

# IDEOLOGY AND ELITE CONFLICTS



## AUTOPSY OF THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION

MESSAY KEBEDE

Ideology and Elite Conflicts  
*Autopsy of the Ethiopian Revolution*

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## Abbreviations

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| CELU   | Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions                            |
| COPWE  | Commission to Organize the Party of the Workers of Ethiopia        |
| ELF    | Eritrean Liberation Front  |
| EPLF   | Eritrean People's Liberation Front                                 |
| EPRP   | Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party                             |
| MEISON | Mela Ethiopia Socialist Neqenaye (All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement) |
| OAU    | Organization of African Unity                                      |
| OLF    | Oromo Liberation Front   |
| PMAC   | Provisional Military Administrative Council                        |
| TPLF   | Tigrean People's Liberation Front                                  |
| WPE    | Workers' Party of Ethiopia   |

## Note on Ethiopian Names

Since the custom in Ethiopia does not use the system of family names, the book identifies Ethiopians by their first name rather than their last name. The latter, which is the first name of the father, is not used to identify a person; it is simply an addition to the real name, namely, the given first name.

## Preface

While the concept of revolution ordinarily fills us with images of the masses protesting and clashing with government forces, this book moves the focus to elites and their conflicts. The change of emphasis assigns to this preface the initial task of specifying the notion of "elite," given the widespread practice of a loose usage of the term.

I use the term "elite" in distinction to "class" to signify the competition for the control of state power by forces that are not defined by the ownership of economic assets. True, a ruling class is an elite group in that it controls power and enjoys status and prestige that are uncommon, but it owes its high social standing to its ownership of economic means. However, in Ethiopia and many Third World countries, elite groups control power and enjoy uncommon lifestyles without having the direct possession of economic means. Such is the case with military, bureaucratic, or technocratic elites. The fact about such elites is that the control of state power, especially of its military and security forces, gives them a privileged access to economic wealth. Understandably, such elites compete over the exclusive control of state power, which they use to extract hefty revenues from an economic system of which they are not productive members. It is with this distinction in mind that this study often applies the term "class" to Ethiopia's traditional nobility, given that its power was the direct emanation of land ownership. The word "elite" is reserved to military groups, officials of political movements (including representatives of ethnonationalist or religious movements), the intelligentsia, the bureaucratic stratum, etc.

The preponderance of elites, political elites in particular, over economic classes is a direct consequence of a modernization process that was primarily introduced, as prescribed by the colonial paradigm of modernization, by externally induced super-structural means (to use a Marxist term) rather than through an internal process of social changes. According to the paradigm, modern economic classes and productive systems were to be progressively drawn from the institution of modern governments run by Western-educated elites, imprudently

baptized agents of modernization. Because externally induced super-structural changes preceded internal evolutions, a social system that institutionalized the preponderance of noneconomic elites came into being, with the consequence that the economic apparatus turned into a ruling instrument of political elites. Accordingly, the goal of such elites is not to facilitate the growth of production and exchange; rather, it is to subsume the economic system to the political purpose of retaining state power—essentially by using the repressive forces of the modern state—and extracting resources to support their privileged status.

This book maintains that the subordination of economic modernization to the interests of political elites accurately defines modern Ethiopia. Though the country defeated all the challenges to its existence for many centuries, it found itself in an existential quagmire subsequent to a skewed encounter with modernity. At first the misfired modernization fostered a severe conflict between modernized elites and a traditional class defended by an autocratic system, the outcome of which was the overthrow of the political system by a revolutionary uprising. Unsurprisingly, the violent nature of the conflict favored the faction of the military elite that advocated the radicalization of the Revolution. However, no sooner had the military elite stabilized the movement by the institution of a repressive and intolerant system than it faced an even bloodier confrontation with ethnonationalist forces. Among the many consequences of this confrontation, the most salient are the defeat of the military regime, the secession of Eritrea, and the establishment of an ethnic federalism that is nowhere near lessening the confrontation of elite forces for hegemony.

To theorize a social movement as complex, massive, entangled, and eventful as a social revolution is a Herculean task that imposes modesty on the findings of this book. Moreover, whatever the thesis and the explanation, a theory of revolution cannot be anything other than a hindsight reconstruction, since to say otherwise would be to assume that events were predictable even before they actually happened. If anything, human history is a creative process; therefore, it defies any deductive claim before the actual occurrence of events. The best a theory of revolution can do is to attempt a retrospective construction after the fact.

Those who question the value of a reconstructive view should keep in mind that the purpose of a theoretical work cannot be to discourse on things that have already occurred, given that what has happened cannot be redone or undone. By contrast, the future is in front of us: it is not yet done and is given to us as something that we can fashion. Is it not reasonable, then, to assume that the interest of a theoretical work that reconstructs the past lies in its possible contribution to the shaping of the future?

The future appears as a determined outcome when people are unable to set their lives in perspective. Each time people fail to extract themselves from the present—that is, to step back from what is currently occurring—they condemn themselves to react mechanically to events, thus rendering themselves incapable of developing choices and acting accordingly.

Insofar as to explain the past is both to uncover and streamline the hidden forces that determine history, a theoretical work restores the detachment and therefore the freedom that people need to engage the future rationally instead of reacting impulsively. Indeed, a rational reappropriation objectifies the past, and thus emancipates the future from unconscious forces, thereby inviting people to evolve from passive to active agents by presenting the future as an object of choice, and not as an outcome of an engulfing necessity.

Bearing all this in mind, I ask you, the reader, to judge this work by how well it exposes and exorcises the demons of the past and how zealously its therapeutic value encourages a fresh perspective for the future. What best protects against the famous saying that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" is a remembrance that liberates people from the hidden forces that control them, thereby changing them for the better.

My belief is that the depiction of Ethiopia's modern history in terms of elite conflicts unravels the forces hidden in revolutionary and ethnonationalist ideologies and suggests the only way by which these conflicts can be geared toward a constructive path, namely, through democratic arbitration based on the principle of sovereignty of the people. Only when as free electors people assume the power of arbitration can Ethiopia find a nonviolent and inclusive method of resolving conflicts. What is detrimental is not the clash of interests, but the fact that the winner becomes both judge and party owing to the absence of an overarching authority with the exclusive right to settle political disputes.

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## Controversies over the Nature of the Ethiopian Social Change

The widespread social protest that resulted in the overthrow of Ethiopia's imperial regime in 1974 was soon followed by a series of radical and deep-going social changes that heralded the implementation of a socialist policy. Nevertheless, despite the unprecedented changes that took place, scholars do not agree on the true nature of the social transformation of Ethiopia. Those who speak of a genuine socialist revolution clash with those who denounce counterrevolutionary digressions. Some maintain that the transformations are minor against a background of overwhelming continuity. Another smaller group insists that socialism was used as a smokescreen for the implementation of state capitalism. Let us review briefly their main arguments for the purpose of getting a sense of the theoretical challenges that the Ethiopian transformations pose to existing theories of revolution.

### The Ethiopian Revolution as a Classic Case

Christopher Clapham, a long-time student of Ethiopian politics, is among those who maintain that Ethiopia has gone through a genuine socialist revolution under the military regime known as the Derg.<sup>1</sup> He criticizes Western scholars, especially those with leftist creeds, for literally ignoring Ethiopia and its sweeping socialist revolution. "Despite the high level of recent interest in revolutionary socialist development strategies in Africa, and indeed in the Third World generally, the case of Ethiopia has been very largely neglected," he writes.<sup>2</sup> The neglect is inexcusable given the "consistency and determination" with which the military regime has implemented a development strategy thoroughly inspired by Marxism-Leninism.<sup>3</sup>

To show that a genuine, determined effort of socialist development was launched in Ethiopia, Clapham reiterates the various socialist measures that the Derg took, such as the nationalization of all rural and urban lands, industries, and financial establishments, and the creation of mass-based organizations, such as peasant and urban dwellers' associations. Not only was this a genuine effort to apply socialism, but it was also fairly successful, as opposed to so many regimes in Africa that claimed to be revolutionary while being either ideologically ambivalent or unable to effect radical measures. In short, the Ethiopian regime has implemented "a classic Marxist strategy of development, sincerely and fairly efficiently."<sup>4</sup>

Clapham's analysis is backed by Crawford Young who, as a scholar quite familiar with African developments, could not but emphasize the exceptional commitment of the Ethiopian regime to the ideology and development policy of socialism. During the 1960s and 1970s, many African regimes—even military ones—claimed to be socialist. Such were the cases of Benin, Congo-Brazzaville, Madagascar, Tanzania, Guinea, and Somalia, to name a few. Yet none of them has implemented changes remotely comparable to the staggering transformations of the Ethiopian social fabric. It is true that regimes that had an earnest commitment to the socialist ideology had appeared in Africa, as in Mozambique and Angola; however, such regimes were established as a result of anti-colonial struggles targeting the end of foreign rule. Unlike the Ethiopian case, these were not the outcome of internal class confrontations causing the overthrow of a traditional ruling elite, nor were their social transformations comparable to those accomplished by Ethiopia's military regime. According to Crawford, fully aware of the contrast of the Ethiopian case with other African regimes that claimed a similar ideological allegiance, "Soviet as well as Western observers have suggested that it is the only true African revolution to date; others that claim this designation, they suggest, are in reality mere national liberation movements."<sup>5</sup>

To emphasize to what extent the ideological consistency and the magnitude of the transformations deserve a serious study, two scholars who have investigated the Ethiopian Revolution closely do not hesitate to write that the "revolution was reminiscent not of the recent upsurges in the Third World but of the classic revolutions of Europe—France in 1789 and the February 1917 revolution in Russia."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, all the basic ingredients that single out the classical cases of the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions are manifest in the Ethiopian Revolution. As in the classical revolutions, the Ethiopian transformation displays: (1) the momentum of class struggle resulting in the overthrow of a landed nobility and its imperial state; (2) the complete change of the social system through a radical and sweeping nationalization of the means of production; (3) deep alterations in the structure of the state and its ideological configuration; and (4) a shift in Ethiopia's international alignment from the West to the East. The change, thus, was both total and drastic.

In terms of violence, too, the Ethiopian Revolution does not pale in comparison with the great revolutions of France, Russia, and China. Confirming those

scholars who readily define revolution by violent changes, the unfolding of the Ethiopian upheaval has changed the society into a battlefield strewn with untold human and material destruction. The death toll was so enormous that one scholar writes, perhaps with a bit of exaggeration:

History offers few examples of revolutions that have devoured their own children with such voraciousness and so much cruelty. It can be estimated that, of ten civilians who had actively worked for a radical transformation of Ethiopia, only one escaped arrest, imprisonment, torture, execution or assassination. The revolution swallowed the whole of the young generation of Ethiopian intellectuals.<sup>7</sup>

In attempting to analyze the reasons why Western scholars paid little attention to the great social significance and theoretical importance of the Ethiopian Revolution, Clapham finds circumstantial reasons, including the limited familiarity of Western scholars with Ethiopian realities and the difficulty in attaining accurate information about the country. Also, social cataclysms due to prolonged civil wars and recurring famines have eclipsed the extent and depth of the social changes. According to Clapham, though, the main reason is the "persistent reluctance on the part of Western Marxists to regard Ethiopia as a case of 'genuine' revolutionary socialist development."<sup>8</sup> How else is one to explain the neglect of Ethiopia's transformation when leftist circles in the West make so much fuss about revolutions in such countries as Algeria, Libya, Mozambique, etc., where the extent of the changes comes nowhere near the Ethiopian mutation? The main reason does not seem to be lack of interest, but rather misinformation leading to the belief that what was occurring in Ethiopia was not a radical revolution. In addition, many Western Marxists were already sympathetic to the Eritrean cause of independence, and so they based their opinion on what Eritrean insurgents were saying about the Ethiopian Revolution.

Are the above reasons enough to explain the little interest of Western scholars in Ethiopia and its transformation? Scholars nurturing doubts about the socialist nature of the Ethiopian transformation would suggest that Clapham is not telling the whole story. Many Western scholars, including Marxist ones, became suspicious and unconvinced of revolutionary developments in Ethiopia because of the history of the Ethiopian Revolution. The military regime seized power and established itself as an absolute authority by virtually destroying the civilian left, which was the revolutionary force of the country. The annihilation of revolutionaries prevented the social upheaval from going in the direction of genuine radical changes. Though transformations have occurred, these transformations do not deserve the name of socialism since their most visible outcome was the extermination of leftist forces. Such a regime, the opponents say, is no more, no less than "a fascist military dictatorship."<sup>9</sup>

The fact of a military dictatorship claiming to implement a genuine socialist program was already enough to trigger suspicion. Apart from exterminating the revolutionaries, the members of the military clique that controlled power did not have a prior ideological commitment to socialism; nor did they show any ten-

dency to support popular struggles. Repression of popular mobilizations and demands has been their most consistent attitude from the start. In light of this repressive policy, one can safely maintain that the effected changes, whatever their magnitude, cannot "transform a conventional military force into a revolutionary vanguard capable of leading a quasi-feudal society toward socialism."<sup>10</sup>

Besides questioning the socialist commitment of the military, many scholars have also challenged Clapham's qualification of the Ethiopian Revolution as a fairly successful experience. The Revolution did not register outcomes that match the realizations of the great classical revolutions. Instead of growth, for instance, the country underwent a sharp economic decline, causing a general deterioration in conditions of life. The reorganization of the political structure did not produce a stronger central state either; on the contrary, the state was so weakened that it progressively lost control of some important regions and was finally defeated by insurgents from these liberated regions. These failures revealed the Revolution's inability to efficiently mobilize the working people for the purpose of defending the Revolution and achieving higher production outputs, especially in the agricultural sector. Thus, they attest to the gap that developed between the masses and the military leadership.

Let us not forget that a characteristic deficiency also hampered social protests in Ethiopia from the get-go. When the urban uprisings exploded, no political organization existed in Ethiopia that was capable of leading the protests. The popular protests were largely spontaneous and unorganized. Unlike other large upheavals, no revolutionary party with a clear program and ideological commitment assumed the leadership of the social unrest. This absence of a prior organizational and ideological leadership casts doubt on the revolutionary inspiration of the social protests. According to one author:

The Ethiopian revolution was not a movement with a clear political goal trying to implement a given programme, but a series of attempts by weakly organised groups acting out of basically corporate interests to influence the course of events in a way that suited their needs and aspirations.<sup>11</sup>

To the extent that the leadership shortcoming relates to the important issue of organization and ideological commitment, this gives substance to the idea that the military rulers talked about socialism but implemented a different policy. Once suspicion is raised about the real goal of the radical measures of the Derg, the door is wide open to views that tend to deny the revolutionary nature of the Ethiopian transformations.

### **The Ethnonationalist Position**

Chief among the detractors of the Ethiopian transformations are Oromo scholars with ethnonationalist views. They regard Ethiopia as a colonial empire, established by the Amhara feudal class after Emperor Menilik conquered and subjugated non-Amhara peoples during the scramble for Africa. These ethnonationalist scholars purport that, though the main social problem that precipitated the

overthrow of the imperial regime was the abject fate of the subjugated non-Amhara peoples, the Revolution did not bring about their liberation. On the contrary, the state was further centralized in the name of socialism and made the sole owner of the resources of these peoples by a radical policy of nationalization. What is more, the Amharization of the "colonized" peoples was intensified: enhancing previous practices, the new military regime was "determined to Ethiopianize the colonized nations completely by destroying their culture, identity, and peoplehood through its so-called modernization policies."<sup>12</sup>

The conclusion of this type of analysis is that the socialist nomenclature of the military regime is anything but true. Though the language changed through the adoption of a different ideology, the imperial practices of Amharization and expropriation were actually intensified. In other words, "under Derg control, there have been no changes that constitute transformation."<sup>13</sup> As a result of the radical measures, the state was neither decentralized nor taken away from the control of the Amhara elite. Still less did these measures allow the "colonized" peoples to take control of their lives and resources. Through the omnipotence of the state, made possible by the socialist ideology, the Amhara elite was able to reach a degree of control and dominance that surpassed by far what the imperial regime had achieved. Clearly, the adoption of the popular ideology of socialism was a device to fool the dominated peoples into believing that the time of equality and freedom had come, when in reality the radical measures were simply consolidating the "colonial" state.

The problem with the ethnonationalist position is that the idea of mere continuity is simply not credible; too much has changed in Ethiopia for this to be the case. To assume that the radical measures have simply consolidated the imperial state is to fly in the face of the structural changes that have altered all the features of the country. The overthrow of the monarchy and of the landed aristocracy is a structural change that seriously undermines the argument according to which the Amhara rule has been strengthened more than ever before. To quote Teshale Tibebu, "the revolution destroyed the power base of the ruling class of the Ge'ez civilization" and its "most important outcome . . . was the rise of the people of the South to public visibility" following the emancipation of southern peasants from tenancy, thanks to the nationalization of all rural land.<sup>14</sup> The political landscape has also been altered significantly by the rise of a new multiethnic elite in place of the exclusive aristocracy.

As to the accusation that state centralization has been enhanced, the argument cannot be used to discredit the revolutionary developments of the country. History shows that centralization has been a consistent goal of revolutionaries, who used state power to consolidate the national territory and effect radical transformations. As Clapham reminds us, "the central goal of revolutionary leaders . . . is to take over the state structure established by their predecessors and to use it, suitably adapted, as an agency for economic development, national integration, and the consolidation of their own power."<sup>15</sup> In this regard, Ethiopia is not a discrepant case: for Ethiopian revolutionaries, too, the centralized use of the state meant the consolidation of national unity through the elimination of

class barriers and the promotion of economic development and ideological uniformity. One can question the validity of the strategy to achieve economic and democratic advancements but not its conformity to revolutionary conceptions.

### The Fascism of the Derg

Closely related to the ethnonationalist stand is the position of those scholars who tie the revolutionary measures of the Derg to the needs of a dictatorial rule. Because such scholars are most sensitive to the elimination of the civilian left, they readily characterize the military regime as a fascistic and counterrevolutionary rule. Two prominent representatives of this line of thinking are John Markakis and Nega Ayele, who write:

Discarding pretences, the military government used massive violence against the vanguard of the popular movement; that is, the radical intelligentsia, labour activists and students. In trying to blunt its spearhead, the regime was undermining the movement and was performing, therefore, a counter-revolutionary task.<sup>16</sup>

Markakis maintains that popular uprisings with legitimate grievances had initiated a revolutionary process. But the rise of the Derg and the subsequent suppression and elimination of revolutionary forces stopped the process and morphed it into counterrevolution. The main reason for the Derg to seize power was to prevent the revolutionary forces from capturing state power. For this purpose, the Derg used fascistic methods of suppression, but it also appropriated some of the demands of the revolutionaries (such as land reform), to gain legitimacy.

The main leftist opposition to the Derg, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), fully endorsed the counterrevolutionary role of the Derg. The adoption of a fascist policy was necessary to monopolize power so as to reverse the tide of history. *Challenge*, the Journal of the World-Wide Union of Ethiopian Students, described the Derg as "the fascist military junta that slyly encroached the seizure of state power to itself and established a counter-revolutionary regime totally inconceivable to the fundamental interests and aspirations of the masses."<sup>17</sup> The implementation of some populist measures concealed the real purpose of the Derg, and so eased the reversal of the social trend. These measures gave legitimacy to the Derg while strengthening its grip on the country. The real purpose of the policy of nationalizations is thus quite clear: the Derg justified and achieved absolute power on everything in the name of the popular ideology of socialism, thereby concealing its counterrevolutionary agenda.

The major drawback of the position denouncing fascism and counterrevolution is its implausibility. For one thing, the measures taken by the Derg were totally uncharacteristic of a fascistic policy. As one previous member of the EPRP concedes, "fascism was applied to the Ethiopian situation by superficial analogy and without any analytical reasoning. It did not carry much convic-

tion.”<sup>18</sup> For another, the thesis of counterrevolution creates the impression that the Derg squashed an imminent socialist revolution. Such an assumption is highly questionable, and even more questionable is the belief that revolution could have occurred without the Derg. The civilian left was too weak and too divided into rival groups to be able to institute a government of its own. Moreover, without the Derg, it would have been difficult to overthrow the imperial regime, and even harder to prevent a conservative military coup, there being no doubt that, at that time, “the left had no center of leadership and no central organ to coordinate the struggle.”<sup>19</sup>

### Socialism as Nationalism

The uncertain commitment of the military to the ideology they professed, as opposed to the resilience of their nationalist allegiance, has led some authors to conclude that socialism was a cover-up for a nationalist policy. More than the commitment to social equality, the military were nationalists, both by profession and personal conviction. In effect, the primary declaration of the Derg expressed a resounding nationalist commitment and deliberately avoided any reference to socialism. As a scholar notes:

Although the *Dirgue* was from 1975 onwards to parade itself to the outside world as the champion of Marxism-Leninism in Africa, it is vital to remember that its *coup d'état* was based on a solid bourgeois and nationalist platform, epitomized in its slogan *Ethiopia Tikdem*, or “Ethiopia First.”<sup>20</sup>

And nothing of what the Derg said and accomplished later on ever questioned the initial nationalist stand. The nationalization of all lands and industries falls under the category of consistent nationalism pursuing a radical policy of integration and nation-building. Moreover, it endows the state with sweeping power, the very kind of power necessary to initiate economic development through “the formation of State Capitalism.”<sup>21</sup> The socialism of the Derg was a disguise; in reality the Derg established state capitalism, which of course required the elimination of the civilian left.

The main weakness of the thesis of socialism as a cover-up to promote state capitalism is that it creates a false dichotomy between nationalism and socialism. The story behind the conversion of many Third World intellectuals to socialism assigns great weight to the frustration of nationalist feelings. Many intellectuals became Marxist radicals because socialism appeared to them as the most consistent nationalist stand. It is not clear why the young officers who took control of the state would have to fake socialism to promote a nationalist agenda when the two ideologies have so much in common. Another weakness of the theory is the lack of credibility. The very association of the Derg with capitalism, of any kind, sounds discordant. Neither the petty bourgeoisie, nor the merchants, nor even state bureaucrats have gained any appreciable advantages from the measures taken by the Derg. None of them had the slightest hint that some form of capitalism was being built in Ethiopia. By contrast, the Derg’s nationali-