

Ethiopia: A Revolution Drowned by Wars and Famine

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Introduction - Background to the Revolution

Ethiopia as a country has been isolated from the rest of the African continent; possessing an old civilization that virtually remained unchanged for centuries. Because of its peculiar nature, Ethiopia was said to be in Africa rather than of Africa. Until 1974, some of the peculiar features were: its imperial structure historically traceable to King Solomon through the biblical Queen of Sheba; the economy based essentially on agriculture with coffee as the main cash crop and, the land tenure system was essentially feudal. As many as nine out of ten Ethiopians formed or depended on farming activities for livelihood. It is therefore inevitable that whatever policy was adopted by the government on agriculture, would affect a large majority of the people. The antiquated land tenure system had frustrated modernization for a very long time.

Agrarian reform was therefore a matter of overriding importance and of legal and technical complexity. It could hardly be tackled by any single individual or by the best intention of sages. Thus, the contributions of Emperor Haile Selassie to the land reform efforts up to the eve of the 1974 coup becomes very essential. His intentions were good, but they failed to achieve the desire end because of great dependence on the vested interest of the church and landowners whose representative dominated parliament. The parliamentarians have a very great stake in land, thus land reform legislation has very slim of getting through and proposed bills suffered amendments and unnecessary delay.

¹Details of obligations on land have changed at times, new nobility have emerged to some extentand the power of the emperor has fluctuated *vis-a-vis* the nobility on no occasion, however, was any attempt made to alter the hierarchical feudal structure arising from the control of land

This has been the major cog in the wheel of economic progress in the country and responsible for mass poverty. In 1972/73, Ethiopia ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world. It had a per capita income of less than eighty U.S. dollars (US \$ 80). Between 1960 and 1970, the annual growth rate of the GNP was estimated at 2.8 percent compared

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with 3.6 percent and 7.1 percent for Kenya and Tanzania respectively for the same period ².

In a country where the cream of the population depends on agriculture, one would have expected a positive encouragement from government policies towards the agricultural sector. This was not the case, in 1972/73, the government budgeted only 2.5 percent of the current expenditure to agriculture, contrasted with 24 percent to defence and internal order i.e. 57 percent to areas where effectiveness is difficult to quantify.

The industrial sector of the economy could also be examined briefly by taking a look at the plight of the urban wage earners. The average annual earnings per employee in manufacturing industry did not grow as fast as gross output per employee - the former was growing at an annual rate of 5.0 per cent while the latter was growing at 12.1 percent. Thus, employers were getting more doubt of the employees than they were actually due for. Table 1 explains the situation better.

Table 1: Earnings and Output in Manufacturing Industry in Ethiopia

Annual	Average Earning/ Employee	Gross Output/ Employee	Fixed Assets/ Employee	Number of Employees
	\$	\$	\$	
1966/67	Eth. 1,102	Eth. 8,052	Eth. 7,720	44,349
1968/69	1,223	9,867	7,520	47,332
1969/70	1,264	11,096	7,550	48,903
1970/71	1,296	12,199	7,182	51,312
1970/71	* 1,3501	* 12,133	* 7,143	* 51,588
1971/72	1,382	12,931	6,772	53,319
1972/73	1,461	14,092	7,114	54,818
Average Annual Change (%)	5.0	12.1		4.2

Source: Adapted from Ethiopia Government Statistical abstract, 1971, 1972 and 1975.

* Revised figures for 1970/71

This table show an increase in Gross Output during the period between 1968/69 and 1972/73 despite the fact that there was a decrease in fixed assets per employee during the same period. The only partial increase or redistribution of income prior to 1973/74 was done in favour of the educated and skilled personnel with increased recruitment at the middle levels. Most of these people were those who were privileged to be in

higher schools in both Ethiopia and abroad. The selections for placement were influenced by the authority. It is also important to note that up till early 1970s, employment in manufacturing never rose to much above 50,000 out of an estimated total of 400,000 in urban productive employment. Furthermore, in order to maintain a cheap docile labour force as an incentive to foreign investors, the imperial regime forbade labour organization until 1962. The foregoing was the picture of the economic woes of the masses of Ethiopia before the 1974 coup.

In a similar way, the political organization in Ethiopia under Haile Selassie had been greatly influenced by feudalism. Even though Selassie promised to govern Ethiopia by law and transformation of the political system into a "Limited monarchy", the influence of feudalism had been persistent.³ Thus, the position of the majority of the peasants was only a little better than that of slaves. The Ethiopian case might be one of the reasons why Kwame Nkrumah described feudalism as a refinement from slavery.⁴ Selassie agreed no less on the evils of feudalism when he said "so long as the feudal system continued, no real stability or social progress could be looked for".⁵ But in spite of the emperor's assertion, feudalism continued and he wielded an enormous personal influence on the political scene apart from the fact that he was one of the largest land owners in the country.

Franchise was indirectly limited because of strict qualifications⁶ for candidacy in elections to the Chamber of deputies. Nomination for example, requires a minimum of fifty signatures on a petition, payment of a deposit of Eth. \$ 500 a literacy test as well as the condition for nomination that is, being a resident and owning a minimum of Eth. \$ 2,000 worth of moveable property. Besides, there was also a formidable cost of fighting elections with an average of Eth. \$ 2,000. These conditions could not be met by the rural population in the country - side and thus only the land owners or their nominees were able to contest elections. Land gave power and position and these in turn provided more power. However, things began to fall apart when in 1973/74 the approach to land distribution proved grossly inadequate. The famine in Wollo province gave a deadly blow to the systems of land tenure. High rate of inflation also worsened the situation. At that point, the peasants who were tenants on their farmlands were also in very deplorable condition with many repressive laws to back up the actions of the land owners. Politics and government had a direct link with land ownership and Emperor decision was binding on the whole political system.

Socially, the life of the common man was blurred by some of the factors noted above. At the early stages of Selassie's rule, he was very free and accessible to his subjects but this changed with time. The governors of the provinces and those in other administrative positions made life unbearable for the citizens. Even in the administration justice, the common

man was hopeless. Judges were accused of widespread corruption and also delays that worked against the interest of the common man. A government sponsored report on Ada district in 1969 showed the pathetic situation common to many districts:

Deliberately or otherwise, public officials spent months to decide minor questions and years to settle major disputes ... it cost people to get anything done in many government offices, because one has to pay almost every official if one is not to be kept waiting for hours to see an official...corruption of a serious sort is reported to be ramparts among local policemen ... who do not prove worthy of the trust placed in them...The characteristic solution to these problems is to avoid ... these public agencies, especially the court and the police, for they create more problems than they solve.⁷

The police and the courts were neck-deep in corruption, the civil service was not better and the general lassitude transcended into the social life of Ethiopians.

The Church also exercised a considerable influence on the country's social life. This influence started from the Emperor himself because the Church exercised spiritual control over him. The sanctification of the Emperor can only be done by Abuna (Bishop) and this was the centre of the Church's spiritual control. The Church in turn benefitted greatly in form of land reward and although theoretically all lands belong to the State, the Church (from early times) acquired a very substantial quantity and it became an inseparable part of the feudal system. Tribute, custom, fear and honour belong to the State as much as to the Church.

Finally in this section, we would talk about the military organization and land ownership. Land was used as a form of reward for military service. Under the Hamle 16.1936 E.C. Order, all who served as soldiers or civil servants of Ethiopia prior to 1936 Battle of Maichew and who had not received land under 1934 E.C. Order, were to receive a grant of 40 hectares from unoccupied state owned lands.⁸ The military service was a main source of social mobility whereby people from lowly birth could excel themselves in military service and become land owners. At the initial stages of his reign, things worked out well, but with time, especially during the last five years of his administration things were no longer at ease between the Emperor and the military. The army had a lot of complaints, which culminated in the crisis of 1974. The initial mutinies were caused by: harsh conditions of having to serve continuously in remote areas, fighting inconclusive wars against secessionist forces in Eritrea, Bale, Ogaden and Tigre. The poor salaries and allowances for the lower ranks was an additional cause for discontentment.

The trend of expenditure on wages and ammunitions in the armed forces were very poor compared with other sectors of governmental activities.

Members of the armed forces had experienced no increase in their salaries and in fact, some experienced reductions in years preceding the coup. All factors jointly or severally spurred the army into overthrowing the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie which by 1974, had succeeded in hurting virtually every segment of the society.

Having examined the various set-ups one may conclude that the major power instrument of the Emperor was the control of land. Given the dire need of land by everybody, the land control was of enormous importance and the support from the Church, elites and the army in his early days were all important to see Selassie through to 1974. Ethiopians' estimation of the Emperor as the "nearest thing" to God also helped to elicit support and acquiescence for his orders. No one could ever think of disobeying him. All the "magic" failed when Selassie's administration had to face the reality of change. The peasant farmers, industrial employees and members of the armed forces realised that they were not benefitting from the economic growth of the country and they had to react. The last straw that spurred them into action was the famine in Wollo province which brought about starvation and widespread inflation in the country.

The foregoing is an attempt to give an account of the decay that permeated the socio-political system in Ethiopia which eventually led to Selassie's overthrow. Before 1974 however, there were many attempts, futile though, to get rid of the Emperor. Notable of such attempts was the Imperial Bodyguard coup of 1960. This short lived attempted coup (December 13 - 17, 1960) was described as the "first and real attempt at revolution" in Ethiopia and it marked turning point in the country's modern history.⁹ The coup was important because it showed the power-base of the Emperor, that is the nobility, the Church and the army and it failed because the plotters were unable to carry along a sizeable number of people from these groups. It is important to note that the plotters of the coup complained that Ethiopia was far behind in economic development, education and living standards compare with other neighbouring countries. "The theme of their attack was the stagnation of the regime and the system concerned (itself) with maintenance at the expense of development."¹⁰ Brigadier-General Mengistu Neway, a young officer in 1935-6 at his trial after the 1960 coup, said, as part of his evidence against Haile Selassie's regime: "I ruminated over why Ethiopian armed forces were so easily broken by the forces of the enemy and I realised that it was fundamentally because of our backwardness."¹¹ At the same time, the Emperor's close allies, in or out of government were enjoying abundant life.

So much was said about the 1960 coup to draw similarities between it and the creeping coup of 1974 and to show that the decadence of the superstructure that culminated in latter coup has a long history. The

plotters in both cases had a genuine concern for general lack of development and a distaste for the imperial rule.

Revolutionary Reforms

Soon after the deposition of the Emperor, the provisional military Administrative Council (otherwise called the Dergue) highlighted the aims of the revolution. These include:

- (a) To urgently acclaim an implement law on land tenancy, which would particularly satisfy the common farmer whose livelihood depends on agriculture, this would increase the country's agricultural products.
- (b) Seeing to it that the equality, rights and progress of all Ethiopian broad masses are properly safeguarded.
- (c) To give free basic education to all Ethiopians and to launch a campaign in attempt to reduce the existing number of illitrates.
- (d) To give more attention to industrialisation for the country's development and progress.

We would assess the performance of the Dergue, *vis-a-vis* these declared aims of the revolution.

The most noted achievement of the Dergue has been its land reform programme. Land is recognised as being central to a broad based rural development, hence the declaration that:

a person's right, honour, status and standard of living is determined by his relation to the land; ... it is essential to fundamentally alter the existing agrarian relations so that the Ethiopian peasant masses ... may be liberated from age-old feudal oppression, injustice, poverty and disease. ...¹²

With the Nationalization of Rural Lands proclamation in March, 1975, land rent was abolished and land can no longer be sold, divided or mortgaged. Each peasant family has the free use of a plot of land not more than ten hectares in area. The big farms were converted to state farms.

In conformity with the socialist approach to societal organisation, the Dergue placed emphasis on the mass organization of the peasant and showing little or no interest in the traditional elites and land owners. Peasant and urban association formed the basis of the social reforms and these are called *Kebele*. The working people enjoyed increased social services like the provision of medical care which doubled. Ownership of housing was limited to a single unit per family. Extra units were

nationalized without compensation. Rents were reduced according to a graduated scale weighted in favour of the lower income groups.¹³

Apart from the re-organization of the masses through *Kebele s*, one other reform that deserves special mention was educational sector. Literacy campaign was organized through local associations. Since modernization and industrialization depend, in the long run, on the quality and quantity of education in the society, the Dergue raised the literacy level from about 5% in 1974 to about 54% in 1986. In content, there was also a radical shift of emphases in the educational system. Comparing the Emperor's days with the post revolution periods R.V. Vivo says:

In those days, education was no more than detailed studies of the lives of kings - which included learning by heart their pompous titles, their genealogical traits, and everything about them from their numerous childhood measles to their numerous medals, bestowed by other things for parasitism. Today, schools teach the history of the masses, the class struggle and the objective and causes of the revolution.¹⁴

To further boost the economy, apart from the impact of the land reform, all industry was nationalized at the beginning of 1975, together with financial institutions, insurance companies and supermarkets without compensation. The state decreed a mixed economy with state ownership of industry, resources and utilities, and a private sector in trade transportation, services, and small-scale manufacturing enterprises.¹⁵

The foregoing in a nutshell represents the objectives *vis-a-vis* the achievements of the Ethiopian revolution. However, the impact of the revolution could have been better felt if not for some hydra-headed problems which seem insurmountable for the Dergue. In the next section, three of these problems will be examined.

Threats to the Revolution.

The Ethiopian revolution has gone a long way to restructure the social superstructure in the country and the lives of ordinary peasants are now much better than what they were during the 3,000 years of feudo-bourgeoisie oppression in Ethiopia. However, with two major wars against Eritrea and Ogaden; and the long drawn famine and the consequent starvation and deaths, the revolution's dreams may never be fully realised.

The revolt in Eritrea has been attributed to factors like: Eritrean nationalism, moslem separation, ant-Amhara feelings, individual dissatisfaction, peasant unrest and perhaps, exposition to socialist theories among others.¹⁶ Each of these factors may not be examined in detail but one can say that all these factors, except the last one, might have had some influence on the formation of the Arab-aided Eritrean Liberation front

(ELF) which tried to wrest the coastal province of Eritrea from the Ethiopian empire since 1960.¹⁷ The moslem separation is also important, because, out of a population of about two million people in the region, moslems were about 40 percent and they feared being suppressed amidst the Christian population. Historically too, the region had enjoyed some independent status. In 1952, it was federated with Ethiopia as a semi-autonomous self-governing territory under a UN resolution. But on November 16, 1962, it was incorporated as a province in Ethiopia against the wishes of a determined minority of Eritreans. Since then neither Eritrea nor Ethiopia had seen peace.

Subversive activities were spearheaded by the ELF which was founded in Cairo in 1958. Apart from appealing to the sentiments of the Arab states about the plan to annihilate the moslem population, they were unwilling to be forced to join the "backward" Ethiopia. Eritrea, for a long time has been the most economically, politically and culturally advanced province in the country, in fact, it has been dubbed the cradle of the Ethiopian civilization.

Several attempts made to find a non-military solution to the Eritrean problem had proved abortive and to fight a guerilla war is costly. It means killing people, material destruction, economic disruption and lack of general social development. For instance, numerous dams and canals which could immensely help alleviate starvation due to drought caused by lack of rain in rural Eritrea were all destroyed by the ELF. Furthermore, more than 13,000 men in uniform and over 33,000 civilians had died or wounded on the account of the ELF separatist ambitions.¹⁸ To keep the guerillas in check, the Dergue has to maintain an army of about 300,000 personnel which is one of the largest in Africa.

The war in Ogaden is another thorn in the flesh of the Ethiopian revolution. Ogaden is an Eastern Province of Ethiopia which just like dagger into the mid-ribs of Somalia territory, just as Somalia's fine tips protrudes into the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Unlike in Eritrea where secessionists sought political independence, the problem in Ogaden has been the attempt of Somalia to integrate the Somalia-speaking nomads in Eastern Ethiopia into Somali Republic. Out of a total of about one million nomadic Somalis outside the republic, about one-half were in Ogaden and the Haud, and about 200,000 in North Eastern region of Kenya. Observers in both Kenya and Ethiopia have seen Somali claims on these areas as an attempt to realise her dream of greater Somalia.

Like in the case of Eritreans, the governments in Addis Ababa from the time of the Emperor had always sought peaceful negotiation as a way of solving the Ogaden problem. But Mogadishu governments were not too keen on peaceful solutions. The Somalis knew perhaps that this could lead

to minor boundary adjustments and this will not help their aim much. For this reason, border clashes have been frequent between the two countries since Somalia became Independent on July 1, 1960. The situation was aggravated when the Ogaden Liberation Front was formed in 1963 under the leadership of Muktal Dahir - a Somalia who was bitterly anti- Ethiopia. The Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF) wanted to liberate the Ogaden region from Ethiopian rule and unite it with Somalia. Former Somalia President Siad Barre is a son of the region and regular Somali forces have joined the terrorist forces to fight in Ogaden though this has always been denied. Eventually, the Somali irredentism led to a full-scale war in 1977 and Ethiopia only won the war in 1982 with the aid of Soviet weapons and Cuban troops. Furthermore, ethnic rivalry has led to armed regional opposition in Tigre province and the Tigray People's Liberation front has been giving guerilla assistance to Eritreans against the Dergue since late 1980. The various civil wars and the war of resistance to Somali invasion have taken a heavy toll on the Ethiopian Economy and these have a negative effect on the Dergue's march towards economic progress.¹⁹

A part from having to commit a lot of men and material resources²⁰ to the internecine wars, another major setback to industrialization and economic progress in Ethiopia is what could be called an act of God the long famine and starvation. This started as far back as 1973. Famine has been a major source of concern for the Addis Ababa government because of heavy losses in human resources. For the fast number of Ethiopian population, suffering has become an invariable way of life - a painful life before painful death. A journalist who aptly described the situation said:

No matter the depth of your belief in man's capacity for survival, the moment you arrive Ethiopia and apprehend the bareness and barrenness of much of its land, you become a pessimist. You expect human misery and destitution. And you won't need to wait too long or look far away to see human misery and destitution.²¹

There has been acute food shortages in Ethiopia and at the onset of any dry spell rural farmers resort to selling their livestock as a means of survival. In 1984 the situation reached an alarming stage and Ethiopia has neither the technology nor material resource to cope with the scale which the ravages of the draught attained. Yet, there is more to the Ethiopia misery than absence of rain. Most of the land is clay soil and when it rains, the Water either runs off or remains to evaporate depending on the topography of the area.

The rural population seem tired of tilling an unwilling soil. A part from tending their large herds of cattle and goats, there is very little else to do. Although ox-drawn ploughs make the rounds on new farm lands, everybody seems aware that all of this will be a near wasted effort in the

absence of rain and because natural manure is mostly used as fuel or building materials, the soil does not get improved. At the height of these natural disasters. Mohamed Amin of Kenya made a documentary film titled "The African Calvary" which has drawn global attention to the Ethiopian calamity and opened the flood gates of assistance. These brought aids from the UNICEF, USA for Africa, Band Aid, Catholic Relief Service etc. Faced with this grim situation, it is little wonder that the Ethiopian revolution could not take a great stride forward in terms of Socio-economic development.

Conclusion

Attempt has been made to recall the appalling state of affairs in the various sectors of Ethiopian society during Emperor Haile Selassie's regime. Also we have discussed the military interregnum that lasted thirteen years in the country and the successes that could be credited to the military. The revolution has been facing so many problems which make real socio-economic progress difficult to attain. When the army took power, there was little or no resistance against the overthrow of the imperial rule. In spite of that acceptance the army had to grope with the insurgent and irredentist elements within the country. Coping with these elements remained insurmountable until the administration changed its military uniform to civilian garb. Here it might be necessary to take a look (if only cursory) at the conduct of the election and the possible acceptance by the people of the election results.

The democratic process started in 1984 with the formation of the workers party of Ethiopia after a referendum which approved a republican constitution. The socialist oriented party was dominated by soldiers and it has very little in common with the Ethiopian workers except its name. At the end of the elections, Mengistu and his henchmen were "elected" in a process that was regarded in diplomatic circles as a sham - it merely legitimise the grip of power by armed soldiers. Today, the general situation in Ethiopia has been characterised by drought, famine, rebellion, war and other national calamities which are now being made worse by an election of questionable acceptance. This writer is of the opinion that Mengistu's continued imposition of his rule on Ethiopians will most likely heighten the intra-regional strife in the country. If this happens it will surely not be in the best interest of the masses who are supposed to be protected by revolution. We will therefore suggest that a programme of national reconcilliation be instituted as a matter of urgency to bring together the various dissenting groups in Ethiopia. A pragmatic step towards this end will be an immediate programme of the present administration's disengagement from power. This will allay the fears of cynics that he Mengistu's administration is a sit-tight one. The

consciousness of the people should be directed towards finding solutions to the enormous national calamities.

The possibility of national stability is very remote as long as the factricidal and internecine wars last, the assistance of the OAU should be requested in solving this problem. Also, the government should request well-meaning African statesmen to use their good offices in finding solutions to the long-drawn wars especially in Eritrea and Ogaden.

Nationalization of large sectors of the economy has brought little benefit to the Ethiopian people. Declining production in agriculture and severe food shortages are a result of the channeling of development funds to large-scale capital-intensive state farms and neglect of peasant sector. Therefore a boom in the state farm sector and its cash crop exports has been offset by starvation in the country side.²² Attention should be directed to the rural dwellers (who form great percentage of the total population) with a view to improving their lot. Besides the assistance of the UN Food and Agricultural Organization especially (and other related specialised agencies) should be sought to find means of improving agricultural production and the soil fertility. New seedlings that are adaptive to the local environment could be developed while dams could be built to combat the drought problems. Also there is a dire need to improve on the extension services and agricultural loans could be given in form of inputs.

Undoubtedly, every government has its blotches, pimples and warts and some of them even cancerous spots. Given serious considerations, it is hoped that the suggestions above, will help Mengistu deal with those blotches, pimples, warts and the cancerous spots and will bring Ethiopians nearer the lofty dreams of the revolution.

NOTES

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3. Christine Sandford, *The Lion of Judah Hath Prevailed*, (Connecticut, Greenwood Press, Reprint, 1972) pp. 55 - 7.
4. Kwame Nkurumah, *Axious of Kwame Nkurumah* (London, Panaf Books 1967) p. 29.
5. Christine Sandford, *op.cit.*, P. 60.
6. These qualifications were enumerated in Patrick Gilkes, *op.cit.*, pp 66-7.
7. *Ibid.*, p.47.
8. John M. Cohen, "Ethopia, After Haile Selassie." *African Affairs*, Vol. 72, No 289, Oct. 1973.
9. Christopher Clapham; "The Ethopian Coup d'etat of December 1960, *Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol. 6, No. 4 1968 pp. 496-7.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Ali A. Mazrui and Michael Tidy, *Nationalism and New States in Africa*. (London, Heinemann, 1984) p. 4.
12. Prologue to the Proclamation No. 31 of 1975, *Nagarit Gazata*, (Addis Ababa) Year 34, No 26.
13. Ali Mazrui and M. Tidy, *op.cit.*, p. 269.
14. Raul Valdes Vivo, *Ethopian: Unknown Revolution*, (Cuba, Social Sciences Publishers, 1978) p. 102.
15. Ali Mazrui and M. Tidy, *op.cit.*, p. 269.
16. Patrick Gilkes, *op.cit.*, p. 179.
17. Ernert W. Leefever, *Spear and Scepter*, (Washington, D.C., The Brooking Institution, 1970) pp. 151-154.
18. Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, "The National Revolutionary War in the North" , Addis Ababa, June 1978, p.26. This was the text of a nation wide broadcast on June 7, 1978 on the situation in the Administrative region of Eritrea.
19. Ali Mazrui and M. Tidy, *op.cit.*, pp. 199, 270.
20. Defence spending in 1982 was about US \$ 439.6 million.
21. The *Gurdian*, Lagos, Nigeria, April, 19, 1986 p.8.
22. Ali Mazrui and M. Tidy, *op.cit.*, p. 269.