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The Ethiopian Post-Transition Defense Review: Building a national army from a revolutionary democratic army

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Key Messages:

- Prior to 1991, Ethiopia's army expanded in size to suppress growing internal dissent. This expansion was coupled with limited technical capability and foreign military assistance to fill command and control gaps. This led to fast-paced de-professionalization.
- The Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democracy Front (EPRDF) Army emerged to overthrow the Derg regime. A new national army, the National Defence Force (NDF), was then re-structured based on the EPRDF concept.
- Now, the NDF demonstrates a strong capacity for upholding its international peacekeeping and security responsibilities and maintains a strong balance within civilian-military relations.
- The key factor contributing to this high level of success was that the EPRDF, the basis for the NDF, had established a unique security culture and analytic capabilities without interest in defense industries or procurement. This strong base, which the NDF was modeled on, greatly contributed to its success.

Introduction

The Ethiopian state underwent major restructuring at the beginning of the last decade, adopting a federal system to replace a highly-centralized state. Specifically, the Ethiopian security sector was transformed, leading to a new conception of threats and security needs. The objective of this paper is to chronicle and analyze the unique Ethiopian experience of restructuring a people's army into a national military force. Through an examination of the restructuring of the National Defence Force, this paper provides background information on

the pre-reform structure and organization of the army, a discussion of the restructuring process, and analysis of how these changes moved the security agencies toward full professionalization. It also demonstrates how, in turn, these processes supported Ethiopia's democratic transformation.

I. Background on the history of the Ethiopian army

The history of the pre-1991 Ethiopian army consists of two phases: Imperial rule and military rule, each phase having fundamental differences. Although 19th century Ethiopian history was full of conflict, the Ethiopian state never had a modern army until the end of the Italian occupation in 1941. At this point, Emperor Haile Selassie I created a centralized, strong, professional regular army as part of his project to build a centralized monarchical state. The imperial regime abolished the ancient military hierarchy and abandoned traditional methods. By 1943, the Ethiopian army was reorganized, and identified the development of a national defense strategy as a top priority in an effort to achieve national control and cohesion. Defense spending at this time left little room for other key social and economic priorities. However, the initial investment in the army paid off in terms of maintaining the territorial sovereignty from foreign aggression.

II. Commitment to Multilateralism

The Ethiopian army saw action in several foreign countries as part of UN peacekeeping missions, and the army's participation in these peace missions had historically rooted motivations. As a victim of failed multilateralism itself, Ethiopia's willingness to deploy its young army for international peacekeeping was driven by its commitment to the founding idea of the United Nations.

III. Internal Repression

However, despite this performance, the army was problematically used to quash internal dissent, suppressing numerous rebellions. This pattern continued over time, and the population's increasing anger and

resentment had serious negative impacts on army morale and loyalty to the imperial rule. The main mission of the Imperial army, despite its splendid performance in maintaining territorial integrity and participation in international peacekeeping, was to defend the throne at any cost and repress internal dissent through massive atrocities. By 1974, most of the population maintained an ambivalent attitude toward the reorganized and modernized military establishment.

IV. Military Rule: 1974-1991

By 1974 the Imperial regime had lost control and the military seized power. As a result, the army's role was redefined as a 'vanguard of the revolution,' allowing it to actively engage in the governance of the nation. The Derg believed that Ethiopia's problems primarily derived from a history of economic exploitation, and that the central contradictions of Ethiopian statehood would be removed along with the feudal system leading to a united Ethiopia under a socialist and nationalist government. However, this vision was not realized, and centralism, the undermining of local economies, and the failure of the commitment to centrally planned economic development fuelled the eruption of civil wars across the country.

V. Expansion, De-professionalization of the Army

The army expanded in size from 1974-1991, mainly to suppress growing internal dissent. These numbers were further swelled by conscripts through the unpopular mandatory national service program. Due to the army's dramatic increase and its limited technical capabilities, the regime was forced to request foreign military assistance to fill command and control gaps. The order of battle was difficult to ascertain because of the foreign intervention into the army's command structure, and the quality of military cadets declined, leading to a fast-paced de-professionalization of the army.

VI. Failed counter-insurgency

The army failed to have an organized military doctrine. Its organization and concept of operations were designed by

foreign military advisors, making it dependent on external advice and poorly suited to counter-insurgency operations. Further, the way the military was deployed against the civilian population was almost certain to produce insurgent resistance. In addition to the centralization of strategic and operational matters, the army's senior leadership was riven by divisions, and the integrity of the armed forces was damaged by the widespread belief that a small cohort of senior generals managed the ministry's affairs in their own interests, manipulating pay, promotion, awards, and retirement. The little professionalism that the imperial army had begun to build was effectively demolished.

VII. Failures of Command and Control

With the army designated as the 'vanguard of the revolution,' a parallel party structure was created within the army that undermined military commanders. Denied of its experienced generals, operational decisions and planning were taken into the hands of the commander in chief of the army and his closest allies with the Soviet military advisors, leading to an overall regression of professionalization of the army during the Derg regime. By the time a coalition of insurgent groups, the EPRDF, overthrew the Derg, army morale and discipline were at a drastically low point and the population had an extremely negative view of both the army and the profession of soldiering in general. For these reasons, the transitional government formed by the victorious EPRDF choose to largely disband the army, with the exception of its most professional members.

VIII. The Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) Army

The EPRDF army was an insurgent force fighting an irregular war that eventually transformed into conventional war over the course of 17 years of resistance. It developed a new military doctrine that elaborated the need to constantly narrow the regime's support base and expand rebellion by developing a

political program enlisting the support of other fighting forces. This doctrine also called for the mobilization of

large numbers of civilians to help maintain security in liberated areas, allowing the core army to prepare and engage in conventional war. The doctrine also laid out the principles for the insurgency, and designed its own military science and art tailored to specific enemies and types of war it was fighting. Strategies and tactics were detailed and widely discussed within the ranks of the army, eventually leading to an overall restructuring of its army that enabled its ultimate victory.

IX. Organization and Support

The EPRDF was a party army fighting to advance a specific political program, and its leadership was a political-military hybrid. This historical association decreased the chances for a palace coup, but also posed a challenge to the army's transformation into a non-partisan, professional fighting force.

In the early days, strong and active civilian support was a necessity, and strong civil-military relations were nurtured through systematic training and institutional rules that reinforced discipline- failure to complete assigned tasks as a result of cowardice or negligence was considered worthy of major punishment. This tradition of devotion to duty and excellence in task accomplishment was an important basis for the EPRDF's later transformation into the current Ethiopian National Defence Force

X. Victory and Reform

In 1991 the EPRDF overthrew the Derg regime. It then faced the challenge of launching a democratic transition. The EPRDF offered a fundamentally different formula than its predecessors, premised on the recognition of the rights of nations and nationalities to self-rule. It also opted for a capitalist economic policy. During this transition period, the EPRDF positioned itself to become the national army, rather than a political entity, and was formally separated from the party and given its own independent chain of command. It demobilized the bulk of its Tigrean contingent with the objective of providing a

space for new recruits from the diverse Ethiopian society, so that the national composition of the Army would reflect

the diversity of the nation. These preparations in place, the formal restructuring of the army began with the ratification of the new Ethiopian Constitution in 1995.

XI. Legal Framework

The legal framework for a professional army was articulated in a new Constitution, which states that the government must be guided by democratic principles, and should promote and support people's self-rule at all levels. In line with the constitutional provisions, political neutrality of the defence forces was also articulated through a new statute. This statute also established a National Defence Council (NDC), creating a structure that was a departure from that of the previous army where similar authority was given to the 'revolutionary campaign central command' dominated by political operators and chaired by the head of state. The new organization allowed senior commanders of the army to control its technical and professional development, and also instituted a civilian Minister of Defence.

XII. New Doctrine, Security Needs, and Threat Assessment

Once the legal framework for a newly organized professional national defense force was completed, the primary task for the central command and the commander in chief of the army was to develop a broad military doctrine. The new doctrine articulated the major foreseeable threats to national security. In order to address these threats, the new Defence Force needed to be prepared to deal with both insurgencies and conventional attacks from other states. The strategy developed to meet the short and long-term objectives of the army was highly informed by the long experience of the EPRDF-led insurgency.

Later, the EPRDF focused on providing intensive training to each of its insurgents so that each infantry member could develop capacity if the need arose. This drastically expanded the size and capacity of the insurgent army.

Learning from this experience, the designers of the Defence Force decided on a small, intensively trained

army that could address counter-insurgency threats and also expand quickly to fight conventional war. This required the development of a large number of reserve forces to be called in for occasional training in their various regions.

This strategy satisfied Ethiopia's need for an economical force that could also expand if needed. With the limited military budget, and an understanding that economic growth was essential to long-term security, military leaders prioritized development over military spending, and the army was reorganized to prepare for its immediate tasks and long-term goals.

XIII. Early Tests

The new regime's security reform decisions were validated by the new Defence Force's success in confronting several threats. The primary national focus on economic development and the focus of the army on human development were key ingredients that enabled the nation to deal with the unprecedented and unexpected aggression of Eritrea in 1998. New recruits were quickly absorbed, funds mobilized and redirected to expand the army's capacity, and capacity of training centers expanded to meet the requirements of the fast growing army, all of which contributed to failure and national disaster for Eritrea.

XIV. Further Reform

At the end of the 1998-2000 war with Eritrea, the army demobilized 133,000 veterans and 17,000 disabled soldiers into civilian life. This demobilization brought the size of the army to its originally intended smaller size and enabled the government to limit defense spending. Further restructuring of the army followed, based on the argument that national defense capabilities should be built on proper analysis of threats, and that the primary focus of any defense capacity development should be human development.

The restructuring and professionalization of the Ethiopian National Defence force was not a one-time act but rather a continuous process over approximately two decades

including new constitutional provisions, a review of military doctrine, security and foreign relations policy review, and subsequent legislation to reflect policy adjustments.

XV. Progress toward Professionalization and Future Concerns

The Defence Force, since its reorganization under a new statute, has made significant strides towards transforming itself into an organization that has internalized constitutional values and norms, and accepts civilian control and authority. The army has developed a culture of strong civil-military relations, and has fostered a culture of regularly contributing labor in support of production activities of poor and rural areas.

However, professionalization of the Ethiopian defence forces is a work in progress. The ongoing structural changes in the country enabled the emergence of a sizeable private sector, the expansion of the middle class, the expansion of literacy, increased urbanization, and the challenged--but continued-- presence of a private press and civil society, all of which contribute to a more open society that demands a professional, non-partisan army.

While these changes have had positive impacts of the development of a professional army, the political culture of a pluralistic democracy is still a long way off. History itself is another factor that impedes the road towards professionalization. There is little culture of being non-partisan in the history of Ethiopian armies and as a result, the army has always been forced to change along with the government, contradicting the development of the non-partisan culture of the security forces.

The military's increasing involvement in the economic sector also raises concerns, mainly that economic interests of the military divert the primary focus of its leadership from its real task of national security. Increased transparency of governance structures would provide an important limit on the role of military establishments in the economy.

The Ethiopian National Defence Force has made major stride in professionalization. However, its movement towards full transformation is contingent on the overall success of the democratic transformation. This should be supported by a converted indoctrination of the army on democratic ethos and values using the constitutional provisions as a starting point for such a program.

XVI. Conclusion

The Ethiopian experience of restructuring a national army based on a people's army concept is something rarely if ever attempted with equal comprehensiveness. The army now demonstrates strong capacity for delivering its security and international peacekeeping responsibilities, and it has developed an unprecedentedly strong balance within civil-military relations.

Several factors contributed to this high level of success, but the key factor supporting successful transformation is the fact that the EPRDF arrived at the task having already developed a completely different security culture and its own political-security analytical capability, and did so without any vested interests in defense industries or procurement.



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