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## DEMOCRACY AND NEW DEMOCRACY: THE IDEOLOGICAL DEBATE IN THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION

Marina Ottaway

In early 1976 the Ethiopian Amharic language daily, *Addis Zemen*, opened its columns to a surprisingly free political debate. Through a series of so-called letters to the editor, two political factions, one violently opposed to the military government, the other reluctantly in favor of it, exchanged daily barbs. Both groups considered themselves Marxists-Leninists, both wanted people's government and a socialist revolution. Both, it should be added, used a complex, abstract, highly intellectual and, in addition, not too clear language which rather belied their claims to represent the broad masses. Here, however, the similarity between the two groups stopped. The anti-government faction, initially known as the "Democracia" group, accused the military council and its supporters of fascism. The pro-government group, known as "The Voice of the Masses", called its rivals anarchists.

This debate was the first and most visible step in an attempt to heal the rift between the military and civilian left in Ethiopia, the major unresolved internal issue of the Ethiopian revolution. From the time of the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in September 1974, the military council, or Derg, was faced with the opposition of one or another faction of the radical intelligentsia, a large section of the student body, the old labor confederation, and, in general, most civilian organized groups. Such opposition was not directed against the policies enacted by the Derg—a sweeping land reform, the nationalization of major industrial concerns, and the organization of the population into peasant associations and urban neighborhood associations whose powers have become quite considerable. Rather, the opposition was directed against the military government per se, dubbed as fascist irrespective of the radical policies it enacted.

The tension between military and civilians had a very important impact on the course of the revolution. It undoubtedly radicalized it far beyond the Derg's initial vague concept of socialism, because the military tried to overcome the opposition of the leftist civilians by adopting many of their ideas. It also led to a period of outright terror, in which rival military factions and rival civilian factions entered into alliances and broke them up again, seeking to eliminate each other in the name of subtle ideological differences and a not-so-subtle struggle for power. Two years after the beginning of the ideological debate, the relations between military and civilians remained as difficult as ever, and the ideological arguments used to justify the rift remained mostly the same; at the same time the military and a part of the civilian left once again recognized they needed each other and were engaged, somewhat reluctantly, in a new search for cooperation.

The research for this article was carried out in Ethiopia in the period under discussion. Much of the information is derived from clandestine pamphlets issued by the civilian groups and from oral communications with individuals involved in the various movements. The precise source of information cannot be specified in most cases, since individuals must be protected and clandestine publications are difficult to identify, particularly when the author only saw unofficial English translations. The authenticity of all sources has been verified as much as possible by cross-checking the information with a variety of sources.

### THE DEBATE

The main arguments in the ideological debate among radical civilians were summarized in a mock debate between *Democracia* and *The Voice of the Masses* published in *Addis Zemen* on 3 April, 1976:

*Democracia*: Incidentally, what do you understand by the word anarchist?

*Voice of the Masses*: Anarchists are those who believe that government is the source of the existence of the exploited and the exploiting, that when you destroy the government, you destroy also social classes. They do not believe in class struggle and oppose any kind of government led by workers. They try to destroy government by eliminating government officials.

*Democracia*: We have reiterated our view that what Ethiopia needs is a government of the oppressed masses led by workers. We have strived in many ways to teach the people to get organized so that they might organize a "famous" workers' government through a scientific, socialist revolution. Where were you at the time?

*Voice of the Masses*: You are a party of doom. You cause nationalized buses to be damaged. You tell people not to get organized, but to struggle. But there can be no struggle without organization. Therefore, you are anarchists. The Provisional Administrative Derg states: Some reactionaries who have been negatively affected by the change and pseudo-progressive anarchists tell you not to get organized, not to elect your leaders, but to struggle. How can one conduct a struggle without an organization? If there is anything defective in the proclamation of the labor law, it will be rectified after its re-examination. If there are labor leaders who have been jailed because of minute errors created during the revolution, their cases will be examined and they will be set free.

*Democracia*: Has "The Voice of the Masses" caused such a statement to be issued? But we have never told people not to get organized. What we told people was to refuse to elect new leaders before their former leaders have been released. We told them to struggle till they shall have their political rights. The tactic worked because their detained leaders are to be released. Those who tell the people not to get organized are reactionaries. They do so in order to continue their exploitation. It is regrettable that the elite officers and their running dogs put us in the same class as our enemies. Fascist lies cannot become truth even if such lies are repeated a thousand times. History is our witness.

*Voice of the Masses*: The detained labor leaders have been released thanks to our struggle. We have to destroy anarchists. To the masses: struggle for your democratic rights.

*Democracia*: We have struggled for many years so that the masses may get back the democratic rights they have been denied. Unlimited democracy.

*Voice of the Masses*: Unlimited democracy means democracy for feudalists, for capitalists, and for the masses. Listen, you oppressed people of Ethiopia. Beware that these anarchists, in collaboration with Mengesha Seyoum, Nega Tegegn and company [leaders of the conservative opposition] are going to reverse the revolution.

*Democracia*: What a distortion. We know that in any kind of democracy, there are limitations. We know that it is the tool of one class or of a group of classes to oppress their opponents. It is unquestionable that the democracy permitted by the elite officers' government is a tool to serve the officers and their running

dogs. We have reiterated that at present, democratic rights should be exercised by workers, peasants, the oppressed petty bourgeoisie in the urban areas, the oppressed soldiers, progressive intellectuals and Marxist-Leninist political progressive parties. But when you talk of limited democracy, you mean democracy for yourselves and the elite officers. Therefore, we advocate unlimited democracy. We have always challenged feudalists, industrial capitalists, bureaucratic capitalists and pseudo-anti-imperialists. We shall keep on challenging them. We expose liberal and opportunistic intellectuals. The newspapers of the elite officers' government, however, are yours.

The conclusion reached by the author of this mock debate, reflecting the Derg's position, was that there were no ideological differences between the two groups, and that it was time they tossed their personal disputes overboard and worked together for the Ethiopian revolution. It is true that there were no clear-cut ideological differences between the two groups, since both were Marxist. There were, however, significant differences in the tactical choices they made, and this led to an increasingly sharp differentiation in their power base. The pro-Derg "Voice of the Masses"—later to become a clandestine party under the name of "All-Ethiopian Socialist Union" or MEISON—originally became influential not because of direct popular support but because it backed the military, which in turn backed it. As a result, this group was put in charge of organizing a pro-government political party and a new labor confederation, and through this activity it succeeded in gaining some popular support, particularly among the workers of the manufacturing sector. It was also conducting political education seminars for civil servants and even members of the armed forces, and it was gaining some acceptance. It is of course difficult to tell how much of this support was based on conviction, and how much on the consideration that it is always more prudent to toe the government line. The fact remains that this group acquired a base and could bring people out for parades and demonstrations and lead political discussions in offices and factories without being challenged.

The "Democracia" faction (which emerged as a party under the name of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party) rejected any form of cooperation with the Derg, asking instead for the immediate formation of a civilian government giving formal representation to all existing organized groups. This choice won it the support of organizations such as the old Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions, the student union, and the various professional associations. All these organizations, including the labor confederation, represented above all the educated section of the urban population. Thus, despite the radical inclinations of its leaders, this group for a time somewhat softened its ideological position, stressing more the idea of forming a united front against the Derg than the ultimate goal of socialism.

The debate in *Addis Zemen* served to make public an ideological and political conflict which had been going on for several years among Ethiopian student activists at Haile Selassie University and abroad, and since early 1974 in clandestine pamphlets circulated in Addis Ababa. *Democracia* first appeared in early 1974, published in circles close to the student movement in Ethiopia and also in North America. In the early 1970s, the Ethiopian student movement had made some effort to spread its influence outside the boundaries of the university, and there is some evidence that by 1974, it had a presence in organizations such as the Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions and the Ethiopian Teachers Association, although their leadership was still in very moderate hands. Within the next two years, the influence of the radicals expanded considerably, both inside these organizations and outside. The creation of the EPRP was part of this trend. It is

difficult to say exactly when the party was formed. The first program, published in August 1975, claimed the EPRP had been in existence already for three and one-half years; however, it appears doubtful that before mid-1975 there was already a party rather than a small cadre of like-minded intellectuals working together.

Pro-government pamphlets did not start circulating until mid-1975. Originally, the military government made no attempt to develop an ideology. In December 1974, when the first announcement that the Derg intended to follow a socialist policy was made, socialism was defined as *hibrettesebawinet*, which was "equality, self-reliance, the dignity of labor, the supremacy of the common good, and the indivisibility of Ethiopian unity" (Provisional Military Administrative Council, 1974). Repeatedly the Derg stressed that Ethiopian socialism was of a new, home-spun variety, and that it should not be confused with any other socialism. During 1975, however, particularly after the proclamation of the land reform, there was an influx into Ethiopia of exiled students and intellectuals who answered the Derg's appeal to all educated Ethiopians to come home. Among those who came back were many leaders and activists of the Ethiopian student movement in Europe. To them, an alliance with the Derg was a unique occasion to make a re-entry into political life and to come back to Ethiopia (a country many had not seen for many years) in a position of influence. Among these returnees was Haile Fida, who had spent some 14 years in France and various European capitals. It is not that Haile Fida and the other returnees particularly liked the military government: their support of the Derg was qualified at best. Deprived of any political base inside the country as they were, however, they needed the Derg in order to make a comeback. Thus started an uneasy alliance between the "Fidaists", as this group became known, and the Derg. That is how *hibrettesebawinet* became "scientific socialism."

By the fall of 1975, the Fidaists were busy organizing a political party. In September, 1975, on the first anniversary of the overthrow of the emperor, the chairman of the Provisional Military Administrative Council announced that a party would be formed. A sort of political bureau was set up shortly afterwards, and Haile Fida was appointed its head. The existence of this political bureau did not receive much publicity, however, and the names of the members were not made known officially. At the same time, the Fidaists started publishing *The Voice of the Masses*, which was tolerated by the government, but not recognized as an official publication, and circulated in semi-clandestinity. Thus, an alliance between the Derg and the Fidaists remained quite ambiguous. At best, it was a marriage of convenience in which the spouses kept a wide sphere of autonomy for themselves.

When the political bureau was formed, an effort was made to recruit to it the best known young radical intellectuals in the country. Not all of them accepted to serve on the ground that, as some put it in yet another clandestine pamphlet:

We believe that the appointed [to the Political Bureau] officials do not represent the people, and have been assigned to this job by the government . . . The Secretariat belongs to the government and its members are agents of the government.

A political party, the pamphlet continued, could only be organized by "the people".

It was at this point, in early 1976, that the debate burst forth in the pages of *Addis Zemen* and in the clandestine *Democracia* and *The Voice of the Masses*.

Summing up the arguments of the debate is not easy because neither party was crystalline in its thinking and because both claimed to follow "scientific socialism" and used Marxist terminology. Moreover, although the EPRP favored a "provisional people's government" and the Fidaists a "provisional revolutionary government", the difference between the two is not self-explanatory. In addition to the problem

of understanding what the EPRP and the Fidaists were saying exactly, there is the problem of knowing what the public understood them to be saying. There are reasons to believe that the difference is substantial, since very few people, even among the educated, really understood the language. The two issues will be dealt with separately.

The kernel of the debate was not the issue of whether socialism was possible or desirable in Ethiopia, but how it could be brought about. The Fidaist position was that in order to accomplish the difficult transition from feudalism to socialism, an alliance with a military government was acceptable. The Derg had shown both some progressive traits and some conservative ones: *Democracia* here would say "fascist". For example, the land reform proclamation was definitely a progressive measure. The arrest of many leftists and labor leaders was not progressive, but did not constitute reason enough to turn completely against the Derg. Rather, it was necessary to continue offering qualified support so as to strengthen the progressive traits of the Derg and minimize the influence of the more conservative elements in it. Collaboration with the Derg was also necessary because in the conditions of Ethiopia, socialism could not be the result of a mass movement, but of a "revolution from the top". Essentially, a representative political process would not have led to socialism because of the strength of the capitalists, the feudalists, and the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. What was needed was a "provisional revolutionary government," that is, a government representing true revolutionaries rather than the existing corporate interest groups. This government would pave the way for some form of socialist democracy once the masses were organized. This idea that the revolution would be carried out from the top down, rather than through a democratic process, led some observers to define this faction as Stalinist. Although there is no doubt that the Fidaists favored very tight control over the process of change at the central level, sacrificing all pretenses at democracy, this is not the whole story. The political bureau consistently supported the development and strengthening of the "peasant associations," which grew from organizations with limited functions relating to the land reform to virtually self-governing units. The urban dwellers associations were also strengthened. What the Fidaists consistently rejected was not popular participation, but the participation in the political process of urban organized interest groups which predated the revolution. These groups were very few, exclusively urban, and only represented a small part even of the urban population. Yet, they were the groups that the left had tried to infiltrate in early 1974, and where the EPRP thus had at least a small power base.

The EPRP also recognized that an immediate transition from feudalism to socialism was impossible, and that it was necessary to go through an intermediate stage. It, however, categorically rejected the idea that a military dictatorship was an acceptable transition and that socialism could be introduced from the top. A transition to socialism could take place only through the formation of a "provisional people's government," i.e., through the broad alliance of all democratic forces willing to cooperate in the destruction of the feudal system. It is easy here to recognize Mao's concept of a "new democratic revolution." Exactly what this people's government should consist of, however, was not clear. The EPRP at times called for unlimited democracy, but at times specified that only workers, peasants, oppressed petty bourgeois, oppressed soldiers, progressive intellectuals and Marxist-Leninist political parties were worthy of participating in the political process. It also indicated that a "provisional people's government" should be understood as a sort of alliance of corporate interest groups, or even as a multi-party system. It

seems that the EPRP leaders, at least originally, thought of a very limited democracy and of an alliance of progressive if not necessarily Marxist groups, but that many sympathizers understood democracy to mean liberal democracy and supported the EPRP on that basis.

According to the EPRP, the military government had no role to play in the transformation of Ethiopia into a socialist country. The party maintained that despite its progressive statements, the Derg was really a fascist military dictatorship and had to be overthrown in a genuine people's revolution. To underline this point, it referred to the members of the Derg as the "elite officers," despite the fact that a large number of them were NCOs. Thus, the EPRP published a so-called list of the Derg's members, which only included captains and majors. A complete and exact list of all Derg members does not exist, but available information shows that NCOs may be the majority and are certainly a large number.

The EPRP admitted reluctantly that the economic reforms proclaimed by the Derg were a step in the right direction, but claimed that they were only half-heartedly carried out. The EPRP opposed the *zemacha*, the student campaign launched by the Derg, because it was not democratically controlled and thus its meaning had been distorted. The crux of the problem was that only those reforms decided upon and carried out by "the people" could be considered revolutionary.

In August 1975, the EPRP published its program. *The Voice of the Masses* answered in April 1976 with a program of its own. An examination of these two documents further confirms the idea that the difference between the two groups concerned above all the problem of how power should be exercised, rather than that of what economic and social reforms should be carried out. In fact, the social and economic aspects of the program were virtually identical. Thus, both groups pledged to grant equality of rights to all religious and tribal groups, and to both sexes; and to eradicate illiteracy, poverty and disease. Both promised job opportunities, higher salaries, pension rights, free medical care and paid annual leave to all workers. Both agreed to the idea that all land and all foreign or other large enterprises should be nationalized, but stressed that small businesses should be allowed to operate. Both would free the country from foreign interference and eliminate all foreign bases from the country.

The differences between the two programs concerned the political system. After the same rhetorical pledges to respect democratic rights, freedom of speech, organization, strike and demonstration, the EPRP and the *Voice of the Masses* reiterated their different approaches. The EPRP foresaw the formation of a civilian provisional people's government, consisting of a national assembly in charge of preparing a constitution and of a government appointed by it. This civilian provisional government would be composed of workers and peasants, students, progressive elements, progressive merchants, progressive soldiers, city beggars and others. The *Voice of the Masses* for its part would have struggled for the formation of a "national democratic republic based on the ideology and leadership of the proletariat in cooperation with farmers and progressive petty bourgeois. The National Democratic Revolution will exercise national dictatorship." This meant that no effort would be made to give a political role to corporate interest groups even if representing progressive forces such as students and laborers. In addition, although participation and self-administration would be encouraged, this would be done in the framework of a system established by a revolutionary cadre at the top.

The difference between the concepts of a political system upheld by the two factions eventually determined that type of political support they would obtain.

All organized interest groups had to side with the EPRP in order to survive. This meant that the EPRP received support from white collar workers, teachers and students, who had been the best organized groups. When MEISON tried to form new organizations to mobilize and control the population, with the Derg's support, it was much more successful in recruiting adherents among blue collar workers who had a lesser stake in the old organizations.

### THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION

Until April 1976, the debate between the Fidaists and the EPRP remained officially one between private parties, although it was no secret that Haile Fida was the head of the Political Bureau and working with the Derg. The Fidaist program was distributed openly to the crowd at the Victory Day celebration on 6 April, but still unofficially. Only two weeks later, however, the Derg seemed to accept officially the major points of the Fidaist position. In a televised address on the night of 20 April, Major Mengistu Haile Mariam, the first vice-chairman of the Provisional Military Administrative Council, announced that the government had drawn up a program for a "national democratic revolution" and launched a policy which would "take the broad masses to a point where they can run their own affairs." The main aims of the program were:

the complete elimination of feudalism bureaucratic capitalism and imperialism from the country, to build a new people's Ethiopia on solid foundations through the concerted collaboration among anti-feudalist and anti-imperialist forces and to pave the way for transition toward socialism. To this end a People's Democratic Republic will be established in Ethiopia under proletariat leadership in close collaboration with farmers and support of the petty bourgeois, anti-feudalist and anti-imperialist forces, to guarantee to the Ethiopian people their right to freedom, equality, unity, peace and prosperity as well as self-administration at various levels and unrestricted human and democratic rights. (*Ethiopian Herald*, 21 April 1976)

Taken literally, Mengistu's statement, although bearing the imprint of the Fidaist position, also contained many points quite compatible with the position of the EPRP. In particular, the idea of an alliance of all anti-imperialist and anti-feudal forces was part of the EPRP program as well. Yet, in the following months, the EPRP's publication repeatedly rejected the position taken by Mengistu, in the name, paradoxically, of the formation of a united front of all progressive forces. The EPRP also rejected the government's policy toward Eritrea, in the name of the "right of nationalities to self-determination" to the point of secession; yet, the Derg's own official policy for the region, issued in May 1976, recognized the right to self-determination to the point of secession (Provisional Military Administrative Council, 1976 a). Clearly, the EPRP's refusal to cooperate with the Derg was not based on ideology alone.

While the Fidaists and the EPRP were busy attacking each other in the name of almost identical goals, the Derg for its part continued to pursue policies that were not identical to those of the political bureau, particularly with regard to the formation of the political party. In theory, the Derg accepted the idea that it was necessary to form a political party. The day after Mengistu's speech, a People's Organizing Political Office was officially set up as a preliminary step toward the formation of the party (Provisional Military Administrative Council, 1976 b). The organizing office would have branches in each region, *awraja* (province), and *woreda* (district), and it would be responsible for the political education of the masses, for the selection and training of future cadres, for studying solutions to the



economic and social problems of the transition period and in general for paving the way for the advent of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The People's Organizing Political Office (later called Political Office for Mass Organizational Affairs) would be placed under a "Supreme Organizing Committee," *de facto* the already existing political bureau. Subordinate to the head of state, the committee would be the liaison between the Derg and the embryonic party. The subordination of the Supreme Organizing Committee to the Derg showed the ambiguity in the military committee's effort to set up a political organization. Although accepting in principle that it was necessary to make room for civilian participation in the running of the country, the Derg remained very reluctant to do so in practice. The result was this attempt to form a political party but to keep it subordinate to the Derg.

For their part, the Fidaists only half accepted the idea that for the time being there would only be an organizing office rather than a full-fledged political party. *De facto*, a Fidaist party called the All Ethiopian Socialist Party was in existence by late 1976. Nevertheless, although it seemed probable that it would eventually become the official party, the Derg was not yet willing to recognize it as such. Recognition would have forced a redefinition of the relationship between the so-called Provisional Military Administrative Council and the new organization. Although it was possible to justify the subordination of the organizing office to the Derg, on the ground that it was not yet a political party, it would have been more difficult to justify the subordination of a full-fledged political party to a military committee. To maintain the subordination would have been in direct violation of Colonel Mengistu's statement that the broad masses would run their own affairs once they were organized.

#### THE PUBLIC'S INTERPRETATION OF THE DEBATE

The ideological debate and the proclamation of the national democratic revolution failed to unify the military and the civilian left. Even the alliance between the Derg and the Fidaists was uneasy and tense from the very outset. Although it failed to bring about the unification of all leftist groups, the debate did have considerable impact on the course of the revolution because it helped to politicize the public. On the one hand, it helped win some support for the Derg by providing it with a much more developed blueprint for action than the vague *hibbrettesebawinet*. On the other hand, it gave those who opposed the military a rallying point in the EPRP. Since the subtle difference in the position of the Fidaists and the EPRP was not always understood by the public, the EPRP obtained support not only from groups that opposed the Derg in the name of a more genuine socialism, but also from some that opposed the Derg because of its socialist stance.

One factor which helped the EPRP obtain support from people who were in no way socialists was that its ideological position, like that of the Fidaists, could not be understood by most people who were not conversant with Marxist literature; this meant most Ethiopians, including a large number of educated ones. Political debate was a dialogue among Marxist intellectuals speaking a language for initiates. There were, from personal observations, professors at the university and high level civil servants who did not understand the ideological statements of either party. Third and fourth year university students employed as translators could provide excellent literal translations but could not understand their meaning. Officials in the Ministry of Information who provided the translation of Mengistu's speech were not sure at all about what it really meant. The list could continue. This lack of understanding was certainly not the fault of the public, but that of the authors

of the pamphlets and the letters to *Addis Zemen*. Nevertheless, the effect of this lack of understanding was important. Faced with an incomprehensible jargon, people began to explain the debate in a language they could understand. The split between the EPRP and the Fidaists was thus explained variously as an ethnic conflict or a division between an authoritarian, illiberal government and a democratic opposition.

The ethnic interpretation was the simpler one. The split between the Fidaists and the EPRP was explained as one between Gallas (or Gallas and Gurages), on the one hand, and Amharas and Tigreans on the other. The evidence was the fact that Haile Fida himself was a Galla and so were many Fidaists appointed to important positions. In reality, probably no more than six out of fifteen Political Bureau members were Galla. The belief that MEISON represented the Galla became a self-fulfilling prophecy, however, and that party increasingly drew Galla support.

The interpretation of the subtle ideological split between two Marxist groups pursuing different strategies as a blunt difference between a fascist military dictatorship and a democratic party is a bit more complex. The military council, being in power, was involved in all the horrors that go with a revolution. It ordered executions and arrests, dispossessed people of their properties and livelihood, made scapegoats of innocent civilians to cover up its own mistakes, and created an atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty. It did not take much effort to prove that the Derg was authoritarian; in the language of the EPRP, authoritarian became fascist. Thus, by a curious twist of revolutionary logic the Derg, being authoritarian, became by definition anti-revolution, sweeping economic measures and the creation of democratic peasant and urban associations notwithstanding. Being an opposition party, the EPRP had cleaner hands, at least until it turned to terrorism in late 1976. In addition, as a group opposing fascism, the EPRP became, by another twist of logic, a defender of democratic rights and liberties. The subtle argument that an interlude of limited democracy was only meant to pave the way for socialism, and that the socialist concept of democracy was quite different from the western one was easily lost. Thus, EPRP to many meant freedom from the Derg's dictatorship.

Evidence for this claim can be found in a variety of places. On a purely impressionistic level, this author personally met people who declared to agree with the EPRP and yet opposed the land reform and other economic measures. It is easy to see that they supported the EPRP because it opposed the Derg. Other self-defined EPRP sympathizers complained that the Derg's propaganda has made the servants uppity, so that they now set forth unheard of demands such as a weekly day off and severance pay if fired. These are extreme cases, to be sure, but the fact remains that they existed in substantial numbers and contributed to giving the casual and careless observer a very distorted image of the EPRP influence. More significantly, even among EPRP sympathizers who did understand the idea that the EPRP ultimately wanted a socialist system, the idea remained that this socialism could be reconciled with western-style democratic rights, the existence of independent labor unions, and the right to strike. Or even that there could be a socialist, anti-"bureaucratic capitalist" and anti-petty bourgeois revolution which did not entail a drop in the standard of living of the civil servants. In other words, many conceived of socialism as the creation of a welfare state.

These impressions by themselves would be thin evidence, since they are based on a limited number of examples. The conclusion that much EPRP support came from urban moderate or even conservative groups, however, is confirmed when we

consider which organizations consistently heeded the EPRP's calls for strike and demonstrations: it was mostly groups representing white collar workers and technical personnel. In September 1974, the first organization to accept the notion of "provisional people's government" and reject the Derg was the Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions, an organization which had always been strongest in banks, insurance companies, the airline, and other white collar and technical organizations (Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions, 1974). The Ethiopian Teachers Association, clearly a petty bourgeois organization, also responded fairly quickly to EPRP propaganda (Ethiopian Teachers Association, 1975).

The first major showdown between the EPRP and the Derg came in late September 1975 over the issue of whether the CELU would be allowed to continue functioning as an independent labor union. The call for a general strike to protest the Derg's attempt to control the CELU was heeded by workers at Ethiopian Airlines, telecommunications, banks, insurance companies, and nationalized supermarkets, with only a smattering of industrial enterprises following suit. In the following months, the Derg dissolved the CELU and tried to organize new unions it could control. The effort was more successful in manufacturing enterprises than among white collar workers. By mid-1977, the only workers who were not organized in a national union under government control were the employees of bank and insurance companies.

In September 1976, the EPRP tried to boycott the celebrations of the second anniversary of the emperor's deposition. The only workers who heeded the call and refused to participate in the parade were the employees of banks, Ethiopian Airlines, telecommunications, and the Post Office. A new strike call two weeks later again was heeded only by banks, insurance companies and supermarket employees before it fizzled.

The facts are quite clear. The interpretation is of course more complex. It could be that these more educated workers were displaying a heightened sense of class consciousness, ability to organize, and capacity to resist manipulation. It could also be that these workers were not class conscious proletarians, but a relatively privileged and well-paid labor aristocracy afraid of losing much more than its chains to the Derg's socialism. Paradoxically, this group also stood to lose under the EPRP's concept of socialism, but for the time being, the EPRP offered the promise of democracy and participation.

During the summer and fall of 1976, there were also some new reasons to doubt that the EPRP remained the same hard core extreme left movement it had been originally. Reports coming from two major towns, Dire Dawa and Jimma, suggested that a definitely conservative element was finding it advantageous to back the EPRP. In Jimma, the EPRP was supported by high school students and coffee merchants. More puzzling is the fact that the students from whom this information was received, while talking a very hard line in EPRP language, did not seem to find it strange that the coffee merchants should have become socialists.

### THE TERRORIST PHASE

The verbal battle between Fidaists and EPRP, which had raged during most of 1976 and gained many supporters for the latter party, escalated in late 1976 into open warfare. Emboldened by their alliance with the Derg, the Fidaists sought to eliminate the rival group by having its members and supporters arrested or killed. For its part the EPRP, having refused any form of cooperation with the Derg, had no choice other than to try to destroy it and its civilian allies. The

weapon it chose was terrorism. The period of violence then ensued, leaving hundreds dead in Addis Ababa and other urban centers. Nevertheless it did not bring the problem of the relations between military and civilian left any closer to a solution. It alienated the public from military and civilian left alike, leaving the former as isolated as it had been before its bid for cooperation with the civilian left, and the latter as far as ever from realizing the ideals of "people's government" or "revolutionary government."

The details of the violent struggle between MEISON, the EPRP, and the Derg cannot be discussed in this article. Briefly, in the fall of 1976, the Derg accepted the Fidaist contention that the EPRP should be eliminated. Arrests followed. The EPRP's response was an unsuccessful attempt to kill Mengistu (23 September), the assassination of the second highest ranking member of the political bureau, Fikre Merid (2 October), and a spate of assassinations of government officials, representatives of the urban neighborhood associations, and other individuals known as MEISON sympathizers.

Not all members of the Derg favored the attempt to destroy the EPRP, believing that such policy served only the narrow interests of Mengistu and Haile Fida. Disagreement on how to deal with the EPRP led to a split within the Derg, which culminated on 3 February 1977 with the elimination of the anti-Mengistu faction. This was the triumph of the alliance between Mengistu and the Fidaists, but it was a short-lived one. Once their major opponents in the Derg were eliminated and the EPRP was weakened by the arrests and seriously discredited in the eyes of the public by its own terrorist acts, the Fidaists decided the time was ripe for their own attempt to destroy the military council. The political bureau increasingly began to act as an independent body, in fact as the supreme body of MEISON, rather than as the head of the Derg-controlled Political Office for Mass Organizational Affairs. There are indications that in mid-March MEISON even tried to bring some six hundred members of those peasant militias it controlled into Addis Ababa, with the intention of overthrowing the Derg. MEISON was counting on the fact that Addis Ababa was by then depleted of troops, since the Derg had thrown all manpower into the war in Eritrea. The attempt was never carried out, but the incident spelled the end of the alliance between the Derg and MEISON. By July, Haile Fida was in prison with many of his allies, others had fled the country or were in hiding, and security forces were tracking down MEISON members just as they had tracked down EPRP members.

### THE SECOND BID FOR RECONCILIATION

With July 1977, the first attempt at reconciliation of the civilian and military left had run its full course, ending in complete failure. The problem that had prompted the attempt at reconciliation in the first place was as acute as ever, however. The Derg needed civilian support, in particular it needed a political party. The economic reforms of 1974 had resulted in the creation of an extremely decentralized system, where 24 thousand peasant associations controlled the land and agricultural production and the urban dwellers associations were increasingly powerful in the cities. This decentralized system needed a unifying force, a party, if the central government was to have any say on policies. The civilian left for its part still needed the military. The possibility of a civilian coup against the military was remote, as shown by the failure of the Fidaist attempt. Moreover, the Derg had carried out important reforms, particularly the land reform, which for ideological reasons the civilians could not reject and because they had been well received

by the population. In other words, the military and the civilian left still needed each other.

The second bid for reconciliation was made possible by the formation of new civilian parties, all calling themselves Marxist-Leninist. By mid-1977 at least four of these parties existed, in addition to EPRP and MEISON: *Abiotawi Seded* (Revolutionary Flame), *Wez Ader* (Labor League), *Ma.Le.Ri.De.* (Marxist Leninist Revolutionary Organization), and *I.Ch.A.T.* (Ethiopian Oppressed Revolutionary Struggle). The most distinctive of these groups was *Seded*, whose members were recruited predominantly among military personnel and high level civil servants. The other parties were formed by former student leaders, just as EPRP and MEISON, and were little more than cliques gathered around a dominant personality.

In June 1977, these groups entered into a Common Front of Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist Organizations. The formation of the front was kept a secret, because none of these organizations, not even the pro-Derg *Seded*, had official standing or legal existence. In September 1977, during the celebrations of the third anniversary of the overthrow of the emperor, the common platform agreed upon by the parties was distributed openly, but unofficially, to the crowds attending the parade. The program of the Fidaists, it will be recalled, had been distributed in a similar fashion some 18 months earlier. The agreement was not signed, so that it is not known for sure which groups joined in the common front. EPRP certainly did not, since it was denounced in the document as a counter-revolutionary organization. The position of MEISON was less clear: although Haile Fida was in prison and many MEISON leaders underground, there was no clear indication about the fate of the party itself.

The Common Front's "Action Programme" was a very vague document because it only touched upon those points on which all groups could agree. The most important aspect was probably the fact that it accepted the National Democratic Revolution program and recognized the legitimacy of all the organizations—trade unions, POMOA, peasant associations, urban dwellers associations—formed by the Derg. The "Action Programme," however, prudently skirted all the issues that in the past had caused controversy and schism in the ranks of the civilian left, that of "people's government" or "revolutionary government" first of all. In other words, the parties that had entered the agreement recognized the necessity of cooperating with the Derg, just as the Fidaists had done in the past, and avoided the controversial issues that would probably have led to new schism in the left.

The effect of the formation of this common front willing to cooperate with the Derg cannot be evaluated at the time of this writing, and in the midst of a revolution it is wiser not to make predictions. Whether successful or not, the formation of this common front underlines the continuing dilemma of the Ethiopian revolution: it has been a "revolution from the top" engineered by a military junta; the policies followed by the military leaders, however, have made it imperative to create a political party. At this time, as in the past, the establishment of cooperation between military and civilian left remains the major unresolved issue of the revolution.

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