

# The Legacies of the Ethiopian Student Movement

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**Fifty years ago, a student movement transformed Ethiopia with radical calls for self-determination and land reform. But while the movement helped bring down the monarchy, the Ethiopia they fought for has never come to pass.**

In countries throughout the world, the 1960s, and 1968 in particular, were a time of political unrest. Ethiopia was no exception, with demonstrations and student rebellion taking aim at the dominant social order. However, as historian Bahru Zewde argues in his book [The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement c. 1960-1974](#), it was really 1969, rather than 1968, that was the pivotal year in Ethiopia, eventually culminating in the East African country's 1974 revolution.

From the beginning of the decade, it was obvious that many in Ethiopia were displeased with the ruling monarchy and the feudal land structure it oversaw. In 1965, students flooded into the streets of Addis Ababa, the nation's capital, chanting the slogan "Land to the Tiller." Their target: the land system that impoverished the country's large farming population.

Demonstrations expanded in subsequent years, and "the national question" was added to the mix of grievances. Living in a country with scores of languages, ethnicities, and traditions, many Ethiopians felt that the ruling class was dominated by a small, select group — the wealthy [Amhara](#) contingent. They drew on ideas of pluralism and self-determination to contest the monarchy, led by [Emperor Haile Selassie](#).

Students were critical in raising these concerns. Many met and built solidarity in Marxist reading groups, where the works of Lenin, Mao, and later the New Left flourished. Then, on December 28, 1969, disaster struck — a radical student leader named [Tilahun Gizaw](#) was murdered by police for his organizing. Gizaw's death was a transformative event, laying bare the repression the government was willing to unleash and helping breed a more radical class of activists that pushed Ethiopia toward revolution.

After Gizaw's death, leftist organizations grew and morphed. In addition to the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the Derg — a committee comprised of low-ranking officers of the Ethiopian Army — gained support from MEISON and grew in influence. In 1974, it was the Derg who overthrew Haile Selassie and the monarchy amid mass protests. But those hoping for a pluralistic, democratic country were soon disappointed. While the Derg implemented radical land reform and abolished feudalism, they also anointed themselves rulers of a one-party, Marxist-Leninist state.

Opposition was violently suppressed. Between 1975 and 1977, the Derg administered a lethal campaign known as the "Red Terror" (*Qey Shibir*) that meted out brutal repression against dissident voices and groups. Casualty estimates vary widely — [the low end is 30,000 deaths](#), the high end [750,000](#) — but one thing was unambiguous: the violent campaign radically changed the populace's

perceptions of the Derg, which had waved the banner of communism during the revolution.

Hannah Borenstein recently spoke with Bahru Zewde about his activism during the pivotal year of 1969, the politics (both good and bad) of the radical students, and the legacy the movements of the 1960s bequeathed to contemporary Ethiopia, a country wracked by ethnic conflict.

**HB | I'm wondering if you can start by talking about where you were in 1969 — and the 1960s more generally — in Ethiopia. Can you talk about your general involvement and exposure to the movements that you write about in the book?**

**BZ |** In 1969, I was in what is called Ethiopian University Service (EUS). It was a mandatory service that students had to do after completing their third year and before their fourth year. We were sent mostly to the provinces, mostly to teach, and I was assigned to teach at a high school in a town called Dembi Dollo in southwestern Ethiopia. So I was there in 1969 when the movement was at a high point, but it was widespread and had ripple effects where I was teaching, including confrontations between the students and the national militia.

I had come to the university in 1965, soon after the [“Land to the Tiller” demonstration](#). During the actual demonstration, I was in high school, but after I joined university, there were more demonstrations every year. In my first year, we had a “Poverty Is Not a Crime” demonstration, and the following year we protested against a bill to limit demonstrations.

In the beginning, it was really only a small group of students who were active, but by the third year, the movement had grown. The high point for me was the end of 1969, because by then I had come back and I was in my senior year, and there were so many things happening concurrently that year.

After student leader Walleign Mekonnen [read his paper](#) “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia,” the constant agitation and confrontation with the government continued to grow. I thought I really needed to write an article on this. I was majoring in history and minoring in political science, and I published in the political science association journal. So, when I started writing the book, I went back to that article.

**HB | What made you go back to it?**

**BZ |** For a long time, I've been interested in the histories of intellectuals in Ethiopia. My book [Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia](#) specifically focuses on earlier intellectuals in Ethiopia, so it was almost automatic that the next intellectual focus would be on this era. I committed myself in that earlier book to start this more recent history.

**HB | What specific works or strands were students turning to at the time?**

**BZ |** The Leninist and even Stalinist renditions were particularly salient at the time. The two most important questions raised by students were the question of land and the nationalities question. The land question in particular — addressed by Lenin and Mao — became an important part of the struggle. It was used to justify the struggle for equality, the end of oppression, and the end of exploitation of the peasant.

The question of nationalities addressed another serious problem. The solution for it was drawn from the writings of Lenin and Stalin, like Lenin's *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* and Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question*. They were, in many ways, taken as a ready-made recipe for the national question. And in the end, it was rather misguided, because it was taken up as a dogma rather than an interpretive framework to be used within the Ethiopian context and the Ethiopian reality. A lot of the writing did not relate to either Ethiopian history or ethnography.

Some of the really advanced students read *Capital*. But in many ways, the New Left writing was more popular than the classical writing. The serious works of Marx and Engels were read by only a few.

Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, and especially Frantz Fanon — these were figures that people turned to. And then there were the figures who were inspirational in other ways, like Malcolm X, who came to visit the students in Addis Ababa shortly before he was assassinated.

While of course the question of land was on everyone's mind, systems of landholding were very different in northern versus southern Ethiopia at the time. In the north, the main system of land tenure was the *rist* system, which made land hereditary and inalienable. Although still exploited, peasants there were far better off than southern tenant farmers, who had to pay tribute to ownership *gults* that were acquired from the monarchy — while working for them at the same time.

**HB | Were the students that were protesting from one area of the country? What were some of the conversations between them about the regionally specific conditions of landlordism?**

**BZ |** The Land to the Tiller protest mainly addressed issues in southern Ethiopia. The southern part in particular had tenancy sometimes to the tune of around 50 percent. So that was the target of the protest — the South.

Some of the articles that appeared in *Challenge* — a student publication published by the Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA) — did have some elaborate discussion of land tenure, but not much as to how the Land to the Tiller idea was going to be implemented and how it was going to take place. I think the real debate on this question came after the 1974 revolution, when there was more freedom of expression and newspapers actually became a platform for the free circulation of ideas.

Many ideas were discussed then, and the Derg, the military group that assumed power in September 1974, opted for the complete nationalization of land. It ended up not really being land to the tiller — it really ended up becoming land to the state.

The fact that it abolished landlordism of course was welcomed. But at the same time, when you look at the slogan in a more nuanced manner, this was not the target. The target was that the peasants would be the owners of the land, not that they would be at the mercy of the government or its representatives, the peasant associations.

**HB | The Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU) was also active at this time. Did it work in tandem with students? Or were there any frictions between groups?**

**BZ |** They did not work together very much initially. But after the student movement eventually transformed into leftist parties, particularly the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), they made it a point to establish links with CETU. Some students went on to work with CETU and were even employed in the organization. So CETU eventually ended up adopting the slogans and ideas of the EPRP.

**HB | In your book, you talk about 1969, and the death of student leader Tilahun Gizaw, as being particularly climactic. Can you elaborate about the reaction to his murder by police and how this ended up culminating in the 1974 revolution?**

**BZ |** This was a turning point in many ways. It led to the emergence of high school student activism, which eventually took over in the 1970s. The assassination and the killing of students the following

day proved that the government was willing to go to any length to suppress the student movement, and quite a number of activists began to see that the old method of confronting the government every year with ritual demonstrations wasn't going to deliver results.

There was also an exodus of a large number of students to North America and Europe. In the process, they started to radicalize the external movement even more. This was what caused the split in ESUNA between the older, more orthodox Marxists and a new radical and militant group of students. Inside Ethiopia, clandestine study groups began to pop up. Some of these groups eventually merged to form the EPRP.

So Tilahun's death and its connection to the revolution is not totally direct. People knew that the revolution would come, but not so soon. And there were a number of contributing factors. There was disenchantment by soldiers with the [war in Eritrea](#) and dissatisfaction with living conditions. There was also the oil crisis in 1973 and the subsequent fuel hike, which sparked taxi strikes. And there was a teachers' strike that was also important — protesting against a new reform that was perceived as designed to make the education system keep poor students at lower levels of education.

But still, the revolution came quite abruptly and caught the ruling class and everyone else by surprise.

**HB | How do you see some of these legacies connected to the political situation in Ethiopia today?**

**BZ |** I think the most enduring legacy of the student movement is the question of nationalities. After protracted debates, in 1971, the student movement almost completely rallied behind this principle of self-determination up to and including secession. And this was taken straight from the books of Stalin. Over time, this was adopted by all leftist parties.

However, subsequently EPRP and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) began to distance themselves from this principle because it was perceived as opening the gate for narrow nationalism. The split actually started in North America when some members of ESUNA — the Eritrean members in particular — felt that it was not sufficiently accommodating the Eritrean question, so they opted to establish their own organization. Shortly after, ESUNA came out with a piece that basically negated their previous stance about the question of nationalities.

The one organization that stuck with this principle up until the very end was the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). It saw the national question as an effective tool for mobilizing the Tigrayan population behind it. When they finally seized state power as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991, they incorporated this question of nationalities into the 1991 charter and then the constitution of 1994. That is how we came to have an ethnic federal system.

It's hard to say what we are going through now. The current prime minister, [Abiy Ahmed](#), appeared to represent a counter-discourse to the question of nationalities. He seemed to aspire to relieve the country of this burden that has really shackled Ethiopia for so many years and has had disastrous consequences. While the ruling party in Ethiopia, EPRDF, has in theory recognized the equality of nationalities, in fact it was controlling everything from the center. So self-determination was not really exercised.

Now we are seeing everything sort of running amok. Everyone wants to be the master of their land. And ethnicity and nationality have become more important than the country. So hopefully we are going through the last motions of this exercise. Or worse may be yet to come.

## HB | What is student activism like today?

**BZ** | Students are so fragmented along ethnic lines they cannot even mobilize for a common cause. The last serious student activism was in 2003, and it resulted in the flight of some of the activists. Nowadays, everyone is in their own ethnic shell. This is completely different from the situation in the 1960s. Right now, it's difficult to have a pan-Ethiopian organization.

In terms of the decline of militancy as well, I think there were two major turning points. After the Red Terror, there was complete passivity. And then, on the eve of the [2005 elections, there was euphoria](#), and soon after a mass clampdown. This was a major setback.

The major problem right now is that there is so much fragmentation along ethnic lines. And this makes it exceedingly difficult to organize students for a common cause.

Bahru Zewde is an Ethiopian historian and the author of many books, including *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement c. 1960-1974*.

Hannah Borenstein is a PhD candidate in cultural anthropology at Duke University.

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**Hannah Borenstein**  
**Bahru Zewde**

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