

During the years that followed, Italy, in violation of the terms of the treaty of Wochallie, advanced further south from its possession of Eritrea and occupied the provinces of AKELE GOUZAIE and SERAIE to the north of the MEREBE River. By 1895, practically the whole of TIGRAY was annexed. This led to the battle of ADWA on 1 March 1896 which saw the defeat of the Italians at the hands of Emperor Menelike's forces. The Ethiopians did not pursue the invading army to the sea. Menelike in a 'conciliatory move' allowed Italy to retain the annexed territories to the north of the Merebe river.

While recognizing his merits in the victory of Adwa, many Ethiopians today blame Menelike for giving away parts of northern Ethiopia in order to divide and weaken his Tigrean rivals. Ras Alula's victory, great as it had been, did not save parts of the country from falling into foreign hands. Barely three years after Dogali, feudal rivalry among Ethiopia's ruling classes, specially Menelike's opportunistic bargains, led to the creation of Eritrea in January 1890.

Constitution for a one-man Country

Voting was held in Ethiopia's constitutional referendum on 1 February 1987 and according to the government's Constitution Drafting Commission (CDC) the people are said to have exercised their democratic rights in "a disciplined and satisfactory manner" and were now 'ready to share government power.'

In what many Ethiopians see as a futile attempt at credibility the CDC, which is under direct control of Mengistu, came out with seemingly "realistic" figures and announced that 18% of voters had rejected the constitution. Announcing the existence of more than 2 and half million negative votes was no surprise for all those who are acquainted with the dictatorship's propaganda tricks and its untiring attempts to gain some legitimacy in the eyes of the Ethiopian people and the international community. Whether or not this opposition was expressed, Mengistu, in his speech announcing the results, was quick to add that 'since about 81% accepted the draft constitution, the document has the support of the Ethiopian people and has therefore been approved.'

The next stage in the 'constitutional process' is the election of a National Assembly which will declare the 'People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia' with Mengistu as its first president.

While the Institute for nationalities and later the CDC, took almost three years to work out the document, only 2 days (15 and 22 June) were allowed for public discussions to 'amend' the draft. Although they were much more vigorous and challenging than the government had expected, these public discussions did not produce much change.

In a statement issued with the 'final version' to be put to national referendum, the CDC claimed that 'corrections that change the content have been made in 12 out of the 120 Articles of the draft.' None of these were however more significant than the 'corrections' made in Articles 10 sub art. 1 in which "the term wild life is replaced by wild animals" or the one made in Article 36 which deals with the rights of women. "As the proposal for more emphasis on equality of women was raised by many Ethiopians... and in order to convey the right message, the commission has decided to change "equality of men with women to equality of men and women."

Significantly, not a single word was 'corrected' in the sections that deal with the country's political set up, the role of the party, the powers of the president, proletarian internationalism and the nationality issue. All these were considered too important to involve the Ethiopian people. Ironically, these were precisely the issues that were most challenged by the people in discussion forums both at home and abroad.

All this is not surprising. The hand-picked intellectuals in the CDC, let alone the Ethiopian people, had no say in defining the basic principles on which the 'democratic republic' was to be based. These were defined well before the commission sat in earnest to prepare the draft 'in accordance with the aspirations of the Ethiopian people.' At the opening session of the CDC on

21 February 1986, this is what Mengistu had to say on the basic contents of the constitution :

"The PDRE will be organised and based on the principles of democratic centralism, proletarian internationalism and socialist justice. It will stand for the implementation of the WPE programme and various policies (?)... The struggle to build a popular new system in our country will bring the workers closer to the powers which stand on the international level for socialism, social progress and peace, and make them a strong part of the world's revolutionary process. The republic's foreign policy will be based on proletarian internationalism and will promote the policy of peaceful coexistence with countries which follow a different social and political system."

One cannot but wonder how and why it took the CDC so long to come out with the draft since after all the contents were defined so clearly even before it was created.

The constitution contains the usual set of clauses guaranteeing equality for women, freedom of the press, speech, assembly, peaceful demonstration, the right to HABEAS CORPUS etc. Incidentally, the constitution of the imperial regime guaranteed all these rights taking care to qualify their exercise by the phrase "according to law". Under the constitution of the 'democratic republic' the exercise of these rights is not unconditional as democratic centralism, the need to abide by socialist rules, the recognition of the party as 'the leading force of society and the state' are included in the draft as the supreme principles of the land. As if all these limitations were not enough, freedom of religion and worship is qualified by the phrase that 'it must not affect the well-being of the revolution.'

One important feature of the constitution is the sweeping range of powers given to the president which many say is unusual even by Soviet standards. In fact, the 'democratic constitution' prac-

tically turns Ethiopia into a one-man country. Just like the former Emperor, the president has legislative powers 'when the Assembly is not in session' ie. for most of the year as the SHENGO meets once a year only and for a very short period. He is the chief executive officer, names and dismisses practically at will all ministers, the chief legal and military officers, is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, has the power of amnesty, signs international agreements, establishes diplomatic contacts, etc.

By way of 'solving' the nationalities issue, the draft provides that "The people's republic of Ethiopia is a unitary state consisting of administrative and autonomous regions". However, the so-called "autonomous" regions will be autonomous in name only as their boundaries, levels and jurisdictions are to be determined by none other than the WPE-controlled National Assembly. Their main function will be supervision and implementation of party directives and state laws. In spite of the constitution's reference to "equality of nationalities" this hardly allows for a democratic solution to the problem.

To sum up, one can say that this constitution and the declaration of the republic expected for September 1987 will offer no solutions to the basic problems facing the Ethiopian people. Continued collectivisation, stifling of the private sector of the economy, denial of the people's basic democratic rights, further alienation of our country's national independence are now legalised by the "supreme law of the land". Needless to say, all this will in no way affect the determination of the country's democratic forces to continue the struggle to rid Ethiopia of the dictatorship which has brought untold harm and misery to its people.