# The Dynamics of Conflicts in Ethiopia: Reflection on the Ascendancy of Ethnic Politics.

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## Introduction

To write about the politics and history of Ethiopia as history of conflicts and instability has become very common. In fact, there is scarcely anything that is more painful/ailing than being pessimist about ones own country and writing about its history from this position. What is equally true, however, is that in order to cure the patient one has to know the cause(s) of the disease. Indeed, Ethiopia's political history is replete with violent conflicts that have always had and continue to have serious consequences for the country's politics, economy, and society.

Conflicts have been fought in Ethiopia in a variety of names. However, sharing of resources (state power, access to national material production and distribution, etc.) has always been a central historical grievance that triggered off conflicts. Any serious student (Kendie, 1992,160; Deng, 1996:59) of Ethiopian politics and history would agree that the cause of instability in Ethiopia has had much to do with the undue concentration of wealth and power at the center. To be so sure, Ethiopia's political tradition/culture had no room for tolerance and accommodation of political views, and interests that are different from the official line. The country's rulers concentrated all decisive state power and were not even willing to share power with their supporters (Teshale, 1995). Being dangerously jealous of power, the Ethiopian ruling classes ruled through the "method" of eliminating or neutralizing their opposition, not through politics of dialogue and consensus. As a result, ascendancy to state power was, more often than not, by use of force of arms and the most urgent task for the successful ascendants to power has always been elimination of not only their predecessors, but also destruction of whatever political, legal, economic, and social institutions they had established. If anything, use of violence in this manner has become the only medium for seizure, maintenance, as well as loss of state power in Ethiopia.

This of course has had negative consequences for the country. It made power holders concentrate national resources, and their time and energy on matters of personal and regime

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security concerns rather than development policy agenda. Self-preservation became the primary task of successive Ethiopian regimes irrespective of their differences in time and ideology. In general terns, national polices that carry the needs and interests of their makers as primary goals would not have any positive trickle- down effect on the society. The social consequences of such policies in Ethiopia's context have been lack of development, popular dissatisfaction, discontent, and revolt against government in different times at varying degrees. The politics of political centralization caused rulers' conviction of the need to give priority to "self-protection" from their power contenders has always been the epicenter of Ethiopia's political problem. In short, study of conflicts in Ethiopia essentially is a study of competition and conflict for power and control of resources.

This piece is a reflection on the topic "Conflicts in modern Ethiopia". As is mentioned above, Ethiopia in her history of existence has experienced several conflicts and wars of different nature (domestic, international) and at different levels of intensity. Of course, it would be tantamount to gross simplification to pick a year or any period of time and say that is when a particular conflict evolved in Ethiopia. Recurrence and interconnectedness of the conflicts in the country make periodization implausible as a method of inquiry. However, for the purpose of this paper, we have to limit ourselves and consider only the domestic (intra-state) conflicts in Ethiopia since the 1960s. This is largely because the deadly conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s, whose influences on present day Ethiopia's political economy are immense, had their roots/genesis in the 1960s social, economic and political conditions the country.

The paper tries to make a modest presentation on the central thesis: Conflicts in Ethiopia have essentially been competition and conflict over resources under a condition of scarcity and the continuing absence of a political culture and system of sharing has perpetuated the problem. This is done by examining the dynamics of the central issues, and the driving forces (actors vis-a-vis the state) of conflicts in the country under the past two successive regimes. The lesson one would draw from this presentation is that, despite rhetoric, the

unchanging nature in the *modus operandi* of the successive Ethiopian rulers has perpetuated the problems of conflicts in the country.

## Conflicts During the Imperial Regime: Resistance Against the Centralizing System of Monarchy with Semblance of Modernity

Compared to the period of the military regime that supplanted it, Ethiopia under Haile Selassie in the postwar period could be said, arguably, relatively stable. Having established a modern army and having successfully managed to loosen the British influence on Ethiopia by shifting alliance to the U.S. America-a new global power-the emperor achieved effective control over the country, secured Ethiopia's independence, and neutralized his traditional domestic power contenders. With the help of force, diplomacy, and "modernization" he weakened morally and physically his competitors for supremacy. Particularly, as the result of expansion of education, educated and loyal class of elite replaced recalcitrant members of the aristocracy in running the modern bureaucracy. As Spencer (1984:259-260) witnessed, by the middle of the 1950s, the young generation of Ethiopians with exposure to modern education had already created some political concern for members of this class. Settled was also the question of Eritrea. Through diplomacy and with external support, Haile Selassie's government managed to join Eritrea with Ethiopia through federal arrangement although this was later nullified and caused the infamous thirty years war. These successes, however, were not accompanied by progress in politics; the feature of which led to the politics of chronic instability in the later decades of Haile Selassie's rule.

Students of Ethiopian history and politics conquer that the 1960 coup attempt against Haile Selassie's regime is a watershed for studying conflicts in the country. The year was a significant landmark as the politics of opposition to the imperial regime is concerned. Prior to this, politics was the affairs of a few and opposition to the regime was marked by plots and conspiracies mainly from within the ruling circle with the main aim to remove Haile Selassie. As Clapham (1992:103) has persuasively argued during the early decades after the liberation (of 1941) the scene of Ethiopian politics was dominated by the emperor who was

surrounded only by "an astonishingly small group of people [who] scrambled for position around the throne". These were people who happened to be around the imperial palace by the virtue of blood and others who were brought to the imperial government either by co-optation or political marriage in order to assist the emperor in running the state. Political opposition during the first two decades after the liberation mainly came in the form of palace coup from what Bahru (1999:131) called "disgruntled elements" of this 'oligarchy.' In the post-coup, however, mode of opposition to Hiale Selassie's personal, absolutist power increasingly was transformed into more open and massed-based movements.

The significance of the coup attempt was not in that it forced Haile Selassie to make reforms in political institutions that would help open up and widen the political space. Politically meaningful credits of the coup rather were that it gave the military political awareness, undermined the regime's repressive capacity in the eyes of the people, and signaled that it was high time for the imperial regime to make reforms in the political and economic order.

However, the political process set by the emperor offered no hope for political progress. The emperor remained more centralizing and repressive. As Bahru (1992:31) succinctly put it, in the subsequent years "there was scarcely anything that preoccupied [the emperor] as much as the acquisition and preservation of political power". Instead of introducing reforms taking stock of the situation, the regime opted for policy of continued suppression of dissent (Bahru, 1999:131). Needless to add, "a major pitfall [of] the [imperial regime] was its blockage of any meaningful democratic opening" (Merera, 1999:119) while relying for its legitimacy on its "mandate of heaven" and on its external patron, the U.S. America, for the transfer of military weapons needed to suppress opposition. According to Clapham (1992:103) centralization of power in Ethiopia in the early 20$^{th}$ century would be rationalized; because of the need for order, economic development, and protection of the country's then threatened independence. With regard to the intense centralizing derive in the post-war period, however, Clapham maintained that "peace and good government could be likewise associated with a powerful emperor" and commented that Haile Selassie

overlooked that achievement and maintenance of peace, order, and development required opening up of the political space. Marcus and Brown (1997:143) also regretted that in spite of the assistance of the liberal, democratic U.S. government, the imperial regime continued under the control of absolute monarch that dominated/controlled Ethiopia's political economy

Perhaps, the introduction of the two successive constitutions (of 1931 and 1955) and the establishment of a parliament were the only politically significant among Haile Selassie's reform measures. Nevertheless, these contributed nothing for the progress in the countries political life apart from canonizing the system of autocracy at home and to give it the semblance of modernity abroad. Instead of creating constitutional/limited monarchy, the Constitution strengthened/legitimized absolutism and, likewise, the parliament had got no significant influence on policy. The emperor and his cronies rather than the population and the parliament determined public policies. Also, "the socio-economic reforms...were given as though in measured doses so that their effect would not upset the position of the ruling classes" (Yacob, 1992:10). Although the emperor had many forward-looking aspects, his efforts at political modernization were not able to facilitate smooth and peaceful passage of political power from one generation to the other. Socio-economic reforms were 'compartmentalized' that is, they were with limited access to the common people, that left the Ethiopian peasants mired in quasi-feudal land-tenure relationships (Harbeson, 1998:65; Yacob, 1992:10).

Peasants suffered economic exploitation and suppression on the hands of corrupt and inefficient administration. The slow pace of industrialization, its uneven distribution, and poor condition of work and low pay arose social discontent. Socio-economic issues like land-tenure system, agricultural heavy income tax policies, administrative inefficiency, corruption of government officials, real or perceived structural imbalance in regional development opportunities caused broad societal dissatisfaction and protests. Peasant uprisings challenged the regime's corrupt administration, its exploitative tax policies, and

peasant alienation from land in different parts of the country. The infant working class pressed for improved work conditions and proper pay. In general, in the 1960s open resistance against the regime from below became the order of the day. Viable opposition, however, came from students of both Haile Selassie I University and secondary schools in the country.

An important point to note at this stage is that the mass-based struggle against Haile Selassie's unfettered personal rule and the system of monarchy lacked an organized political leadership. Apart from rulers' greater maximization of state power and centralized control of resources, Ethiopia did not know liberalism or political pluralism. Political parties or civil society organizations as means of bringing group influence on central government policies were not tolerated. Protests against rulers' bankrupt policies and unjust practices were always suppressed by the means of arms obtained from foreign assistance. In such a situation of absence of political party (parties), the students defined the role of leadership for themselves. With their advantage of modern education, knowledge of global politics, awareness of Ethiopia's relative backwardness, and being conscious of their dimmer [employment] prospects in face of the government bureaucracy's (the major national employer) declining absorbing capacity (Araya, 1999: 150-151), the students played vanguard role in the battle against the imperial regime. Among the socio-economic and political issues the student forwarded after 1965 were "Land to the Tiller," "Freedom of Press and Assembly", "Social Justice and Proper Pay", and "Bread to the Hungry".

The period from 1965 to 1974 was the era of increased challenges to the imperial regime and the regime's increased violence. This period, as Bahru (1999:131) said, "marked the transition from the reformist to the revolutionary era". It was when the imperial regime was desperate and willing to use any means necessary to retain power and the "radicalized" students were willing to raise any issue in order to mobilize the population for the regime's downfall.

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It was in this "...course of the revolutionary process" (Addis Hiwot, 1987:58-59) that the students also raised the national question as another political agenda. Awareness, recognition, or appreciation of this question was either not previously there, or, at least, it did not come to be an issue on a par with other concerns. Gebru (1987:60-70; 79) correctly believed that radicalization of the petty bourgeoisie before the 1960 coup attempt was related to `career blockage'. He also made it a point that the rise of `micronationalism' by the new generation was related to the question of Eritrea that in 1969 provoked the students to rise it as a sensitive political issue and whose `solution', however, `left the entire generation...on the horns of a dilemma'. At any rate, in spite of its sensitivity and centrality in Ethiopia's politics today, nationality question and "nationality"/regional based movements, with the exception of Eritrea, did not bring any effective and well organized challenge to the monarchy.

Lastly, the imperial regime that failed to offer any social, economic and political reforms of significance, that lost its heavenly based legitimacy, and that also had exhausted its repressive capacity collapsed in 1974 and the system of monarchy that outlived its welcome crumbled. However, to make matters even worse for the country the state power did not pass to an organized political party/ies (this was desperately absent), even not to the students that Merera (1999:120) would like us to believe as "forces with revolutionary credentials". At any rate, the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia never led to the triumph of forces that would pursue social progress.

### The Military Rule: Power Centralization, and the Ascendancy of Regional/Ethnic Conflicts

The Dergue that headed the military regime, abolished the monarchy, abolished the feudal land-tenure system that freed millions of Ethiopian peasants from the bondage of tenancy also failed in many respects to make change in the country's tradition of system of administration. Centralization in administration of the country and unfettered system of personal rule continued under the military regime even in its crudest form. The Dergue, for example, ruled the country for 13 years without the Constitution, although constitutions have

had limited relevance in checking rulers' power in Ethiopia. This period of the Dergue's rule was really the darkest period for the people as every Ethiopian, particularly the young and educated generation was at the mercy of the regime. Except during its early years, the regime pursued Haile Selassie's style of rule and mode of treatment of opposition. Critics and those who opposed the regime's policies and practices were neutralized and cooped at best or physically eliminated or forced to flee the country at worst.

The Dergue's slow but steady derive to centralization of power and its subsequent loss of popular legitimacy undermined the important reform measures of its early period. The Dergue that initially came to power without any clear vision and policies of its own acquired the knowledge, ideas, and techniques of running the state by allying itself to civilian groups. These groups and the radicalizing influence of the then Ethiopian society steadily drove it to the left. Consequently, the Dergue's original nationalist slogan of "Ethiopia Tikdem" in 1974 transformed into "Ethiopian Socialism" in 1975, to "Marxism-Leninism" in 1976. Indeed, this was the period when the regime scored considerable credit by introducing important soico-economic and political reform measures.

Nevertheless, reversal in the early achievements of the revolution and subsequent erosion in the legitimacy of the military regime started soon. To begin with, although the Dergue, consciously or not, tolerated organized political activities in its early years, it gradually became unconfident in itself and retreated from its commitments and increasingly centralized state power. The period from the last quarter of 1976 to 1987 was when state power increasingly became the private property of Mengistu Haile Mariam. He systematically eliminated all power contenders within the Dergue and consolidated central authority under his personal leadership. Having concentrated power Mengistu failed to seek political solution for the various social and political problems and demands. The regime ceased to further tolerate those elements, organized and non-organized, in the society that criticized its policies. Those who advocated democratic dialogue, transition of power to popularly elected civil government, and voiced peoples' interest and needs were not

welcomed by Mengistu's regime. If plurality of ideas and criticism to government are *sine qua non* conditions of at least good government, critics of government policies were rewarded with either detention or death in Ethiopia. Using the division and power rivalry among the political groups of the left intelligentia, the Dergue under Mengistu's leadership went on its own ways of dealing with the country's political and socioeconomic issues.

The purpose of the revolution to overthrow the imperial regime and to dismantle the system of monarchy was to place a new and good government. However, it seems correct to say no that the emergence of the Dergue as a leading organ marked the end the hopes and expectations for a government that would bring justice and socioeconomic and political progress *ab initio*. How the regime handled its opposition and how it managed the society's socioeconomic, political and military problems led to ugly consequences. Thousands of young Ethiopians suffered physical elimination and those who survived, either withdrew from politics, co-opted ("cowed to captivity") by the regime, fled the country or took refugee to the mountains of Ethiopia to continue politics by other means.

**The Ascendancy of Regional/Ethnic Conflicts**

As has been mentioned in the preceding chapter, the national question did not come to a center-stage as a political issue in Ethiopia until the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Even then the issue did not go (with the exception of Eritrea) beyond ideological debate within the Ethiopian Student Movement. Micro-nationalism became a major national political issue when the Dergue, in a manner consistent with the imperial regime's policies, adopted the policy of extreme political centralization and exclusion of the left intelligentsia. In other words, forced withdrawal of multinational forces from national politics and the Dergue's inability or unwillingness to correct the political mistakes of its predecessor regime on many fronts elevated ethnicity/regionalism to the status of prominence.

In fact, Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic state where no significantly deliberate policy that would have addressed the material and psychological interests of all the country's peoples has never been made. Nevertheless, ethnic/regional-based conflicts that Ethiopia faced in the 1970s and 1980s were mainly not because of ethno-cultural diversity of the people and even not

due to the imbalance in the structure of the country's development opportunities, but mainly because of the policy of extreme centralization of power and forceful alienation of the opposition which the military regime pursued.

Many scholars on Ethiopian affairs agree that the 1975 land reform act, which answered the question of the peasantry, had also addressed the national question and the conflict it would cause. Dessalegn persuasively argued that the national question in Ethiopia was grounded on the question of land (particularly in the South) and, thus, was struck at roots by the land reform legislation that decisively released the peasants from the repressive and exploitative landlordism. Hence, for Dessalegn the land reform rendered the national question irrelevant as its material (economic) aspect, and by implication its political issue, is concerned (See Shiferaw Bekele, 1992: 328-329). According to Markakis (1998:142) the military regime's radical land reform as a timely class act dissolved the exploitative ethnic class conjunction, removed a major material grievance of peasants, gave them vested interest in the state and undermined ethnic appeal of (micro-) nationalist politicians. Clapham (1988:215) also pioneered in saying that the land reform smashed peasants' economic question. particularly in the South, and "retained local allegiance" to the military regime at least during the early years of the revolution.

However, peasants' confidence in and support of the Dergue quickly eroded as the latter gradually but decisively began to establish its complete economic and political control on rural society. Peasants associations that were established on the basis of the land reform legislation as independent institutions of peasants' local self-administration transformed into "transmission belts" (Abera Yemane-Ab, 1987:97). In other words, peasant associations were reorganized and became adjuncts of the state that operated as the "lowest local organs) of state control" (Pausewang, 1997: 196, 1990:214). This reversal in the role of these initially autonomous political, legal and administrative peasant organs was so decisive that by 1984, when the regime's *de jure* single party was formed, peasants democratic self-administration totally been restricted and their associations had become the central

government's local instruments of law and order. Henceforth, peasant leaders, although continued to be formally peasant elected, became just local despots in their relations to peasants while they were loyal servants in their relations to the central government and helped the latter as local agents for implementing policies (Eshetu Chole, 1990:90-93). In a subsequent development, peasants were subjected to variety of heavy taxes and contributions as well as other resented policies such as forced labour on state farms, forced resettlement and villagization programmes, abduction into military services and government controlled pricing and marketing (Pausewang, 1997:189; Shiferaw Bekele, 1992:326). With reversal in their gains of the early period of the revolution in terms of relatively improved living standards, better social conditions, more participation and influence on both local and national affairs, peasants became disillusioned, frustrated and dramatically lost confidence in the government.

Several reasons could be thought why the regime wanted to establish its costly tight rural control when its legitimacy in urban centers had already been eroded dangerously. (Brune, 1990: 27; Befekadu and Tesfaye, 1990). The military regime tightened its grip on the countryside for both political and economic reasons. Politically, its intention was mainly to remove peasant leaders, who were politically conscious and that were considered sympathizers of either the "right -roaders" (Meison) or the EPRP. Economically, the regime wanted control over rural community for extraction of surplus through a variety of tax regimes to finance the bloating bureaucracy, the regime's war efforts on many fronts, and to subsidize the rising and politically sensitive food prices in Addis Ababa. Be it for whatever reasons, the government, by 1978, had already withdrawn form its commitment to guarantee the rural people autonomy and self-administration. This caused peasants' to shift their loyalty in favor of ethnic politicians.

In general, under a condition of desperate lack of economic and political security in their relations with the government and absence of any urban-based organized voice and representative institutions to defend their interests and articulate their demands, peasants needed new political "alliance" for support and security. Thus libations movements, which

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emerged as the forum for the left intelligentsia and the youth to continue political activities also, became platform available and accessible to the rural millions to resist the military regime. In short, ethnic appeal began to evoke greater [peasant] response when the military regime squandered its credits by betraying the revolution and reversing its early achievements (Markakis, 1998: 142; Clapham, 1988: 125; Aberra Yemane-Ab, 1987:95). Ethnicity and ethnic nationalism in Ethiopia thus emerged as a reaction to the failure of the state institutions and agencies to provide hope and leadership to the vast majority of the people.

In short, in face of the Dergue's centralist propaganda and practice, associations that had existed as civil society organizations in their motives and goals were dramatically transformed into "liberation" fronts by the middle of the 1970's. For Example, the TPLF could trace its origin to the Tigrian National Organization (TNO) formed in the early 1970's. Similarly, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) evolved from the Metcha-Tulama self help association of 1963 to the Ethiopian Peoples' Liberation Front formed in 1973 to be renamed OLF in 1976 (Markakis, 1998:142). By the second half of the 1980's various liberation movements particularly the TPLF/EPRDF and the EPLF had galvanized local material and moral support, recruited fighters, and became formidable fighting forces. With the help of a number of forces and factors, the same fronts forced Mengistu out of office and seized power in Addis and Asmara simultaneously. This has had the consequences of institutionalizing ethnic policies at national level in Ethiopia and the birth of Eritrea as an independent state that latter would launch war against Ethiopia.

## Conclusion

Conflicts in Ethiopia, although fought in different names, have had their causes in violent competition over state power and resources. Irrespective of differences in time and ideology, successive Ethiopian regimes pursued similar policies and modes of operation in running the state. The imperial regime, while giving a semblance of modernity, conducted state affairs in traditional manners. Critics to the regime's policies were not desired and they were repressed. The military regime that supplanted the imperial regime and promised "socialist"

justice and democracy systematically adopted the policies and *modus operandi* of its predecessor only with changes in style and ideological rhetoric. Both regimes' ruthless repression against their respective political adversaries and their extreme centralization of authority and resources as the only means of preserving their power have had cancerous wounds on the body politic of Ethiopia

The Dergue's failure to promote the interests of the people in whose name it used violence as a means of struggle for power and resources was carried to absurdity. The political consequences of these were the rise of military dictatorship in the name of the revolution, the decline of multinational politics in Ethiopia, and the ascendancy of ethnic/regionalised politics. Today, ethnic politics has become overriding agenda while there is dangerous lack of effectively organized and disciplined multinational political alternative to the EPRDF. Although this is attributable to Megistu regime's policies and praxis, the existing mutual distrust between the incumbent and the opposition on the one hand, and among the opposition itself has now become a cause of concern today. History of Ethiopian politics is replete of the history of missed opportunities. In short, ethnicized politics in Ethiopia is a reaction to the failure of the state and the political elite to democratize state society relationships and thus mutual trust and confidence among the political elite for genuine power sharing would be the only guarantee for sustainable peace and development in Ethiopia.

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