JONATHAN BAKER

ETHIOPIA'S ROAD TO PERESTROIKA:

In search of the end of the rainbow?
ETHIOPIA'S ROAD TO PERESTROIKA:
In search of the end of the rainbow?

JONATHAN BAKER

The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1990
Ethiopia's road to *Perestroika*:
In search of the end of the rainbow?

There can be no doubt that events in Ethiopia have reached a crossroads. At no time since the 1974 revolution has the credibility and durability of the regime in Addis Ababa appeared so critical. Moreover, reports regarding the situation within the country are confused and shrouded by ambiguity. There has been endless speculation regarding the imminent demise of the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. This speculation finds support in the fact that the Soviet Union, Ethiopia's main patron, is extricating itself with undue haste from a seemingly hopeless situation, as in Afghanistan, accompanied by its erstwhile allies from Eastern Europe. Added to this, the various guerilla movements appear to be making unstoppable advances and have control of large areas in the north. Thus, according to some observers, the writing is very much on the wall for Mengistu.

While, at a crude level of analysis, the foregoing remarks may be correct, what is needed is a clearer understanding and contextualisation of the situation. The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of events leading up to the current crisis, the ways in which it has been managed by the regime, and the responses by some of the main actors involved. It should be stressed that because of the complexity of events since 1974, a number of details have been generalised.

**State control and the search for legitimacy**

From the date of Mengistu's assumption of absolute power in February 1977, the overriding concerns of the military *cum* Marxist regime have been threefold. First, to eliminate the structural vestiges of the imperial regime and proceed with socialist reconstruction; second, to establish and maintain centralised control and create a state apparatus and a ruling party paraphernalia which would provide the regime with legitimacy; and third, to maintain the territorial integrity of the empire inherited from Haile Selassie.

It has been the way in which some of these goals have been pursued (particularly the third) that has precipitated the current Ethiopian crisis. The purpose of this section is to detail each of the above mentioned concerns as they provide the backdrop, and in some cases, form the core of the problematique underlying the current situation.
The elimination of the structural vestiges of the imperial regime and socialist reconstruction

The first acts of the Derg (the committee of lower-ranking military personnel which was established in June 1974) was to depose Haile Selassie in September, 1974 and, execute 57 officials of the ancien regime without trial in November, 1974. This was followed by the establishment of a Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) in December, 1974. These brutal executions put paid to the notion that Ethiopia would have a 'revolution without bloodshed' and was a foretaste of the widespread urban violence that was to follow in 1977 and 1978.

From an ideological viewpoint, the membership of the Derg was divided regarding the political direction the new regime should follow. Some favoured a return to civilian rule, while others, later to form the dominant position, were in favour of remaining in office for an indefinite period.

Eventually, however, the PMAC decided on some kind of socialist orientation specifically suited, it was stated, to Ethiopian conditions and which would incorporate "equality, self-reliance, the dignity of labour, the supremacy of the common good, and the indivisibility of Ethiopian unity" as its central tenets (Ottaway, 1978: 63). Further, the PMAC published the contents of its new programme entitled the National Democratic Revolution, the aim of which was "to liberate Ethiopia from the yokes of feudalism and imperialism, and to lay the foundations for the transition to socialism" (Halliday and Molyneux, 1981: 100).

To reflect their new ideology and to eliminate imperial socio-economic structures, the regime took control of the 'commanding heights' of the economy and nationalised big industries and banks, and implemented a far-reaching rural and urban land reform. In 1975 and 1976 the government enacted legislation relating to the organisation and ownership of rural and urban land. In short, all rural land was nationalised and usufructuary rights were redistributed to the landless and to tenants (Negarit Gazeta, Proc. 31 and Proc. 71, 1975).

The greatest effects of the rural land reform were felt in the southern regions of the country which had been incorporated into the empire at the end of the nineteenth century by Menelik II. In these regions, Amhara soldiers were rewarded for their war services by grants of land taken from the subjugated non-Amhara populations. In effect, the conquered peoples became tenants and serfs on what had previously been their land. The Amhara became the landed class and a new set of unequal power relations was implanted, which were only swept away by the revolution in 1974. To implement the rural land reform, and to provide for the eventual collectivisation of agriculture, peasant associations were established throughout the country, which in practice have
responsibility for administering and directing the lives of millions of rural people.

In the urban sphere, the government enacted policies which were to break the power of the landowning elite. The ownership of extra houses was declared illegal and confiscation took place. All rents were reduced which reflected the official ideology of socialism and social justice (Negarit Gazeta, Proc. 47, 1975).

To provide for the implementation of these measures and organise urban dwellers for administrative, political, economic and social purposes, urban dwellers' associations or kebeles were established in all urban areas (Negarit Gazeta, Proc. 104, 1976).

In theory, kebeles are self-governing, democratically elected bodies which have important functions including the construction of schools, mother-child clinics, roads and pathways, house construction and maintenance, protecting kebele property, conducting health education, vaccination and literacy campaigns, and for organising political education campaigns.

A number of critics of the regime have pointed to kebeles and peasant associations as solely instruments of political control without giving credit to the many benefits which these organisations have brought in terms of social improvements. That these reforms have not produced greater benefits is due not to the nature of the institutions themselves but rather to constraints imposed by a war-torn economy hindered by resource scarcity.

The establishment of centralised control and the search for legitimacy

The declaration of the National Democratic Revolution in 1976 provided the framework which would eventually lead to the establishment of a Marxist-Leninist state. In retrospect, it is interesting to speculate why the PMAC decided on a course of action which would lead to the adoption of the principles of scientific socialism as articulated in the USSR. There is no doubt that the search for legitimacy has been one of the overriding concerns of the regime; state take-overs of power by the military do not provide the degree of legitimacy required, while civilian multi-party states run the risk of being voted out of power. It could simply be that the leadership of the PMAC—and after 1977 this meant Mengistu when he had effectively eliminated his closest rivals for power—was attracted by the perceived magic of scientific socialism (stressing science, technology and production) as being the solution to all of Ethiopia’s ills. It can be added that Mengistu’s passionate desire to become the undisputed strongman of the regime was easily accommodated by the experience of personality cults in some Marxist regimes elsewhere in the world. The close ties which have existed between Ethiopia and North Korea may be an expression of the fact that Mengistu is an admirer of Kim Il-Sung who is the epitome of the personality cult.
To reflect the new socialist policy, political, economic and, not least, military ties were cemented with a number of countries in the socialist camp. In November, 1978, Ethiopia signed a 20-year treaty of friendship and cooperation with the USSR and close relations were established with Cuba which provided great military support in the war with Somalia in 1977-78.

From 1977 the regime turned its back on the USA and official anti-American sentiments became increasingly vitriolic. In the longer term, this anti-American stance was to prove disastrous, as Ethiopia is now realising in its effort to re-establish and cultivate Western, and particularly American, ties to compensate for the loss of Soviet, Cuban and East European support.

Throughout the entire period since the revolution, and particularly since the proclamation of the National Democratic Revolution, the regime has been intent on centralising the economy, extending effective state power to peripheral regions through institution building, preparing the ground for the establishment of the vanguard Marxist party and, finally, eliminating threats from political opponents, apart from the geographically-based guerilla movements. These aims should not be considered as mutually exclusive, however, but should be seen as interlocking parts of a total strategy.

The most serious threat to the regime in its early days was presented by groups jostling for power with the PMAC, of which the most dominant was the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) which instigated a campaign of urban assassinations (commonly referred to as the White Terror) from about September, 1976. To counteract the White Terror, Mengistu launched, in February 1977, the so-called Red Terror whereby a vicious counter-attack was made against the EPRP and elements considered sympathetic to it. The kebeles were provided with weapons and a ruthless campaign of violence followed. As one commentator suggests the Red Terror also resulted in many indiscriminate killings and the settling of old scores.

It was gang warfare with arbitrary executions, lynchings, and street massacres. No one was spared: men or women, young or old were gunned down in broad daylight or dragged out of their homes at night and killed. Bands of men attacked anyone they suspected of holding opinions other than their own. Many high school students were among the dead. Bullet-ridden bodies were left in the streets, or publicly exhibited to try to intimidate rival factions. It is said that Mengistu originally had a list of more than a thousand people to be eliminated in the terror. Many others close to Mengistu seemed to have lists of their own. The Red Terror claimed thousands of victims across the country (Dawit, 1989: 32).

The terror campaign lasted until mid-1978 when the EPRP was, for all intents and purposes, eliminated as a threat to the regime. Having settled the most immediate and dangerous challenge to its existence the regime accelerated the programme for institution building throughout the country. Although peasant associations and kebeles were strengthened, they were also made more responsive to the demands of the PMAC. For example, since 1978, all peasant associations have been obliged to supply the State Agricultural Marketing Corporation with a
percentage (fixed by quota) of their grain production at officially fixed prices which are generally below the open market price (Clapham, 1987: 162). This system was introduced to facilitate improved control over food production and supply, to provide cheap food for urban populations and to eliminate exploitative profits by traders (Pausewang, 1988b: 4).

While some of these goals are noteworthy in terms of the government’s concern for social justice and improvement in welfare levels, the quota system has certainly had a marked disincentive effect on peasant production. Moreover, the regime has pursued a campaign of actively promoting the establishment of producer collectives (collective farms)—a campaign resisted by the majority of peasants.¹

Other measures which form a part of the process of increasing government control over the peasantry are the villagisation and resettlement programmes, of which the latter has created an international outcry. The basic philosophy behind villagisation is that to provide the scattered rural population of Ethiopia with essential basic services it is necessary to collect farm households into newly established villages. More specifically, it is hoped that villagisation will promote agricultural productivity through more effective extension services, bring about more rational land use patterns and conserve natural resources, provide access to welfare services such as schools, clinics, water supplies and strengthen security and self-defence (Cohen and Isaksson, 1987: 436). It is also suggested that villagisation will make agrarian socialism and political control and education of the peasantry easier to achieve.

The establishment of a resettlement programme was initially undertaken by the revolutionary government following the famine in early 1974 which was partly responsible for the downfall of the imperial regime. Since that date, the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) has had overall responsibility for implementing population transfers from resource-depleted to resource-endowed regions of the country (Kirsch, 1989: 1-2). In principle, the programme is a sound one and this view is endorsed by the former commissioner of the RRC, Dawit Wolde Giorgis (1989: 281–308). Large areas of Tigray and Wello and portions of Shewa, Gojjam and Gondar (Map 1) have suffered, and are suffering, from such severe environmental degradation that agricultural production is not viable and peasant survival is at severe risk. According to data from the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), fifty per cent of the Ethiopian highlands, which account for half of the total area of the country, are affected by significant erosion. Furthermore, according to FAO if present population trends continue more than 150,000 people a year would require resettlement in order to prevent further soil losses (FAO, 1986).

¹ It should be noted that the vast majority of land (94.7 per cent) is still cultivated by small-holders, while 3.5 per cent is under state farms and 1.8 per cent under collectives and agricultural settlements (Cohen and Isaksson, 1987: 443).
However, the experience of resettlement since the revolution has been, in some cases, disastrous and according to Dawit Wolde Giorgis, "resettlement for Mengistu was not a development program but a solution to his social and national security problems" (Dawit, 1989: 285). Criticism has also been raised at the way the transfers of population were conducted including lack of adequate planning, inhuman recruitment techniques, hastily devised and implemented resettlement schemes, inadequate transport arrangements and so on. In 1984/85, a total of 600,000 people were transferred to settlement areas in Wellega, Ilubabor, Gojjam, Kefa, Gondar and Shewa in the space of just 18 months (Kloos and Aynalem, 1989: 113).

A measured assessment of the overall results of the resettlement programme during this period is provided by the above writers.

Available information shows that, while some schemes are progressing quite successfully, many others have failed to become self-sufficient and self-reliant. Persisting low production, adaptation difficulties (both physical and mental) of settlers to their new environment and high return migration rates indicate a number of problems caused by the haste in planning and implementing this massive resettlement programme, and by lack of resources. (Kloos and Aynalem, 1989: 125).

The Ethiopian resettlement programme has produced a fair amount of literature. The government view is presented in The Courier (1986), while other views are presented in, inter alia, Dawit (1989), Getachew (1989), Kirsch (1989), Kloos and Aynalem (1989), and Mekuria (1988).

The establishment of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia

Concomitant with this process of state control the regime introduced measures which should lead to the establishment of a sole political party, and which would provide the legitimacy so obviously required by the PMAC. Consequently in 1979, the government created the Commission to Organise the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia (COPWE). Along with the establishment of the COPWE, the government also created new mass organisations such as the Revolutionary Ethiopia Women's Association (REWA), the Revolutionary Ethiopia Youth Association (REYA), and strengthened the peasant associations, kebeles, and the state-controlled All Ethiopia Trade Union (Keller, 1988: 220).

In September 1984, the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) was launched—exactly ten years after the revolution. Finally it appeared that the regime had achieved legitimacy and that the vanguard party constructed on strictly Marxist-Leninist lines would provide Mengistu and the provisional military council with the formal legality which they had sought so long. State power had been extended to all regions of the country, with the obvious exceptions of guerilla-held territory in the north. The final event which marked the crowning point in the transformation of the state was the proclamation of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) on 12 September, 1987.
Map 1. Ethiopia
The creation of the socialist constitution

A major responsibility of the WPE had been to create a new constitution which would inaugurate the PDRE. A 343-person committee was established by the party with responsibility for drafting the constitution. In June, 1986, the constitutional drafting committee, following a year's work, presented a 119-article draft document (Keller, 1988: 220). A million copies of the draft constitution were distributed and following discussions at the grassroots level, ninety-five amendments were proposed, but only slight modifications were made to the draft document. A referendum on the new constitution was held on February 1, 1987, and three weeks later Mengistu Haile Mariam announced a positive result: 81 per cent of the electorate voted in favour of the new constitution, while 18 per cent voted against (Keller, 1988: 220).

The articles of the constitution can be grouped into a number of main subject areas. Commitment to socialism is firmly grounded in a number of articles. Article four proclaims democratic centralism as a cardinal principle, the construction of a socialist system is a major goal (article eight) members of the National Assembly (Shengo) have to make a pledge of allegiance to socialism (article 79), and in article six the Workers' Party of Ethiopia is the guiding force of the state and the entire society (Negarit Gazeta, Proc. I, 1987).

The constitution provides the President with wide ranging powers (articles 84–88). He is elected by the Shengo for a term of five years, and is the chief executive officer and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. He chairs the Council of Ministers' meetings as well as those of the Council of State. He nominates all important appointees to the WPE, including chief legal officers, chairman of the Workers' Control Commission and the chief auditor. He can also appoint and dismiss any minister, as well as the President of the Supreme Court, deputy presidents, judges and the Attorney-General (Negarit Gazeta, Proc. I, 1987).

Thus, in theory and practice, the President is all powerful and the only check on the abuse of power is apparently through the Shengo. It is doubtful, however, whether this provides a viable vehicle with which to prevent political manipulation, particularly since all Shengo members are WPE members who have been vetted for their loyalty. Not surprisingly, Mengistu Haile Mariam, Chairman of the WPE, was elected by the Shengo as President of the PDRE.

Another group of articles in the constitution deal with the nationalities issue. The “indivisible and inviolable” nature of Ethiopia is proclaimed (article one). The equality of the various nationalities is stressed, and chauvinism and narrow nationalism are rejected (article two). The languages of the various nationalities are given equal status (article two), although in article 116, Amharic is to be the working language. Article 116 may appear to overly discriminate against the other major languages of Ethiopia—the Oromo language, for example, is the mother tongue of probably half the country's population. But the special status accorded to Amharic merely gives official recognition to the
fact that it is the *lingua franca* throughout much of the country. Much of what is stated in the constitution regarding the respect for and representation of nationalities in Ethiopia is well thought through and deserves credit.

*The maintenance of Ethiopian territorial integrity*

The third broad concern of the government in Addis Ababa has been the maintenance of the territorial integrity of the state inherited from the imperial regime. The manner in which secessionist demands have been promoted and the inadequate way in which the central state authorities have responded pose the gravest threats to both the stability and durability of the regime and to the geographical cohesion and unity of Ethiopia since the revolution.

With this in mind, an overview of some recent developments including an assessment of the ideological complexions of the anti-government forces and the nature of their alliances is necessary. At the outset, it should be stressed that there is no single united front and factionalism and the shifting of ideological orientations appear to be characteristic features.

The vanguard of the opposition movements in Ethiopia in terms of effectiveness and ability to successfully confront the regime militarily is the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). In the past there have been a number of factions and splinter groups (some still exist) but, on the whole, the EPLF has the most coherent policy and is the doyen of the Eritrean movements. The oldest of the Eritrean opposition groups, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) has at least a symbolic military existence and a significant political presence both inside and outside Eritrea.

At the risk of oversimplification, the Eritrean question arose following the Italian capitulation, and the surrender of their colony of Eritrea in 1941. From that date until 1952 Eritrea came under British administration. Subsequently, the United Nations decided that Eritrea should have a federal status with Ethiopia, but this came to an end in 1962 when the Eritrean assembly, amid accusations of intimidation and corruption, voted for Eritrea’s formal and complete inclusion in Ethiopia, as the empire’s fourteenth province. For an excellent account of the Eritrean issue including the historical background to the dispute, see Tesfatsion, 1986.

The armed struggle by the Eritreans against what they perceive as a fundamental betrayal of their special interests began in 1961 and has continued ever since and can now claim the dubious distinction of being Africa’s longest conflict. To portray the history of the conflict as one of uninterrupted struggle, however, is misleading and the war against both the pre- and post-revolutionary regimes in Addis Ababa has fluctuated in intensity and varied in the degree of success on either side. But as the war enters its third decade, the EPLF have decisively gained the military initiative and are poised to effectively wrench the last re-
maining central governments outposts (Asmara, Keren and surrounding areas in the north of Eritrea) from Ethiopian control. The vital port of Assab, in the south of Eritrea, still remains fairly securely under government control.

The other main guerilla movement which has been active in the last few years is the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), which has scored some important and recent military victories in the northern administrative regions of Tigray, Wello and Gondar. Although its aims have, on occasions, been unclear and contradictory, its overriding goal is the overthrow of the present regime. Elsewhere in the country, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) operates in the administrative regions of Wellega and Harerge, while the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which was almost eliminated during the Red Terror, operates militarily in south-west Gondar and western Gojjam. Moreover, there have recently been reports of armed clashes between the TPLF and the EPRP in Gondar region as the former movement has attempted to widen its sphere of military operations (Indian Ocean Newsletter (ION, 6.1.90). In addition to the above movements, there are a good number of disparate anti-government groups, both inside and outside Ethiopia, and whose significance may increase (or decrease) depending upon the future course of events in the country.

The EPLF, since its emergence as the leading Eritrean guerilla movement in 1981, has undergone some fairly radical shifts in ideological orientation. As recently as 1986 it was termed “a secessionist movement with a radical Marxist ideological orientation” (Ottaway, 1986: 234) but the EPLF has now officially declared it does not subscribe to Marxism and is in favour of a multi-party system and the need for a mixed economy (AC, 18.11.88). Moreover, the election of Issayas Afewerki, a Christian, as the secretary general of the Front in 1987 has enabled it to present itself as a moderate secular organisation (particularly in the eyes of the Americans from whom it hopes to gain support), in contrast to the Marxism espoused by the regime in Addis Ababa. However, it has been suggested that Issayas has been the dominant figure in the EPLF, at least since the mid-1970s (Tesfatsion, 1989: 52).

Since its second congress in 1987, the EPLF has emphasised the need for collaboration and unity with other opposition groups within Ethiopia and has provided munitions and training to the TPLF and the OLF. In the past and, indeed, even now, the lack of unity and cooperation between the various anti-government groups has been a factor which has favoured the Ethiopian government.

The position of the EPLF regarding the basis for a negotiated settlement is that the future of Eritrea should be decided by referendum involving three options: independence, federation or regional autonomy (AC, 18.11.89 and ION, 10.3.90). The Ethiopians, by contrast, have consistently argued that any resolution of the Eritrean question must be within the framework of the Ethiopian state. It is this intransigence in negotiating positions which makes the situation appear so intractable. At least on two occasions, however, the Ethiopian government has of-
ffered autonomy for Eritrea. In May 1976, the PMAC issued the Policy Decisions on Eritrea or, as it was commonly known, the Nine Point Plan. "The Plan stated the PMAC's preparedness to solve the Eritrean problem by granting regional autonomy. It effectively ruled out federation, confederation, or state separation as options available for the Eritrean people" (Tesfatsion, 1986: 72). The plan was rejected by the EPLF who insisted, apparently, on nothing less than independence (Tesfatsion, 1986: 74–75).

A second attempt to offer concessions to the Eritrean, and other, opposition groups was made in September 1987 when the government devised a plan to redraw internal boundaries to articulate ethnic realities. Under the plan the 14 administrative regions (formerly provinces) would be abolished, and replaced by 28 administrative regions and five autonomous regions. Eritrea would become an autonomous region with special status. It would be allowed, _inter alia_, to promulgate its own laws, through its own _Shengo_, provided they do not conflict with Ethiopian law. Moreover, the special status conferred on the region gives it powers to establish any industry, have responsibility for education to junior college level, draw up its own budgetary plans and collect revenue. The EPLF has dismissed these reforms as a form of colonialism and an attempt to destroy Eritrean unity (AC, 18.11.87).

The ascent of the TPLF as a force capable of inflicting a number of military defeats on Ethiopian government forces is, in many ways, remarkable. From the ideological perspective, however, the TPLF has shown what amounts to naivety accompanied by a good deal of political manoeuvring. In November, 1989, the TPLF chairman, Melesse Zenawi, indicated that the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray was the driving force behind the front's ideology and stated that "the nearest any country comes to becoming socialist as far as we are concerned is Albania". He went on to reject the one man-one vote principle (Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 1990). At the same time, Haile Demeissie, one of the TPLF's political leaders, in an interview with the BBC, reiterated the admiration for Albania and stated that it was "a genuine Marxist-Leninist Society". Mikhail Gorbachov was denounced as a "social-imperialist" while Stalin's path was hailed as a "genuine democratic one" and that "only the revisionists and their cliques around the world say that Stalin is a terrorist" responsible for the death of millions (ION, 9.12.89). According to the TPLF chairman each region in Ethiopia would have the right to secede if they so desired, but that they would eventually re-unite for economic reasons (EIU, 1990).

These statements by the TPLF brought condemnation from many other groups who view such comments as encouraging disintegration of Ethiopia and the replacement of the present Marxist government by an avowedly non-democratic political system.

The TPLF has apparently realised that it is dangerously out-of-step with the broad consensus and consequently at the end of April 1990 corrected its earlier statements. Thus the front is now aiming to project
itself as a non-Marxist, pluralist movement.\(^1\) The need is emphasised for a provisional transitional government in which all opposition groups could participate, including members of the present government although President Mengistu would have to step down. An interim government would then have the responsibility for organising free elections within two years (*Africa Economic Digest (AED)*, 16.4.90 and *ION*, 5.5.90).

Militarily, both the EPLF and the TPLF have made impressive gains against government forces. As indicated earlier, government forces control only two major urban centres—Asmara and Keren—and a few other small strategic outposts. Massawa, Ethiopia’s second port after Assab on the Red Sea, fell to the EPLF in February, 1990. This loss was a major catastrophe for the government as it had provided the main overland supply route to Asmara’s population and to the 100,000-man Second Army defending it. The guerilla forces destroyed a number of Ethiopian naval ships and captured a wide range of military equipment including tanks, artillery, multiple rocket launchers and anti-tank missiles.

Prior to the capture of Massawa, Mengistu Haile Mariam made a broadcast over Ethiopian radio in which he prophetically expressed the view that “if Massawa falls, it would lead to the secession of Eritrea and destroy the unity for which generations of Ethiopians have sacrificed their lives” (*African Research Bulletin (ARB)*, 15.3.90).

Whether Eritrea finally comes under guerilla control depends upon a number of factors, not least, the ability of the Ethiopian army to launch a successful counter attack. The prospects appear slender. Asmara is now supplied by air, but whether this is logistically viable for long is doubtful.

The TPLF has also had a number of spectacular successes against the Ethiopian army in Tigray, Wello and Gondar Regions. It is stated, however, that local populations have not supported the Front’s activities and that this “has forced them to use tactics of fear and violent intimidation” and that their victories have been explained by a disinclination on the part of the Ethiopian military forces to confront the TPLF (*ION*, 14.10.89). In some cases, however, government forces aided by local peasant militia have recovered captured ground from the TPLF. Part of the problem in attempting to make a clear assessment of the military situation in Ethiopia is the speed with which events change and the claims and counter claims that are made by both sides. It has, for example, been claimed that the TPLF are in Shewa Region and are active less than 200 kms from Addis Ababa, while TPLF reconnaissance groups are approaching the outskirts of the city (*ION*, 28.4.90).

Whatever the truth of some of these claims the military situation does, nevertheless, appear precarious for the regime. In the past, mas-

---

\(^1\) The TPLF and the lesser-known Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (EPDM) have recently formed an umbrella organisation, the Ethiopian People’s Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPRDF). This is apparently an attempt to extend the power-base of the TPLF beyond Tigray.
sive Soviet assistance in terms of weapons, advisers and logistical support has enabled the Ethiopian government to overcome military setbacks, but now that the Soviet Union is in the process of retreating from Ethiopia and arms shipments are destined to cease during 1990 (the exact date appears to be the subject of some speculation) there would appear to be few options left for the PDRE regime. The Ethiopian army, according to most accounts, is battle weary and demoralised and even elements of the military leadership question the validity of a military solution to the internal conflicts.

In May 1989, for example, an unsuccessful coup attempt was made by high-ranking officers representing all sections of the armed forces to overthrow Mengistu. Their demands included a negotiated settlement to the conflicts and a more broadly based government. (ARB, 15.2.90). However, the fact that the coup was suppressed is an indication that Mengistu still retains sufficient support within the military (Sasaran, 1989: 79).

A reversal of policies and new initiatives

Faced with the withdrawal of Soviet military support, a serious coup attempt by leading high-ranking officers, a series of severe military defeats by the guerilla forces, and a deteriorating economic situation (created by falling coffee prices on the world market as well as inappropriate internal agricultural policies), President Mengistu Haile Mariam has little room for manoeuvre. However, Mengistu is nothing if not the master of survival and, as he has shown in the past, has the ability to turn adversity into advantage.

The peace talks

With such an array of formidable problems, the government has been forced to undertake negotiations with both the EPLF and the TPLF in two separate series of talks. The EPLF and the PDRE held two rounds of preliminary talks in September, 1989 in Atlanta, Georgia and in November, 1989 in Nairobi, with former US President, Jimmy Carter, as chairman. Both rounds were of a preliminary nature and discussed procedural matters concerning the nomination of observers. The EPLF insisted that the United Nations should participate as an observer as it is, according to the Secretary-General of the EPLF, Issayas Afewerki, “a party to the conflict because the root problem arose when the United Nations mishandled the issue after the Second World War” (AED, 16.4.90). The Ethiopian delegation approved the selection of the UN as one of the EPLF’s choices of international observers. However, the UN

---

1 Twelve Ethiopian generals were executed for their part in the coup attempt (The Ethiopian Herald, 22.5.90). It might have been prudent for Mengistu to have shown clemency particularly with army morale at a low level, and in the light of the recent political liberalisation proposals.
Secretary-General, Perez de Cuellar, indicated in a letter to Jimmy Carter that the UN could not become involved unless the issue was between two member states and only then when it had the support of the General Assembly or the Security Council (EIU, 1990).

Issayas Afewerki’s reaction was both surprising and unhelpful, as indicated by his speech over EPLF radio, Voice of the Broad Masses of Eritrea on the 10 December, 1989, in which he accused Carter of having forged the letter from Perez de Cuellar and implying that President Carter was untrustworthy and dishonest (BBC, 13.12.89). Issayas went on to suggest that the Ethiopian government had been forced to negotiate because of the military situation but also stated that the PDRE motives for attending the talks were suspect and that it was merely a “time-buying tactic” (BBC, 13.12.89).

Obviously, statements such as these are not conducive to the creation of an atmosphere which would lead to progress being made. While the Ethiopian delegation wanted the substantive discussions to begin within two months of the Nairobi talks, the EPLF wanted more time to discuss and assess the results of the preliminary talks. From the statements made by the EPLF, it is not difficult to obtain the impression that they were not particularly serious about negotiations.

In an attempt to find mutually acceptable negotiating positions, the PDRE and the TPLF have had three rounds of preliminary discussions, all in Rome, under the chairmanship of the Italian Government. The second of the first two rounds (4-11 November and 12-19 December, 1989) produced agreement as to which countries should act as mediators and observers (EIU, 1990). Agreement was also reached that a third round of negotiations should be held between the 20-29 March, 1990.

These talks, however, broke down after the Ethiopian delegation refused to accept the TPLF conditions that the discussions should cover the entire country (AED, 16.4.90). The official Ethiopian objection was expressed as follows: “... for an organization that has consciously and explicitly founded its aims on the basis of a particular region to claim a right to speak on behalf of the people of the entire country is transparently presumptuous” (Ethiopian Embassy, Stockholm, press statement, 29.3.90).

It certainly does appear that the TPLF is attempting to project itself as the representative of anti-government forces in Ethiopia and thus is positioning itself to become the natural leader in any post-Mengistu regime. The TPLF link-up with the EPDM to form the EPRDF can be viewed as one way in which the TPLF is attempting to give credibility to its claim as a broadly-based opposition front. The recent formation of the Oromo People’s Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and its alliance under the umbrella of the EPRDF (as reported by the TPLF Secretary-General on Voice of the Ethiopian People for Peace, Democracy and Freedom radio on the 24th May, 1990) is also evidence of the TPLF’s portrayal of itself as the representative of major nationality movements (BBC, 31.5.90). It is questionable, however, whether there is a need for another Oromo movement particularly since the OLF and other Oromo
movements already exist, although the above-mentioned broadcast does state that “among the existing Oromo organisations, only the OPDO has said that it stands for the democratic unity of the Ethiopian people and democracy”. As indicated earlier, factionalism and division are characteristic features of the anti-government fronts.

Furthermore, TPLF military confrontations with the EPRP in the western regions of Ethiopia may be seen as a move to silence or destroy rivals for power and ideological enemies.

In a radio broadcast over Voice of the Ethiopian People for Peace, Democracy and Freedom radio, on the 21st May, 1990, the Secretary-General of the TPLF, Melesse Zenawi, stated that the TPLF proposals for a provisional transitional government as outlined in its “peaceful and democratic transitional programme” was the “only alternative” for Ethiopia (BBC, 28.5.90).

The chances of the peace talks between the EPLF and TPLF being re-convened appear remote. Both guerilla movements probably feel confident that they have now gained the decisive military advantage and that it is only a matter of time before the Ethiopian regime capitulates.

President Mengistu, for his part, has devised two recent and mutually supporting strategies. One has been to find a new military patron (Israel) to compensate for the withdrawal of Soviet support, and the other has been to unveil a new economic and political programme which, it is hoped, will widen his political support and give impetus to a stagnating economy.

An emerging Ethiopian–Israeli Axis?

While Ethiopia and Israel have had no official links since 1973 following Israeli occupation of part of Egypt, a founding member of the Organisation of African Unity, privately bilateral relations have been conducted in many spheres, particularly in military assistance. Prior to the rupture in diplomatic relations, Israel had provided Ethiopia with a variety of assistance including, inter alia, the training of anti-guerilla units and the personal security force of Haile Selassie, medical assistance, the construction of an airport, providing staff to the Haile Selassie I University and experts for various agricultural projects (ION, 27.1.90; Kassim, 1988: 29).

For Israel, however, Ethiopia was, and is, an important client to be cultivated in an area of Africa dominated, for Israel, by hostile Arab states. In many ways, Israel considers Ethiopia a unique client in Africa. Obviously, historical links are important. Ethiopia has a small, but for Israel, significant Jewish minority known as Beta Israel (commonly referred to as Falashas) who state that their ancestry can be traced to Jews at the court of King Solomon and to his son, Menelik, by the Queen of Sheba. But the overriding importance of Ethiopia for Israel is geopolitical in that it is the only non-Arab state with a coastline along the Red Sea. Furthermore, free navigation through the narrow straits of Bab-al Mandab (25 kms in width) for Israeli vessels from the part of Eilat is
considered vital for Israel, economically and psychologically (Kassim, 1988: 28).

Thus the reasoning goes that Israel will go to great lengths to prevent the disintegration of Ethiopia, and the secession of Eritrea as it may either declare itself an Arab state (and therefore take a belligerent anti-Israel stance) or it may fall under the influence of powerful Arab states. Either way, the result would be the same—the creation of what has been termed an "Arab Lake" which would be inimical to the interests of Israel.

Moreover, Ethiopia has considered Israel an important ally in the fight against Eritrean secession, so that while diplomatic connections were severed in 1973, Israel continued to support Haile Selassie with covert military support (Kassim, 1988: 32). While the Ethiopian revolutionary regime denied the existence of any cooperation between the two countries, Israel continued to provide a range of military equipment, training programmes and other support. It was only when the Foreign Minister of Israel, Moshe Dayan, publicly declared in 1978 that his country was assisting Ethiopia in the Somali war that the Israelis were expelled, but even then low-level contacts were maintained between the two states (Kassim, 1988: 33-34).

Despite the enormous differences in the ideological and political persuasions of Israel and Ethiopia, it is clear that these differences are transcended by their one dominant common interest—prevention of Eritrean secession. In view of this, the re-establishment of diplomatic relations on the 3rd November, 1989, came as no surprise and merely extends continuity and adds impetus to this special relationship. A good deal of speculation and exaggeration surrounds the nature of renewed Israeli assistance, but most reports focus on military support and cooperation, although this is strongly denied by both Israel and Ethiopia (Africa News, 28.5.90; ARB, 15.4.90).

The evidence, however, would seem to suggest otherwise. According to the reliable Israeli newspaper, Ha'aretz, it is reported that the Americans have "incontrovertible evidence" that several hundred Israeli advisers are assisting the Ethiopians against guerilla forces in Eritrea and Tigray. The same source indicates that Israeli tactical advice has helped Ethiopian forces in recent military engagements in Wellega district, western Ethiopia. Israeli technicians are also upgrading Ethiopian F5 jets (ARB, 15.4.90). According to Eritrean sources, Israeli military advisers have visited Ethiopia to train the armed forces in the use of new Israeli weapons including the Kfir plane, manufactured in Israel (ARB, 15.5.90). Moreover, EPLF radio stated that the Ethiopian Government "had invited Israel to set up a base on the Dahlak Islands" in the Red Sea (BBC, 20.4.90).

Whatever the truth of these and similar reports, it is fairly clear that there is now a fairly active Israeli military presence in Ethiopia. Kassa Kebede, a senior aide to President Mengistu, told a news conference in Jerusalem, following the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, that both Ethiopia and Israel shared "the geo-strategic relationship of keep-
ing the Red Sea a non-Arab sea” (ARB, 15.4.90) and this would certainly
add credibility to EPLF reports that Israel has been invited to establish a
base in the Dahlak Islands.

Another motive for Ethiopian interest in strengthening links with
Israel is the former’s interest in a rapprochement with the USA and re-
establishment of full diplomatic relations. The Ethiopians have made
no secret of their desire that this should happen, and as Kassa Kebede
stated on the Voice of Israel radio “as Israel has a relation with the
United States and Israel has also close and strong relations with the
Jewish lobby in the United States, we see possibilities for benefiting
from that” (BBC, 8.11.89). Whether the United States views a reconcili-
ation with the Ethiopian regime as in its interests is debatable. The
Americans consider an improvement in relations with an unstable
and, until recently, very unfriendly regime as a risky venture which
would not bring tangible benefits. Apart from this, they probably have
suspicions about the sincerity of the Ethiopian government which had
lambasted the Americans at every conceivable opportunity. Both coun-
tries do however share the view that any resolution of the Eritrean
conflict should be within an Ethiopian framework; this might provide
a point of departure for a normalisation of relationships.

The decision by the Ethiopians to allow free emigration of the re-
main ing Falasha population to Israel must also be seen as an attempt to
cultivate opinion, not only in Israel, but also among the Jewish lobby
in the United States.1

If Israeli military support is able to turn the military advantage in
favour of the Ethiopian regime, it will only provide a respite and not a
solution to the seemingly intractable problem of Eritrea and the de-
mands from other anti-government forces. There is also the great risk
that, with the active involvement of Israel in Ethiopia, the Middle East
conflict will spill over into the Horn of Africa and thereby set in motion
a series of events, the implications of which could be far more
dangerous and far-reaching than could have ever been foreseen. Gen-
eral al Bashir, Sudan’s Head of State, gave an indication of such fears
when he stated that “the Israeli presence in the Red Sea” is “a threat for
Sudan and the whole of the Arab Nation” (ION, 27.1.90).

Perestroika for Ethiopia

The other strategy devised by President Mengistu represents a complete
reversal of the commitment to socialism. In a speech on the 5th March,
1990, to the 11th Regular Plenum of the Central Committee of the
WPE, Mengistu outlined proposals for wide ranging and fundamental
policy changes in both the political and economic spheres of the state.

1 In 1984 more than 10,000 Falashas were airlifted to Israel via Sudan under “Operation
Moses”. The operation brought stern condemnation from the Ethiopian Government and
the OAU for flagrant interference in the affairs of a sovereign state (Kassim, 1988: 26).
However, according to Kassa Kebede, Ethiopia did not object to the 1984 operation, but
what irritated the government was the publicity surrounding the event (BBC, 8.11.89).
The speech was published in its entirety in *The Ethiopian Herald* (8.3.90) and extracts from it are given below.

According to Mengistu, the “transition to the socialist system ... has proved difficult and unattainable,” partly as a result of mistakes made at the policy level but mainly through changing world circumstances—an allusion to the fundamental changes which are occurring in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Consequently, Ethiopia was obliged to “adapt or perish”.

The insufficient attention that had been paid to the private sector has “had a negative impact on the national economy”. In particular, agricultural productivity has suffered as a result of misguided policies which have had a disincentive affect on the peasantry. Henceforth, the “new economic order” would “be a mixed one built on state, private and cooperative ownership”. The management of state companies will be based on “competition, profitability and productivity” and those that do not achieve satisfactory results will be leased or sold to individuals, private companies or cooperatives or, in extreme cases, closed down completely.

While a number of the statements are ambiguous and leave room for interpretation, the overall message is clear: the Ethiopian economy is to undergo a radical restructuring. More specifically, special attention is paid to the needs of the agricultural sector which is the backbone of the economy. Thus, peasants are to be allowed a large degree of independence from state control, and although “land will continue to be under state ownership,” individual farmers will be allowed to employ labourers, and transfer ownership to heirs. State ownership of land is deemed necessary in order to prevent “the repetition of wrongs suffered by the peasant.” With this measure, the government is rightly attempting to protect peasants from the development of an exploitative system which characterised the *ancien regime*. Free market forces are to be allowed to determine agricultural price levels and this means that the onerous quota and fixed pricing systems will disappear, as will grain control stations which were established to control the degree of private grain trading. All these changes must also assume a shift away from collectivisation. The private sector is to be encouraged to establish large commercial farms on state land, to stimulate cash crop production for export and as industrial raw materials.

Particular emphasis is also placed on the role of private entrepreneurship and house construction. Insufficient housing and poor housing standards have been a major problem for the government, and a major source of criticism from urban dwellers. Under the new policy, any individual will be allowed, without an upper limit on capital invested, to build, rent, sell or lease private housing, offices and factories. This measure will certainly benefit the wealthier urban population who have the ability to pay, but should not benefit the poorer sections to any great degree. Presumably, the *kebele* system, if retained, would still be able to provide low quality housing for the poor.
While the above examples cover some of the more important sectors of the economy, it is explicitly stated that "private entrepreneurship will be able to participate in any ... field ... without any hindrance." Attention is also paid to the role that foreign capital can play in conjunction with Ethiopian counterparts through joint ventures, although details regarding complete ownership by foreigners are unclear. A special decree on investment, announced in May, 1990, deals with investment incentives and tax issues and this does clarify the position somewhat. For example, tax exemptions for up to five years is allowed for necessary imports in order to establish an enterprise. Furthermore, foreigners and Ethiopians living abroad can invest in projects as long as investments are made in hard currency. The repatriation of profits (in hard currency) is also guaranteed (The Ethiopian Herald, 8.5.90).

The other major focus of Mengistu's speech was on political change within the country. It should be emphasised that the proposed political reforms were dealt with in a fairly superficial manner but they do, at least, provide some indication of future policy. Mengistu stated that the Workers' Party of Ethiopia "should change its nature and even its name." Henceforth the new party would be known as the Democratic Unity Party of Ethiopia and would "embrace all nationals irrespective of their class, and religion, tenets ..." as long as they were "genuinely committed to Ethiopia's unity and progress." The structure, mandate and orientation of the new party were not disclosed, although "the content and mission" of the party would "be submitted to the public for democratic discussion and election." Closer inspection of the little that was revealed, however, does indicate that Marxist-Leninism has been cast aside. No information is available as to whether the various institutions (such as peasant associations and kebeles) so assiduously built-up over the past 15 years would suffer a similar fate. President Mengistu is absolutely clear about one issue, however, and that is the fact that there can be no compromise regarding the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. Consequently, the olive branch which is offered to anti-government groups is conditioned by the proviso that they recognise "the democratic unity of the Ethiopian people."

The decision to produce a new political structure, while complementing the economic reform proposals, can also be viewed as an attempt by the regime to project itself internationally as a democratic alliance of forces which is making every effort to adopt a conciliatory position vis-à-vis the opposition movements. More cynical views might suggest that the President is attempting to court popularity among the general population by moving away from what many see as a dogmatic Marxist system, and in so doing maintain and even enhance his own power position.

The reaction by the opposition to the reforms was negative. The TPLF, for example, stated that "if the party in power doesn't give up power and subject itself to the electorate, then all the talk about a multi-party state is a joke" (AED, 16.4.90). The EPLF's reaction was
equally scathing and indicated that President Mengistu “is in cloud
cuckoo land”, while the EPRP responded by saying “he is ridiculous to
think that we are going to rally with our dictators just because they
have changed the name of their party” (ION, 10.3.90).

There is no doubt that the economic and political reforms have been
welcomed by many Ethiopians. The reactions to the restructuring pro­
gramme internationally have been mixed; some feel it is a step in the
right direction while others feel that the reforms are too late (ARB,
31.3.90).

One immediate and practical consequence of the economic reforms
was a fall in the price of cereals in Addis Ababa by between 30 to 60 per
cent. The price of tef, for example, an important staple grain in
Ethiopia, fell from about $80 a hundredweight (approximately 50 kilo­
grams) to between $30 to $55 a hundredweight. Peasants farmers have
also benefitted from the abolition of the fixed price and quota systems
whereby they were previously paid only $17-$18 a hundredweight for
tef (ION, 24.3.90), and they can expect to receive more for their produce
now that free market forces determine price levels.

Another move which is likely to be welcomed by the peasantry is the
tacit abandonment of the policy of villagisation. An important reason
for this retreat is that farmers, who had been re-settled in new villages,
were often obliged to walk considerable distances each day to reach
their fields, and this contributed to declines in agricultural productiv­
ity. It is suggested that the ending of villagisation is likely to bring
about an increase in Western development assistance to Ethiopia.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made to trace the emergence of the present
Ethiopian regime and to identify the main constituents of its policies
and ideology. The main threat to its stability has come from guerilla
groups fighting either for secession or the overthrow of the govern­
ment. The success of these forces militarily has left Mengistu with few
options, particularly in view of the Soviet withdrawal.

President Mengistu has, however, shown a remarkable determina­
tion to survive, despite seemingly impossible odds, and one wonders
whether the two-pronged strategy involving perestroika-type reforms,
on the one hand, and Israeli military support, on the other, can suc­
cceed. If they do not, the treasure at the end of the rainbow so desper­
ately sought, may turn out to be fool’s gold.

There are, at least, three interrelated factors which seem to favour
the present regime. First, the opposition groups do not present a united
front and consequently should the present regime be overthrown, it is
doubtful if peace will emerge in Ethiopia. Most likely the opposition
groups will face enormous problems in finding sufficient ideological
common ground and cohesion with which to form a new government.
Such fears have been articulated by the chairman of the TPLF, Melesse
Zenawi, when he expressed the view that the "possibility of armed clashes among opposition groups after the demise of the Mengistu regime cannot be ruled out" (EIU, 1990). Second, the two major international power brokers, the USA and the USSR, are not in favour of the secession of Eritrea and thus would be averse to supporting groups espousing such sentiments and may instead consider ways of supporting, politically not militarily, the present regime. Third, should the economic reforms start to have a measurable impact, western governments may adopt a more positive position regarding increased economic assistance, including political support, and this would enhance and strengthen the position of the present government.

* * *

I would like to express my appreciation to Tesfatsion Medhanie who made a number of useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. While we may have differences of opinion regarding some of the issues raised, we nevertheless respect each other's views. Needless to say, I am responsible for any errors that this paper may contain.

Bibliography

Books and articles


I have followed Ethiopian convention by citing Ethiopian authors by their praenomen.


**News summaries and commentaries**


*African Confidential*, 18.11.87, 28, 23; 18.11.88, 29, 23.

*Africa Economic Digest*, 16.4.90, 11, 15.

*Africa News*, 28.5.90, 33, 8.

*Africa Research Bulletin*, Political Series, 15.2.90, 27, 1; 15.3.90, 27, 2; 15.4.90, 27, 3; 15.5.90, 27, 4.

Economic Series, 31.3.90, 27, 2.

*BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts*, 8.11.89, ME/0608; 13.12.89, ME/0638; 20.4.90, ME/0743; 28.5.90, ME/0775; 31.5.90, ME/0778.


*Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 14.10.89, 401; 9.12.89, 409; 6.1.90, 412; 27.1.90, 415 10.3.90, 421; 24.3.90, 423; 28.4.90, 428; 5.5.90, 429.

**Official Publications**

*The Ethiopian Herald* (Addis Ababa), 8.3.90, XLVI, 149; 8.5.90, XLVI, 198; 22.5.90, XLVI, 210.


