

THE ETHIOPIAN ARMY AT A CONCEPTUAL CROSSROAD?

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One of the foremost tasks of the Abiy government has been to undertake massive reform in the army and the security apparatus of the state. The reform process has taken almost two years, and it was declared the mission accomplished. But what triggered the reform process is an important question not just to justify the reform agenda in the army, but also to understand the future course of action in this key department of state.

Since it reorganized in the year 1995, the institutionalization & workings of the Ethiopian army has remained under the umbrella of revolutionary democratic concept. Revolutionary democrats advocate the need to adopt the western way of building armed forces.

According to revolutionary democratic teachings, the army of countries in Western world, though free from politics, in addition to defending the sovereignty of their respective country, stands to defend the western values.

Therefore, the army, in addition to safeguarding the sovereignty of Ethiopia, should stand to defend the principles and values of revolutionary democracy. Moreover, the army should be built up on the principle of realizing the fair representation of nations, nationalities and people of Ethiopia. This is a note on how revolutionary democracy understood the essence of army and the role of armed forces:-

“.....under a multi-party system, the defense force cannot continue as the army of the EPRDF-it has to be the army of the state.....but severing its direct links with EPRDF does not mean abandoning its revolutionary democratic

character. Various bourgeoisie armies do not have direct organizational ties or commissars, yet to they could shape in any form for any task the bourgeoisie desire them to fulfill. So we need to gain sufficient experience in how to organize our defense force to carry out the required revolutionary democratic tasks through indirect ties just as in the case of the bourgeoisie armies. Thus although it became free and neutral in appearance, the army will be revolutionary democratic in content and protect the constitution and the rights of the masses.”

(Source: Revolutionary democracy document disseminated to EPRDF members in 1997 (1985 E.C) to depict principles and directions as to how to move on to meet revolutionary democratic political, social and economic goals)

Overall, while revolutionary democracy teaches the need to detach the armed forces from the party membership, at the same time it connotes for armed forces adhere themselves to the revolutionary democratic principles and goals.

However, this depiction is ambiguous, and in many ways open room for critics that propagates hesitations against the professionalism and independence of the army from political influence of the ruling EPRDF.

Today, when the Abiy Ahmed government declared the army has depoliticized in its mission and role, there remains one issue hanging over. That is, the pillars of the reform agenda were not disclosed to public.

Though all secrets of the state attributed to national defense forces may be understandable, the Ethiopian populace still requires on the principles the army refurbished. The people of Ethiopia have a right to question and get answer if the reform process ably insulate the institutionalization of the army from any political interests, if any.