Land & Liberation in Eritrea: Reflecting on the work of Lionel Cliffe

Alemseged Tesfai

This article examines the contribution Lionel Cliffe has made to a characterisation of the war of liberation in Eritrea. It does so by looking at the specificity of the Eritrean case and the dimensions of the struggle for liberation including the military strategy of the EPLF and the strategy for land reform.

In an article written in the late 1980s, Lionel Cliffe identified some of the major characteristics that had distinguished the Eritrean liberation struggle from other similar movements at that time (Cliffe, 1988). It was these factors, I believe, that had attracted not only Cliffe, but also such scholars of distinction and international renown as Basil Davidson, the late Abdulrahman Mohammed Babu, Alain Fenet, Mary Dines, Francois Houtart and many others, to support the Eritrean cause and to help it gain the international exposure that had eluded it for so long.

The Eritrean liberation movement, especially after the emergence and eventual dominance of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), had been something of a maverick among the similar movements of the day. Unlike most African liberation struggles it was not fighting a European colonial power or a minority-dominated state like apartheid South Africa. Nor did the enemy fall into the ‘neo-colonial, repressive, puppet pattern of states’ as had existed in Vietnam, El Salvador and the Philippines (Cliffe, 1988:87).

Ethiopia was a black African state with historical economic and cultural claims over Eritrea and it mustered substantial Western support. Haile Selassie was a feudal monarch with considerable global prestige and substantial help from the US, including in his attempt to crush the Eritrean revolution. The sympathy and support, moreover, that Eritreans might have had from the Soviet Union, its allies in the Eastern Bloc and China during the Haile Selassie era, dwindled by the mid-1970s. It was at that time that the declared marxism of the Mengistu regime had won them over to the side of the Dergue. With the Eritrean revolution maintaining its own marxist line, it could not gain the type of US support that the contras in Latin America or Jonas Savimbi in Angola managed – and neither did it seek such support.

Although Cliffe recognised that the ability of the Eritrean revolution to sustain itself for so long without outside support was a major achievement, he also expressed some doubts about the benefits of its longevity (Cliffe, 1988:88). By the 1980s, the EPLF had developed the strategy of self-reliance to a level probably never achieved by any liberation movement before or since. Early on the movements needed to survive by snatching the enemy’s guns to use them to fight him with; this probably necessitated self-reliance. As time wore on, however, spontaneity gave way to the conscious and deliberate development of the principle, such that it became the distinguishing feature...
not only of the EPLF as an organisation, but also of its cadres. By the time Cliffe visited the liberated areas in 1983 to head a food assessment team it had turned into a beehive of activity working to sustain the strategy of self-reliance.

Cliffe's slight misgivings about this strategy emanated from at least three observations. The fact that the EPLF could not hold the towns that it had liberated in the late 1970s because it could not counter or resist Ethiopian air bombardments worried him. If it was to proceed with the struggle for liberation it needed the anti-aircraft guns that were not available to it. Second, since by the early 1980s, the EPLF had withdrawn to the mountains of Sahel for positional warfare, he was concerned that this would lead to the professionalisation of the army and its eventual alienation from the people. Last, Cliffe saw in the EPLF's building of strategic-training, logistics and administration centres, a reduction in the possibility for a negotiated and political solution (Cliffe, 1988:88-90).

But these were cautious remarks within a larger and more wholesome appraisal and appreciation of the effectiveness of the strategy itself. Cliffe was well aware of the historical events and reasons that had led to the split within the ELF and to the emergence of the EPLF. The earlier ELF's division of its forces into religious and regional units had created disunity and havoc within its ranks. Some of these had gone on to form the future EPLF.

Cliffe, however, had no illusions that this task would be simple. He observed, for example, that the initial confinement of the ELF to the Western Lowlands of the country had led to 'a definition of Eritrean nationalism that appealed only to the Islamic-Tigre speakers ...' but that this had later begun 'to be transcended as people from other areas reacted to the indiscriminate reprisals the Ethiopians took against all elements of the population.' This shift in or broadening of the power base was what had strengthened the EPLF, although it was to remain somewhat of a stranger in the ELF dominated areas of the Western Lowlands for quite a long time.

Along with others like David Pool and Jordan Gebre Medhin, Cliffe saw 'the process of land reform promoted under EPLF auspices in the highlands as a decisive step in forging a genuine involvement by the peasants especially the poor and landless, in the broader struggle ...' (Cliffe, 1988:94-95). But that was in settled agricultural areas. The same rules, he implied, could not be expected to apply in the predominantly pastoral and agro-pastoral communities of the lowlands. Conscious of the fundamental differences in the systems of land tenure in both regions of the country – village (diesa) and extended family ownership (risti) in the highlands and state ownership (demaniale) in the lowlands – Cliffe was aware that uniform standards of land reform and social transformation could not be applied in both areas. Referring to the class-based land redistribution in some highland villages, he cautioned that it would be difficult to 'conceive of an approach for egalitarian development among livestock herders'. He saw here, a potential basis for cleavages along the lines of religion that needed to be removed.

His fascination with the EPLF's programme of land reform as a means of garnering the peasantry's participation in their social transformation was unaffected. The EPLF was not seeking to replace the old system with one of its own making. The traditional tenure and redistribution laws and practices were to remain intact – the beneficiaries, however, were to change. Thus, land previously concentrated in the hands of a few endas or extended family units was redistributed to the communities. The process of redistribution itself followed the old traditional practice, thus ensuring that power was being transferred to the people.
Commenting on the EPLF’s statement and belief that ‘the task of organising the economic life of the masses must start from above and below simultaneously’, Cliffe noted:

It is such an interplay between a development dialogue, involving the Front and people’s own organisations, and their mutual engagement in mobilisation to change the lot of the people and simultaneously to generate the widest support for the struggle, and the creative and sensitive approach to these tasks, that constitutes the uniqueness of the Eritrean revolution and also forms the platform for its several other achievements (Cliffe, 1988:102).

But this was half the story as it involved only the predominantly settled agricultural communities of the country. The differentiation of the peasantry in the pastoral lowlands was based not on land but on herd ownership, where the EPLF, ‘fought shy … of instituting some redistributive measures with regard to livestock’. However, Cliffe argued that there would be a need at some point for the EPLF,

to take these pastoral and agro-pastoral societies seriously, not as examples of a more backward, ‘nomadic’ life style but as having an arguably more adaptable system of coping with arid environment, and to work out a strategy for development that makes economic and environmental sense in these areas but that does get the class equation right. How to build on the poorer peasants who depend on livestock while not completely alienating the richer herders is one of the more crucial future tasks of the Eritrean revolution (Cliffe, 1988:103).

And Now …

Much has happened since Cliffe wrote the above article over fifteen years ago. Yet much of Cliffe’s cautionary observations remain pertinent. With the benefit of hindsight and some of Cliffe’s more recent thoughts on Eritrea, it is possible to briefly comment on his past perceptions.

Although Cliffe was a great admirer of the EPLF’s military prowess, ingenuity and resilience, he probably placed too much emphasis on Ethiopia’s air and technological superiority over the EPLF to the extent of worrying about the Front’s ability to step out of its trenches, recapture towns and maintain them until independence. In fact, the same year that the book in which his article was published, 1988, the EPLF divisions left their trenches in Sahel to completely annihilate the strongest and most entrenched of Ethiopia’s three major frontlines. Thus, the EPLF scored, what Basil Davidson described in a BBC interview as one of the greatest victories by a liberation front anywhere in the world since Dien Bien Phu. It happened that Davidson was visiting the EPLF base areas at the time.

There were two reasons, I think, that were responsible for the neutralisation of Ethiopia’s air superiority. First, the perception had grown, especially among Eritrean combatants, that fighter planes were, at best, a deterrent to daylight movement that caused some damage some of the time. Yet even that ‘deterrence’ proved more psychological than actual, eventually warplanes were discounted as decisive factors in the outcome of major battlefield confrontations. True, by then, trench and underground shelter security had been greatly improved and there was some upgrading in the air defence system of the people’s army. But this had not been of such a level as to make any significant dent in Ethiopia’s air superiority. Afabet and Massawa, from its liberation in February 1990, and other such towns and their people suffered constant harassment and significant loss of life from air attacks but even the
civilian population learned to live and persevere through the ordeals until total liberation in 1991.

The second factor was the ineptness, in this regard, of the Ethiopian air force. They simply never really made full use of their obvious advantage, even with the active support they were accorded by Soviet, East European and even South Yemeni pilots. Puzzling instances abound where the Ethiopian air force would fail to take opportunities that sometimes exposed the Eritrean army to positions of defencelessness. Such an instance, for example, is the massive and exposed EPLF troop withdrawal from Barentu, a town in the west to the base areas of Sahel in 1985, a trek that took over a week to clear men and materiel out of harm’s way.

Reflecting further on Cliffe’s cautionary note regarding the EPLF’s strategy for liberation is a second military point. This is the view he expressed that positional warfare would professionalise the army and alienate it from the people. This was, I think, a valid observation but not from the point of view of the professionalisation of the army. Even today, over eleven years into independence, the Eritrean army can hardly be classified as professional. This is because it still consists, in most leadership positions, of former liberation fighters who have not really changed their old ways. The army also still retains a majority of young draftees into the national military service that await demobilisation. The mind-set of professionalism amongst Eritrean soldiers may yet be long in coming.

EPLF tradition had always had a negative attitude towards national armies, which it had seen as agents of repressive regimes, such as those of Haile Selassie and Mengistu. They were always depicted as causeless, brutal and the antithesis of the liberation fighter, who stood for people’s rights and salvation. It was a genuine feeling, genuinely preached to and accepted by every recruit into the EPLF. With the long withdrawal of the EPLF into the mountains of Sahel, the picture of a besieged and helpless population waiting to be salvaged by its sons and daughters may have settled inside the mentality of every combatant and, along with it, the feeling or the attitude that he or she knew best for the country and the people.

This development is, of course, the inevitable consequence or product of liberation fronts that win. Presumably, the longer and the more protracted the struggle the more entrenched the attitude. A population that is thankful to its liberator is often ready to submit to his or her direction. The problem always arises when the people begin to assert their views and to pose them as the alternatives to the existing line. For this reason, Cliffe’s word of concern remains valid.

The third and final point that I want to comment on deals with the central importance that Cliffe had given to land reform as a means of harnessing popular support for the EPLF and as an important element in enhancing the unity of Eritrean society. Cliffe had high hopes about the EPLF’s attempts to find a solution to the difficult problem of land reform. In 1994, the Land Commission of Eritrea hired Lionel Cliffe and Issa Shivi, who had just chaired a national land commission in Tanzania, as short-term consultants. Their findings were probably far removed from what had fascinated Cliffe in the 1980s. In its long dealings with the population and with land matters, the EPLF was concluding that only a radical shake-up of the traditional system could solve the explosive problems that it had been harbouring. After the Ethiopian Dergue’s reforms of the late 1980s, land ownership in the highlands had divested to the various villages whose members were supposed to recycle their plots through redistribution by lot, at fixed periods of not less than seven years. Although this had
its roots in the old *diesa* system, it had been considerably altered. To accommodate
villages with smaller land, the Dergue had merged the land of adjoining villages, thus
removing some age-old borders. In other, older *diesa* areas, the formerly mandatory
redistributions had long stopped with the result that those in possession were
becoming virtual owners blocking new ones from their rightful claims. The system
thus lacked coherence and consistency.

A more important problem for the EPLF was the dichotomy in the system of
ownership in the highlands and the lowlands. In the former, village or extended
family ownership was a state-recognised traditional right. On the contrary, following
an Italian decree of over a century ago, all land below 1,500 metres had become state
owned, the *demaniale*. To the Front, this was manifestly unfair and called for
rectification and standardisation. Other more classical problems such as landlessness,
fragmentation and parcellisation of holdings, endless land litigation on trespassing,
village and plot borders were also motives for seeking a more radical change.

In 1992, the EPLF Central Committee, which also acted at the time as the national
assembly, passed a directive that declared all land in Eritrea state-owned. It
announced the formation of a Land Commission, which was to draft a land
proclamation based on a study of the Eritrean land tenure system. In February 1994,
the Land Commission presented its findings and a draft proclamation to the Third
Congress of the EPLF. It was to become the law of the land in August 1994.

The Proclamation declared all land state-owned but retained the traditional rights of
citizens to access land in the form of usufruct rights in perpetuity, as opposed to
ownership in perpetuity or permanent access in the form of periodic redistributions.
Holders of such rights of usufruct, according to the new law, are permitted to lease
their land, but land sales are prohibited. Women are entitled to equal access both to
agricultural land and to a plot in one’s own village for the purposes of building a
dwelling home. Usufruct rights are also inheritable. Since land belongs to the state,
village ownership and, therefore, village boundaries are no longer recognised,
although villages are allowed to retain their traditional grazing, water and other such
rights. The same law applies to pastoral and agro-pastoral areas with the provision
that pastoralists maintain their traditional grazing rights unless expressly stated
otherwise by law.

Cliffe’s reaction to this legislation was, of course, predictable. As a far cry from the old
attempts that had captured his imagination, the proclamation failed to impress both
him and Issa Shivji. They were of the opinion that the traditional tenure system was
rational and should have been retained. The idea of state-ownership, therefore, did
not go well with them, both in principle and for the complex administrative problems
of implementation that they thought the government would be unlikely to handle
efficiently.

Second, they found the idea of doing away with village borders highly objectionable.
They saw the village as the most important social element of national political and
economic coherence. They were also skeptical about the alterations envisaged
regarding the fragmentation and parcellisation or fragmentation of individual
holdings. They maintained, on the contrary, that the practice had developed as much
in response to fairness in distribution as coping with ecological changes and
fluctuations. They also preferred to see land conflicts settled by traditional means of
resolution and not in courts of law. Cliffe’s major misgiving about the Proclamation
related to the conditions of the pastoral population. The draft proclamation, he felt,
made only a passing mention of that important sector and, consistent with his earlier concern, he intimated that such a handling of the matter would not bode well for future developments.

Almost eight years after becoming law, Land Proclamation 58/1998 is still only partially in use. The traditional rights to plots for dwelling houses are being distributed more or less in accordance with traditional rules and practices. However, the diesa system still operates in the highland areas where it is predominant, albeit without the attendant periodic redistribution. In a few areas, informal redistribution of agricultural holdings have been put into effect by some of the more active administrators. Apart from this, the old system remains intact in the highlands. Nothing substantial has also happened to effect the changes that had been perceived as essential to bridging the gap between the land tenure systems of the highlands and the lowlands of Eritrea. The idea of instituting a regime of access to land through a system of rights of usufruct in perpetuity has thus not yet occurred.

Various reasons, including the last war with Ethiopia, are often sited as the chief cause for the delays in the full implementation of the Land Proclamation. Cliffe would probably welcome such delay as he will probably see a chance here for the government to review the law.

Alemseged Tesfai was the Acting Head of the Land Commission of Eritrea from 1993-1996; e-mail: alem@eol.com.er.

Bibliography


