

WARID: Ethiopia (OLF)
STARDATE: 1 July 1983
ENDDATE: 31 December 1992
Related cases: Ethiopia (ELF, ELF-PLF, EPLF) 1964-1991,
Ethiopia (TPLF, EPDM, EPRDF) 1976-1991,
Sudan (SPLA, NDA) 1983-2004
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Conflict overview

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was one of the various organizations fighting against the domination and discrimination of the Oromo people within the Ethiopian state. It was founded in 1976 and engaged in a low-scale armed struggle with the government. Military operations were often started from its base in Sudan. The intensity of the fighting fluctuated, with several years not seeing a single fatality; however, hostilities continued from 1983 until 1992. During this period, the OLF fought a guerrilla war against two different central governments, first the Derg and then the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The Derg, a socialist military regime, faced several insurgencies throughout Ethiopia that demanded secession or autonomy for different parts of the country. They responded with repression and built up the largest military force of Sub-Saharan Africa. Two rebel organizations finally succeeded in overthrowing the regime: the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), gaining autonomy for Eritrea, and the TPLF (Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front). The latter had formed a coalition with closely controlled ethnic allies, called the EPRDF, ousted the Derg and seized governmental power. The OLF and the EPRDF had occasionally cooperated but experienced a greater number of distortions, clashes and political differences. When the EPRDF seized power, they included the OLF in the transitional government. Despite this cooperation at the political level, armed clashes continued, this time between the EPRDF and the OLF. In 1992, the OLF accused the EPRDF of irregularities in the preparations for the elections and withdrew from the transitional government. Violent clashes increased, and the EPRDF managed to defeat the OLF and demobilized their fighters by including them into the running demobilization program designed for the soldiers of the Derg army.¹

1 For the conflict overview, see Gilkes 1999; Makinda 1992; Matthies 1991; Pausewang 2009; Scherrer 1998; Schlee/Shongolo 1995; Vaughan 2003.

According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the war between the OLF and the government ended when low-intensity fighting under the threshold of an armed conflict was reached [WARENDUC=5]. This view is not in line with the assessment of the case-specific literature. Coletta et al (1996: 44) speak of a ‘defeat’ for the OLF and the capture of 21,200 OLF soldiers by the EPRDF; Vaughan (2013: 217) notes the “relatively rapid neutralizing of the bulk of its forces” [WARENDOS=4].

The war lasted 114 months [WARDUR=114] and left, according to the UCDP, at least 1,484 people dead [FATALUC=1000].² This number includes 364 victims of one-sided violence by the government against civilians.³ Sources we were able to locate as to the fatalities of Ethiopian wars do not give any account of the battle-related deaths in the war between the OLF and the government during 1983-1992 [FATALOS=n.d.].⁴ Since the OLF fought for the secession and autonomy of Oromia and did not aim at toppling the central government, only the population of the disputed territory is relevant here. The first general census carried out by the central government in 1984, one year after the war started, counted 12.4 million people as belonging to the ethnic group of Oromo [PREWARPO=12400000]. No data exists for the region of Oromia; at that time, there were no political unit comprising the majority of the Oromo population, one that is widely dispersed among other ethnic groups (Vaughan 2003: 286). According to this number and to estimations by the UCDP, 0.01% of the population died in this war [INTENSUC=0.01]. As no other sources about the death toll could be found, the war’s intensity according to other sources cannot be assessed [INTENSOS=n.d.].

The military balance at the end of war

The OLF forces were defeated by the EPRDF (Coletta et al 1996: 44; Vaughan 2003: 217). At that time, the majority of the OLF forces were encamped in accordance with a previous agreement between the EPRDF and the OLF. This agreement had provided for the encampment both of OLF forces and EPRDF troops in the region of Oromia until the regional elections. However, the OLF encamped and EPRDF did not, which resulted in a quick defeat of the remaining OLF forces as soon as they decided to withdraw from the government and return to armed resistance [VICTORY= -1].⁵

2 UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia, http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/gpcountry.php?id=55®ion>Select=1-Northern_Africa (31 Mar 2015).

3 As there were three active conflicts in Ethiopia at that time – namely about Eritrea, the central government and Oromia –, the 364 victims are only one third of the total number of victims of one-sided violence.

4 For information about the fatalities, mostly relating to the war between the EPRDF and the government and/or the war between the EPLF and the government, see Debiel 2008; Kozul-Wright/Forunato 2011; Matthies 1991.

5 Scherrer 1998: 56.

According to Cunningham et al. (2009), the OLF controlled parts of Oromia. Vaughan (2003: 217) also notes that the OLF had an extensive operational territory, although the term ‘operational territory’ does not imply a permanent civilian presence and implies that the OLF mostly fought against the Derg regime with guerrilla tactics. When the EPRDF seized governmental power in 1991 and the OLF became part of the transitional government, the OLF administered Dembi Dollo, an area in Western Wollega (Albin-Lackey 2005: 9). This territorial control was of a small scale but signified the civilian presence of the OLF. The EPRDF conducted a military campaign called ‘Peace and Democracy’ in order to take control of this area while the OLF was still in the government (Vaughan 2003: 217). The clashes resulting from this operation explain why the war continued even though the OLF was in the government. The OLF lost control over this territory with the encampment of its combatants prior to the elections in June 1992. According to an OLF leader, territorial control shrank to two small base areas as a result of the encampment [REBTERR= -1].⁶ After the fall of the Mengistu regime in 1991, the EPRDF was unable to immediately seize full control over the entire territory of Ethiopia and was first confined to the north and major towns (Schlee/Shongolo 1995: 10; Vaughan 2003: 216). Nevertheless, the central government held more territory compared to the OLF [MORETERR= -1].

The fighting capacity of the OLF was ‘low’ according to Cunningham et al. (2009). This judgment is in line with assessments by the case-specific literature, which ranks the OLF as the third-strongest insurgency against the Derg and therefore weaker than the TPLF/EPRDF and the Eritrean rebels EPLF [REBFIGHT= -1]. Due to the encampment of 15,000 of its roughly 20,000 troops in the summer of 1992, the OLF’s fighting capability was diminished considerably. Even though some of the OLF fighters managed to leave the camps and resume fighting, their forces were rapidly dispersed. 20,000 OLF-members and sympathizers were arrested by the government in 1992. Many fighters who escaped imprisonment went into hiding (Scherrer 1998: 31; 56-58). The OLF’s military force was “almost entirely neutralized” (Albin-Lackey 2005: 10). Although it is not clear how many of them were part of the military wing, it is evident that the OLF was unable to continue fighting in more than a few areas and in more than a sporadic manner [CONFIGHT= -1].

Needless to say, the collective leadership of the OLF was especially targeted through mass arrests. The majority of the political leadership was either detained or went into exile (Scherrer 1998: 31). As such, the OLF effectively did not have any functioning leadership at the end of war [LEADER= -1].

6 Scherrer 1998: 40.

The military balance at the end of the war shows the defeat of the OLF and the victory of the government [**WARBAL= -1**].

The military balance in the post-war period

After defeating the OLF, the government integrated former OLF combatants into the running demobilization program that it had designed for former Derg soldiers. OLF centers were created and 21,200 OLF ex-fighters were demobilized (Coletta et al 1994: 24; 45). In 1993, the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) were founded as the new state force (Stapleton 2013: 102). The IISS Military Yearbook only registers the ENDF from 1997 onwards. Until then, it registers the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF, the leading sub-organization of the EPRDF) and 10,000 to 15,000 members from the OLF as armed forces in Ethiopia. This information contradicts the assessment made by the case-specific literature and appears outdated (IISS 1992-1998). We therefore ignore this assessment and take 1993 as the first year of an existing state force, being that it was the founding year of the ENDF. There were no integration schemes for the OLF combatants. The ENDF undertook efforts to raise the number of Oromo and other ethnic groups within its ranks that were underrepresented in the first years of its existence.⁷ However, we do not find a sufficient connection between ethnicity and political positions that would infer that an Oromo in the army would be a sympathizer or even member of the OLF [**STATEFOR 1993-1997= -1**].⁸

While the majority of OLF fighters were encamped and demobilized, some members of the OLF succeeded in hiding and later rebuilt an armed resistance. An OLF leader later admitted that it took the OLF one year to regroup (Guutuma cited in Scherrer 1998: 53). In 1993, the OLF was completely dispersed and did not count as a separate force, whereas the government's new army did [**SEPFORCE 1993= -1**]. From 1994 on, the OLF resumed small-scale armed attacks that did not reach the threshold of war until 1998, illustrating that they successfully remobilized and had separate armed forces at their disposal [**SEPFORCE 1994-1997=0**].

We lack data concerning the number and equipment of the OLF troops. As we have already seen, the IISS estimations do not appear to reflect reality in this case [**TROOPS 1993=n.r., TROOPS 1994-1997=n.d.; ARMS 1993=n.r., ARMS 1994-1997=n.d.**].

When the OLF was defeated by the government, its remnant supporters were able to retreat into Somali and Kenyan territory “with relative impunity” (Gilkes 1999: 21). Moreover, they

7 <http://hornaffairs.com/en/2011/12/23/ethiopia-army-replaced-13-generals-and-303-colonels/> (15 Jan 2015).

8 Coletta et al 1996; Scherrer 1998: 52.

were clandestinely present in several areas in southern Oromia. Though these retreats were important for the later resumption of armed attacks in 1994, they did not meet our definition of controlled territory – the OLF did not show any civilian presence and remained confined to a hit-and-run tactics (Guutuma cited in Scherrer 1998: 53). The government, on the other hand, exercised control of the territory of Ethiopia and therefore controlled important territory [**TERRCON 1993-1997= -1**]. Since the OLF did not control territory, we also code the gain of territory and its vulnerability to be in favor of the government [**TERRWIN 1993-1997= -1; VULNERAB 1993-1997= -1**].

From 1993 to 1998, there were no peacekeeping troops in Ethiopia [**PEACKEEP 1993-1997=n.r.**]. None of the permanent members of the UN Security Council was likely to intervene in case of a renewed armed conflict [**P5ALLY 1993-1997=n.r.**].

While the first post-war year mirrored the complete defeat of the OLF with a value of -1 [**POSTBAL 1993= -1**], the situation for the OLF improved slightly with the regrouping of its guerrilla forces [**POSTBAL 1994-1997= -0.8**]. This resulted in an overall military imbalance to the advantage of the government [**BALANCE 1993= -1, BALANCE 1994-1997= -0.9**].

Economy

As we do not have data about Oromia’s gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in current USD, we report the population and GDP figures for Ethiopia.⁹ The GDP fell in 1994, recovered slightly and then dropped again in the year of the renewed war.

Table 1: GDP per capita in current USD

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population (total)</i>	<i>GDP per capita</i>
1993	49,743,883	166
1994	55,199,953	126
1995	57,023,519	134
1996	58,815,116	145
1997	60,584,273	142

The scale of compromise after the civil war

In 1991, after the EPRDF had won the war against the Derg and a transitional government was established that included representatives from several ethnic groups (Bihonegn 2014: 5-6; Makinda 1992: 17). The OLF joined this transitional government and gained four ministries; however, its members left when disputes over participation in regional elections escalated in June 1992 (Gilkes 1999: 28; Schlee/Schongolo 1995: 11). Beneath the OLF, there were

⁹ <http://data.worldbank.org/country/ethiopia> (27 Feb 2015).

several other organizations claiming to represent the interests of the Oromo: among them was the OPDO (Oromo People's Democratic Organization), which was created by the EPRDF in 1990 and formed part of its alliance (Vaughan 2003: 217). The OLF never recognized the OPDO as a legitimate representative of the Oromo people, but rather as a puppet organization of the EPRDF (Lencho Latta, speaker of the OLF, cited in Scherrer 1998: 103).¹⁰ Lacking any serious opponents due to the withdrawal of the OLF, the OPDO won the regional elections in 1992 and formed the regional government of Oromia (Tareke 2009: 109). The same happened in the 1994 national elections. This means that the EPRDF controlled this region through its sub-organization [**GOVERN 1993-1997= -1**].

The OLF had no veto power [**VETO 1993-1997= -1; VETOSAT 1993-1997=n.r.**]. It was likewise not allowed to compete in elections. Its existence as a legal political party endured from mid-1991 to mid-1992 (Scherrer 1998: 41). After that, OLF members and even sympathizers were systematically arrested, killed or “disappeared” (Gilkes 1999: 36). This harassment does not only apply to OLF-members, but to any political organization of the Oromo except the OPDO. As Siegfried Pausewang (2009: 3) points out, “any indication of opposition can be life dangerous”. Furthermore, the regional election in 1992 as well as the first national elections in 1995 were neither free nor fair according to the International Community (Gudina 2009: 119; Tetzlaff 2009: 107). This is to the advantage of the government [**ELECT 1993-1997= -1**].

In the early days of its struggle, the OLF did not take a clear stance towards the question whether it wanted Oromia to be an independent state or a federal state within Ethiopia. For example, the OLF Program in 1976 formulated the aim of a People's Democratic Republic of Oromia “as an independent or a federated state within a multinational democratic society” (cited in Jalata 2010: 17). When the OLF was part of the transitional government, it demanded a referendum on Oromia's independence (Lencho Latta, speaker of the OLF, cited in Scherrer 1998: 104) and committed itself to the Transitional Charter that proclaimed the “self-determination of all the peoples” as a “governing principle” (Transitional Charter 1991: 1). We consider the independence of Oromia as the maximum demand of the OLF, as the quest for a referendum still contained this option. It should be noted that the independence of Oromia would have had severe consequences for the state of Ethiopia, as the Oromia region is the largest region in the country, encompasses Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, and accounts

10 According to Sarah Vaughan (2002: 222), a proverb circulated in Oromia at that time, saying that “behind every OPDO-member stands a Tigrayan with a Kalashnikov”.

for more than 50% of the crop production in Ethiopia.¹¹ Therefore, the independence of Oromia was clearly not in the interest of the central government, even though the EPRDF claimed to support the right to self-determination. Neither a referendum nor the independence of Oromia was realized, which was to the advantage of the government [EXBORDER 1993-1997= -1]. In 1992, Ethiopia was restructured into new regional subunits according to their ethnic composition. The OLF participated in this process, as it was at that time part of the government, and expressed satisfaction with the new regional boundaries (Lencho Latta, speaker of the OLF, cited in Scherrer 1998: 104). Therefore, this item lost its potential for conflict already during the wartime [INBORDER 1993-1997=n.r.].

As already mentioned, the OLF also considered the establishment of Oromia as a federal regional state within a democratic Ethiopia as a viable option (Vaughan 2003: 178). This demand was clearly a conflict item during the rule of the Derg. The EPRDF, as the main author of the Transitional Charter, claimed to have the same position concerning the self-government of the regions. However, with the suppression of any anti-EPRDF forces prior to the elections in 1992 and 1994 (Tetzlaff 2009: 17) and the installment of the OPDO as regional government, the government kept political control over Oromia despite the allegedly federal organization of the country [COMPETEN 1993-1997= -1].

Despite a leftist rhetoric against the ‘capitalist world system’ and the ‘imperial state system’ which supported the regime of the EPRDF, no concrete demands of the OLF could be found concerning the economic organization of Oromia or Ethiopia [ECONOMY 1993-1997=n.r.].¹²

Beneath the political self-determination, the recognition of the Oromo culture and language was one of the main demands of the OLF. During the war, the OLF even produced books and teaching material in Oromo language (Scherrer 1998: 45). This demand for cultural recognition of the ethnic group of the Oromo was denied during the Derg regime. The language in schools and all administrative units was Amharic, which resulted in a disadvantage for those who learned Afaan Oromo as their mother tongue. This policy changed with the transitional government. Reforms for the recognition of the different languages and cultures of Ethiopia were partly prepared by OLF ministers while they were still in office, but mostly implemented by OPDO officials when the OLF left the government (Scherrer 1998: 48-50). After the withdrawal of the OLF, the government would have been in a position to

11 <http://www.ethiopia.gov.et/de/stateoromia> (31 Mar 2015).

12 See Oromo Liberation Front: The Intensification of attack on Oromo peoplehood and rights. The Violence of the Tigrayan ethnocratic state and the tyranny of globalization, Online article from Oromia speaks, 10: 2, no date, http://www.oromoliberationfront.org/Publications/OS_Vol10_2_Intensification.htm (20 Mar 2015).

ignore this demand, but it nevertheless implemented it. Furthermore, the EPRDF undertook more general efforts to reflect the ethnic diversity of the country in the army and other central positions (Coletta et al 1996: 44). During the first post-war years, even Oromo officials referred positively to these reforms (Scherrer 1998: 48-50). This optimistic assessment vanished after several years and contemporary literature lays out the persisting cultural repression of the Oromo (Hassen 2009; Pausewang 2009). Despite these assessments, we see a substantial improvement in the promotion of ethnic diversity compared to the beginning of the war, at least during the first post-war years. Concerning the specific demands of the OLF, both sides renounced fully enforcing their aims: the OLF renounced being the actor to implement these policies but still welcomed them; the EPRDF implemented these policies, though the pressure to do so waned after the OLF left the government [**SPECPRO 1993-1997=0**].

There were no other central conflict items in the war [**ISSUE 1993-1997=n.r.**; **ISSUE2 1993-1997=n.r.**]. No new demands emerged in the post-war period [**NEWCON 1993-1997=n.r.**; **NEWCON2 1993-1997=n.r.**]. The OLF did not gain concrete benefits from the compromise about the recognition of Oromo culture, while the government presumably gained slightly more popularity among the Oromo population with this policy [**BENEFIT 1993-1997= -1**; **BENEFIT2 1993-1997=n.r.**].

The overall scale of compromise shows that the government was clearly in a more favorable position [**COMPROM 1993-1997= -0.86**].

The stability of peace

In 1994, the OLF had recovered and reorganized in exile. It resumed fighting with a hit-and-run strategy, first on a very low scale. As there were no battle-related deaths in 1996 or 1997, these clashes do not constitute a renewed war, but a low-scale armed conflict. In 1998, however, the OLF again became active. In 1999, they took advantage of the fact that the army of Ethiopia was heavily engaged in the intrastate conflict with Eritrea and started an invasion from Somalia that resulted in bitter fighting against the government. [**SAMEWAR=1**; **DATESAME=1 Jan 1998**]. Until then, we count 61 months of no or low-scale activity in this dyad [**PEACMON1=60**].

Furthermore, in May 1998, the government engaged in an intrastate war with the EPLF of Eritrea (Abbink 1998: 552). Additionally, in 2004, another conflict between the government and the ONLF (Ogaden National Liberation Front) reached the threshold of war. The conflict with the OLF was the first to re-escalate [**ANYWAR=1**; **DATEANY=1 Jan 1998**;

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13 http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdata/gpcountry.php?id=55®ionSelect=1-Northern_Africa# (15 Jan 2015).