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## HISTORY WORKSHOP

THE BURDEN OF HISTORY:
THE CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES OF THE
DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS IN ETHIOPIA

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# THE BURDEN OF HISTORY:

# THE CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES OF THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS IN ETHIOPIA

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# THE BURDEN OF HISTORY: THE CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES OF THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS IN ETHIOPIA

**Bahru Zewde**

## The African Context

In April 1994, a group of African historians met in Bamako (Mali) under the auspices of the Council for the Development of Economic and social Research in Africa (CODESRIA). They were assigned two formidable tasks - to revitalize *Afrika Zamani* as a truly continental journal for historians and to assess the ongoing democratization process in Africa from the historian's perspective. In the end, at least at the formal level, the first task proved less onerous than the second. The historians assembled at the workshop were able to broaden the editorial committee and thus make it more representative of African historiography and at the same time set up a scientific committee to monitor its progress. The second assignment was not so easily accomplished. The general tone of the workshop in this regard was one of pessimism and despondency - a situation which provoked one of the participants to comment that history is fast replacing economics as the dismal science. But caution and scepticism, not to say cynicism, have been inherent in the historian's profession. The participants of that particular workshop could be said to have been torn between professional caution and the genuine desire for a better future for their continent. This was why there were repeated attempts to dispel the prevailing gloom by pointing to the bright spots of the African past and calls for the fostering of those democratic traditions to check the overall drift towards authoritarianism.

The democratization process in Africa raises some fundamental questions. These questions have been raised and discussed in a number of colloquia and publications.[1] Some of these questions are: What do we mean by democracy in

[1] The above-cited CODESRIA dedicated its sevenrth general assembly to a discussion of the democratization process in Africa, and this paper draws on some of the papers presented on that occasion.

the first place? Does democracy have indigenous African roots? What are the exogenous and endogenous factors that brought about this new chapter in the continent's history? How deep-seated is ethnicity in Africa and is it the apotheosis or the nemesis of the democratization process? Lurking in the background of all these questions is the rather disturbing one: is perhaps all this talk of democratization and transition an academic or a public relations exercise? The stark reality of Somalia, Rwanda, Zaire, etc., makes this last question less cynical than it would otherwise appear at first sight. Finally, coming closer to our own subject, we are also forced to pose the question: What does Ethiopia have in common with the African experience and what are the features that are peculiarly its own?

Implicitly or explicitly, the Western liberal democratic model is often taken as the acme of democratic governance. The target that most African countries set themselves in the process of democratization is the attainment of institutions and practices that have been the basic ingredients of the Western democratic tradition. These include above all multi-partyism, independent judiciary, free press, and popular sovereignty expressed through the legislature. But keen observers have not been oblivious to the limits of this declared paragon of democracy, pointing to its formal character and the struggle in recent decades of marginalized groups (women, gays, ecologists, etc.) with an "alternative, participatory vison of democracy" to achieve what has come to be known as the "empowerment" of the common man.[2] To a continent that has not been able to attain even the formal aspects of democracy, limited as they might be, this groping for a deeper edition of it may sound as a bit of a luxury. On the other hand, the strengthening of civil society that underpins the alternative vision of democracy is germane to the discussion of the democratization process in Africa. For the ultimate hope to salvage the imprerilled process seems to lie precisely in such strengthening of civil society.

Moreover, a direct and participatory form of democracy is presumed to be the hallmark of the perceived African pre-colonial democratic tradtion, more specifically of "village democracy". The pre-colonial past has been portrayed in diametrically opposite fashion: as an age of barbarism and arbitrary rule (by colonialists), and as one of egalitarianism (by African nationalists).[3] Both

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[2] This is brought out forcefully in Eboe Hutchful, "The International Dimensions of the Democratization Process in Africa", paper presented at the Seventh General Assembly of CODESRIA, Dakar, 10-14 February 1992.

[3] Abdoulaye Bathily, "Pouvoirs et dynamiques de changement politique en Afrique: de l'Ere pré-colonial aux Indépendances", paper presented at the Seventh General Assembly of CODESRIA, Dakar, 10-14 February 1992, pp. 2-4.

positions apparently suffer from selective presentation of the facts. The former position need not detain us here. The latter we have to address. It is obvious that the idea of a uniform and pan-African egalitarian socio-political system throughout pre-colonial Africa is an untenable position. In the first place, Africa has seen empires (Mali, Songhay, Aksum) and military dictaorships (Shaka Zulu, Dahomey) as well as village democracies in pre-colonial times. Secondly, even the so-called village democracies had either an unmistakable stamp of gerontocracy about them or were quite often disrupted by the intervention of powerful individuals or groups relying on military prowess or invoking spiritual powers.[4]

Ultimately, one is also forced to question the relevance of a pre-colonial socio-political organization to the contemporary African reality. For it is inconceivable that Africa can go back to its past, however idyllic it may be imagined to be. One writer has even gone so far as to say that all attempts to relate the contemporary question of democratization to pre-colonial African society smacks either of naiveté or of ideological manipulation.[5] At any rate, it is self-evident that Africa in the 1990s is a much different proposition than Africa of the 1890s or earlier. So much has changed in territorial configuration, social and economic differentiation and the international alignment of forces. Contemporary Africa can only build on the cumulative legacy of its pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial experience.

Another point that features prominently in the discussion of the democratization process in Africa is the relative weight of external and interanl factors. To the former belong the collapse of the Communist order in Eastern Europe, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and the human rights conditionality of Western governments, notably the US, and some donor organizations. The latter pertain to the strength of the mass and popular movements for democratic reforms inside Africa itself. The ripple effect of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc on Africa is bound to vary from country to country, with the maximum effect probably on countries like Ethiopia which were so closely tied with that bloc. Thandika Mkandawire has shown fairly convincingly that the sponsors of SAP were not particularly worried about the guaranteeing of democratic rights; as a matter of fact, initially, they tended to favour authoritarian regimes. He puts the weight on the strength of the domestic forces, notably the vitality of the popular movements in countries like Mali and Togo. SAP, which

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[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 7-13; J.-F. Bayart, "La problématique de la démocratie en Afrique noire. 'La Baule, et puis après?'", *Politique africaine*, no. 43 (October, 1991), p. 8.

[5] Bayart, p. 9.

antedated the democratization process by almost a decade, incidentally rather than deliberately abetted the democratic struggle by undermining the legitimacy of the regimes that adopted it and whittling away the post-Independence gains in social welfare.[6] It is difficult to give much weight to the human rights conditionality argument, given in particular the way in which it has been tempered by considerations of self-interest on the part of the self-appointed defender of those rights, the United States.

Eboe Hutchful, in his paper cited above, points out the well-nigh paradoxical concurrence of "the globalization of the capitalist economy" in the wake of the collapse of the Communist order and the emergence of ethno-nationalism in Africa.[7] Ethnicity has indeed become a force to be reckoned with and social scientists have increasingly been forced to address it. How much it has deep historical roots and how much it is an ideology of the elite, legitimized on occasions by the very social scientists who presume to investigate it, remains problematic.[8] Historians, looking at the issue from a relatively longer perspective, generally tend to question the permanence of the ethnic factor. As Terence Ranger has argued with reference to pre-colonial Zimbabwe, "People defined themselves *politically* - as subjects of a partiuclar chief - rather than linguistically, or culturally, or ethnically".[9] Elsewhere, too, the picture in pre-colonial times was not so much of compartmentalized ethnic communities as of multi-ethnic societies interdependent and interacting with each other.[10]

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[6] Thandika Mkandawire, "Adjustment, Political Conditionality and Democratisation in Africa", paper presented at the Seventh General Assembly of CODESRIA, Dakar, 10-14 February, 1992, pp. 5-8, 12. Cf. Bathily, p. 17, who also sees the East European factor as "un facteur favorable et non le facteur initial déterminant".

[7] Hutchful, p. 1.

[8] For an argument on the mass basis of ethnicity, see Eghosa E. Osaghae, "A Re-Examination of the Conception of Ethnicity in Africa as an Ideology of Inter-Elite Competition," *African Study Monographs*, 12 (1) (June 1991), pp. 43-60. Martin Doornbos calls ethnicity "the resilient paradigm" ("Linking the Future to the Past", *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 52, 1991, p. 53), thereby implicitly underlining its epistemological, more than its objective, value.

[9] Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tribalism in Zimbabwe* (Gweru, 1985), p. 4.

[10] Bayart, p. 7. For the Ethiopian dimension of this historical process of interaction, see Taddesse Tamrat's articles: "Processes of Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The Case of the Agaw", *Journal of African*

On the other hand, although one might be able to perceive nuances in the emphasis given to ethnic identity in British and French colonial policy, it is difficult to attribute the emergence of ethnicity entirely to colonialism. As a matter of fact, one can even argue that colonialism often ended up creating nation-states out of diverse ethnic groups. Conversely, the democratization process and its attendant political pluralism seem to have the potential of accentuating ethnic identity. The question Africa currently faces, as Doornbos has posed it, is thus whether ethnicity threatens to bring about "a basic restructuring of African state systems, beginning with most ancient of all, Ethiopia" or whether the issues it raises would turn out to be "transient phenomena, likely to disappear soon enough as they get 'satisfied', partly perhaps through their very articulation".[11]

Where does Ethiopia fit in in all these? This will be the subject of the rest of the paper. But it might be in order to make a few general observations from the outset. First and foremost, the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial categories do not apply in the Ethiopian case. Uninterrupted by these major divides, Ethiopia could be said to have witnessed a linear and organic historical evolution to a degree few other African countries have done.[12] Secondly, as Bayart has remarked, Ethiopia could be said to have belonged to "la 'grande tradition étatique' de l'Europe et de l'Asie",[13] with all the essential attributes of a feudal order,[14] rather than to the genre of "village democracies". Such a stratified setup was scarcely conducive to the generation or fostering of democratic traditions. Innovations and initiatives have therefore tended to come from above rather than to emanate from below. The current democratization process is no exception. While the changes in the Soviet Union had a definitely debilitating effect on the Mangestu regime, the main impetus for change came

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*History*, 29 (1988); "Ethnic Interaction and Integration in Ethiopian History: The Case of the Gafat", *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 21 (1989); and Donald Crummey, "Society and Ethnicity in the Politics of the Christian Ethiopia during the Zamana Masafent," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, VIII, 2 (1975), pp. 266-78.

[11] Doornbos, pp. 54-55.

[12] I have already alluded to this in my contribution to the CODESRIA workshop on the "Military and Militarism in Africa": the papers of that workshop are expected to come out soon.

[13] Bayart, p. 9

[14] See Donald Crummey, "Abyssinian Feudalism", *Past and Present*, No. 89, pp. 115-38.

from within rather than from without. Yet, no urban mass movement heralded the fall of Mangestu, as in some other African countries. It was swept aside after suffering *total* military defeat in the hands of a predominantly rural guerrila force. And the tone and the terms of the democratization process have been set by that victory and those victors. Finally, a combination of the ethnic origin and basis of the main insurgent force, the Tegray People's Liberation Force (TPLF), and the hallowed Marxist-Leninist priniciple of national self-determination have injected into contemporary Ethiopian politics the element of ethnicity to a degree unprecedented in the country's history.

**Democratic Traditions**

While northern Ethiopia, the seat of the classical Ethiopian civilization, offers few cases of democratic governance in the past, the southern part witnessed certain democratic and egalitarian forms of administration and decision-making. Of these institutions, the *gada* system of the Oromo is perhaps the most famous. It was an age-grade system whereby the power to administer the community was transferred to the sixth age grade every eight years.[15] The transfer of power was preceded by an energetic election campaign, featuring oratorical skills, traditional wisdom as well as recitations of military prowess. It was marked by the *butta* ceremony, which combined a military campaign to a new target and a joyous occasion of feasting and singing. Although there were individual officers entrusted with specific responsibilities, power resided principally in the assembly, known as the *chafe*.[16]

But, except in a few areas like the Borana on the Ethio-Kenyan border, the *gada* system did not survive long after the phenomenal migrations of the Oromo to the northern highlands in the sixteenth century. From the outset, the system had inherent deficiencies. It was a male-oriented institution and excluded the female members of the community. Moreover, as Mohammed explains, it "worked ideally for small groups whose members knew each other and met face to face when the situation demanded".[17] Another inherent weakness of the system was that the communal assembly could make decisions but had no power

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[15] The standard work of reference for this has been: Asmerom Legesse, *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of an African Society* (New York, 1973). But see also the more recent Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethipia: A History, 1570-1860* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 10-16.

[16] Mohammed, pp. 10-12, 14.

[17] Mohammed, p. 12.

of enforcing them. As the Oromo abandoned their original homeland and settled in the central and western highlands of Ethiopia, the institution faced even more formidable challenges. The shift from pastoralism to sedentary agriculture intensified and the attendant competitions and quarrels facilitated the emergence of a strong arbitrating force. Moreover, the increase in agricultural production made possible by the fertile lands of southwestern Ethiopia led to the accumulation of wealth and to social stratification. The spoils of the endemic wars that attended the migrations of the Oromo also tended to benefit certain sectors of the community at the expense of others; the powers of the Abba Dula, the institutional war leader, were visibly enhanced as a result of this process. The dispersal of clans of the same tribe in different directions as well as the merger of clans of differing tribal orign also contributed towards weakening the hold of the *gada* rules.[18]

The upshot of this process was the emergence of Oromo monarchies in southwestern Ethiopia. In addition to the two states of Limmu-Enarya and Gomma that are the subject matter of Guluma's thesis cited above, these were Gera, Guma and the most celebrated of them all, Jimma Abba Jifar. Further to the north, in Wallaga, emerged the principalities of Leqa Qellam and Leqa Naqamte.[19] This transformation from the egalitarian *gada* institution to monarchical rule appears to have been completed by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Two external factors that further enhanced the process were the juxtaposition of these Oromo communities with long-standing monarchical forms of government among the Omotic peoples of southwest Ethiopia (notably Kafa, Janjaro, and Enarya) and the advent of Islam in the nineteenth century.

Unlike the Oromo, some peoples of the Lower Omo have been able to maintain to this day a participatory form of decision-making. A notable example are the Mursi, who have the reputation of debating an issue until a consensus is reached. Like the *gada* system of the Oromo, only the male members of the community take part in these meetings (known as the *methe*) which form a testing ground as much for social standing as for oratorical skills. For "... what is at stake in a public meeting is not just the reaching of a decision on some matter of current concern, but also the reaching of a decision on status ranking within the

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[18] Guluma Gemeda, "Gomma and Limmu: The Process of State Formation among the Oromo in the Gibé region, c. 1750-1889", MA thesis (Addis Ababa University, Dept. of History, 1984), pp. 36, 41-48.

[19] For a general discussion refer to Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia* (London, Athens, Addis Abab: 1992), pp. 18-19.

community".[20] These meetings are often held in conjunction with some public ritual functions, sometimes lasting upto four consecutive days. This institution has given rise to the *jalabai* (pl. *jalaba*), the influential speaker who usually comes in towards the end of the debate and whose role it is to sum up and synthesize - in Turton's words "'an authority' even if he is not 'in authority'".[21] As a result of this institution, which they apparently share with other East African pastorialists, the Mursi have not developed "chiefly power"; the only approximation to that is the role exercised by the priest.[22]

**Authoritarian Traditions**

Elsewhere in Ethiopia, the scales were decisively tipped towards authoritarian rule. A strong dosage of authoritarianism has permeated the classical Ethiopian state. The monarch has enjoyed extensive, and often absolute, powers over life and property. Even before the absolutist monarchy of Hayla-Sellase, one can cite the case of the medieval emperor Zara Ya'eqob (r. 1434-68), who, through a combination of religious fanaticism and political authoritarianism, exercised a terrifying hold over his subjects.[23] An important feature of this strong monarchical rule was the impermanence of the nobility. On the occasions when the nobility posed a challenge to the monarchy, as for instance during the so-called *Zamana Masafent*, or in its English rendering "the Era of the Princes" (c. 1770-1855), the nobility vied for control of the monarchy rather than acting as a corporate entity. The impermanence of the nobility was matched by the virtual absence or weakness of the middle class or the bourgeoisie. As a result, Ethiopia has had the benefit neither of a Magna Carta nor of a bourgeois democratic revolution. This fact has also had a bearing on the fragile nature of civil society in contemporary Ethiopia.

With only a slight retreat in the fourth quarter of the last and the first quarter of this century, the history of Ethiopia since about 1850 has been one of a steady move towards ever higher forms of centralization. The idea of establishing a unitary state was first kindled in the fiery mind of Emperor

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[20] David Turton, "The Social Organization of the Mursi: A Pastoral Tribe of the Lower Omo Valley, South-West Ethiopia", PhD Thesis (Oxford, 1972), p. 302.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 279.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 352.

[23] Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527* (Oxford, 1972), pp.238-42, 284-85.

Tewodros (r. 1855-68), who made a desperate bid to restore the power and glory of the imperial power that has been in decline since at least the middle of the 18th century. His dream turned into a nightmare under the combined assault of domestic insubordination and foreign invasion. As if learning from his mistakes, his successors, Yohannes (r. 1872-89) and Menilek (r. 1889-1913), adopted a more federalist approach towards regional rulers. Yohannes was a *negusa nagast* ("king of kings") in the true sense of the word, prepared to delegate authority and to bestow the title of *negus* ("king") to at least two of the regional rulers, Menilek of Shawa and Takla-Haymanot of Gojjam. Although it is fashionable nowadays to associate the name of Menilek with everything that is odious in the incorporation of the southern parts in the nineteenth century, that emperor was not always harsh and exacting in his administration. In broad terms, he followed the devolutionary approach of his predecessor. Beneficiaries of this policy were not only the regional nobility of the classical Ethiopian core but also some of the rulers of the recently incorporated periphery; examples are Kumsa (alias Gabra-Egziabher) Moroda of Leqa Naqamt),[24] Abba Jifar of Jimma,[25] Shaykh Khojale al-Hasan of Asosa-Beni Shangul,[26] the Afar ruler Hanfari of Aussa, and Hamdan Abu Shok of Gubba.[27]

Almost all these regional concessions vanished under Emperor Hayla-Sellase (r. 1930-35, 1941-74). Under the imperative of creating a modern state that can have the financial resources and the institutional strength to withstand the challenges of Europe, Hayla-Sellase embarked on a policy of centralization unprecedented in the history of the country.[28] This process spared neither Menilek's veteran generals (like *Dajjach* Balcha of Sidamo) nor the hereditary rulers of the south (like Abba Jifar of Jimma), nor those of the north (like *Negus* Mikael of Wallo, *Ras* Gugsa Wale of Bagemder and *Ras* Haylu Takla-Haymanot

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[24] Tesema Ta'a, "The Oromo of Wollega. A Historical Survey to 1910", MA thesis (AAU: History, 1976), pp. 83-84.

[25] Tekalign Wolde Mariam, "Slavery and the Slave Tradein the Kingdom of Jima (ca. 1800-1935)", MA thesis (AAU: History, 1984), pp. 46-47.

[26] Atieb Ahmed Dafalla, "Sheikh Khojele Al-Hassan & Bela-Shangul 1825-1938", BA thesis (HSIU: History, 1973), pp. 51ff.

[27] Peter Garretson, "*Manjil* Hamdan Abu Shok (1898-1938) and the Administration of Gubba", in Joseph Tubiana, ed., *Modern Ethiopia. From the Accession of MenilekII to the Present* (Balkema/Rotterdam, 1980), p. 203.

[28] I have tried to deal with the structural foundations of this process in my "The Economic Origins of the Absolutist State in Ethiopia (1916-1935), *Journal of Ethiopian History*, XVII (1984), pp. 1-29.

of Gojjam). Largely spared these encroachments from the center was the ruling house of Tegre. The two branches of that house - as represented by the two grandsons of Emperor Yohannes, *Ras* Seyum Mangasha and *Ras* Gugsa Ar'aya - were confirmed on the western and eastern parts of the province, respectively, until 1935. The Wayane rebellion of 1943 pushed the central government into imposing direct rule of an exacting nature under the veteral leader of the Resistance to Italian Occupation, *Ras* Abbaba Aragay. This lasted until 1947, when *Ras* Seyum and later his son *Ras* Mangasha were successively appointed governors of the province until the 1974 revolution. The overall process of centralization was started well before 1935 but picked up momentum after 1941, with the laying down of the new provincial administration structure, the re-establishment of the ministries in a more strengthened form and the expansion of the bureaucracy.[29]

The state, which thus began to excercise ever tighter control over its subjects, assumed leviathan proportions under the totalitarian rule of Mangestu Hayla-Mariam. This final period lasted from 1977, when the popular movement that had been the springboard of the 1974 revolution was finally brought down to heel, to 1991, when Mangestu's regime collapsed. At no other time in Ethiopian history has a government had such *total* control over its subjects as in that period. The peasants were controlled by the peasant associations. The urban dwellers were under the tight supervision of the urban dwellers associations. Neither labour, nor the youth, nor the press - in short no component of what is understood by civil society was allowed even a whiff of autonomy. It was one big exercise in recasting society in the image of the political regime. In sum, Mangestu brought the authoritarianism inherent all along in the Ethiopian political tradition to its highest pitch. In two other respects could the Mangestu regime be said to have been the culmination of the inherent authoritarianism of the Ethiopian state - in its militarism and its pronounced ideological motivation. We shall look at these two aspects in some more detail.

**Militarist Traditions**

With a life span of something like two millenia, the Ethiopian state has exhibited an enhanced degree of coercive power deployed both for construction (of lasting architectural edifices) and territorial expansion.[30] This resulted in a pervasive

[29] For the details of the process, the reader is referred to Bahru, *Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 128-148, 201-209.

[30] The following is in essence a resume of my paper, "The Military and Militarism in Africa: The Case of Ethiopia", presented to the CODESRIA

military ethos and the fusion of political and military titles. The same personnel were administrators and judges in times of peace and commanders when war broke out. It was on this foundation that the modern Ethiopian army was built. As in so many other facets of modern Ethiopian history, Tewodros began a process that was pushed a bit further by Menilek and consummated by Hayla-Sellase. It was particularly after 1941 that the furtive steps towards the setting up of a modern, professional army were pursued with greater vigour and confidence. With a judicious tapping of varied foreign resources (British, American, Swede, Norwegian, and German) to avoid over-dependence on any one of them, Hayla-Sellase built an armed force impressive both in size and quality and consisting of the Army, the Imperial Body Guard, the Air Force, the Navy, and the Police.

After the armed forces that Hayla-Sellase had built up so studiously, inspired by the revolutionary ideas of the students that he had equally fostered, overthrew him in September 1974, the country underwent a degree of expansion of the military and the militarization of society unprecedented in its history. The armed forces expanded about six-fold their pre-1974 size through a combination of regular recruitments, mobilization of peasant militias and the introduction of compulsory military service. Abetting this process was not only the military background of the Darg, the Committee of military officers and NCOs that presided over the revolutionary process, but also the external and internal challenges that it faced, the former in the form of the Somali aggression of 1977 and the latter in that of the EPLF-TPLF insurgency that finally spelt its doom.

The long ancestry of the military in Ethiopian history and its pivotal place in the social fabric was attended by a high degree of militarism. To be a soldier, to bear arms, has always remained a sign of manly distinction. The horse-name which kings and members of the nobility customarily assumed was one sign of the important place that warfare occupied in social life. The *fukara*, the war chant traditionally performed to exhort warriors to prodigious feats of valour or to celebrate such feats was another. The fact that military service was also rewarded with tributary rights over or outright grants of land gave the ingrained military ethos a solid economic basis. Under the Darg, military discipline and Marxist-Leninist ideology combined to breed a national culture of conformity and uniformity. Both the Darg and its opponents, particularly the TPLF, were born of the same military tradition and motivated by the same ideology. Negotiation and compromise were therefore ruled out on both counts. The confrontation could therefore be resolved only through the total defeat of one and the total victory of the other - with all that that implied for the character of the transition process that followed.

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workshop held at Accra in April 1993 and revised for publication.

## The Ideological Heritage

Although Christianity and Islam have co-existed in Ethiopia since the turn of the first millenium, Ethiopia has customarily been known as a Christian country (or in the more dramatic rendering, "an island of Christianity"). This was because, enjoying royal patronage, Christianity became the dominant religion and the dominant culture. As such, it has left an indelible stamp on the history of the country and the psyche of its adherents. The heritage of the Orthodox Church permeates the art, architecture, literature and moral perception of that section of the population which has played the dominant role in the country's history. Church and State existed through the centuries in a symbiotic relationship, the former providing legitimacy, the latter protection and endowments.

While there was little fundamental conflict between Church and State, the Church itself has been rent ofentimes by internal controversy. Which was the real orthodox doctrine of the Orthodox Church was not always so easy to determine. Sectarianism was therefore an endemic syndrome in the Ethiopian Church. The high point in doctrinal controversy was reached in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the Church was divided into warring factions espousing divergent interpretations of the nature of Christ.[31] Another significant feature of Ethiopian Christianity has been the underlying tension between the Church establishment on the one hand and monks and hermits on the other arraigning the former for tainting itself too much with earthly dispositions, including material possessions and political involvement.[32] A streak of millenarianism, conjuring apocalyptic visions of a perfect new world rising from the ashes of the old, has thus run through Ethiopian Christianity.[33] After 1991, this tension which had been a recurrent theme of Ethiopian religous history has assumed a radical rift between the Church establishment and the congregations, who find the sermon of a hermit more edifying than the benediction of the patriarch.[34] As a matter of fact, the

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[31] For this see, Donald Crummey, *Priests and Politicians. Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia 1830-1868* (Oxford, 1972), ch. II.

[32] Taddesse, *Church and State*, pp. 108-118.

[33] Merid Wolde Aregay explores one dimension of this phenomenon in his "Literary Origins of Ethiopian Millenarianism", *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Ethiopian Studies* (Moscow, 1988), pp. 161-72.

[34] The phenomenon of Abba Gabra-Masqal, who mesmerized the Addis Ababa laity with his powerful sermons until he was put behind bars, is a good case in point. The emergence of two rival sects within the Orthodox Church is reported in *Mogad* of Genbot 11 1986 (May 19, 1994), a report strenuously denied two weeks later by the Church authorities (*Mogad*, Genbot 28 1986/June

present patriarch has come to be viewed with a degree of opprobrium unprecedented in the history of the Church.

If religious orthodoxy was a prime preoccupation in former times, ideological rectitude has been the essence of Ethiopian political life in more recent times. This began with the adoption at the turn of the 1960s of Marxism-Leninism by the student movement as the panacea for Ethiopia's ills. The parallels with Russia are striking in this regard. Just as in Russia, in Ethiopia too, an almost imperceptible transition was made from religious orthodoxy to ideological dogmatism without the attenuating influence of an intervening period of free liberal thinking. Marxism, in its Leninist, Stalinist and Maoist editions, has been the dominant ideology of first the student movement and then of the left as a whole since the late 1960s. It began in the mid-60s with the emergence of a small but determined group of initiates nick-named "the Crocodiles". Its organizational skills as well as its faith in the veracity of the doctrine it has come to espouse, which contrasted sharply with the prevarication of the liberal majority, assured it ideological and organizational ascendancy by the beginning of the 1970s.[35]

This ascendancy dictated the character both of the 1974 revolution and the post-74 regimes. In other words, the tone and the parameters of the revolutionary process were set by the students. The Darg had no option but initiate itself into the intellectual discourse began by the students if it wished to stay in power. Through a long and painful process of ideological schooling, the Darg was able to supplant the left and assume the mantle of authentic standard-bearer of Marxism-Leninism. Mangestu adopted the rhetoric of the left and its recipe for the organization of the vanguard party to establish the most total control of society that any Ethiopian government has been able to achieve. The EPRDF, which supplanted the Darg in May 1991, had more authentic Marxist-Leninist credentials, its leaders having been members of the student movement in the early 1970s. Another difference between the Darg and the EPRDF is in the alacrity with which the latter sized up the international situation in the late 1980s and effected a *formal* transformation from a communist organization into a broad front fighting for "peace and democracy".

The Marxist-Leninist ideological baggage informed the post-74 revolutionary process and continues to inform the post-91 transition process in at least three important ways: the premium placed on organization, the pervasiveness of a commandist economic policy, and the perception of what has come to be known as the national question. We shall treat each of these three aspects in turn.

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2 1994).

[35] Bahru, *Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 223-226.

Compared to the camaraderie of the early twentieth century intellectuals and the disasters of Garmame Neway, who with his brother Brigadier General Mangestu Neway organized the abortive coup of 1960, the achievements of the post-60 generation in the sphere of organization are nothing short of prodigious. It can even be argued that Ethiopia would have been better of with less of the organizational skill demonstrated by the leftist intelligentsia. The swing to the left in the late 1960s was attended by the adoption of a presumedly well-nigh infallible recipe for organization, in its Leninist variant for the urban setting and its Maoist one for the rural. A cardinal feature of the recipe was the principle of "democratic centralism" with the accent decidedly on the centralism than on the democracy. This recipe was first tried at the student level, notably with the establishment of the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) in 1966. The Darg discovered its utility and applied it to achieve the highest level of mobilization - and regimentation - of society ever recorded in Ethiopia.[36] Utilizing the same organizational recipe, the EPRDF smashed the Darg's gigantic military machine and seized state power in May 1991.

The same ideological baggage has permeated economic policy since 1974. It had to its credit the most revolutionary land reform proclamation ever promulgated in the African continent. On the debit side, however, it ushered in a stifling control of the national economy by the state. In the rural sector, aside from the state control of land, it was characterized by measures ranging from tight control of agricultural marketing to ambitious programs of collectivization, villagization, and resettlement.[37] In the urban setting, it involved the nationalization of urban land and of financial institutions and state control of wholesale and retail trade through its marketing corporations and the urban dweller associations. The disastrous consequences of such all-pervasive control of the national economy are all too manifest to require elaboration.[38] These and

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[36] One of the major contributions of Christopher Clapham's sober analysis of the Mangestu era (*Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*, Cambridge, 1988) is its documentation of the Darg's achievements in this regard.

[37] The decade-long study of Dessalegn Rahmato in this sphere is recapitulated in his "Land Tenure and Land Policy in Ethiopia after the Derg", a paper prepared for the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies to be held in East Lansing (Michigan), 5-10 September 1994; I am grateful for his permission to let me draw on this paper.

[38] But for an expert assessment, see Eshetu Chole and Makonnen Manyazewal, "The Macroeconomic Performance of the Ethiopian Economy 1974-90," *The Ethiopian Economy: Structure, Problems and Policy Issues. Proceedings of the First Annual Conference on the Ethiopian Economy*, ed. Mekonnen Taddesse (Addis Ababa, 1992), particularly pp. 28-30.

the changed international political climate (*perestroika* and *glasnost*) forced the Darg to make a rather belated retreat from the command economy. Although the stalwarts of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) persisted for long on being more Soviet than the Soviets themselves, ultimately the Gorbachev revolution had a ripple effect in Ethiopia too. Theoretically at least, the command economy was abandoned in favour of the mixed economy. The Darg even took tentative steps towards accepting the SAP package of the IMF/World Bank; negotiations in this respect presumably foundered on the rock of devaluation, which the Darg was not prepared to consider.[39] Thus, the transition from the command economy to the free market was not abrupt. Nor has it been complete. A strong dosage of residual commandism is detectable in the economic policy of the EPRDF-dominated Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE), notably in its attitude towards both rural and urban land, as indeed in its conception of popular participation and decision-making.

But arguably the most potent ingredient of the Marxist-Leninist ideological baggage has been the principle of the right of nations to self-determination upto and including secession. The principle was first aired at a student gathering in Christmas Hall (the main student dining hall of Addis Ababa University) on a fateful November evening of 1969. The vector of this pregnant idea was the intrepid if rather adventurist stalwart of the student movement, Wallelign Mekonnen. In 1970, the Algerian-based student exiles gave the student movement a more comprehensive rendition of the problem under the pseudonym of Tilahun Takele.[40] Entitled "The National Question ('Regionalism') in Ethiopia", the piece soon became the gospel of the Ethiopian student movment and the left. The term gospel is used here not without reason. For it amounted to little more than a literal application of Leninist rhetoric and Stalinist dogma - rich in polemics but woefully short on empirical data. And yet, the principle - and especially its fateful rider, "upto and including secession" - became the true test of any self-respecting Ethiopian Marxist.

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[39] Eshetu Chole, "A Preliminary Appraisal of Ethiopia's Economic Reforms 1991-93", a paper prepared for the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies to be held in East Lansing (Michigan), 5-10 September 1994, p. 18, n. 11; I am equally grateful to Eshetu for allowing me a preview of his paper.

[40] A pseudonym carefully selected to symbolize two generations of opposition to the Hayla-Sellase regime, that of the "father", Takkala Walda-Hawaryat, who battled the emperor with singular determination until his death in 1968, and of the "son", Tilahun Gizaw, who was murdered by the regime in 1969, in the wake of the government hysteria provoked by Wallelign's paper.

There is no doubt that, particularly with respect to the oppressed and exploited southern half of the country, the principle addressed a fundamental problem.[41] But in the rush to conform, few asked the crucial questions such as: What are the nationalities and nations of Ethiopia? How did they evolve over time and what was the nature of their mutual interaction? How precisely do they exercise their right of self-determination? In the objective economic circumstances in which Ethiopia found itself, need one push the principle to its extreme limit of secession? In the end, therefore, the principle amounted to little more than a legitimizing instrument for any organized national elite that took up arms against the central government.[42] It is a telling comment on the abstract nature of the whole exercise that the two major nationalities/nations of Ethiopia, the Amhara and the Oromo, have been cultural categories rather than territorially defined political entities. Yet such was the power of the theory that even the Darg was forced to make some half-hearted concessions to it by establishing autonomous units in its People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. After 1991, the student theory of the 1960s and 1970s has become official doctrine. The absence of any critical re-examination of the principle has meant that Ethiopia is now virtually set to be the laboratory for its testing out, irrespective of the disastrous lessons of the Soviet and Yugoslav experience.

While within the realm of ideology, a few words on Islam are appropriate. As indicated above, Islam was relegated to a clearly secondary status in the past. A major handicap that Ethiopian Muslims had suffered was their exclusion from the hereditary usufruct right to land (*rest*) prevalent in the north. As a result, the Muslims had traditionally been forced to concentrate on trade. A confused attempt by *Lej* Iyyasu (1913-16), the designated heir of Menilek, to redress the imbalance ended in his deposition.[43] During the period of Fascist Italian occupation (1936-41), the new rulers, in line with their policy of undermining the political prerogatives and cultural advantages of the Christian Amhara ruling class, introduced policies favourable to Islam, such as recognition of sharia law, the use of the Arabic language for instruction and in the media, and the building of mosques, including the Grand Mosque in Addis Ababa. Most of these policies

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[41] And yet it was the Eritrean insurgency, not the south, that provoked the issue. Ultimately and ironically, the Eritrean problem was resolved outside the framework of national self-determination which Tilahun Takele took so much pains to construct for it.

[42] For the manipulative potentialities of ethnicity, which in Ethiopian parlance is only known in its elevated edition of "the national question", see Doornbos, p. 58.

[43] For the details, see Bahru, *Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 124-28.

were reversed after the restoration of the Hayla-Sellase regime in 1941.[44] A more enduring, and this time indigenous, wind of change began to blow in 1974, heralded by a mammoth demonstration of the Muslim population of the capital, with the enthusiastic support of several Christians. The ultimate result of this popular demonstration was the official recognition of Islam as a national religion, as made explicit in the official celebration of three Muslim holidays and the ascription of equal protocol status to the patriarch and the imam. In essence, therefore, what has taken place after 1974, amplified after 1991, is not so much the dis-establishment of the Church as the co-establishment of both Christianity and Islam.

## Countervailing Influences

The above picture of classical Ethiopian society is admittedly grim. With such a background, the prospects for democratization are bound to appear dim. What are the redeeming features of Ethiopian history that can dispel the gloomy picture somewhat? What are the "bright spots" in this rather unremitting image of authoritarianism and orthodoxy? It is easier to ask such questions than to answer them. For the counter-currents strike one by their futility or ephemeral character or their not so decisive import on the political instance. Even if and when such counter-currents assume a more durable shape, they do not always dispel the gloom cast by the two millstones of Ethiopian history. With this note of caution, let us turn to look at these counter-currents, focussing on three of them - propretary and juridical rights, regional challenges, constitutionalism, and the press.

### *Proprietary and Juridical Rights*

The predominant form of landed property in classical Ethiopia has been the *rest*. This gave the peasant an usufruct right over land by virtue of belonging to a certain lineage. Although his right to sell it was restricted to members of his lineage, he could bequeath it to his offsprings. *Rest* right gave even the lowest Ethiopian a sense of worth and importance in the social hierarchy. Interestingly enough, this lineage form of land ownership was a common feature among a number of the southern peoples of Ethiopia as well as those of the north until the

[44] Hussein Ahmed describes these events in detail in his yet unpublished paper, "Islam and Islamic Discourse in Ethiopia (1973-1993)", paper prepared for the 12th International Conference of Ethipian Studies; I am grateful to the author for permission to refer to his paper.

large-scale alienation of land that set in this century.[45] While the 1975 land reform proclamation eliminated the privileges of the exploiting landlord class, particularly in the south, state control of land and resources diminished considerably the peasant's sense of security and self-esteem.

Parallel with the access to land went a system of justice and arbitration which gave Ethiopian society an egalitarian character. This again was not confined to any one section of Ethiopian society but was prevalent in both the south and the north. Both Oromo and Gurage societies were governed by the *sera*, the traditional code of justice interpreted by elders versed in it. In the north, too, the traditional mode of arbitration could pit the lowest against the highest, with the exception of the monarch who was deemed to be above earthly justice. Again the lowest subject had the right of appeal to the king if he felt that justice had not been rendered. The traditional process of litigation, the *Tatayyaq Muget*, attained a degree of elaboration and sophistication scarcely matched in the political realm.[46] The oratory and self-confidence exhibited in the judicial process contrasted sharply with the obeisance and submissiveness experienced in the political sphere.

*Regional Challenges*

Under the imperial sway of the Ethiopian monarch, strong regional loyalties have existed throughout the country's history. In the north, regions like Tegray, Shawa, Gojjam, and Bagemder evolved with their own distinct identity, although such identity could be further tiered at sub-regional levels (e.g. Adwa, Agame, Endarta for Tegray; Manz, Yefat, Marhabete for Shawa; Mota, Bechana, Damot for Gojjam; etc.). Indeed, as already mentioned, for the Amhara and Oromo regions, regional loyalty had greater force than ethnic identity. The history of classical Ethiopia was characterized above all by the rivalry of different regional rulers to assume a predominant position in the imperial power set-up. The nineteenth century saw both the climax of these regional rivalries (in the first half) and the beginnings of the reassertion of imperial power (in the second). In the twentieth century, regional forces waged their last - and invariably losing - battle against the ever-growing powers of the central government. Gojjam and Tegray probably illustrate these regional challenges to the highest degree.

[45] Bahru, *Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 88-89. I am grateful to Donald Crummey for pointing to me the egalitarian implications of *rest*.

[46] See Aberra Jembere "Tatayyaq Muget: The Traditional Ethiopian Mode of Litigation", *Proceedings of the Eighth Internaitonal Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Taddese Beyene (Addis Ababa, 1988), pp. 245-52.

Until the Battle of Embabo (6 June 1882), when the forces of *Negus* Menilek of Shawa defeated those of *Negus* Takla-Haymanot of Gojjam, the Gojjame ruler, who enjoyed also the favours of the reigning emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889), was an important contender for the imperial throne. At Embabo, Menilek won a double victory - he ensured his unrestricted access to the rich southwest and ascertained his succession to the throne. After Embabo, Takla-Haymanot acquiesced in his junior status, but continued to rule his region with considerable autonomy and respect from the emperor. This modus vivendi between center and periphery was disturbed in 1932 when his son, *Ras* Haylu, fell foul of Hayla-Sellase's centralizing drive. He nearly lost his life but ended up losing only his liberty; his region lost its autonomy.[47] The heroic performance of the regional nobility in the resistance to the Fascist Italian occupation earned it, albeit temporarily, provincial governorships in the post-1941 order. But the more independent-minded (like *Dajjach* Balay Zallaqa) and rebellious (like *Bitwaddad* Nagash Bazabeh, grandson of *Negus* Takla-Haymanot) got crushed under the resurgent powers of the imperial center. Measures to assert greater central government control through land measurement and taxation ignited a series of popular revolts, the most serious of which took place in 1968.[48]

In Tegray, the death of the Tigrean-based Emperor Yohannes at the Matamma battlefield in 1889 was attended by the total disarray of the Tigrean nobility. The emperor's designate, Mangasha, swayed between submission and defiance until he was finally confined to prison, where he died. Shawan governors - *Ras* Makonnen, *Ras* Wale, and finally *Dajjach* Abata - were successively appointed to rule the troubled province. The final appointment provoked a serious rebellion led by *Dajjach* Abraha, which was crushed.[49] Thereafter, the governorship of the province remained within the two branches of the Yohannes family. In 1943, the eastern part of the province rose in a rebellion uniting both peasantry and nobility; this was known as the Wayane. The crushing of that rebellion too was attended by the imposition of direct rule from Addis of an iniquitous nature which came to an end in 1947; the governorship then reverted to Yohannes's grandson, *Ras* Seyoum, and after 1960, when he was killed in the course of the abortive coup led by Brigadier-General Mangestu Neway, to his son, Mangasha. The flight of *Ras* Mangasha in the wake of the 1974 revolution

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[47] Bahru, *Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 61-62, 143-44.

[48] The Gojjam uprising is one of the trilogy of post-1941 rebellions analyzed in detail in Gebru Tareke's *Ethiopia: Power and Protest. Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 160-93.

[49] A history graduate student, Makonnen Berhane, is just finishing a thesis on this period of Tegray history under my supervision.

and the re-imposition of direct rule of an even more exacting nature formed the backdrop for the second major Tegreyan insurgency of the century, which evnetually brought the TPLF to central power.

What these two regional challenges - the Gojjame and the Tegrayan - had in common was that they were essentially reactions to the growing powers of the central state. In as much as they resisted political oppression and economic exploitation and stood for regional autonomy and social equity and economic security, they had positive content. But they did not always represent more progressive forces or objectives than those at the center. Gebru suggests somewhat tentatively that the Gojjam uprising of 1968 had the character of a "vendée revolt" and clear messianic overtones,[50] while "Conservative religious orthodoxy" permeated the Wayane uprising of 1943.[51] Only after 1975, under the leadership of the TPLF, did the Tegrean challenge assume a more advanced ideological - and organizational - shape than the center. Whether the success of that challenge is going to bring to Ethiopia a better form of governance is precisely what is at issue today.

The Bale uprising of 1963-70, which was another regional challenge faced by the Hayla-Sellase regime, had more pronounced class (peasant) and ethnic (Oromo and Somali) dimensions than either the Wayane or the Gojjam uprising. It was as much directed against the cultural domination of the north as against the policy of land alienation. But to see it as a manifestation of pan-Oromo nationalism would be anachronistic, for it had few ramifications in other Oromo areas at the time. There was also in the Bale case a clearly articulated external factor - the tide of pan-Somali nationalism that attended the independence of the Somalilands and the birth of the Somali republic in 1960.[52] Somali irredentism created an even more recalcitrant bone of contention between the two countries, erupting in a clash of arms in 1963 and a full-scale war in 1977. But here, the local (i.e. Ogaden) element was not as important as the dispute between two sovereign states over an international boundary.

But undoubtedly the most momentous regional challenge came from Eritrea. The Eritrean case is too detailed and complex to do justice to in a paper of this size. Only the highlights will be indicated here. Much of presentday Eritrea was part of the classical Ethiopian state until 1890, when it was carved up as an Italian colony. When the Italians were driven out of Eritrea - as indeed from Ethiopia as well - in 1941, the prevalent trend in Eritrea was for union with

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[50] Gebru, pp. 160, 189.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

[52] *Ibid.*, pp. 125-26, 159.

Ethiopia. But the systematic fostering of separatism by the British, who had established an interim administration, and the Italians, who still harboured a nostalgic hankering for their former colony, created a counter-current. The inability of the Hayla-Sellase regime to accomodate the regional autonomy that the separate, even if short, history of Eritrea dictated and the UN settlement of 1950 guaranteed provoked the armed struggle that ultimately resulted in the independence of Eritrea. Initially, progressive forces in Ethiopia espoused the Eritrean cause as part of the democratic struggle against Hayla-Sellase. As we have seen above, the student movement and the left even tried to subsume it under the Marxist-Leninist recipe for the national question. The Darg era exacerbated the whole situation and recast the question in the starkest of terms: forcible union versus unqualified independence. Now that independence has been achieved, the question still lingers how much the achievement of that objective has promoted the cause of democracy. Even if the authoritarian character of the EPLF can be explained by the exigencies of the armed struggle, it remains a matter of considerable doubt whether a genuinely democratic society can be built in independent Eritrea on those foundations.

*Constitutionalism*

Ethiopia has seen four constitutions (three proclaimed and one aborted in the drafting stage)in its history; it is soon to have its fifth one. The Eritrean constitution of 1952, which defined the federal arrangement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, is of a different order as it did not apply to the whole of Ethiopia.[53] The first constitution was proclaimed in 1931, "granted" - as the Ethiopians were all too frequently reminded - by Emperor Hayla-Sellase as a sort of coronation gift. This granting from above remained the pattern of the history of Ethiopian constitutions. The single exception, the one prepared by a constitution-drafting commission in the wake of the 1974 revolution, did not see the light of day.

The 1931 constitution was essentially in the nature of a definition of the respective prerogatives of the monarchy and the nobility, with the accent clearly more on those of the former than on those of the latter. The rights of the common people were only grudgingly conceded. Modelled after the Meiji constituion of 1889, the constitution underlined the absolute powers of the monarch, established the rules of royal succession, and set up a bicameral parliament, with an appointed upper house and a lower house constituted through indirect elections

[53] It is, however, analyzed for its contemporary relevance by Christopher Clapham in his "Constitutions and Governance in Ethiopian Political History", in *Constitutionsalism: Reflections and Recommendations*, ed. The InterAfrica Group (Addis Ababa, 1993), pp. 32-34.

in which the landed gentry clearly had the upper hand.[54] As candidly explained by the author of the constitution, the Russian-educated *Bajerond* Takla-Hawaryat, democratic governance was explicitly ruled out as having "caused too much bloodshed even among the civilized nations".[55] As Clapham concludes, "the 1931 constitution established a model for Ethiopian constitutions which was to be repeated in 1955 and 1987. It was an instrument designed to consolidate the power of those who already held it, by appealing to an external model of legitimation which would consolidate the legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of its principal foreign allies, and to which domestic political actors were expected to subscribe".[56]

The revised constitution of 1955 was yet another gift of Emperor Hayla-Sellase, this time to commemorate the silver jubilee of his coronation. Although it was intended to dispel the embarrassment created by the more liberal Eritrean constitution, it made few significant concessions to liberal democracy. Over a quarter of its provisions were concerned with the question of imperial succession. The absolute prerogatives of the emperor were spelt out in even more unmistakable terms than in 1931. Its major departure from the past lay in the provisions for universal adult suffrage and an elected chamber of deputies. But the people could not be enticed to vote in any meaningful numbers and the property qualifactions for parliamentary elections tended to give even the lower house of parliament an upper class bias.[57]

Were it not for its Christian and Solomonic bias, the draft constitution of August 1974 might probably have gone down in history as the best constitution ever drafted for Ethiopia. But it was swept away by the tide of events which swept the Darg to state power in September 1974. It was drafted not to consolidate the power of any particular group but to answer the basis questions of democracy raised by the popular upsurge of February 1974. The membership of the "Supreme Constitution Commission", as it was called, was a cross-section of bourgeois liberal opinion.[58] As such, it tried to strike a careful balance between traditional authority and popular demands. In so doing, it could be said to have reflected more faithfully the country's stage of development than could

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[54] Bahru, *Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 140-43.

[55] Quoted in *ibid*, p. 143.

[56] Clapham, "Constitutions and Governance", p. 32.

[57] Bahru, *Modern Ethiopia*, pp. 206-07.

[58] It was also assisted by a competent secretariat drawing on some of the best representatives of the legal profession.

be said of later prescriptions for the country's ills. One of its most important departures from the past was the provision for a constitutional monarchy and the abolition of the rule of male primogeniture for royal succession. However, although it provided for the separation of church and state, it insisted unequivocally that the monarch cannot be of any faith other than the Orthodox Christian one nor of any dynasty other than the Solomonic. Executive power was to reside in a prime minister elected by a national assembly, which was the supreme legislative body. Civic rights were recognized in absolute and unqulaified terms. It also provided for an independent judiciary and, more significantly in view of its current importance, for devolution of the over-centralized state power to the provinces. Finally, it recommended the setting up of the office of ombudsman, coining an apt Amharic word for it, *enba tabaqi*. It is interesting that, although it was never ratified, the 1974 constitution gave the post-74 order such lasting terms as *kefla hagar*=administrative region (in place of the old *taqlay gezat*=governorate-general) and *beherawi shango*=national assembly (in place of the old foreign loan word *parlama*=parliament).[59]

While the 1974 constitution remained a mere theoretical proposition, the 1987 constitution, which sought to legitimize Mangestu's personal rule, did not have that much of a long life either, lasting as it did barely four years. That constitution purported to repose power in the working masses of Ethiopia. In a blatant identification of the incidental and the essential, that power was to be exercised on their behalf by the self-proclaimed vanguard party, the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE). While it recognized the existence of different nationalities, the constitution reaffirmed the unitary structure of the state, although providing for certain autonomous regions. A striking feature of the constitution was the contrast between the formal and the substantive. The drafting and ratification process was attended by a great deal of popular participation, including even Ethiopian communities abroad, culminating in a popular referendum. In actual fact, the whole exercise effected little change on the initial draft. The constitution provided for a freely elected national assembly and guaranteed civic liberties. In reality, only candidates designated by the WPE were elected and few people were prepared to put the promised civic liberties to the test. In sum, the whole thing was one big exercise in heavily monitored democracy.[60]

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[59] *Constitution of Ethiopia - Draft* (Addis Ababa, 1974).

[60] "Constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia," *Nagarit Gazeta* (Maskaram 1, 1980). For comments, see Clapham, pp. 36-38.

*The Press*

The press has a short history in Ethiopia, going back to only the beginning of the century. Among its pioneers was the Eritrean intellectual *Blatta* Gabra-Egziabher Gila-Maryam, who started circulating his views on national and international issues after escaping from an Italian prison near Assab, where he had been detained on charges of spying for Menilek. Two weeklies, *Aemero* and *Berhanena Salam*, began to appear soon after. The latter, patronized by the then progressive prince *Ras* Tafari, the future Emperor Hayla-Sellase, had its heyday in the second half of the 1920s when it served as a forum for the progressive intelligentsia, whom Tafari had drawn over to his side in his struggle against the conservative Empress Zawditu and the nobility allied to her. This was one of the brightest moments of the Ethiopian press, when vital national issues were freely discussed and debated. Unfortunately, it was short-lived. For the attainment of full power by the young prince in 1930, when he ascended the throne, signalled at the same time the end of the utility of the progressive intellectuals and their free organ. *Berhanena Salam* survived the next five years, up to that is the Italian invasion of 1935, as a typical government paper.

That became the norm for the press from 1941 to 1974, when it engaged in unabashed adulation of the emperor and blind defence of the status quo. Then came another spell of liberty with the popular upsurge of February 1974. The tide of repressed feeling was so high that not even the seizure of state power by the Darg could check it. Free expressions of views on various aspects of the revolutionary process continued well into 1975. In a way any element of self-restraint was discarded as most writers were writing under pseudonyms. The high point of this free expression of views was reached with the debates between the stalwarts of the two leftist parties, EPRP and MEISON, in the "Revolutionary Forum" (page 2) of the Amharic daily *Addis Zaman* and in such magazines as *Goh*. In the end, even the advantage of clandestinity given them by their pseudonyms could not save the authors from the wraths of the "white" or "red" terrors which devoured the rival members of the left. After the establishment of Mangestu's personal rule in 1977, the press entered its darkest period of adulation of the "infallible" ruler and cynical manipulation of the people.

**Summing Up**

The above survey of Ethiopian history has tried to show both the overbearing weight of authoritarianism and orthodoxy in Ethiopian society and the presence, if in a weaker form, of some countervailing tendencies. Undoubtedly, the struggle between the "anti-democratic" and "pro-democratic" elements in Ethiopian society has been an uneven one, with the scales unmistakably tipped towards the former.

The purpose of this exercise has not been to preach fatalism and despondency but to urge caution and restraint in one's expectations from the transition process and one's judgements of it. We are and we are not prisoners of our past. We are prisoners to the degree we do not properly understand it. And we are not to the extent that we can properly analyze it and avoid its pitfalls. True historical knowledge liberates because it saves one from repeating past mistakes. The challenge in Ethiopia is to escape the tyranny of the past, not to repeat it. The value of history is to help us understand the anti-democratic traditions of the past in order to try to overcome them. This admittedly is a difficult task. But knowing is going half way towards solving a problem.

In the Ethiopian context, therefore, the most formidable challenge is to **liberate society from the authoritarianism and militarism of the imperial legacy and the doctrinaire and commandist traditions of Marxism-Leninism.** An important way of meeting the challenge is by fostering the brighter aspects of the Ethiopian past while consciously fighting the darker ones. The sense of security and self-esteem that the individual enjoyed through both access to land and expectation of fair arbitration are traditions worth cultivating. An individual who has a personal stake in society and who can expect from society recognition of his human worth can assist considerably the growth of a genuine democratic culture. The essence of that culture should be respect for the common man, listening attentively to what he wants for himself rather than trying to do it on his behalf and in his name. If common sense could replace ideology, much of Ethiopia's ills would have a better chance of cure. The north, which has given the country its glorious civilization, has also burdened it with a political culture whose essential attributes appear to be complexity and intricacy bordering on cultivated deviousness. It is probably high time that the body politic got a salutary infusion from the simplicity and transparency of the southern political culture.

Another vital lesson of the Ethiopian past is the importance of regional loyalties and identities. Ethnic identity is a relatively recent phenomenon, largely created and fostered by politically motivated elites. Given its relative vastness and the diversity of its traditions, Ethiopia cannot but adopt a federal form of government. But there is no historical justification for that federal structure having an ethnic basis. Nor does the experience of other ethnic federations of the past (USSR, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia) have so many salutary lessons to offer. On the other hand, equitable regional units reflecting historical reality and responding to economic rationality could and should be set up. Only in that manner could Ethiopia avoid the over-centralization of the past and the future danger of disintegration.

Given the background of very short spells of press freedom in the past, the transition process faces a formidable challenge in fostering the culture of a free press. The post-1991 period has seen yet another spurt of free expression of

views. But many observers have entertained from the outset a somehwhat fatalistic foreboding of its impermanence. Nor are some of the developments that have taken place recently calculated to dispell this fatalism. The current spell of press freedom has both similarities and differences with the post-1974 precedent. The major difference is the emergence of a large number of privately owned papers and magazines now, whereas two decades back most of the debates took place within the columns of the government-owned papers. This situation has come about through a combination of factors - the ethos of private enterprise that has come to prevail and the resort of many civil servants who have fallen victims of the government's retrenchment policy to earning their livelihood by the fount of their pen. The fact that these victims included some of the country's most skilled personnel has tended to place the government-owned press at a clear disadvantage. On the other hand, the culture of anonymity - which seems to be a pervasive Ethiopian trait - has persisted. While this may save the authors from legal accountability, unfortunately, it also has the injurious effect of freeing them from moral responsibility. The culture of a free press can thrive and prosper only when the government is prepared to view it with tolerance and it in turn is ready to exercise its right with responsibility.

A few words finally on the international dimensions of the problem. More than any other country in Africa, Ethiopia has had the chance to develop on its own. It has had in short no significant colonial legacy. Many aspects of its modern history bear a stamp of this independent and organic evolution, the 1974 revolution probably being the most dramatic illustration of this fact. But it would be naive to think that Ethiopian independence has always been absolute. The Italian occupation of the country, brief as it was (1936-41), nonetheless left behind some vestiges, not least of which was the birth - fostered by the British - of Eritrean separatism. Another aspect of the influence exercised on Ethiopian history by external forces is the support given by foreign powers to the domestic ruling class - the USA to the Hayla-Sellase regime, the Soviet Union to Mangestu, and again the USA to the Transitional Government of Ethiopia. The obverse side of this relationship is the zeal with which Ethiopian governments adopted essentially alien institutions more to impress foreign observers or allies than to bring about genuine transformation in the country - beginning with Menilek's establishment of ministries in 1907, through the 1931 and 1955 constitutions, to the 1987 constitution. It remains to be seen whether the current constitution-drafting exercise would have any more genuinely domestic basis. But foreign allies do not always bail out a government in its times of trouble, unless they have vital interests of their own to defend and protect. The foreign powers only scoffed at Menilek's ministries. The 1931 constitution did not save Ethiopia from Italian invasion in 1935. Nor was the United States prepared to go into any extra trouble to save Hayla-Sellase in 1974. In the end, a government has to settle accounts with its own people. It survives or perishes by their judgement.