

# Ethiopia: unknown revolution, uncertain future

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**When the West became conscious of the uprising taking place in Ethiopia, some time had already passed since the emperor Haile Selassie had been overthrown, along with the oldest theocracy on the planet - an ancient feudal dynasty, feudal, born out of the myth of the biblical romance of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, which had stifled Ethiopia for centuries. This overthrow resulted from student struggles, barracks revolts and above all a peasant revolt of a rare intensity.**

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Reading the programme of reforms promised by the “revolutionary coordination committee” (the “Derg”, from the Amharic word meaning “Committee of Equals”), constituted by the armed forces, police, and the national guard and chaired by an obscure major, Mengistu Haile Mariam [1] one is seized immediately by the inherent necessity of revising the history of the French Revolution, the genesis of the *Communist Manifesto* and the complexity of the October Revolution. The project was to totally smash the feudal dynasty through an unprecedented mix of modernisation and repression.

Two years passed before the “natural allies” of countries in revolution, the USSR and its satellite states, came to its aid, less through ideological deference to the class struggle and proletarian internationalism than through strategic concerns on the shores of the Red Sea.

In Europe, revolutions in Third World countries have been of great interest to governments and peoples. There would be books, articles, support committees, many would visit to breathe the revolutionary air.

The Ethiopian revolution has not exerted this fascination. It remained in the shadows, away from all curiosity. Was this because of its singularity? Can one give credit to “a revolution installed by a military junta”? Mengistu would repeat several times that “you cannot invent class consciousness, our task, for we soldiers, is to render the people objectively militant, the Party will only be born from above”. A curious revolution that attacked as its main target the militants who had been to the forefront in combating the feudal monarchy, the trade unionists and the students. An entire generation of intellectuals would be annihilated.

Ethiopia is the second biggest country of East Africa in terms of geographical density and population. It is located at the summit of the highlands of Abyssinia, dominating the Horn of Africa (which comprises Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia). Situated at the fringe of the Arab world, Ethiopia has been officially Orthodox (Coptic) Christian since the 4<sup>th</sup> century, although 50% of its population is Muslim. Peopled by numerous ethnicities - the Amharas (the dominant ethnic

grouping until 1991, when a new regime dominated by Tigrayans came to power), the Tigrayans, the Oromos, Afars, the Issaas and the Somalis. These lands also sheltered the Jewish Falasha (exiles) tribe, distant descendants of Jews captured during expeditions from the Ethiopian kingdom of Axum to Yemen in the 6<sup>th</sup> century; pariahs among the pariahs, they emigrated to Israel in two successive waves (1984 and 1991).

Ethiopia repelled European attempts at colonisation and from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Emperor Menelik amused himself by signing and countersigning agreements with France, Italy and Britain, without ever endangering his sovereignty. Decades later, a man with sombre eyes, enveloped in a black cloak, mounted the tribune at the League Of Nations, to ask for aid from the international community faced with the invasion of the Italian fascist army "If you do not react, your turn will come soon" he announced prophetically. He was met with silence.

This was the genesis of the myth of the emperor Haile Selassie, crowned in 1930, legendary defender of the Christian faith, henceforth judged to be progressive although he was no more than a fervent nationalist. A myth which concealed the ostentatious luxury of his court and the millions of dollars placed in Swiss financial centres, while the country was swept by famine. This contradiction would subsequently lead to the final destruction of the three thousand years old empire. Thus when the dynasty of the Salomonids collapsed, the revolution that followed seemed incomprehensible to everyone except Ethiopians.

Most of the exiled intelligentsia were sympathetic to Marxism-Leninism and tried to situate the ills of Ethiopian society within the matrix of socialism. Inside Ethiopia, the dominant elite was proud of a prestigious past that prevented it from recognising that the present had nothing prestigious about it. Meanwhile, the dominant Amhara elite extorted huge sums in taxes from the peasantry or subjected them to supplementary forced labour.

The luxury of the court concealed the extreme poverty of its subjects, 90% of them peasants. The illiteracy rate was 90%. Peasants struggled daily to survive (in 1960, an Ethiopian peasant had the same standard of living and the same tools to work his land as his European equivalent of the Middle Ages). Revolts here and there were stifled, only to recommence elsewhere, witnessing to the raised consciousness of these peasants and a rejection of fatalism. Slavery was theoretically abolished in 1966, but peasants still had to submit to the landowners, the religious brotherhood, and the local state functionaries.

Economically, Ethiopia was an agricultural country. Politically, land ownership formed the essence of the legitimacy of the regime. Thus, society, economy and politics were undeniably linked to land ownership. The empire perpetuated an enormous disparity in rights between the owners of land and those who worked it, a disparity which would remain immutable for centuries. While other countries progressed, some even outside of the so-called developed zones, Ethiopia remained timeless, cultivating structures, modes of life and thought foreign to the modern world.

### **The army as guardian of the empire**

The granting of land in the different regions had always obliged the beneficiary to enrol in the army or to recruit men, so the army was formed from a multiplicity of groups ready to face any threat, its hierarchy originating from the caste of the nobility. Haile Selassie remained faithful to the ambition of his predecessors, that of basing imperial preponderance on the nuclei of the provincial nobility to ensure the unity of his empire and to checkmate any notion of autonomy.

On the eve of the revolution, the army had around 40,000 men. More than any other institution, it

was the private property of the emperor and the object of all his attention. With the forces of internal security, it absorbed a considerable part of the state budget. Unlike the rest of Ethiopian society, the army was open to foreign influence. The US supplied weapons and officers were trained in US schools. Moreover, Israel trained elite troops involved in repressing the oldest liberation struggle on the African continent, in Eritrea.

The attempted coup in 1960 led the emperor to change strategy to ensure the loyalty of the army. 70% of the officers were of Amhara origin, 10% were Tigrayan or Eritrean, the rest coming from the largely Muslim Oromo grouping. The Emperor, obsessed by the possibility of a coup, stirred up rivalries between the units of the army by moving them to various strategic points. Thus the imperial guard was stationed in the capital, where it was under surveillance. The second regiment was stationed in Eritrea, and the third in the Ogaden region, two regions where liberation fronts, fighting respectively for Eritrea and for integration into Somalia waged a merciless struggle.

In the pre-revolutionary period, the privatisation of the land acted as a factor in the monetarisation of the economy. Until then the motor of modernisation had come from the reinvestment of the surplus drawn from levies. To bypass these structural obstacles, which were the cause of immobilism and economic stagnation, the emperor attempted an agrarian mini-reform, giving lands to some individuals and to members of the Coptic clergy. He also allocated large areas of land to foreign companies for the cultivation of cotton, coffee, cereals and vegetables, a way of supplying internal consumption and increasing exports. When lands were not subject to inheritance, usufruct was transmitted from generation to generation, essentially for the Amhara grouping.

If this practice weakened the monarchy, it also allowed it multiple speculations. This growth of the mercantile economy through the privatisation of the land went hand in hand with the development of mechanised agriculture and the creation of paths of communication, often built with Italian financial support. The emergence of a mercantilist economy had implications for society as a whole.

The most remarkable change was the appearance of a lumpen proletariat. In the Ethiopian case, this phenomenon was the result of the privatisation of land, agrarian mechanisation in the North and demographic growth in the South. The urban economy could not absorb this migration, creating an army of poor in the urban centres.

As for workers and employees, who represented barely 1% of the population, they were concentrated in not very developed industrial zones. Wages were one Ethiopian dollar per day, without any social security or any project of trade union organisation. However, in relation to the situation of the peasants and the unemployed, they appeared privileged.

The first Ethiopian strike broke out during the construction of the Franco-Ethiopian railway in 1947. It was the first sign of a wave of workers' struggle linked to a certain industrial take-off, and to the influence of the Eritrean trade union movement, which was much more advanced because of its links with the Italian Left, with demands centred on recognition of trade union rights.

From the 1960s onwards, a decree on labour relations ratified the right to form trade unions while forbidding it to civil servants. The right to strike was only authorised for each sector, without relations between them, after two months, notice. The first confederation of workers was created in 1962 under the name of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions. Numerous manoeuvres were employed to impose a leadership in line with imperial designs, singularly cooperative with the employers and very influenced by the US model. Members of the federation came from two very different sectors, workers in the nascent industrial sector and employees in banks, transport and insurance as well as civil servants who received a wage very much higher than that of a worker. On the one hand, an educated petty bourgeoisie, on the other a minority working class living below the

poverty level. The federation, even with 900 affiliates, was deeply apolitical. The gap between affiliates and leadership prevented it from playing a significant role as the imperial regime began its decline.

If the different components of Ethiopian society could allow the emergence of a new bourgeois class, social reality assumed that wealth and power remained in the hands of the same court aristocracy. This emergence did not take place because there was a social chasm between the state functionaries and the higher circles of the nobility, even if, in order to create a semblance of cohesion, the emperor granted favours to commoners who homogenised within the regime's institutions. The dialectical relationship between the right to land ownership and the exercise of power remained immutable.

We should also mention the student movement, which represented the most radical and most organised opposition sector, and which would become the central target for the military junta's repression. Its importance was apparent at three determinant moments - during the attempted coup in 1960, in the big demonstrations for agrarian reform in 1965, then later when the imperial guard repressed a student meeting on the university campus in 1972, more than a thousand students were arrested and sent to forced labour camps. Their ideology openly embraced socialism and their key demands were "land to those who work it and self-determination for the different ethnic groupings".

If the student movement was at the centre of the opposition, it had its weaknesses. The conviction that radical change would rescue Ethiopia from its lethargy was not enough to build a homogeneous movement that could overcome the socio-political cleavages that divided it. The student mass was composed of a minority originating from the largely Amhara elite, without great material problems, and a majority of modest origins.

The creation in 1968 of the Pan Ethiopian Socialist Movement inside the union of Ethiopian students gave birth to the first clandestine movement, known as Meison. The majority of its adherents were studying in European universities and were under the influence of the European Communist Parties. This movement subscribed to an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle so as to accomplish what it considered as a priority task - recruitment, training and mobilisation. Divergences among some of the cadres of this group led a year later to the creation of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). The latter advocated a transition to armed struggle. Accused of being inspired by armed struggles of the Guevarist type in Latin America, they split and in 1971 the Revolutionary Organisation for the Liberation of Ethiopia was founded. Initially a small grouping, it received solid support from the Eritrean Liberation Fronts and the Palestinian fronts.

Finally the student movement, faced with everyday repression, maintained its position as a fierce adversary of the regime, building relations with the trade unions and successfully infiltrating the leading apparatus of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Union, while making contacts with non-commissioned officers in the armed forces. Student struggles occupied a strategic space between an opposition that was radicalised and centralised and the oppositions on the periphery like the Eritrean and Ogaden opposition fronts.

## **The Eritrean question**

As a political entity, Eritrea had its origin in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when the kingdom of Axum dominated the Red Sea, and its decline began in the 7<sup>th</sup> century when the Arabian Peninsula was conquered by Islam, cutting the kingdom of Axum off from the Red Sea. For some centuries, a fierce struggle took place with Arab invaders coming from the coast or from the interior of Sudan, for Ethiopia was

determined to maintain its domination over the seas off the Eritrean coast. In 1557, the Turks occupied Eritrea, in 1856 they gave way to the Egyptians, followed by Italy. Thus Ethiopia was deprived of its opening to the sea. This last colonial occupation led to a political awakening, with the creation of political parties and an advanced trade unionism, which rejected the feudal structures of its metropolis.

An Italian colony since 1890, in 1941 Eritrea came under the control of the British, who advocated its annexation by Sudan or its integration into Ethiopia. At the end of the Second World War, the international decisions concerning its future opened a political space for the nationalist organisations. The Christian population, influenced by the arguments of the Church, advocated reattachment to Ethiopia. The Muslim population supported an international mandate status that would lead to a future independence. From the 1950s onwards, for reasons linked both to the specificities of the region and the tropicalisation of the abstract notion of the "Cold War", the United Nations proposed a federation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This federation corresponded in fact to an annexation by Ethiopia.

From 1961, the Eritrean Liberation Front, the first to fight for total independence, received aid from certain Arab countries concerned about Christian Ethiopia, which was moreover supported by Israel and exercised an influence on the Red Sea. This Front led to hostility between Christians and Muslims, with the latter drawn to the Arab world and identification with Egypt and Sudan. These contradictions would give birth to another rival Front, which took form and weight from 1972 under the name of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front.

The Ethiopian revolution of 1974 had repercussions on the conflict. The intervention of the USSR (which previously had supported the Eritrean resistance) on the side of Ethiopia changed the situation completely, with the Ethiopians forcing the ELF into Sudan and provoking its break-up, while the EPLF withdrew to the north where it fought a fierce struggle with financial help from the diaspora.

The reconciliation in 1975 of these two Fronts allowed a consolidation in order to pursue the total war that had been declared by Ethiopia from the end of the 1970s. With the "Red Star" campaign the Ethiopian army mobilised around 300,000 men, supported by unprecedented Soviet logistics and by Cuban troops. Finally, in 1993, Eritrea became independent. Nonetheless, it had to deal with the wounds from nearly 30 years of war, the discontent of the Muslim population and an armed opposition that condemns the totalitarian practices of president Isaias Afewerki, today revealed as a typical African dictator in the pay of the United States.

### **The collapse of the Stalinist military regime**

The collapse in May 1991 of the Stalinist regime led by Mengistu turned another page in Ethiopia's tormented history. The collapse of the regime stemmed from the struggle of the guerrilla movements, essentially the Eritrean Liberation Front, allied in 1975 to the Tigray Liberation Front, which fought in the region of the same name situated between the Amhara heart of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Without demanding independence, they fought for participation in the Ethiopian government.

The EPLF had long abandoned its Marxist references, but the TPLF identified with Albanian socialism, and thus an autarchic Stalinism. After the defeat of the Ethiopian army, abandoned by its Soviet allies, against a background of perestroika, the TPLF undertook the creation of a broader organisation. In line with the frontist tradition, it brought together a range of organisations supposedly representing all ethnic components, including Afar (OPDA), Oromo (OPDO), Amhara

(EPDM) organisations and the Organisation of Former Officers, all grouped under the rubric EPDRF. The only genuine organisation here was, however, the TPLF (the Tigrayan minority represent only 7% of the population of Ethiopia), the other organisations regrouped in the EDRPF had no roots among the peoples represented. A conference held in London, supported by the United States, granted power to the EPDRF.

Ethiopia was now governed by a former Tigrayan resistance fighter - Melles Zenawi, of Stalinist and pro-Albanian background, who transformed the EPDRF into an apparatus of power. Legislative elections granted it the legitimacy that it previously lacked. Its policy of regionalisation raised hopes for an autonomy that has ultimately exacerbated existing ethnic tensions, and endangered an already fragile national unity. If no democratic opening figures in the plans of the government, the risk is that Ethiopia could sink deeper and deeper into the practice of the single (ethnic) party, with the danger of the state collapsing and the ethnic groupings abandoned to a fate of endless struggle.

In this new configuration, the ethnic problematic conceals the debate on the economic and political nature of this regime which was preceded by centuries of feudalism and then by a dictatorship. All the more so in that the Mengistu regime had in its latter days undertaken a process of economic liberalisation involving the restoration to the peasants of land that had been forcibly transferred to collective farms. Land ownership remained nationalised under the transitional government of Melles Zenawi, state farms and properties remained, while the economic programme stressed the necessity of a withdrawal of the state from direct management of the economy. Five million people currently remain totally dependent on international food aid.

The conference held on July 26-August 1, 2003, in Maryland (USA) for the creation of the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) saw 15 oppositional organisations forming a united front. The main forces involved are:

- The Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF). Of socialist inclination, this movement fights for the self-determination of the Afar population in Eritrea and in Ethiopia and for the constitution of an Afar identity localised in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. It has in the past armed the Djibouti FRU guerrillas.
- The Pan Ethiopian United Party
- The Pan Ethiopian Socialist Movement (Meison). The first clandestine student movement before the revolution, of weak significance today. Marked by a significant Marxist influence. It participated in the government between 1975 and 1977, before becoming the victim of the "red terror" unleashed by the Mengistu government.
- The Council of Alternative Forces For Peace and Democracy
- The Ethiopian Democratic Union Party
- THEADISO or Renaissance of the Democratic Union. A movement of weak significance, created in London in 1975, implanted in Amhara traditionalist sectors. In 1976, it benefited from the aid of the Sudanese authorities who allowed it to set up training camps on their territory; it has also received financial aid from Saudi Arabia. Today it is only a political movement.
- MEDHIN, or Ethiopian Salvation Democratic Party. This party was founded in Washington in 1992 by the former minister of foreign affairs of the Mengistu government. It is an ultra-nationalist group with an Amhara base benefiting from the support of US conservative groups, as well as the Ugandan and Kenyan regimes and former high-ranking soldiers from the Mengistu era.
- Ethiopian National United Front (ENUF).
- Federal Democratic Unity of the Ethiopian People's Party.
- The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) founded at the beginning of the 1970s. Originally a far left movement, it participated in the overthrow of the monarchy before launching a guerrilla war against Mengistu's Stalinist government. Faced with the "red terror" of which it was

the chief victim, it renounced urban armed struggle in favour of rural actions. Following the execution of its main leaders, it broke up into several factions and ceased its military activities. Since 1991, it has been one of the main opposition forces inside the EPRDF. In contrast to the 1970s, it would seem, at least officially, that it does not enjoy external support. Some of its members are still exiled and others are implanted in zones controlled by the army. However it remains a solid opposition front that could play a significant role in the events to come.

- The United Democratic Front of the People of Gambella
- The Oromo National Council
- The Oromo People's Liberation Organisation
- The Democratic Coalition of the Peoples of the South of Africa
- The Tigrayan Alliance for Democracy

In its final declaration, the UEDF said its aim was "to set up a pluralist system while drawing lessons from the experiences of the oppositionists on the formation of fronts". They have not elaborated further on the strategies to follow in order to overthrow the current regime. The front is led by a council of 30 people, or two representatives of each organisation, and is open to any opposition organisation adhering to the principles of the Front.

The novelty is that since the liquidation of the bipolar order, ideological references seem to have lost all connection to a structured international framework. In these alliances nationalist, religious or ethnic themes intermingle. This is one avatar among others in the difficult adaptation of the African continent to a process of democratisation which is highly destructuring.

Conditioned by centuries of feudalism, victim of totalitarian regimes, prey to political banditry, this is the situation of Ethiopia today. The regime of Meles Zenawi has not opened a breach in the democratisation of the country or settled the ethnic problems, it has imposed the Tigrayan ethnic grouping at the summit of the state, to the extent that members of the Copt clergy originating from this group act as political cadres and exclude other forces.

The great powers only see the Horn of Africa as a strategic zone. Since 9/11 the will of the US to co-opt Ethiopia to control terrorism has borne fruit. Moreover, numerous connections have been opened up between the Arab world and the Horn of Africa. Migratory exchanges have developed, with Yemeni traders selling their produce in Ethiopia while Ethiopians emigrate to Saudi Arabia. There are also cross-frontier ethnic connections; Sudanese and Somali ethnic groups are established in Ethiopia and liable to be manipulated in the latent conflicts with Sudan and Somalia.

The active presence of the Arab League in the Horn also creates contradictions among the Muslim population. The US, which supports Eritrea while deploring its totalitarian regime, says that the regime is the sole force countering the possibility of an Islamist wave endangering the security of Israel and creating regional instability. These concerns have mounted following the creation of an "Eritrean Islamic Jihad". Sudan, object of much attention, is an Islamic state strongly implicated in the jihadi current. Djibouti, although having strong connections with France, has also become a US enclave for the surveillance of all the Islamist movements.

Somalia, a country without a state since 1991, after the US intervention and the fall of the government of "socialist orientation" of Siad Barre, with seven million Sunni Muslims, is engaged in peace negotiations currently taking place in Kenya. Many problems are emerging, starting with the difficulty of disarming the rival factions armed by Ethiopia, Eritrea and some Arab countries. Religious representatives have begun to make themselves heard, which has awakened the attention of the US, which claims that the Al-Ittihad Al-Islami Front and a good number of sheikhs are linked to Al-Qaida.

To say the least, the future remains uncertain.

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## **Notes**

[1] Mengistu is described in his biography as the son of a slave, aged barely 34 and taking revenge on a kingdom of aristocrats.

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## **P.S.**

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