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BACKGROUND TO THE CRISIS IN ETHIOPIA
(Part Two: The Post-Monarchy Predicament)*

by
Asamenew G. W. Gebeyehu

In the first part of this article, I argued that the state in Ethiopia has historically been characterized by extreme centralization, ruling-élite violence, and dictatorship.¹ Similarly, the relationship between state and society and between elites and "masses" has often been conducted through the medium of violence. As a result, society in Ethiopia has long been deprived of its right to peaceful existence, development and democracy. In this second part, I shall explore the "revolution" of 1974 to see if it has altered in any radical sense the conditions that it allegedly set out to change. Is the regime's claim to be revolutionary in any way justified, or are we witnessing simply a continuation of the legacy of the past marked only by revolutionary rhetoric? In the following pages I shall attempt to show not only that there has been very little change for the better, but that much has worsened in the living conditions of the people.

Let us begin with the general understanding of the term "revolution." Revolution is often conceived of as a violent political, economic, social, and psychological process through which the existing order of society is altered, reorganized, and transformed into a higher and more mutually beneficial level. Both the Marxian theory of class struggle and the liberal theory of political conflict tend to subscribe to the view that violence is an inevitable feature of all revolutions committed to the idea of a fundamental change in state-society relations.² Chalmers Johnson expresses this common view when he says that "to make a revolution is to accept violence for the purpose of causing the system to change; more exactly, it is the purposive implementation of a strategy of violence in order to effect a change in social structure."³ Any such process that is not committed to the idea of a fundamental change and to the building of the institutions of change by which the legitimate aspirations of society are met cannot claim to be a revolution, socialist or otherwise.

It must be emphasized at this point that although history has shown time and again that revolutionary change involves, necessarily, one form of violence or another, violence in itself does not constitute revolution. It is rather a means necessitated by the goals revolutions aim to achieve—justice and liberty—and only as such does it become a component part of revolutions. It is hardly debatable, at least theoretically, that the mission of revolutions is to change the *status quo* for the purpose of improving the human condition in all its aspects.

Without this central component of the concept, revolution simply becomes a bloody rite of passage through which ruling elites rise and fall, thereby making the process a mere cyclical repetition of events. One has to bear this in mind when discussing the Ethiopian crisis following the relatively peaceful collapse of the monarchy in 1975.

Since the February 1974 upheaval leading to the deposition of Emperor Haile Selassie in September 1975, Ethiopia has been going through a violent crisis. To this crisis, quite a number of Ethiopian and expatriate scholars would grant a "revolutionary" status.⁴ If revolutions are measured simply by the degree of their violence, the Ethiopian crisis can indeed qualify as a revolution. However, beyond the ideological rhetoric, political veil, and propaganda arsenal of those who led and managed the crisis at its various stages, no positive changes have been effected which even remotely justify the violence and suffering unleashed on the country in the past sixteen years.⁵ What has become an agonizing reality, on the contrary, is the increasing deterioration of the human condition—the moral, economic, social, and political decomposition of society, also involving a dangerous move towards the balkanization of the country. Today, after sixteen years, it is obvious that whatever its original motives and goals were, the Ethiopian revolution has failed disastrously, leaving cancerous wounds on the body politic of the nation. The painful consequence of these cancerous wounds is to be seen today in what I consider to be the irresponsible actions of the various forces—be it the dictatorial central government or the movements that call themselves "liberation movements" (whose rigid adherence to a military solution for an essentially political problem, and the attendant insensitivity they show to the human tragedy which their violent engagement has brought about, cannot be condoned). In retrospect, then, given the amount of injustice suffered by the people and the almost cynical neglect of this suffering by the forces involved, the Ethiopian revolution is not only a total failure but also a degeneration and a tyrannical negation of the very peoples in whose name the violence is carried to absurdity.

It serves no purpose here to lay the heavy burden of responsibility for the ongoing tragedy *solely* on the shoulders of any particular individual or group. Indeed, such tendencies as vigorously displayed by the military government, the various opposition forces and, no less vigorously, by some expatriate "experts" on Ethiopia has not been productive and will not provide urgently sought solutions to alleviate the suffering of the people.⁶ It wouldn't, in fact, be too presumptuous to say that the self-justifying accusations and counter-

accusations have only helped prolong the crisis by adding fuel to violence which has engulfed the entire country.

Whether one acknowledges it or not, the heavy burden of responsibility for turning what initially appeared to be a genuine popular revolution into an orgy of violence weighs heavily on the collective consciousness of the generation of the revolution. It is worth noting that individuals, be they the extremist members of the present military regime or those of the opposition forces, are only symbols of this collective failure—constant reminders of the tragedy that has befallen the people.

Under such circumstances, perhaps the best thing for rational people to do would be to go beyond the tragedy of the recent past, and the quest for vengeance, and ask serious questions that are directly relevant to the future of the country. Can the crisis be resolved in a way mutually beneficial to the contending forces? How are the legitimate aspirations and expectations of the different peoples of the country to be satisfied? Most important of all, and more immediately, how can peace, which at this point in time is a prerequisite for any meaningful change, be achieved and the groundwork for democracy and development be laid? The situation may not be all that hopeless, and one can indeed be optimistic, as I myself am, that the conflicts beleaguering the country can be resolved in a meaningful way and that the dignity of the suffering people can be restored. But one must be aware, as painful as it is, that optimism alone is not going to bring deliverance.

The answer to the questions raised above requires much more than simple optimism and wishful thinking. It begs an objective understanding of the root causes of the national crisis and a genuine effort on the part of all Ethiopians directly and indirectly involved in the conflict to find a lasting and peaceful solution. In my opinion, this requires, first and foremost, a recognition of the futility of the violent path taken in the past and a willingness to seek alternative ways and means of resolving the conflict in its totality at all levels of state-society relations: local, regional and national. At this juncture in the bloody history of the Ethiopian people, only a genuine commitment to a democratic and peaceful resolution of the conflict and national reconciliation based on the respect of the fundamental human rights of all Ethiopians regardless of ethnicity, religion, region, and political opinion seems to be the only logical alternative to the fratricidal wars from which no one group has benefited. Surely, even those who are in the leadership both of the central government and of the various opposition forces must realize (if they are truly concerned about the fate

of the peoples whose "cause" they so often proclaim loudly) that a mortally wounded country of over forty-two million people can no longer be denied, whether in the name of "unity" or of "liberation," the fundamental rights of basic survival in a peaceful environment, without which democracy and development become sheer exercises in hollow rhetoric. The people cannot simply be held hostage by individuals or groups who have, at this particular juncture, mastered the art of violence, betrayal, and deception. As we shall see later, it would be unrealistic, a fatal mistake with dire consequences to the nation, to entrust the present leadership in the government (and, for that matter, in the opposition forces) with the task of building the necessary institutional framework for national reconciliation, peace, democracy, and development—at least not while both sides cling tenaciously to their extremist positions, each side unwilling to compromise on at least one of its stands. In fact, given each side's extremity, one is fully justified in wondering why at all they are talking about "negotiation," "peaceful settlement," and "democratic solutions" to the conflict. Such lofty goals cannot be achieved as long as the present barbarism and dictatorial tendencies prevail.

It was indicated in the first part of this article (*UFAHAMU*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1) that the central issue in the Ethiopian conflict in the past sixteen years has been the question of political power and its distribution between rival individuals or groups who claim to be the "legitimate" representatives of the national interest or of a section of it. It was also pointed out that historically, the question of political power throughout the Ethiopian state hierarchy has been associated with the ruling-elite culture of violence. In this second part of the article we shall see how this violence has manifested itself since the demise of the monarchy.

In every historical epoch, the rise and fall of ruling elites at national and regional levels has often been conditioned by the availability and effective use of force. What made violence an important instrument for the seizure and maintenance of political power was the dictatorial conception of power as a means to individually control, own, and dominate all societal activities—political, social, economic, and cultural. Power, as the Ethiopian ruling elites historically conceived of it, is a zero-sum game in which the winner takes everything and the loser loses everything, including, in most cases, his life. Such conceptions of power impede the possibility of power-sharing and, consequently, the peaceful transition of power from one holder to another.

The Ethiopian "revolution" has not changed this basic and destructive attitude to political power and its concentration on the highest levels of the state hierarchy. The post-monarchy elites have so far made no serious effort to change the authoritarian structure of the centralized state and the traditional conception of power, its use, and the means by which it is contested, won, and maintained. On the contrary, they have not only inherited the dictatorial tendencies of their predecessors but also overstretched their pathological obsession to singularly capture the commanding heights of power beyond its acceptable limits. This should not be seen as an isolated behavior to be attributed to a single individual or group. The experience of the past sixteen years indicates unmistakably that despite their ideological rhetoric and petty political differences, the military government, the leaderships of the various political parties, the now morally and politically bankrupt intelligentsia in exile, and the various "liberation movements" as well, have an essentially "feudal" and unmitigated authoritarian attitude towards power, "honor," and "duty." It is ironic, but nonetheless part of the tragic scenario of Ethiopian politics, that the worst obstacles to change have been the presumed agents of change themselves. In this, more than anything else, lies the reason for the demise of the Ethiopian revolution and the cause for the continuing conflict. The consequences for the society go beyond the political and economic failure of the revolution. In human terms, an entire generation of productive force has been lost; economically, suffice it to say that Ethiopia has simply become the symbol of destitution.

Yet this enormous human tragedy does not seem to have any impact on the conscience (or what little of it might possibly be left) of those who have done nothing better than mastermind a campaign of destruction in the name of socialism, democracy, self-determination, and a corpus of other seemingly genuine slogans. Since no rational observer can identify any commitment to such concepts by the parties involved in the conflict, and since no meaningful result has been achieved to justify the use of such concepts, one has to conclude that their function in the course of the Ethiopian power struggle has been to rationalize the quest for and control of dictatorial power and to legitimize the inhumanity of their political and militaristic adventures. In this case, one wonders whether what has really been happening in Ethiopia over the past sixteen years is not a perfect political reincarnation of the nineteenth-century "Era of the Prices," the period in which a violent power struggle between the various "feudal" warlords and aristocrats left much of the northern and central part of the country in a state of

chaos, anarchy, and destruction.⁷ Certainly, there are striking similarities between the modern "warlords" and their nineteenth-century counterparts. In both cases, the objective of conflict is the seizure of power at national and regional levels; violent confrontation is preceded by the weakness of the central government; the dictatorial tendencies of the leaders involved in the conflict prevents any attempt at creating an institutional framework of power-sharing; and, finally, the leaderships of the various rival groups in the conflict appear to be untouched by and cynically oblivious of the enormous pain and suffering of the people..

An important element which perhaps differentiates the "Era of the Princes" from its reincarnated version is that today's "warlords" have perfected the art of violence not only in terms of weaponry but also in terms of finding convenient political and ideological justifications for their sadistic actions. For instance, at the early stages of the revolution, while the military government and the two civilian opposition parties (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party and All Ethiopian Socialist Movement, popularly known by its Amharic acronym "Me'isone") were objectively engaged in a struggle for political power and sole possession of it, they presented their aims to the public as a struggle for socialism, democracy, people's government, and socioeconomic development.⁸ Further, each group claimed to be the sole legitimate representative of the interests of the "masses." Such claims are certainly part of the political rhetoric, but this does not alter the fact that the people in these groups did not know much about the "masses" that they claimed to "deliver," even while conceding that their concerns were genuine. A cursory glance at the programs of these groups indicates that the alleged "basic differences" each claims to have with the others is a matter more of formulation than of substance, in which case one can safely assume that what was at the heart of the matter in the conflict was nothing other than a seizure of power itself. The various "liberation movements" fare no better on this point. At one time or other they, too, have claimed as their cause the building of socialism, with programs not very much different from those of the other parties in their overall constitution, except for adding the term "national liberation." In all cases the individuals in the leaderships were and are connected mostly with the professional, petty-bourgeois, and, in some cases, aristocratic classes that benefited most from the former regime. Consequently, the often loud claims to know the interests and concerns of the "masses" are preposterous, at best. This is not to say that there were no individuals then (or that there aren't now) who may have been genuine in their concerns, but that is a far cry from understanding and mastering the situation. The petty differences and intellectual squabbles on all sides have only helped turn the legitimate question of cultural groups and

regions for equality, empowerment, and self-determination (in its broad sense) into a personal and egotistical power struggle.

In sum, the root cause of the conflict as it has manifested itself over the past sixteen years is nothing other than a conscious and vicious struggle for this power. Similarly, the dictatorial tendency in the different leadership groups, inherited and cultivated over a period of many years, continues to be both the perpetuator of the conflict and a major obstacle for the peaceful and democratic resolution of the issue of power. The consequence of the failure to even approach a peaceful resolution to the conflict is the human tragedy that we witness today.

First of all, an entire generation of productive forces consisting of the best and the brightest—the very generation which had the promise to bring the country and the people out of their misery—was lost. A great many were unceremoniously killed during the infamous "Red Terror" of 1977. Still more are dying under the slogans of "Motherland or Death" on the one hand, and "National Liberation" on the other. Hundreds are still imprisoned, others exiled, and some disappeared without a trace. Neither is the fate any better of those who survived the madness of the power struggle and stayed at home out of some moral conviction to serve their country. The general atmosphere of fear and terror which has become the hallmark of the society in the past sixteen years has not enabled them to fully invest their knowledge and energy in any meaningfully productive way. And a society whose creative capacity is repressed cannot and will not, at least in the foreseeable future, stand up to the complex challenges of life and survival.

Second, in the absence of professionally capable and morally responsible citizens to construct the institutions of change and lead the country on the path of peace, social harmony, and economic recovery, highly incompetent, extremely corrupt, violent political cadres are now in charge of the important affairs of the state, operating in such an absurd fashion that their incapability seems a consciously willed one. For these people, conveniently twisted ideological and political justifications have not been lacking to turn shame into pride, and failure into achievement and "honor." Consequently, under such circumstances, even the most genuine policies of government could not escape being sabotaged from within by the incompetence and irresponsibility of the cadres whose job it was to implement those policies.

Third, the continuing violent power struggle within the government, and between the government and the various opposition forces, has been the major factor for the lack of any social, economic, or cultural development. Scarce national resources that could have been used to enrich the physical and spiritual well-being of the Ethiopian peoples are unnecessarily spent by all sides on weapons of destruction. Such use (in fact abuse) of resources seems to have no other purpose

than to be a means of discrediting or legitimizing the positions of one or the other of the rival groups in the conflict. It is usually assumed that countries have the right to defend their national interests by all means, not the least of these being force, particularly against external enemies, real or perceived; what governments consider "internal threat" to national security is also dealt with in more or less the same manner. In this respect, what the government of Ethiopia is doing at present in terms of maintaining Ethiopia's territorial integrity is in keeping with the logic of modern day political and military "philosophy." It may be logical, but it is perhaps not necessarily right or to the liking of those who question the unity of Ethiopia. Similarly, it can be argued that peoples who are oppressed by any one group have the right to fight for self-determination and empowerment, not seldom using force as a last resort to assert themselves. In a situation where the parties involved cling tenaciously to force, to the exclusion of other means, right becomes synonymous with might and the peoples' humanity becomes a mere function of just this show of might.

The question that must now be asked is whether military force is the only weapon available to the parties involved for ironing out their differences. The show of force on all sides has reached such absurd proportions that it no longer seems to matter what the blood-letting is all about. What is even more alarming now is the increasing and irresponsible effort by the leaderships of rival groups to create fear, suspicion, and animosity among the different cultural groups, so much so that the point no longer seems to be the "territorial integrity" of Ethiopia or "self-determination" of the nationalities about which the parties in conflict are senselessly adamant. The only group which will benefit from such hate-mongering and continuing fratricidal war is the very minority elite which holds dictatorial power in all the parties involved. It has become increasingly apparent in the past sixteen years that a number of individuals within the government and opposition forces (such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front, Oromo Liberation Front, and Eritrean People's Liberation Front) have been interested more in the escalation of the conflict than in finding a solution.

Finally, the political power struggle at national and regional levels and the absence of any genuine effort on all sides to create an institutional arrangement by which the legitimate needs of the people are satisfied have only helped create a condition that promises nothing more than a grim future, not only for the Ethiopian state but also for the causes championed by the various "liberation movements." The Ethiopian government, in its frenzy to keep the country intact, has so far come up with nothing more than a repetition of its dogmatic war-cry, "Ethiopia or Death!" Similarly, the "liberation movements," operating in formulaic equal-opposite-reaction mode, are bent on regionalizing and ethnicizing the whole issue so much so that the question no longer

seems to be the "liberation" of the peoples for whom they claim to stand. Rather, it has turned into a game of simply "disproving" that Ethiopia ever existed as a historical entity, which claim, even if granted, has no relevance in terms of bringing about a mutually beneficial solution in which the needs of the people are no longer marginalized. The situation is still being exacerbated by the active engagement of "Ethiopianists," local and expatriate, whose "expertise" from half a globe away is in the main directed at the negation of Ethiopia's historical existence prior to the nineteenth century,⁹ as if, to reiterate, that such issues really matter to the peasants whose priorities are such down-to-earth ones as survival—food, shelter, clothing. For these needs of the peasants to be fulfilled, peace is the one condition that must be met at present. How the positions these scholars take help solve the problem in terms of bringing about this much needed peace is beyond comprehension.

What is important for our purpose here is to stress that the Ethiopian problem is a national problem and not specific to a particular region or cultural group alone. No cultural group in Ethiopia today is either worse or better than the others. The entire country is the private "colony" of whatever ruthless dictators are in power, and, as such, it makes absolutely no difference to the people whether these dictators are Amharas, Oromos, Tigreans or Martians. Evil by any other name is still evil. What needs to be liberated is the entire country, and this requires a concerted effort on all sides and a willingness to compromise. No one can deny that the issue of self-determination itself is a legitimate issue. It cannot be denied either that the distribution of national resources between the various cultural groups and regions has been unequal and even discriminatory in the past. Some have had better access to resources than others, and the resources of some have been exploited to benefit others. Social, political, and administrative injustices have been committed against a large majority of the country's regional and cultural groups by the dominant ruling elites.

In light of all this, regional and cultural self-determination is a legitimate cause insofar as it aims to bring regional economic, political, and cultural equality, to create a solid institutional framework to ensure equal access to common resources, and to democratize and empower civil society so that it can defend its rights and interests. Self-determination, more than anything else, is about the empowerment of the "ordinary" men and women at all levels of social and territorial organization. It is an idea which aspires to give political, economic, and social empowerment to civil society and which aims at disintegrating the oppressive, exploitative, and rigidly centralized state apparatus. Unfortunately, this fundamental idea about the right of the individual in society, the right of the community in the region, and the right of the

region in the country is misconceived and misrepresented in Ethiopia today. Regionalism and issues of regional self-determination in the Ethiopian context need to be reoriented and concertized. The goal of regionalism and self-determination within the Ethiopian context is not to bring about the territorial disintegration of the country (a thing that benefits none except power-seekers at the top level) but to dismantle the existing non-representative and centralized state institutions and illegitimate military government so that it can be replaced with a decentralized, democratic, and pluralist state institutions and representative government accountable to civil society. I must emphasize here that I do not consider the institution of the state and the government which controls it as being synonymous with Ethiopia. The existence of Ethiopia as a country is not to be identified with the state, and an anti-state and anti-government position is by no means to be seen as an anti-Ethiopia position. Similarly, while regionalist movements for cultural and economic as well as political self-determination can and must be anti-state and anti-government, it is my personal position that they need not, indeed should not, be anti-Ethiopia for the simple reason that, at this juncture in time, the anti-Ethiopia position per se does not, in all honesty, benefit any of the communities that presently live in Ethiopia. The idea is to find the panacea for the patient, not to kill it.

By way of conclusion I wish to stress that Ethiopians, and also those who claim other identities, need to come up with new and original ideas to resolve the question of power at national, regional, and local levels and put the country on the path of peace, democracy, and development. Such new and original ideas must come from the shared experiences of the people. The aim should be to challenge the ideology, myth, and reason of the existing order of society with the ultimate goal of protecting the universal interest and welfare of society at large. The new Ethiopia I envision cannot but be one, liberated from the tyranny of dominant elites, from the culture of violence and from the extremely centralized, parasitic state. The realization of the ideals of peace, democracy, and development cannot come about under the existing conditions. Rather, they are contingent upon the liberation of society from a leadership which has long lost its moral legitimacy to lead and from a state which is no longer the institutional representation of civil society. Neither are the current warriors in the struggle for power qualified to lead the future Ethiopia. The current path taken by all parties, rather than bringing about peace and democracy, helps to bring nothing other than a new cycle of violence, even when promises of a multi-party system or periodic elections are vehemently made. *Total political, economic, and cultural empowerment of civil society* is the answer to the ills suffered by the people. The tired slogans we hear on all sides must be put to sleep.

*I am grateful to Mr. Yonas Admassu of Comparative Literature, UCLA, for some important suggestions and editorial assistance. However, I take responsibility for the views forwarded in this article, which are not necessarily shared by him.

¹Asamenew G. W. Gebeyehu, "The Background to the Political Crisis in Ethiopia, Part One: The Imperial Heritage," *UFAHAMU* Vol 18, No. 1, 1990, 25-40.

²For a good summary of the opposing views on revolution, see the introductory chapter in Theda Skocpol's *State and Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 3-43.

³Cited in Skocpol, *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴See, for example, the attention-catching titles of Marina Ottaway, *Empire in Revolution* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1978); Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution* (London: Verso Editions, 1981); and Negussay Ayele, "The Ethiopian Revolution Seven Years Young," in *Journal of African Marxists*, No. 3 (January, 1983), 47-63.

⁵The much-celebrated "achievements of the revolution," such as land reform, nationalization of the major sectors of the economy, literacy campaign, etc., have only been symbolic achievements which did not translate into any meaningful social and economic change for the masses. The continuing specter of mass poverty, misery and famine is a clear indication that whatever the "revolution" took away from the former haves has not been served to the have-nots.

⁶The tragedy of such rhetorical engagements reaches its apex in the fact that the violence and the ensuing crisis have cynically been turned into an "academic commodity" in the "stock markets" of international conferences, the majority of whose participants are there for personal gains, at best.

⁷See Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia: the Era of Princes* (London: Longman, 1968).

⁸For an account of the use of these concepts by the different groups, see Marina Ottaway, "Democracy and New Democracy: The Ideological Debate in the Ethiopian Revolution," *African Studies Review*, 1978.

⁹The strongest claim to this effect has been made in a recent book. See Bonnie K. Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa* (Trenton, New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, Inc., 1990).

ARROGANCE IS THE DISEASE OF LITTLE MEN

WHEN AN ELEPHANT TRAMPLES ON THE GROUND
IT IS NOT THINKING OF AN ANT

supplied by Mazisi Kunene