H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Pool. *From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean People's Liberation Front.* East African Studies. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001. xvi + 206 pp. $42.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1387-6.

Reviewed by Vladimir Shubin (Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences)
Published on H-Africa (October, 2003)

The Most Successful Liberation Front on the African Soil?

The Most Successful Liberation Front on the African Soil?

This book, which is a must for every scholar of the Horn of Africa, is devoted to the formation and development of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, which led the struggle for independence of Eritrea and became the governing organisation in this country in 1991.

The modern history of Eritrea is fascinating in its complexity. It included Italian colonisation, British occupation, federation with Ethiopia, annexation by Ethiopia, de-facto independence and, finally, de-jure independence. Moreover, Eritrea became the first and so far the only African state created as a result of cessation from another African state.

Such a phenomena could not but bring about a number of books, in fact dozens of them. However the book under review is distinct from many others because it describes not the history of the country or of the struggle for independence in general but of its driving force–the EPLF. Another feature (and a strong point) of the book is author's efforts to put the history of the EPLF into its social and historical context. Having done this Pool moves to the political context and in particular discusses the roots of discipline and autonomy of the EPLF.

The second part of the book analyses the formation of the front, its self-organisation and efforts to organise the masses, its activities against the Ethiopian rule. Finally, the third part, a shorter one, describes developments after 1991 including the reorganisation of the EPLF into Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994.

The author provides a very solid basis for understanding "the complex and cross-cutting cleavages of Eritrean society" (p. 35) by describing geography, ethnic and social composition of the population, relations between religious communities as well as the historical interaction of Eritrea with neighbouring (and in some cases distant) countries.

Discussing "the roots of discipline and autonomy" the author claims that the EPLF initiated "the process of creating an organisational and institutional autonomy in two dimensions: an internal one free from the impact of Eritrean social divisions and external one free from the influence of regional states" (p. 38). As to the latter the claim seems to be an exaggeration: true, the EPLF was free from being dominated by foreign powers, but not from being influenced by them. Unfortunately, perhaps due to this claim, the author pays inadequate attention to the foreign policy of the EPLF. For example, Pool himself admits that "a kernel" of new strategies adopted after the internal crisis in the front was "laid by the training period in China" (p. 80). He does mention that a group of Eritreans, including future EPLF leaders Ramadan Muhammad Nur and Issayas Afeworki, went there in the midst of the "Great proletarian cultural revolution" but says nothing about the nature of their training (pp. 53-54, 82-83).

Even more doubtful is whether the EPLF was not affected by the divisions in Eritrean society. Pool several times insists on autonomy of the EPLP from that society and even speaks about "an imperative to insulate organisational members from their own society" (p. 38) as if a guerrilla movement can operate with any degree of success in such isolation. In this respect the author contradicts himself, since he underlines the EPLF's closeness to Mao Zedong's tactics which stipulated that the population is the sea in which the guerrilla fish swim.

Another contradiction is also evident. The author pays a lot of attention to the rigorous political education of the EPLF members but then, though "with hindsight," regards as "fair" characterisation of the EPLF "as a pragmatic movement with limited ideological coherence" (p. 60). Nevertheless he emphasises "a high level of organisational continuity and coherence" within the EPLF ranks, but in the absence of "ideological coherence" the discipline could be maintained mostly by repression (p. 60).

In fact in spite of Pool's affection for the front from time to time he has to admit the dubious way by which the organisation disciplined itself. The author refers to "a high degree of secrecy about the nature of internal controls, a fundamental component of enhancing front autonomy both in the sense of minimising outsiders' knowledge of the front and of containing internal dissent" (p. 90). Such a "control" meant in particular that the first protracted internal crisis was "only resolved with the appointment of a jury at the end of May 1974 and the approval of the verdict of execution" (p. 79).

He claims that from the mid-1970s "the constant and large-scale individual disgruntlements" did not develop into "serious internal political problems." It did not prevent, however execution of "a dozen or more" of active members of the opposition, "a motley of educated critics" (p. 86), referred to by the author, though in passing. He also mentions that Solomon Woldemariam, a founder of the front, "was captured fleeing to Sudan in 1980 and some years [later] executed" when "his [undisclosed]individualistic activities proved too much" (p. 86). Rather sketchy is a story of "the marginalization" of Nur (p. 87), who headed the EPLF for ten years before being replaced by his assistant Afeworki. What was behind this move–political differences or personal power struggle remain unknown to a reader.

Even more secretive was the nature of the Eritrean People's Socialist Party, which according to the author was founded in the early 1970s and dissolved in 1989, though the dissolution was announced five years later (pp. 92-93). To the author's credit he admits, though a bit timidly, that "the continuation of secrecy after independence seems disproportional" (p. 95).

Writing on combat activities of the front Pool prefers dealing with its "liberation struggle in a thematic way rather than through a detailed history of battles" (p. 60). He does mention such important developments as "the truce between two fronts in 1974" (p. 135), a "joint EPLF̈ÖELF assault on Asmara" in 1975 (p. 81) or the EPLF-ELF unity agreement of 1977 (p. 124) and its subsequent collapse resulting in the "second civil war." However the lack of a detailed history does not help one to understand how the EPLF managed to sideline its forerunner, the Eritrean Liberation Front and finally defeat the Ethiopian forces in 1991. Besides, the author's claim that "from the late 1970s the EPLF became the sole [as distinct from major] representative of Eritrean nationalism" (p. 133) is not substantiated. In fact according to the author himself it was only in August 1980 when "the EPLF ['whatever the causes'] attacked the ELF forces and drove them to the Sudan border in western Eritrea" and by mid-1981 ELF "still had about 10,000 fighters" (p. 146).

Also in passing, Pool writes about "a [temporary] break of relations" between the EPLF and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the mid-1980s, though a more comprehensive analysis may help understand the roots of a bloody armed conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia in the late 1990s.

More detailed is the author's analysis of the developments which led to the formation of the EPLF in 1977, sixteen years after the commencement of the armed struggle in Eritrea. In particular he pays an adequate attention to the front's immediate predecessors–the People's Liberation Forces and other groupings.

One of the best parts of the book is chapter 4, "Organising the masses." It shows in particular how the EPLF manages to attract a considerable support from various groups of the Eritrean population. An interesting detail emerges when the author writes about social and economic programmes of the front: in a number of cases its steps followed those taken earlier by the Derg, that is by the Ethiopian authorities. Thus, when in late 1975 the EPLF began implementing its land reform it had to take in mind that big plantations had been already nationalised (p. 108). Neither did the EPLF reverse at that time the nationalisation of properties over and above one residence, a policy introduced by them before the towns were "liberated" by the EPLF (p. 122).

The last part of the book, "Independence," describes a rather unhappy story, especially of Eritrea's conflicts with all (!) neighboring states. The author also writes, "The exclusive character of post- independence politics provides a basis for the opposition to portray the system as essentially undemocratic, EPLF justifications for its dominance notwithstanding" (p. 197). Unfortunately, however, he does not indicate on what side of the dispute he is.

Pool correctly writes that "transition from a centralised and highly organised liberation front is fraught with difficulties" (p. 196). Indeed the temptation is high to explain recent misfortunes by the PFDJ/EPLF traditions acquired during a highly centralised armed struggle. However, there are other examples in Africa, say, in Namibia and South Africa, where the liberation movements that achieved victory almost concurrently with the EPLF managed to avoid these pitfalls, even if Pool calls EPLF "the most successful liberation front on the African soil" (p. 1).

The book would have gained if Pool had paid more

attention to the causes of the struggle for independence. Were they social? If so, why did not they subside after the Ethiopian revolution? Was a compromise with Addis Ababa impossible because of Mengistu's authoritarian rule? But was that very different from the authoritarian practices in the EPLF? Was the struggle guided by the feeling of Eritrean national identity, born, paradoxically enough, during to the Italian colonisation? However, for how long will this identity prevail? The independence of Eritrea meant that at least two ethnic groups ("nationalities" in the EPLF language)–Afar and Tigrinya–were divided by the border with Ethiopia. So, will not irredentism replace secessionism one day?

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Vladimir Shubin. Review of Pool, David, *From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean People's Liberation Front*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. October, 2003.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8284

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.