppression. The old question remains at the heart of analysis of Ethiopian politics in 1991: which comes first - class or nationality?

The second assertion - that of widespread mobilisation on the basis of nationality - is also dubious in the context of the foregoing remarks. The research suggests that the “mushrooming” of so many nationality-based organisations reflects the fact that they were actively encouraged to organise in this way. First and most obviously, they were encouraged by the EPRDF’s official proclamation on this issue. They were undoubtedly also encouraged by the need to compete with an admittedly substantial number of existing nationality-based liberation fronts - the number of which only grew with the energetic efforts of the EPRDF to bring them all to Addis Ababa. In short, it was the need to be seen to participate in the essentially “liberal democratic” arrangement now underway which brought them forward, and this set them at a great distance from those older movements who were now to deliver what they had fought for:

“Oromo and Tigrai communities have demonstrated their readiness to determine their political destiny. A government that recognizes the right to self-determination is obliged to provide them with a meaningful framework for its expression. […] Any such arrangement […] will encourage other communities to seek their place in the sun.” (Andreas Eshete, 1992:12)

For many of the representatives of smaller nationalities and smaller liberation movements,
the apparent advantages to be gained from the proposed arrangement were clearly enticing. Their motivation, and the basis from which it sprang, is far distant from that which provoked internecine conflict in the mountains of eastern Tigray more than thirteen years previously.

It has already been noted that almost no discussion was held on the proposal for fundamental and complex restructuring of the Ethiopian state on the basis of nationality. Even a procedural discussion as to who would redraw the Ethiopian map (as was held, for instance, in relation to the establishment of the Constitutional Commission) did not take place. Given the complexities of the ideological issue - particularly in the context of its bloody Ethiopian history - any serious debate on this proposal would have been disastrous for the organisers of the conference. For the same reasons its absence perhaps does more to undermine the forum than anything else.

This section has pointed to three problems. The first is the intrinsic contradiction between national self-determination, and its delivery by proclamation. The second concerns the chicken-and-egg relationship between nation and nationalism, and the umbilical cord between successful nationalist struggle and economic disadvantage, which, it is argued, in Ethiopia remained unbroken. The third is the elevation by means of the conference, of individuals and organisations without a clear history of either nationally-based or class-based opposition. Each of these three points illuminates the existence in Ethiopia of two fundamentally different levels of political activity, which the July conference brought together but never sought to reconcile.
4.3 A COMPACT FOR GOVERNMENT: BREAKING THE MOULD?

"The Charter is an audacious achievement of our triumph over tyranny" (Andreas Eshete, 1992:3)

"The Charter is the first time Ethiopia has had a 'compact for government'. In adopting it we were saying "although we differ, we agree to abide by this sketchy document which shall govern the transition period". Instead of a constitution, which had always been a grant of the government, this was a basis for joining together and working together." (Lencho Letta, interview)

Little has been said in this paper about the traditions of governance of the Ethiopian state, but they provided a potent backdrop to the conference. Whatever their view now of the Transitional Government, all but one of those interviewed¹⁸ stressed the significance of the occasion itself, as a 'rite of passage' out of an authoritarian past.

In bringing together representatives of different political organisations, on the basis of their different political programmes, it is clear that the conference acted as a confidence building mechanism at a number of levels. Dr Fekadu Gedamu (subsequently elected Council Vice-Chairman) was not alone amongst Ethiopians who decided to join the government as a result of what they saw of the conference proceedings: "it was on the basis of the charter that we began to have confidence" (Fekadu Gedamu, interview).

As a result of the London talks and Herman Cohen's statements at that time, the role of the US Administration was a high-profile one¹⁹. As a result, many saw the conference as the quid pro quo which the Americans had extracted from the movements. It is clear that the form of government approved by the conference enormously calmed the anxiety of the international community. All were aware that, given the situation of the Ethiopian economy, its support was a prerequisite in accordance with which a new government might stand or fall.

¹⁸ The exception is Mesfin Wolde Mariam.
¹⁹ Anti-EPRDF demonstrators in the early days of the Provisional Administration, for instance, focused their anger on the US embassy.
The interest of the international community focused upon coalition building, and the establishment of democratic institutions of government, which would take the country out of the situation where "[Haile Selassie's] personal authority counted for everything and there were no formal institutions, no definition of functions, and no separation of powers" (Clapham, 1969:448), or where the "revolutionary state possess[ed] unlimited formal powers for regulating the lives of its citizens" (Clapham, 1988:108). International and Ethiopian delegates were equally conscious of the one-party state as the 'spectre at the feast'. The discussion concentrated on the establishment of formal mechanisms designed to protect against its recurrence. The very fact of the presence of the delegates - the very existence of the 'coalition' - was seen by many as the primary preventive factor:

"We thought, "at least the conference has shown them [the EPRDF] to be responsible. At least they are not alone. At least others are there who will influence them if things turn bad"." (Beyene Petros, interview)

One of the clearest conclusions of this research, and of this paper, is that whilst the conference of July 1991 may not have resulted in a one-party government, its convention reflects - to a large degree - a one-party dynamic.

Before concluding, it is necessary to take the analysis a stage further. Many of the interviews which were conducted during the research were coloured by terms such as 'magnanimity', 'generosity in victory', and - in many cases - complaints of its subsequent evaporation. If the EPRDF was as thoroughly in control of the process as this paper eventually suggests, why are they so frequently charged - by the OLF and others - of having suffered a subsequent "change of heart"? Or is there something missing from our understanding of the nature of the coalition which political organisations were apparently invited to join in June 1991?

It has been suggested that:

"The problem of Ethiopia is that the EPRDF needed to build a coalition: now that so many organisations have withdrawn from the Transitional Government, it is clear that they have failed." (Christopher Clapham, author's notes, January 1994)
The EPRDF response to this assessment, and to the assertion of 'magnanimity' is, after 3 years, direct, and worth quoting at some length:

"Both [analyses] have missed the point. Those who think that this is a kind of gift have missed the point. Yes we needed to build a coalition, but we needed to build a coalition essentially built in rural areas. Some of the groups that came out after the transitional arrangement felt that, because they were similar in view with the EPRDF, the EPRDF should ally with them. We don't ally with groups. We ally with people. Eighty-five percent of the population lives in rural areas. Any alliance that helped us to mobilise this 85% we made; any that didn't, we didn't. And we have succeeded: not only because of those who were positively inclined to the EPRDF, but primarily because of those who were not. Because these people are reference points. We need these reference points: it is not a question of magnanimity: we need these reference points to show the peasants the other side of the coin, so that they can choose, based on an understanding of the facts, because that is the only type of decision that can sustain grassroots participation. So in terms of where Clapham makes a mistake, he does not differentiate between political groups that claim to represent the people, and the population itself. We have"failed" to create the coalition of the type that Clapham expected - but that was never our idea. As far as we are concerned the transitional arrangement was a splendid success, well beyond our expectations. Where we didn't succeed is in the nomadic areas, and we didn't even try. Because in these areas, clan realities are the key issue - not political issues, not politics. We didn't try to organise in these areas because we knew it wouldn't work." (Meles Zenawi, interview)

Whether there has been open political competition between parties in Ethiopia during the last 3 years is warmly disputed - but it is not the subject of this paper. What is interesting about these comments is the great distance that separates them from the language in which the conference has been analysed - and from the language of the conference itself. What is described here is not the establishment of the institutions of democratic governance called for by Herman Cohen, nor the "precarious balance" between state and civil society set out in many africanist texts on democratisation. The dubious theory of opposition views as "points of reference" notwithstanding, the gulf is a more fundamental one than the standard division between city and countryside: it touches the nature of political work. Here it is not the proceedings of the conference which are instructive, but the nature of the differences which materialised between the TPLF/EPRDF and the OLF, as set out above in Chapter One.

It has been suggested that there are two areas in which the TPLF drew more heavily on the ideas of Mao Tse Tung, than any others. These are the issue of nationality, and the nature
of the relationship between a political party and the peasantry. Whilst the favour with which Mao Tse Tung himself was viewed may have waned, both issues remained at the core of the movement’s philosophy throughout its evolution during the Dergue régime. Both were acutely problematic as the EPRDF became the leading member of a multi-party government of a country throughout large parts of which it had not operated.

The remarks made on nationality in the previous section stress the contradiction between national communities achieving self-determination, and the process which resulted in the Charter. In a parallel sense, there seems also to be a contradiction between the pursuit of political mobilisation - of coalition building - at the grassroots, and the convention of a conference which not only institutionalised the authority of political organisations unlikely to have either the capacity or perhaps the inclination to compete in these terms, but which also distracted them from the real work at hand.
CONCLUSION

In writing this paper, it has been possible to document recent political developments in Ethiopia by drawing on the observations and views of the major actors, and with reference to primary materials.

The paper has attempted to examine the two dominant issues of nationality and the nature of political mobilisation, or of 'democracy' itself, both in terms of how they operated at the level of the conference, and in terms of how they were perceived as functioning from within the EPRDF. The conclusion of the paper is that there was considerable discrepancy between these two levels.

The composition of the conference, and its limited consideration of the issue of self-determination of nationalities, inaugurated a reconstitution of the state in recognition of the rights of nationalities, which seemed to assure many organisations of their permanent place within it. For the EPRDF it established a framework, and a timetable, within which they could continue to expand their work of political mobilisation beyond those areas where their activities had by then already been established.

In a parallel manner, both the convention of the conference, and the nature of its deliberations, laid the ground for the establishment of a multi-party liberal democratic government which broke with past authoritarian traditions. At the same time, it provided a basis from which the EPRDF could continue, in its own terms, to "forge a coalition with the people".

Such issues as these could not be treated properly by the conference as it was convened, and perhaps not at all in July 1991. The conference presented a forum for people to meet and to recognise central problems, but not to resolve them. All sides recognised that the conference was an indispensable prelude - but not more than a prelude - to a period of transition which would allow the reformulation of the Ethiopian state. In this the conference differed from a number of other African 'reconciliation conferences', during which the
convergence, in some cases the collision, of a number of political agenda threw up unpredicted or unpredictable results. In the case of the Addis Ababa conference, it is almost the lack of such a convergence that gained the EPRDF the scope, and the time, to carry out the implementation of its policy. That policy was, as this paper has sought to demonstrate, always grounded on a very clear position both on the issue of nationality and on the issue of political mobilisation.
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In addition the research has made use of press releases and military communiques of the major Ethiopian Political Organisations (EPLF, EPRDF/TPLF, EPRP/COEDF, OLF, etc), as well as a file of several hundred press cuttings on Ethiopia, prepared by the International Press Cuttings Service, covering the period May - October 1991.

Finally, the research has drawn upon that part of the video recording of the Addis Ababa Conference proceedings (approximately 18-20 hours) which was broadcast at the time on Ethiopian Television. The video was lent by W/ Hagossa Tsegai, Head of Information, Office of the Council of Representatives, Transitional Government of Ethiopia, and a copy is available from the author. The proceedings, which were conducted in Amharic and a number of other languages, have been painstakingly translated into English by Ato Aseffa Gezahegn, one of those who provided simultaneous translation at the time of the Conference. Quotations are taken from this unofficial translation, which is available on tape from the author.
LIST OF INFORMANTS

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All informants were interviewed, some of them on several occasions, between June and September 1994. Notes or tape recordings / transcripts are available from the author. The research has also benefited from the informal observations and suggestions of a wide range of persons not cited here.

* 

Sultan Ali Mirah of Awssa Afar, Conference Representative, Afar Liberation Front (ALF)

Ato Ahmed Abdelmeijid, Council Member, Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO)

Ato Ahmed Ali Mirah, Conference Representative, Afar Liberation Front (ALF)

Ato Amare Aregawi, Head Ethiopian News Agency, formerly Head Ethiopian TV, Ethiopian People’s Revolutionnary Democratic Front (EPRDF) member

Professor Andreas Eshete, InterAfrica Group, Conference Observer

Ato Bereket, Vice-Chairman Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (EPDM), EPRDF Conference Representative

Dr Beyene Petros, Biology Department Addis Ababa University, Conference Representative and former Council Member, Hadiya National Democratic Organisastion (HND0)

Dr Fekadu Gedamu, Chairman Council of Representatives, Council Member, Gurage People’s Democratic Front (GPDF)

Ato Haile Kiros Gessesse, EPRDF member, Council of Representatives, former TPLF representative, Washington, London and Khartoum

Dr Haile Wolde Michael, Council Member and Conference Representative, Gurage People’s Democratic Front (GPDF)

Ato Kifle Wodajo, Chairman, Constitution Drafting Commission, Council Member and Conference Representative, Ethiopian National Democratic Organisation (ENDO)

Ato Lencho Letta, Conference Representative, Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)

Dr Mekonnen Bishaw, former Chairman, Sociology Faculty Addis Ababa University, Conference Observer (Alternate Representative of the Institutes of Higher Education)

President Meles Zenawi, Chairman, EPRDF, Conference Chairman
Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam, Geography Department Addis Ababa University, Ethiopian Human Rights Committee, Chairman 1991 Peace & Reconciliation Committee

Ato Negash, EPRDF Information Centre, former EPRDF representative, London

W/ Netsinjet Asfaw, Head of Information, Office of the President, EPRDF member

Ato Sebhat Nega, Adviser to the Prime Minister, former Chairman TPLF, EPRDF Conference Representative

Ato Seyoum Mesfin, Minister of Foreign Affairs, former Head of TPLF/EPRDF Foreign Relations Bureau, EPRDF Conference Representative

Ato Tesfay Habisso, Secretary Council of Representatives, Council Member and Conference Representative, Kambatta People’s Congress

Ato Yosef Tesfaye, Constitution Drafting Commission, former Executive Committee member Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), and Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF)

Ato Zegeye Asfaw, ex-Minister of Agriculture, Conference Representative, Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)
PEACEFUL AND DEMOCRATIC
TRANSITIONAL
CONFERENCE OF ETHIOPIA
NEGARIT GAZETTA
July 22nd, 1991

TRANSITIONAL PERIOD
CHARTER OF ETHIOPIA

WHEREAS the overthrow of the military dictatorship that has ruled Ethiopia for seventeen years presents a historical moment, providing the Peoples of Ethiopia with the opportunity to rebuild the country and restructure the state democratically;

WHEREAS the military dictatorship was, in essence, a continuation of the previous regimes and its demise marks the end of an era of subjugation and oppression thus starting a new chapter in Ethiopia history in which freedom, equal rights and self-determination of all the peoples shall be the governing principles of political, economic and social life and thereby contributing to the welfare of the Ethiopian Peoples and rescuing them from centuries of subjugation and backwardness;

WHEREAS peace and stability, as essential conditions of development, require the end of all hostilities, the healing of wounds caused by conflicts and the establishment and maintainance of good neighbourliness and co-operation;

WHEREAS for the fulfilment of the aforementioned conditions and for the reign of a just peace, the proclamation of a democratic order is a categorical imperative, and;

WHEREAS to this end, all institutions of repression installed by the previous regimes shall be dismantled, regional prejudices redressed and the rights and interests of the deprived citizens safeguarded by a democratic government elected by and accountable to the People;

WHEREAS from The Peace Loving and Democratic forces present in the Ethiopian society and having Varied Views, having met in a Conference convened from July 1 - 5 in Addis Ababa have discussed and approved the charter laying down the rules governing the Transitional Government as well as setting down the principles for the transitional period. Now, therefore it is hereby Proclaimed as follows.

PART ONE
DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

Article One

Based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly by resolution 217 A (III) of 10 Dec. 1948, individual human rights shall be respected fully, and without any limitation whatsoever. Particularly every individual shall have:

a) The freedom of conscience, expression, association and peaceable assembly;
b) The right to engage in unrestricted political activity and to organize political parties, provided the exercise of such right does not infringe upon the rights of others.

Article Two

The right of nations, nationalities and peoples to self-determination is affirmed. To this end, each nation, nationality and people is guaranteed the right to:

a) Preserve its identity and have it respected, promote its culture and history and use and develop its language;

b) Administer its own affairs within its own defined territory and effectively participate in the central government on the basis of freedom, and fair and proper representation;

c) Exercise its right to self-determination of independence, when the concerned nation/nationality and people is convinced that the above rights are denied, abridged or abrogated.

PART TWO
PRINCIPLES GUIDING FOREIGN POLICY

The Transitional Government will conduct its foreign relations on the basis of the principles of respect for the sovereignty and equality of states and non-intervention and non-interference in internal affairs, as well as the promotion of mutual interests. Accordingly:

Article Three

The policy of destabilization and conflict-promotion hitherto actively pursued by the previous regime with respect to the country’s neighbours shall cease forthwith with the issuance of this Charter.

Article Four

It shall abide by all mutual agreements that respect the sovereignty of Ethiopia and are not contrary to the interests of the People.

Article Five

Local governments shall have the right to establish direct contact with relief organisations with respect to relief work.

PART THREE
STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION OF THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT

Article Six

There shall be established a Transitional Government consisting of a Council of Representatives and a Council of Ministers.
Article Seven

The Council of Representatives shall be composed of representatives of national liberation movements, other political organizations and prominent individuals to make-up a total of no more than 87 members.

Article Eight

The Transitional Government shall exercise all legal and political responsibility for the governance of Ethiopia until it hands over power to a government popularly elected on the basis of a new Constitution.

Article Nine

The Council of Representatives shall exercise legislative functions as follows and oversee the work of the Council of Ministers:

a) draw-up its rules of procedure.

b) election of its Chairperson, who shall also be the Head of State, and a Vice-Chairperson and Secretary; the Head of State shall appoint the Prime Minister whose appointment shall be approved by the Council of Representatives. The Head of State, the Prime Minister, the Vice-Chairperson and Secretary of the Council of Representatives shall be from different nations / nationalities;

c) approve the Prime Minister’s nomination of members of the Council of Ministers, drawn-up on consideration of ascertaining a broad national representation, technical competence and unswerving adherence to the Charter;

d) initiation and promulgation of proclamations and decrees pursuant to the Charter;

e) adoption of national budget;

f) provide for the administration of justice on the basis of the Charter; the Courts shall, in their work, be free from any governmental interference with respect to items provided for in Part One, Article One of the Charter;

g) establish the Constitutional Commission;

h) ratify international agreements;

i) create committees for defence and security policy during the transitional period;

j) provide the mechanism to ascertain the fair and impartial application of the mass media;

k) issue just labour law that protects the rights and interests of the workers.
PART FOUR
TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMME

The following provisions for a transitional period have been adopted in order to lead the country towards full democracy.

A. POLITICAL

Article Ten

The Council of Representatives shall constitute the Constitutional Commission to draw up a draft constitution.

The Constitutional Commission shall submit to the Council of Representatives the draft constitution.

Article Eleven

Upon adoption of the draft constitution by the Council of Representatives, the Constitution shall be presented to the people for discussion.

The final draft shall be presented for adoption to the Constituent Assembly to be elected pursuant to the final draft of the Constitution.

Article Twelve

Elections to a National Assembly shall be held on the basis of the provisions of the new Constitution.

The Transitional Government shall handover power to the party or parties that gain a majority in the National Assembly.

The said national elections shall be held no later than two years after the establishment of the Transitional Government. Provided however, that the period can be extended by the Council of Representatives for no more than six months.

Article Thirteen

There shall be a law establishing local and regional councils for local administrative purposes defined on the basis of nationality. Elections for such local and regional councils shall be held within three months of the establishment of the Transitional Government, wherever local conditions allow.

B. RELIEF AND REHABILITATION

The Transitional Government is unequivocally determined to ensure the delivery of relief assistance to areas ravaged by war and drought. In connection with this:

Article Fourteen

It shall give priority to the rehabilitation of those areas that have been severely affected by the war, prisoners of war, ex-prisoners of war as well as those sections of the
population that have been forcibly uprooted by the previous regime’s policy of vilagization and resettlement.

The rehabilitation of those forcefully uprooted by the previous regime’s policy of villagization and resettlement shall be done in accordance with their desire.

**Article Fifteen**

It shall take immediate steps to reconstruct or repair the infrastructure that has been destroyed or damaged by the war.

**Article Sixteen**

It shall give special consideration to hitherto neglected and forgotten areas.

**Article Seventeen**

It shall make special efforts to dispel ethnic mistrust and eradicate the ethnic hatred that have been fostered by the previous regimes.

**PART FIVE**

**LEGALITY OF THE CHARTER**

**Article Eighteen**

This Charter shall serve as the supreme law of the land for the duration of the transitional period. Any law or decision that is contrary to the Charter shall be null and void.

**Article Nineteen**

The Amharic and the English texts of this Charter have equal authenticity. Where disparity occurs between the two languages the Council of Representatives shall decide.

**Article Twenty**

The Charter shall be effective upon publication in the Negarit Gazette.

Addis Ababa this 22nd day of July 1991

MELES ZENAWI

CHAIRMAN OF THE CONFERENCE
PARTICIPANTS OF THE CONFERENCE

(Figures in brackets indicate number of seats allocated to the organisation in the Council of Representatives of the Transitional Government)

Adere Nationality (Harari National League) (1)
Afar Liberation Front, ALF (3)
Benishangul People’s Liberation Movement, BPLM (2)
Ethiopian Democratic Action Group, EDAG (1)
Ethiopian Democratic Coalition, EDC (1)
Ethiopian Democratic Officers’ Revolutionary Movement, 
EDORM (EPRDF member) (2)
Ethiopian Democratic Union, EDU (1)
Ethiopian National Democratic Organisation, ENDO (1)
Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement, EPDM (EPRDF 
member) (10)
Gambella People’s Liberation Movement, GPLM (2)
Gurage Nationality (Gurage People’s Democratic 
Organisation) (2)
Hadiya Nationality (Hadiya National Democratic 
Organisation) (2)
Horiale (Ogaden Liberation Front) (1)
Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia, IFLO (3)
Issa & Gurgura Liberation Movement (1)
Kambatta Nationality (Kambatta People’s Congress) (2)
Oromo Abo Liberation Movement (1)
Oromo Liberation Front, OLF (12)
Omotic Group (Omotic People’s Democratic Front) (2)
Oromo People’s Democratic Organisation, OPDO (EPRDF 
member) (10)
Sidama Liberation Movement, SLM (2)
Tigray People’s Liberation Front, TPLF (EPRDF member) (10)
University / Higher Education Representatives (1)
Wolaita Nationality (Wolaita People’s Democratic Front) (2)
Workers’ Representatives (3)
Western Somali Liberation Front, WSLF (2)
United Oromo People’s Liberation Front (1)

ORGANISATIONS TO WHOM COUNCIL SEATS 
WERE ASSIGNED SUBSEQUENT TO THE CONFERENCE

Agaw People’s Democratic Movement (1)
Burji People’s Democratic Organisation (1)
Gedeo People’s Democratic Organization (1)
Kaffa Peoples’ Democratic Union (2)
Yem National Movement (1)

OBSERVERS OF THE CONFERENCE
Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, EPLF
United Nations, Organisation of African Unity
Representative of General Babangida of Nigeria, then OAU Chairman
neighbouring states: Djibouti, Kenya, Sudan
UN Permanent Security Council Members, and G7 States
Ethiopian academics, religious leaders, & prominent individuals.
ETHIOPIAN AND ERITREAN POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS OR BODIES
MENTIONED IN THE PAPER
NOT LISTED AMONGST CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS AND OBSERVERS

Addis Ababa University Students' Union, AAUSU
All Ethiopia Socialist Movement, Meison (COEDF member)
Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces, COEDF
Democratic Unity Party of Ethiopia, DUPE
Eritrean Liberation Front, ELF
Ethiopian People's Democratic Alliance, EPDA (COEDF member)
Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, EPRP (COEDF member)
Peace and Reconciliation Committee, Addis Ababa University
Teranafit
Tigray Liberation Front, TLF
Tigray National Organisation, TNO
Tigray People's Democratic Movement, TPDM (COEDF member)
Workers' Party of Ethiopia, WPE