

Editorial**THE «TRANSITION» IN PERSPECTIVE**

The inventory of major armed conflicts in Ethiopia (see back cover page) starts with the infamous period of «Zemene Mesafint»: Called the «Era of Princes», this period, which stretches from 1769 to 1855, is one of indescribable chaos, anarchy and bloodshed with Amhara, Oromo and Tigrean warlords fighting for supremacy at the center, local chieftains trying to grab territory of smaller neighbours and several attempted invasions of the country by foreigners especially the Ottoman Turks.

Although this period ended with the rise to power of Emperor Tewodros II, the ordeals of the peoples of Ethiopia did not end with the close of this era. Since the middle of the last century, more than 20 attempts by foreigners to invade the country were repulsed at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. Perhaps more significantly, internal strife continued to bleed the country. Sovereigns at the center continued to usurp power by force and battled to maintain their hard won status of «King of Kings». From this time on up to the present day, the prevailing atmosphere of violence at the top of Ethiopia's "leadership" was such that all the top leaders of the country, be they kings or presidents, with the exception of Emperor Menilik II and Mengistu Haile Mariam, either committed suicide, died in battle, were murdered in custody or were poisoned.

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Transition ends, problems remain

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Death or deposition of the sovereign triggered the process of «transfer of power» which to this day remained an extremely bloody affair stretching over a number of years with rival factions exploiting regional, ethnic and/or religious affiliations to settle the issue at the battlefield.

With the rise to prominence of Ras Teferi and his coronation as Emperor Haile Selassie 1st in 1930 after a chaotic and bloody 14 year «transition» period, the country witnessed a new phenomenon: although the business of securing, exercise and «transfer» of power continued to be governed by the same old rules, formal instruments of government like constitutions and elections were introduced to legitimize political power secured by the barrel of the gun and maintained through use of increasingly sophisticated organs of state security.

For the last 65 years, under 3 successive regimes, Ethiopia experienced three constitutions and several elections, each time presented by the new regimes as a radical break with the past and intended to solve «once and for all» the chronic problems of politics in Ethiopia: the absence of popular participation and instability.

Although he had his own idea of what constituted «the people», Emperor Haile Selassie was the first to talk about the need and the reality of popular participation. In his address to the 84 senators and deputies elected on the basis of the 1931 constitution he announced the dawn of the New era in these terms: «Up to now, the burden of government rested on the shoulders of the sovereigns alone, who ruled their people as a father would guide his children. Now the time has come for the people to participate in the affairs of the country».

Decades later, in 1987, Mengistu who battled his way to supreme power after 13 years of «provisional government» declared on the eve of the proclamation of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) that he was the real innovator: «Now, for the first time in the history of Ethiopia, a constitution

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drafted, enriched and ratified by the people themselves is going to be put into effect». Eight years later, in the wake of the «first multi-party elections» to establish the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), Meles tried to convince the Ethiopian people that between the FDRE and the PDRE, the issue was not one of «change of seal» but rather of substance as these elections marked «the introduction and implementation of a system where the people can decide as to who is to administer the country. This is a new phenomenon in the history of Ethiopia and it is a big change.»

Elections, however, never addressed the real problems of the country let alone resolved them. To the rulers they were marginal instruments of power. To the governed, they have always been irrelevant as they were systematically «result oriented» (the UN euphemism for seriously fraudulent and manipulated elections), conducted on the terms dictated by the rulers within «constitutional frameworks» which decreed the political, ideological and socio-economic choices of the group in power as the «supreme law» of the land.

Constitutions were even more marginal and irrelevant than the electoral processes. Mengistu's and Meles' claims to the contrary notwithstanding, they were never the result of the expression of the free will of the people. They always come at the end of transition periods to further legitimize and consolidate the newcomer's power already secured and maintained «by other means». Promulgated with one vigilant eye on actual or potential opponents, their purpose is not only to provide a legal framework and basis for the incumbent's supremacy but also to pre-empt any and all attempts to change the established order.

Promulgated at a time when the feudal ideology had an absolute hold of the country, Emperor Haile Selassie's constitution had no need for sophisticated legal jargons. It bluntly decreed the political and socio-economic order was divinely ordained and proclaimed the monarchy as the only form of government suitable for Ethiopia. The Constitution preemptively disqualified any and all claimants to the imperial throne by simply decreeing members of Haile Selassie's family as the «eternal» rulers of Ethiopia as enacted by Article 6 of the Constitution which states that the imperial crown shall be «perpetually attached to the dynasty of Emperor Haile Selassie I».

The Constitutions of Mengistu and Meles, although worked out in different national contexts and to formally respond to different international norms, were essentially geared to the incumbents' need for further consolidation and legitimization and to bar the road

to peaceful change or transfer of power. Although this bitter reality seems to be overlooked by the alleged pioneers of democracy in the West and by some vociferous NGO activists, the two Constitutions are alike both in purpose and substance.

The Constitutions are portrayed as documents resulting from the free expression of the will of the people as they were «approved» by 81% of Ethiopians under Mengistu and by more than 90% of the members of a «freely elected» Constituent Assembly under EPRDF. In both cases, however, the «freely expressed will of the people» strangely coincided with the ideological vision, the political views and the socio-economic interests of the rulers as outlined in their respective party platforms which, for all practical purposes, were a recipe for one-party rule and inevitable strife.

«Freely» borrowing from the political platforms of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia and the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray (the core of EPRDF's leadership) both Constitutions organized the political structures of the country on the basis of one all knowing «supreme organ of state power» which is the Stalinist constitutional version of the revolutionary catch word «All power to the Soviets». To establish this hold on society on firm grounds, both Constitutions - again borrowing from the party platforms of the ruling parties decreed state ownership of land thus arrogating to the rulers the control of the one and only «commanding height» of the economy in this rural society.

Unlike Mengistu, Meles claimed his Constitution introduces multi-party democracy in Ethiopia. But a careful reading of the Constitution clearly shows this is a far cry from reality. The Constitution allows for the creation of political parties with different ideological, political and socio-economic options. But in a context where TPLF's political platform is imposed as the supreme law of the land, winning a majority becomes a futile exercise. For a party contesting elections on the basis of a programme allowing for example for a democratic state based on the principles of separation of powers, judicial review, independence of the judiciary or private ownership of land, it would not be enough to defeat EPRDF to apply its programme. It also has to «defeat» EPRDF's Constitution or abandon its own programme and continue to apply the political and socio-economic options of the defeated EPRDF.

The futility and absurdity of multi-party elections on the basis of the political and socio-economic platform

of the ruling party has proved so embarrassing even to those foreign friends of the Front, that they are now resorting to arguments which highlight the need for «authoritarian rule» for Ethiopia or foreign powers' geo-political concerns to justify continued support to the one-party rule now fast emerging in Ethiopia. Others have picked up the argument used by EPRDF over the last months: «Compete. Win the elections. Revise the Constitution». But even a casual reading of the constitution and the amendment procedures - and specially the power of veto recognized to groups of less than 5% - is enough to show that no hope of revising TPLF's document could be reasonably entertained «until the second coming» unless of course the group comes to terms with democracy and accepts the proposed revision.

Unlike Mengistu whose Constitution established a highly centralized state, Meles claims his document allows for the setting up of a «Federal democratic Ethiopia». Here again, westerners with simplistic and superficial views of the complex situation in Ethiopia are mistaking rhetoric for practice. The setting up of a «federal system» that grants ethnic groups «the right to secede if they choose» is complacently underscored as proof of EPRDF's democratic designs. Having taken it for granted that Ethiopians have now been granted «democracy» and «federalism» to a degree that could make the whole exercise a «frightening experiment» and a «bold gamble», many westerners are now waiting to see «if it works» before proposing the Ethiopian «experiment» as a model for the solution of the ethnic problems now bleeding Africa. We say it is indeed a «frightening experiment» because we know it will not work.

We know it will not work, not because EPRDF's Ethiopia is «democratic and federal» but because what is emerging is a highly centralized one-party state. The recognition of the right to self-determination, high on the agenda of the country's democratic forces for the last three decades, considered as the only basis to build a united and democratic country of brotherly peoples, necessarily implies full rights of nationalities to decide on all matters of their special concern and full and equal participation in all matters of common concern and national interest. These cannot be guaranteed under a Constitution with no mechanisms to ensure respect of individual human rights, no provisions allowing for real empowerment of ethnic groups in their internal affairs and their participation in matters of common concern within the framework of a genuinely democratic and federal Ethiopia.

We know it will not work because EPRDF's solution to the problem of nationalities is based not on empowerment of ethnic groups but on the negation of the fundamental human and democratic rights of all the peoples of Ethiopia. The experiment is «frightening» not because we have a federal system but because this «federalism» is a replica of the Soviet model where the so-called

member states were controlled by local communist parties all accountable to the CPSU. EPRDF's federalism is based on the assumption that the group or the party at the center - ie TPLF - would control all the ethnic members states of the federation through locally recruited surrogate organizations who are either members or satellites of EPRDF. The system - and the country - will get into trouble if and when one ethnic based organization opposed to EPRDF wins elections in one of the member states of the federation and starts to pursue political and socio-economic policies that are not in line with what is provided for in TPLF's constitution.

So after all has been said and done, and at the close of what has proved to be a «useless century» of missed opportunities and 3 still-born «new beginnings», our country is back to square one. The question now is will there be another and genuine «new beginning» before the country gets engulfed in yet another cycle of violence and disaster.

Unfortunately, the complexity of the situation and the extremely unfavourable conditions prevailing both at the national and international levels are not of good omen to Ethiopia's peaceful transition to a viable pluralist system. This is so not because «our people are too demanding» as was rightly pointed out by CAFPDE's April Manifesto entitled «For a new democratic beginning». The solution proposed by all concerned Ethiopians and all the country's friends in the international community are free elections and a democratic constitution in line with the wind of change now sweeping over Africa.

The transition fiasco seems to have convinced most Ethiopians that the minority ethnic government would never accept the challenges of democracy. EPRDF's high-handed manners in dealing with the peaceful opposition, plus the arrogant and irresponsible pronouncements of some foreigners concerning the political situation in our country are fast marginalizing those who try to pursue the peaceful path and reinforcing those radical elements who argued from the start that resorting to arms was the only option left if the country's opposition forces were to be taken seriously.

It will of course be up to Ethiopians themselves to get their country out of this intricate situation and put it on the path to lasting peace. The international community can play a useful role by giving consistent support to those who are waging an uphill struggle to salvage the peace process in this war-weary land. If this is asking too much, it is our right to demand that governments, diplomats and some NGOs in the west at least stop trying to tell us that EPRDF is the best thing that ever happened to Ethiopia and refrain from adding fuel to an already explosive situation.