

*JOHN MARKAKIS*

# Nationalities and the state in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's first attempt to count its population was made in 1984. The results, although incomplete, indicated a total of over 42 million, several million more than previously estimated. This proved Ethiopia to be the country with the third highest population in Africa. Its composition is highly varied: more than eighty languages are spoken, each embodying a unique cultural heritage and a distinct identity. The great majority of these groups are small in size and insignificant in economic and political terms. One of the two largest groups is the Amhara, the main branch of the Abyssinian family and the traditional rulers of Ethiopia, whose historic homeland is the northern plateau. The Oromo, whose bulk reside in the south, rival the Amhara in terms of population. The Tigrinya speakers, the smaller Abyssinian branch, occupy the province of Tigray in the north and the Eritrean highland.

There are striking sociocultural differences and little intermixing between some groups, particularly the pastoralist inhabitants of the lowlands, such as the Somali and Afar, and the highland peasantry. On the other hand, in some regions there has been considerable assimilation into the dominant Amhara culture, especially among the Oromo in the central part of the country. Christianity and Islam have native roots in Ethiopia, and a history of animosity exists between their adherents. Traditional African creeds also survive. In short, in its ethnic and sociocultural composition, the Ethiopian state is typically African.

Ethiopia, however, is unique in the manner of its creation. As is well known, the founder of the present state is the Christian highland kingdom of Abyssinia, whose origins can be traced into antiquity. After centuries of medieval decline and obscurity, Abyssinia emerged as a regional power in the second half of the nineteenth century, just in time to fend off an Egyptian incursion in the north and, subsequently, to contain an Italian invasion in the same region. While Italy was able to establish control in the colony it called Eritrea, Abyssinia itself competed successfully in the imperialist scramble in the south. This feat was accomplished by Menelik, originally the ruler of the southernmost Amhara province of Shoa, and later Emperor of Ethiopia (1889–1913).


TWQ 10(4) October 1989/ISSN 0143-6597/89. $1.25

Menelik's conquests in the last quarter of the nineteenth century doubled the territory and population of his domain, henceforth officially called the Ethiopian Empire. A great variety of ethnic groups inhabited the conquered territories and, unlike Abyssinia, Ethiopia was a highly heterogeneous state.

In many instances the manner of the conquest was violent, and was followed by frequent despoilment, enslavement, and other vicissitudes that left a bitter legacy among the conquered. A vast expropriation of land (up to two-thirds) in much of the conquered territory turned many of the local peasants into tenants of landlords, who acquired land through grants from the state. The landlords were Abyssinians, mainly from Shoa, and some Oromo who served Menelik. They constituted a ruling class distinguished from the peasants not only by its economic position and political status, but also by its Christian religion, Amharigna language and Abyssinian culture. The result was a politically explosive conjunction of ethnic and class divisions. Under the circumstances, state rule could not be effectively maintained by the quasi-feudal traditional Abyssinian political system, and a process of modernisation, bureaucratisation and militarisation was carried out by Menelik's successor, Haile Selassie, who became regent in 1917, king in 1928, and emperor (king of kings) in 1930.

## The imperial regime

During Haile Selassie's reign, the notion of Ethiopia as a Christian, Amharigna-speaking nation—that is, an extension of Abyssinia—was cultivated. In a speech to the United States Congress, the Emperor described it as 'A Christian island in a sea of Islam'. Appropriately, Muslims, who rivalled the Christians in population, had no role in public life. All Ethiopian languages other than Amharigna were banned from printing and broadcasting. In what became an absolute monarchy in fact as well as theory, political power was monopolised by the Emperor and was exercised at the centre through a coterie of hand-picked retainers, while the Abyssinian aristocracy continued to rule the countryside, both north and south, where more than ninety per cent of the population lived.

The renovation of the state had reached an advanced stage by the 1960s, when it faced the first challenges from dissident ethnic and regional groups. By this time, Ethiopia had a sizeable military establishment—in fact, the largest in sub-Saharan Africa. Its training,

upkeep and weaponry were provided by the USA, a power with which Ethiopia had established a close patron–client relationship. Throughout the 1960s, the Ethiopian army was kept busy suppressing rebellions that broke out in various parts of the empire. Goaded by the introduction of taxation in 1963, the Somali pastoralists in the Ogaden and Bale provinces rose spontaneously in the hope of joining their ethnic kinsmen in the adjacent independent Somali Republic. They succeeded only in provoking the first armed confrontation between Ethiopia and Somalia at the end of that year. While Somalia's backdown ended the affair in the Ogaden, the uprising spread to the Arsi (Oromo) peasantry in Bale, the victims of manifold exploitation at the hands of provincial Ethiopian officialdom. It was not until 1969 that this rebellion was ended. In the meantime, the military had to deal with an uprising in the Amhara province of Gojjam, in 1968.

The most serious challenge, of course, was posed in Eritrea. The former Italian colony passed under British military rule in 1941, and the end of World War II ushered in a period of political conflict concerning the colony's future. Ethiopia proclaimed its right to annex Eritrea and mobilised support among the Christians in that province, while also lobbying among the Great Powers, especially its future patron, the USA. Not surprisingly, Eritrean Muslims were opposed to any link with Ethiopia, and generally favoured independence. The United Nations approved a compromise solution in the form of federation, which provided Eritrea with genuine self government and the religious communities with parity in all spheres of public life.

Although formally accepted by Addis Ababa, the scheme was anathema to the Emperor, because it limited his prerogative incongruously in one corner of his domain. It was also feared that the independence movement might revive in the climate of political freedom guaranteed by the Eritrean constitution. Consequently, no sooner was the federation installed in 1952, than it became a target of subversion from Addis Ababa, and was finally dismantled altogether in 1962. That year, a small guerrilla force belonging to the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), founded in 1960, had already gathered in the lowland of western Eritrea. Understandably, the ELF was an exclusively Muslim movement at the time, and was to remain predominantly so for some years.

While it seemed possible to suppress or contain these centripetal pressures militarily, the imperial regime gave no thought to a political response. Indeed, there was little that could have been done in this respect within the confines of the absolute monarchy, where the very notion of

politics was subversive because it intruded into the royal prerogative, as the Eritreans had discovered during their brief experiment in self rule. The official image of Ethiopia as Abyssinia *writ large* ruled out the mention even of the existence of ethnic and regional differences, let alone conflicts. In fact, the long wars waged throughout the 1960s were rarely mentioned publicly, and then only as operations against bandits.

The taboo was exploded at the end of the decade by the radical student movement, which had become the regime's political nemesis. As militant Marxists, the radicals were obliged to confront the national issue and, after some agonising, opted for the Leninist principle of national self determination and declared their support for the Eritrean rebels. The regime reacted fiercely, and the first result was a massacre of students at the campus of the University of Addis Ababa, in December 1969. From then on, the national issue was forced onto the agenda of every political movement in the country.

Only the imperial regime continued to pretend that the issue did not exist, although by the early 1970s it had become a military problem as well, affecting its main pillar of support, the army. This was partly due to soldier weariness with long periods of service in remote areas, where living conditions were primitive as well as dangerous. Three of Ethiopia's four army divisions were permanently stationed in the troubled regions. In the early 1970s, the Second Division in Eritrea was suffering rising casualties, while losing control of the countryside to the nationalist rebels. Even more serious was the infection of the lower ranks with the spirit of political alienation manifested foremost in the student movement. Indeed, it was junior and noncommissioned officers who had passed through university and secondary school who led the military movement that toppled Haile Selassie from the throne in 1974.

## The military regime

The military intervention turned into a veritable social revolution which ended not only Haile Selassie's long reign, but also the era of the *ancien régime*. This was the result of a mass upheaval that shook the country in 1974 and created the momentum for social as well as political change. Sparked by the exposure of the regime's culpability in the heavy toll taken by the 1973–74 famine, it snowballed as one disgruntled group after another added its grievances and demanded redress. Now formed into political factions, the radical intelligentsia set the mood and agenda for the popular movement by demanding nothing less than a new social

order. When the Dergue, a committee of representatives from various branches of the armed forces, emerged in mid-year, the radicals monitored its every move, prodding it to take drastic action against the old ruling classes. After the Dergue seized power in September 1974, the radicals then dogged its every step, demanding fundamental socioeconomic reform that would preclude a restoration of the old order. Partly out of sympathy with radical goals, but mainly in order to harness the popular movement to its rule, the Dergue obliged. A series of decrees nationalised industry, finance, plantations, agricultural land and urban real estate, dismantling the material foundations of the old order and putting most economic assets under state ownership.

The most significant of these measures was a sweeping land reform which nationalised land, limited holdings to a maximum of ten hectares, forbade the selling and renting of land and the use of hired labour, and redistributed land equally among those who tilled it. Landlordship and tenancy were eliminated overnight, and the possibility of land accumulation in the future was precluded. Apart from the revolutionary economic and social implications of the land reform, it had an immediate and highly significant political impact, because it dissolved the ethnic and class conjunction that prevailed in the southern half of the country, and forestalled the rise of ethnic and regional dissidence in an area where it was thought most likely to appear. The land reform gave the peasantry in the south a vested material interest in the Ethiopian state, as well as a political interest in the incumbent regime.

No such political acumen was evident in the Dergue's handling of the national issue, where its policies proved to be the same as those of the imperial regime, although more energetically pursued. This became immediately obvious in its handling of the Eritreans. Apparently, the option of a political approach to the nationalist fronts was never considered. The sole political gesture made by the first head of state appointed by the Dergue, General Aman Andom, was intended to outflank the liberation fronts by appealing directly to the people of Eritrea to support the regime in Addis Ababa which had overthrown their oppressors. The Eritrean rebels responded with an offensive that nearly overran the province, and the Dergue sent the first of an endless series of reinforcements to the north. General Aman, who objected to this escalation, was killed.

Since it subsequently espoused Marxism as its ideology, the new regime could not formally reject the principle of national self determination. Indeed, it was included in its Programme of the National Demo-

cratic Revolution issued in April 1975, albeit minus the crucial provision 'up to and including secession'. As explicitly proclaimed in their chosen motto 'Ethiopia First', the soldiers' primary goal was the preservation of the Ethiopian state, and they could not countenance secession. Nevertheless, advised by a faction of the radical intelligentsia known as MEISON (from the initials of its Amharic name meaning the All-Ethiopia Social Movement) the regime felt obliged to make a formal gesture to the Eritreans. In March 1976, it issued a nine-point plan offering to consider regional autonomy at some point in the future. In the meantime, it invited Eritreans to cooperate in promoting the 'unity of the oppressed classes of Ethiopia'.

By now, the composition of the nationalist movement had changed significantly through the inflow of large numbers of Eritrean Christians. The snuffing out of the political freedom enjoyed in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the proscription of their Tigrigna language in education, the heavy-handed rule of Amhara officials, and other handicaps associated with the dismantling of the federation had cooled Christian Eritrean feelings towards Ethiopia. Students were among the first to flock to the ELF, followed by workers alienated by the smashing of the fledgling Eritrean trade union movement, and the onset of economic stagnation that forced many of them to emigrate in order to find work. Ethiopian pacification efforts wreaked havoc in the countryside, and provided the nationalist movement with peasant recruits. The Christian inflow created strains that split the ELF at the turn of the decade, and gave rise to a far more radical movement, eventually to become known as the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF). Although an internecine struggle between the two rival fronts raged in the first half of the 1970s, they managed to take advantage of the political disarray in Ethiopia in the middle of the decade, and nearly succeeded in liberating the province. By the end of 1977, only four towns in Eritrea still remained in Ethiopian hands.

A more meaningful approach was adopted by the Dergue on the cultural plane, where it departed from the policy of the *ancien régime*. From the beginning, it had promised cryptically to abolish 'certain traditional customs which may hamper the unity and progress of Ethiopia'. The ban on printing and broadcasting languages other than Amharigna and English was lifted, and cultural pluralism was recognised as the Ethiopian condition. Islam was granted official standing. On the other hand, the Orthodox Church lost its lands and its state-supported status. The Amhara monopoly of high office was broken. Although its exact

ethnic composition was not known, the Dergue itself was not homogenous, and several of its prominent members were not Amhara.

This departure complemented a trend towards economic integration that had advanced under the *ancien régime*. Capital investment, economic development, and the required infrastructure during the last two decades of imperial rule had concentrated in the industrial belt south of Addis Ababa, the coffee-producing region in the southwest, and the cotton-raising region in the east—all areas that had been incorporated into the Ethiopian state during the recent expansion. Industrial workers, commercial crop producers, traders, entrepreneurs and others involved in the modern economic sector were integrated into an economic nexus fashioned and controlled by the state. Regardless of their ethnic origin—and most of them were not Abyssinians—they increasingly identified with the state upon which their material welfare depended. This was even more so with career military men at all levels, and most recently applied to the southern peasantry, the main beneficiaries of the land reform. Thus, various ethnic groups and social classes have rallied to the defence of the state, because they identified their own interests with its preservation. They contributed heavily to the human and material resources consumed in the desperate struggle waged by the military regime since 1974, against a plethora of ethnic and regional movements intent on transforming or abandoning the state.

## National movements and the left

Not surprisingly, most such movements arose in peripheral areas largely untouched by economic development and entirely neglected by the state. The potency of the material factor is highlighted in the case of Tigray, the homeland of the junior branch of the Abyssinian family, but also the poorest province of Ethiopia. A different language and historic rivalry with the Amhara preserved a virile provincial identity among the people of Tigray, who have been quick to take up arms against a central government dominated by Amhara since Menelik. Not a single sign of economic development appeared in Tigray in the postwar period to relieve the pressure of the population on a land exhausted by millenia of erosion. Tigray was the focal centre of three major famines triggered by drought in this period. The Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) was formed in the mid-1970s, and was soon challenging the regime for control of the province.

Ethnic differences, historic hostility, lack of access to the state and

material deprivation were also the seeds that gave rise to the Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF), whose constituents were the Ogaden pastoralists, the Somali and Abo Liberation Front (SALF) in Bale and Sidamo provinces, and the Afar Liberation Front (ALF), all of which emerged at the same time, when the Dergue's determination to preserve the state in the form it had inherited from Haile Selassie became clear. It was then that groups of radical intellectuals turned to ethnic and regional mobilisation as the most effective method for waging the political struggle.

The imposition of military rule was the cause of the first split in the thin and fractious ranks of the Ethiopian left. While one faction, MEISON, chose to work with the Dergue in the hope of becoming its political mentor, another faction, the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP), declared war against the regime and its radical allies. Both factions accepted the right of nations to self-determination, but both were loath to see the class struggle weakened by the proliferation of dissident nationalist movements. Hoping that even Eritrea could be brought into the Ethiopian fold once the class struggle was won, they were less than categorical in their acceptance of Eritrea's right to independence. This ensured that their relationship with the emerging ethnic and regional movements, whose leadership came from the same ranks of the radical intelligentsia, was destined to be hostile. In the case of MEISON this was unavoidable from the start, since this group was obliged to accommodate itself to the Dergue's position. The EPRP was initially helped by the EPLF to set up a guerrilla base in Tigray province. Their relationship soured when the former refused to accept that Eritrea was an Ethiopian colony, a thesis implying that nothing less than separation was possible.

In the meantime, the EPRP and TPLF confronted one another in Tigray. The former upheld the primacy of the class struggle and claimed the right to operate throughout Ethiopia, while the latter insisted the national struggle had priority at that stage, and would not tolerate rivals in its home province. The matter was finally settled with arms, and the defeated EPRP force was expelled from Tigray. The emergence of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was another cause for strain and hostility. Keenly aware of the potential political weight of the Oromo, both MEISON and EPRP established front organisations designed to harness Oromo nationalist sentiment to the class struggle, and neither welcomed the appearance of a separatist Oromo movement. Likewise, the radicals had no regard for the WSLF and SALF which were under the

thumb of the military regime in Somalia, or the ALF whose patron was Ali Mira, the Afar sultan and former cotton magnate. When the Somali army invaded the Ogaden in mid-1977, the EPRP condemned both the invasion and the Dergue's attempts to resist it—a confused and politically damaging stand. MEISON judged the same time opportune to make a grab for power and was purged.

## Stalemate

The national issue thus proved to be the second cause of multiple fracture within the left, and sealed its defeat and destruction. This had been largely accomplished by mid-1978, and the regime could now concentrate on resolving the national issue by force. The military establishment expanded fivefold, making it the largest in the continent and the most heavily armed, with Soviet weaponry. Initially, the peasant associations were used to conscribe manpower, but compulsory military service was introduced in 1983. The country's resources were commandeered in an all-out effort, symbolised in patriotic slogans such as 'Everything for the Motherland', 'Unity or Death', and 'Everything for the War Front'. Ideological justification was provided by claiming that since the Eritreans were opposing a revolutionary socialist regime in Addis Ababa they were objectively siding with reaction and counter-revolution. Successive major campaigns were launched, involving as many as 100,000 men, and combining land, air and sea operations of a type not seen in Africa before. Casualties each time were counted in thousands and tens of thousands.

With massive Soviet material support and Cuban combat assistance, the Somali invading force was expelled in early 1978. The main thrust of the military effort was then switched to Eritrea. The first offensive, in mid-1978, succeeded in recapturing the towns and pushed the rebels to the northern tip of the plateau and the western lowland, where the battle lines were to remain for several years. The regime in Addis Ababa reasoned that if the Eritrean rebels were defeated, all other challenges to the state would collapse. This was thought to be particularly true of the TPLF in Tigray, whose growth owed not a little to EPLF support. Hence, the Dergue was content to hold on to the main towns in Tigray and keep open the main road to Eritrea. The risk involved in this strategy was that the Tigray rebels would take advantage of the lower priority assigned to them to consolidate their hold in the countryside and prepare themselves for major operations—which is what they did. The

TPLF also sponsored another armed movement, the Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement (EPDM), whose sphere of operations was in the adjacent districts of Wollo and Begemdir provinces. The EPDM was formed from remnants of the EPRP, a movement kept alive by other survivors who established an armed presence in western Gojjam province. Mutually hostile, these two groups constituted the only opposition to the regime not influenced by ethnic or regional considerations.

After the defeat of the Somali army, the Dergue had little difficulty re-establishing state control in areas contested by the WSLF and SALF. This was partly due to the accommodating attitude of the regime in Mogadishu which, menaced by proliferating domestic opposition, did not wish to provoke Addis Ababa. Therefore, it obstructed attempts by these movements to resume operations inside Ethiopia. However, given a chance to turn the tables on its enemy, Addis Ababa did not hesitate. In the early 1980s, two Somali opposition movements based in Ethiopia and armed by the Dergue began attacking targets inside Somalia with the aim of overthrowing Siad Barre.

The OLF, whose potential constituency was the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, did not live up to its promise. The scope of the process of economic integration under the imperial regime, noted above, covered mainly Oromo areas and limited its appeal to urban groups there. Likewise, the land reform later undermined its appeal among the peasantry. After trying for some years to establish a base in the mountainous Chercher area in Hararge province, the OLF shifted its attention to the west, and moved into the lowland fringe of Wallega province, where it posed no real threat.

Sustained military effort failed to eliminate the threat in the north. However, it succeeded in stalling the economy and creating scarcity, inflation, unemployment and mounting debt. The war consumed most available resources, leaving little for development. In the first decade of military rule, production grew at an average of 2.5 per cent annually, falling behind a rate of population growth now estimated at 2.9 per cent. External debt at the end of 1985 rose to nearly 60 per cent of GDP, and the debt service ratio stood at 27.3 per cent. Buoyant coffee prices, Ethiopia's main export, staved off bankruptcy.

Prices skyrocketed, and in order to feed its armies and the urban population, the regime had to squeeze the peasantry through a system of compulsory purchasing of grain at prices fixed by the state. As in the case of securing manpower for the military, the peasant associations

were used to operate this system. Thus, what were conceived initially as the means of peasant emancipation were turned into instruments of state control. Compulsory purchase proved a disincentive that depressed agricultural production, and contributed to a serious problem of food insufficiency even before drought returned in the early 1980s. This visitation set off a famine far worse than the one that preceded the collapse of the imperial regime. It claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, and made Ethiopia the ward of international charity.

The Dergue let international organisations look after the victims, while it busied itself setting up a political front, the Working Peoples Party of Ethiopia, and also persisted in its efforts to crush the rebels in the north. Continuous failure, however, sapped Ethiopian morale, and the rebels in Eritrea and Tigray were able to go on the offensive. In 1988 they moved against the towns, which fell one after another, often without a fight. Within a few months, the Ethiopians in Eritrea were besieged in the main cities of Asmara, Keren, the port of Massawa, and a couple of lesser towns on the border with Tigray. In the latter province, they were pushed steadily southwards, and when Makale, the provincial capital, fell in March 1989, they were left holding only a mountain fortress at Maichew. The loss of Tigray closed the land route to Eritrea, and rendered the Ethiopian position in the latter region untenable in the long term.

The scale of the defeat could not be concealed. The regime declared a state of national emergency, expelled all foreign aid workers from the north, and proceeded to bomb the rebel-held towns. A hastily arranged reconciliation with a similarly imperiled regime in Somalia enabled Ethiopia to transfer troops from the Ogaden to Eritrea. For the first time, Mengistu Haile Mariam, the regime's leader, acknowledged the mortal threat posed by those he called 'terrorists', and wondered why they rejected the 'peace offer' made to them in the Constitution of the Peoples Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, adopted in 1987. This had long been mooted as the definitive political solution to the national issue in Ethiopia. A Nationalities Institute was founded in 1983 for the purpose of studying the ethnic composition of the country, in preparation for a constitutional design embodying regional self government. Article Two of the Constitution proclaimed Ethiopia a unitary state which shall ensure the equality of nationalities and the realisation of regional autonomy.

A plan was subsequently drawn up rearranging the administrative map of the state into twenty-four administrative and five autonomous

regions. A diluted variation of the Soviet model, it provides for varying degrees of regional self government to be exercised with the consent of the central government and under the supervision of the Workers Party of Ethiopia. The greatest degree of autonomy is granted to the autonomous province of Eritrea, which is subdivided into three administrative regions roughly corresponding to the main ethnic clusters in that area. Eritrea is to lose the entire coastal Danakil region and the port of Assab, now included in a new Assab administrative region which embraces the Afar region. Tigray, another autonomous region, also loses its entire eastern lowland to Assab. The southern half of the Ogaden and Bale are joined in the Ogaden autonomous province, while the northernmost Somali group, the Issa, are grouped into the small Dire Dawa autonomous region bordering Djibouti, where the rest of the Issa live. The scheme is remarkable for the range of possibilities it offers to foster rivalries among ethnic groups and thereby dilute regional solidarity.

## Conclusion

By now, it has become obvious that a military solution is not a realistic option for resolving Ethiopia's manifold national conflict. Thanks to the intervention of foreign interests, the armed conflict lasted much longer, and was fought on a much higher technological level, than the country's resources could allow. In view of recent developments in international relations, and the impetus towards resolution of regional conflicts, it is unlikely that Ethiopia will continue to obtain massive supplies of modern weaponry cheaply. Far less dependent on external support and sophisticated weaponry, the guerrillas are not similarly constrained. Sooner or later, willingly or not, the state will have to come to political terms with its opponents. This is not likely to happen under the present regime, whose every effort has been designed to give the state a totalitarian form, and whose credibility has collapsed along with the war effort. A decisive change at the centre that would allow consideration of negotiated settlement is a prerequisite to any solution.

Such a settlement would have to address the root cause of the conflict, which is the problem of managing and distributing equitably social and economic resources that have always been scarce. Resource management is the function of the state, and the pattern of distribution among regions, ethnic groups and social classes is basically determined by their access to the state. In Ethiopia, such access was unequal in the past and

remains so now, and the material result has been great disparity in the distribution of resources. In a pattern that is common to Africa, such disparity coincides with ethnic and regional divisions, which lend themselves for the purpose of political mobilisation. The political result has been a series of upheavals, the most dramatic being the 1974 revolution, the product of combined class, ethnic and regional contradictions. The upheavals continue in the form of the various dissident movements, which are essentially fighting for greater access to state power in order to change the existing pattern of resource allocation.

It follows that the essence of a settlement will concern the form of the state, which is highly centralised and rigidly authoritarian. It was the Dergue's determination to preserve this form that provoked such varied and determined opposition. Decentralisation affording genuine self government to ethnic and regional groups is the essential condition for settlement of the conflict. In the recently adopted constitution, the regime sought to address precisely this point, but much too late to be taken seriously.