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Regionalism and democracy in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT *For centuries Ethiopia's rulers have attempted to overcome local bases of power and establish a strong central government. To the extent that this was achieved, it produced many largely ethnically based rebellions which plagued the country until the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's victory in 1991. The new government, which had its origins in an ethnically based revolt opposed to the hegemonic position of the Amhara in Ethiopia, appears committed to devolving power to regional ethnic governments and has even granted them the right to independence. This article examines the background to this process, critically discusses constitutional provisions regarding national self-determination, and provides an overview of the experience of the regional governments and the role and obstacles they face in moving long-authoritarian Ethiopia towards democracy. Ethiopia's experience is thus instructive to other states in Africa contemplating or undergoing programmes of decentralisation.*

Devolution of state powers has been on the political agenda of governments in Africa since the 1970s when the failure of centralised regimes became increasingly apparent. However, no African government has seriously entertained the idea of devolving powers to ethnically based regions, much less explicitly granting their constituent elements the legal right to secede. And in the past Ethiopian leaders have been consistent in their efforts—usually through repressive means—to overcome regional, religious, and ethnic divisions, weaken local administrations, and establish strong central governments. However, the country's current Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government has made devolution of state powers to ethnically based local administrations, including the right of secession, the centrepiece of its programme. Thus an examination of the Ethiopian experience is of considerable interest to many countries in Africa suffering from its legacy of state centralisation and the hegemonic position of one ethnic group. The background to the EPRDF's policy will be examined and an attempt made to evaluate the efficacy of the new ethnically based local governments and their contribution to the challenge of democracy in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian state in history and conflict

The core of the contemporary Ethiopian state derives its origins from the Axumite civilisation which took form in the first millennium BC in what is now

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the northernmost province of Tigray. The Axumite and subsequent Amhara empires waxed and waned for the next 2 000 years. However, in the late 19th century and first decade of this century the Amhara emperor Menelik II from the central province of Shoa incorporated the lands and peoples of the south, east and west into an empire which became the modern state of Ethiopia. The nobility, and particularly those from Shoa, were the primary beneficiaries of this expansion, while those from Tigray served as 'junior partners' in the enterprise. Tigray's nobility competed directly, but unequally, with their Amhara counterparts for positions and status within the central state, while the peasants increasingly felt the impact of state centralisation in the deteriorating authority of their traditional regional rulers and the imposition of Amharigna. As a result, most Tigrayans concluded that the general decline of their province was caused by the Amhara and specifically the rise to power of Menelik II.

These processes continued under Emperor Haile Selassie, who reduced the power of the regional nobility through reliance on bureaucratic forms of administration. To the extent that his efforts were successful they produced, and gave increasing importance to, an educated, powerless—and thus resentful—class of teachers, students and state functionaries who would eventually prove the undoing of his regime and the empire on which it was based. In addition, there was a contradiction between the dominant position of a Shoan Amhara elite and the political, economic and social marginalisation of the non-Amhara majority of the population. The revolt in Eritrea that Haile Selassie precipitated by arbitrarily ending the system of federalism under which the territory was incorporated into Ethiopia after the Second World War provided a further challenge to the legitimacy of the regime. Lastly, in an increasingly anachronistic empire there was a fundamental class contradiction between a minority from the north who held most of the land in southern Ethiopia and a majority forced to work on what had previously been their land.

As opposition forces, particularly those from the university in Addis Ababa, grew in strength, an ageing Haile Selassie proved increasingly unable to contain the situation. From its inception in the mid-1960s the student movement had a pan-Ethiopian character but, encouraged by the revolt in Eritrea, Amhara dominance in the state and the cultural and employment advantages enjoyed by Amhara students, the demand for the national self-determination of Ethiopia's various ethnic communities increasingly came to the fore.[1] Generally students followed Soviet experience and accepted in principle the right of Ethiopia's ethnic communities (called nations) to self-determination, up to and including secession, but at the same time held that, with the replacement of the old regime by a communist party committed to ending exploitation and respecting the rights of these various peoples, there would be no need for independence. While students played the leading role in undermining the legitimacy of the old regime, they did not have the political unity and organisational capacity to mount an insurrection, and a section of the military, or Derg, stepped into the power void in 1974. Under pressure from the students and demands for change from the countryside the Derg adopted a radical ideology and undertook a fundamental transformation of Ethiopian society, the key element being the 1975 nationalisation of rural land. These developments suggest a historical trajectory different

from elsewhere in Africa, a view reinforced by Ethiopia's long imperial rule and its position as a state with the capacity to keep colonial powers at a distance.

The Derg initially encouraged the development of non-Amhara languages and cultures and entertained the idea of some type of federally structured Ethiopia, with this in mind it established the Institute of Nationalities in 1983. Although there was no transfer of power from the central state, it appears that part of the mapping and other work carried out by the Institute influenced the current EPRDF government when it laid out regional boundaries in the post-1991 period.[2] However, former members of the Institute make clear that the notion of allowing ethnic groups the right to independence was not considered. Indeed, the Derg fought to maintain a strong central state, refused to share power with either the politically conscious middle classes or the emerging regional and ethnic elites, and ensured that the state retained its predominately Amhara character. As a result, the new military regime was challenged from many quarters, but increasingly from ethnically based movements in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Convinced that the Derg would not take up the problems of the country's ethnic minorities or democratise the state, militant Tigrayan students held that the best means to challenge its authority was to launch an armed struggle based on the peasantry, and it was this conviction they took to the countryside with the formation of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1975. Following Stalin and using his terminology, the TPLF leadership assumed that Ethiopia's primary contradiction arose from the Amhara state's domination of the oppressed nations. It further concluded that only national (ie ethnically based) movements could successfully confront the Derg and provide the means for replacing the centralised Ethiopian state with a nation-based federation. This proved effective in mobilising Ethiopia's peasants and was to be reflected in the policies of the EPRDF government in the post-1991 period, while the class-directed approach favoured by many in the student movement failed.

Although the TPLF's struggle cannot be recounted here,[3] it is important to emphasise that the Front's 16-year long struggle forms the background to the present government's policies on regionalism and continues to shape political life in Ethiopia. The founding of the EPRDF as a coalition of ethnically based parties under TPLF domination in 1988 again gave expression to the latter movement's concentration on the nationality question. EPRDF components eventually included Amhara, Oromo, southern based parties, a small and short-lived organisation of captured Derg officers, and other quickly established ethnically based movements. The creation of separate member organisations was a response to fears by other ethnic communities of TPLF power. However, in spite of the nominally coalition structure of the EPRDF, from the beginning the TPLF provided the leadership, ideological direction and majority of the fighters of the movement.

Shortly after EPRDF forces entered the capital in May 1991 talks were held with a large number of opposition groups interested in attending a transitional conference, but significantly those encouraged to participate were predominantly nationally based, either liberation fronts, or groups organised just before the conference.[4] Class-based movements, such as the leading parties of the student movement and the Derg's Worker's Party of Ethiopia (WPE), were not permitted

to attend the conference and have to date not been allowed to participate in the political life of the country. This ensured that the EPRDF/TPLF's approach to the critical issue of national self-determination would win sympathy.

Indicative of both its control over the conference, and its desire to win the agreement of the next most powerful movement, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the EPRDF ensured that there was almost no discussion of its plans radically to restructure the Ethiopian state along national lines. Instead, after approving the rights of the country's nationalities, including that of secession, it was left up to the government to ensure that conditions for national self-determination were met.[5] The national basis of the majority of the organisations, together with the prestige of the EPRDF as victors over the Derg, the authority of its transitional programme calling for an ethnically based devolution of state powers, and the OLF's close involvement and support of the process, crucially shaped the outcome of the conference. However, the commitment of the TPLF—and later the EPRDF—to the right of national self-determination, and the implication that this involved the establishment of ethnically based regional administrations, was long-standing and cannot be considered primarily a result of the conference, nor of the subsequent 1994 constitution.[6]

After the Addis Ababa conference TPLF and EPRDF leader Meles Zenawi became president of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). A Council of People's Representatives dominated by 32 members from the EPRDF and 12 from the OLF was organised, and on 22 July 1991 the Council adopted the Addis Ababa Charter to serve as an interim constitution. The TGE issued Proclamation Seven which established 12 regions based on ethnicity (largely defined by language) and two urban centres that were too diverse to be divided.[7] Regional elections were held in most of Ethiopia on 20 June 1992 but, after alleging intimidation and other irregularities, the OLF boycotted them and withdrew from the government. Its forces then launched an armed insurrection which was quickly put down and 20 000 suspected OLF members were imprisoned. This testified both to continuing disputes over the distribution of state power and to the ability of the armed forces to ensure the security of the new government. The EPRDF's leadership considers the rapid containment of the insurrection as evidence of the skills the army acquired in the anti-Derg war, of its capacity to neutralise peasants whom urban-based opposition forces might attempt to mobilise, and of the correctness of its policies to devolve powers to ethnically based administrations.

Opposition groups and many of the country's intellectuals have vehemently opposed EPRDF plans to devolve powers to ethnically based administrations because of concerns that these moves would bring about the dismemberment of Ethiopia, although the Front argues that such criticisms represent a rearguard attempt to protect Amhara hegemony. The OLF in turn fears that the government intends to deny Oromos a right to national self-determination that would include independence.[8] Apart from the OLF, opposition to the government in the transitional period was mostly reflected in struggles within the public bureaucracies which pit Amhara, and to a lesser extent Oromo, functionaries against their largely Tigrayan political masters. Faced with such opposition by 1996–97 the EPRDF was much more restrained about pursuing reforms to the central state,

such as reducing the predominance of Amharas and moving towards a more equitable ethnic balance among civil servants. Generally the central public bureaucracy remains as it was under the Haile Selassie and Derg regimes: deeply conservative, resistant to change, extremely hierarchical, preoccupied with concerns about security, and in need of far-reaching reform.

Although the sincerity of the government's pledge to permit Ethiopia's nations the right to break away from the country is as yet untested, it appears committed to devolving powers to local administrations. The first step towards achieving this was the 1992 regional elections which were followed in 1994 with elections to the Constituent Assembly to complete and ratify a new constitution. In both elections there was evidence of human rights violations and, in the latter case, of 39 parties participating, most were members or supporters of the government, while the major opposition forces, including the OLF, the All Amhara People's Organization (AAPO), and a coalition of southern parties, boycotted them.[9] A constitution was then approved in December 1994 by the Council of People's Representatives which led to the creation of a federal state of 10 regions. This paved the way for national elections on 7 May 1995 that, in the absence of the major opposition parties, produced a massive victory for the EPRDF and its allies, and on 24 August the country was formally proclaimed the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE).

The devolution problematic

Constitution-making under the EPRDF has little in common with the bargaining, trade-offs, and compromises that usually typify such processes; rather it reflects the weakness of the country's democratic institutions, the political objectives of the governing party, and its position of dominance within a state where serious opposition had been crushed or marginalised. The basis of regional governments and one of the unique elements of the constitution is expressed in Article 8 (1) by the assertion that 'all sovereign power resides in the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia' and further that the constitution is 'an expression of their sovereignty'. Not only does sovereignty not lie with individual citizens, they in turn are divided into three groups—nations, nationalities and peoples—terms which are not distinguished. From this premise it is further held that, 'Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession' (Article 39 (1)).

The conditions under which the right to secession can be accomplished include a two-thirds vote of the state legislature, the organisation by the federal government of a referendum, majority support of voters in that referendum for separation, and subsequent agreement on the division of public assets. Although some analysts find the constitutional right to secession extremely dangerous and argue that it will foment nationalism,[10] realising the necessary conditions would prove extremely onerous, the more so given the fact that the EPRDF would be overseeing and carrying out these constitutional provisions. Further, any state may increase its area by incorporating a population of adjacent state(s), and that 'nations, nationalities and peoples within the states ... shall have the right to establish, at any time, a state of their own' (Article 47 (2)), although the means

by which this is to be accomplished is not specified. Both the federal and regional governments have executive, legislative and judicial powers and there is a constitutional list of concurrent powers, although the federal government can delegate some of its powers later. However, the constitution has not laid down unambiguously the structures, powers, and major functions of the federal and regional governments.

The judicial system shares jurisdictions between the regional states and the centre. In most federal systems a supreme court serves as ultimate protector of the constitution, provides judicial review, and resolves disputes over powers between the federal and regional governments, but this is not stipulated in the Ethiopian constitution. Instead, such matters are reserved to the Federal Council or the Council of Constitutional Inquiry, bodies whose composition would largely be made up of political figures. Neither the federal or state supreme courts have the power to nullify laws passed by either House of Parliament. Moreover, as Brietzke has pointed out, it is doubtful whether the Ethiopian judiciary has either the ability or willingness to take up the challenges posed by the complexities of a federal system.[11]

In addition, the final status of Dire Dawa, a major industrial and commercial centre on the country's sole railway line is yet to be determined. The difficulty in resolving the fate of politically tense Dire Dawa, which has been the location of numerous terrorist attacks over the past two years, illustrates the regional, clan, ethnic and religious conflicts in the Horn of Africa and suggests some of the difficulties in devolving power to local administrations. Further limitations to devolution include the limited financial, manpower, natural resources and infrastructure in many of the regions, bureaucratic opposition, resilience of earlier patterns of administration, imbalance between a powerful centre and weak regions, and the vagueness of the constitution in defining relations between the levels of government.[12]

Ultimately, in an Ethiopia with a weak civil society, the absence of a tradition of respect for human rights and a history where powerful men and not laws have defined the relationship between subjects (there were no citizens) and the state, the present constitution must be recognised primarily as a symbol of the new regime and part of an effort to achieve domestic and international legitimacy. While weak in many areas, the new constitution reflects the EPRDF's desire to end Amhara hegemony and bring historically marginalised groups into the political process (if only under the Front's tutelage) by establishing ethnically based local administrations such as that in Tigray. However, whether other regions and ethnic communities that did not share Tigray's experience of revolutionary struggle can acquire the legitimacy and high administrative standards which that province has achieved under the TPLF is questionable. In addition, the model of devolution must not be viewed independently of the organisation that is carrying it out, the EPRDF. In spite of the government's endorsement of capitalism, pluralism and a realigned foreign policy, the EPRDF remains a Leninist-structured and controlled party. And it is this party which not only oversees the public bureaucracy but also has a formative influence over regional parties.

Five methods of EPRDF control or influence over the regions can thus far be identified. The first is direct membership of EPRDF representatives on regional

councils, such as currently exists in Beneshangual and Afar. Second, there are EPRDF members in each region, some of which, such as in the case of the Southern Region, play an active role in political affairs and, in the case of Gambella, are used to reconcile differences between the sometimes antagonistic Nuer-and Anwak-based ruling parties. Third, the EPRDF provides a wide variety of seminars, courses and educational functions for regional party officials. Fourth, the EPRDF can directly discipline members of its component organisations. Finally, the army has assumed direct control in various unstable parts of the country, such as the Somali, Afar, Gambella and Benishangual regions, and the Borena zone of Oromia.

As a counterpoint to federal power, regional and zonal party leaders (as opposed to many who staff the public bureaucracies) are predominantly nationals of the area in which they reside. Therefore most of Ethiopia's non-Amhara population no longer face the indignity of having to speak Amharigna and appear before members of an Amhara elite at the local level where most decisions of interest to the people are made. Moreover, while initially financially stretched, since 1995 regions and zones have benefited from a generally robust economy and growing transfers of resources from the national government, as well as their own increasing capacity to collect taxes. This is bolstering the confidence of local administrators and leading in some cases to increasing efforts to preserve and extend their spheres of autonomy. Official encouragement given to indigenous languages in the schools and public bureaucracies is fostering the formation of local identities and as a result a cultural renaissance is taking place in many parts of the country. Nonetheless, the success of the regional administrations continues to be problematic. EPRDF officials usually acknowledge the present weaknesses of the new governments, but contend that these are transitory problems which will be overcome with time and experience. However, it cannot be assumed that fundamental problems of legitimacy, as opposed to acquiring administrative skills, will be so readily achieved, as a cursory examination of the new regional governments would appear to confirm.

Unlike the TPLF, which has a rich base of dedicated and talented party personnel to draw upon, the ruling party in the Amhara region, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) is still struggling to establish itself and is largely opposed by intellectuals and townspeople. Nonetheless, it is believed that, because the guerrilla campaign carried out in this region from the early 1980s was more extensive than that carried out by other dissident movements (with the exception of the TPLF), the regional government is, after that in Tigray, the most viable in the country. The ANDM has, however, been sorely tested by controversies over its 1997 land reforms, which led to demonstrations in Addis Ababa, and over the dismissal of and subsequent laying of criminal charges against its leader, Tamrat Layne, who held the key positions of deputy prime minister and defence minister in the national government. The other EPRDF components were established much later and have more doubtful bases of support. Of particular concern is the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) which is widely perceived as being weak, corrupt,[13] and an instrument of the TPLF, and is discredited in the view of most Oromo intellectuals. Moreover,

while the OLF has proven itself militarily inept, it still retains the loyalty of most of these same intellectuals.

The southern regional and zonal governments are probably weaker than their counterparts in Oromia, although for essentially the same reasons. While the OPDO did play a minor role during the final days of the conflict in the liberation of its territory, the EPRDF-affiliated South Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (SEPDF) was created after the formation of the transitional government. As a result, it was TPLF forces that initially occupied the region when the Derg army evacuated its bases, without in most cases any resistance. The first administrations were military-dominated and made up solely of Tigrayans; only later were southern Ethiopians captured during the war given political training and quickly made to assume administrative and 'elected' positions. It is indicative of the TPLF's need to control the political process that it did not build alliances with the few southern parties which existed at the time and instead has carried out a campaign of harassment against them. The result is that, unlike their counterparts in Tigray, cadres selected to administer the south typically have little political or military experience, generally have low levels of education, frequently appear to be motivated by opportunism and not surprisingly have questionable legitimacy among their constituents. Weak leadership gives rise to accusations of theft, bribery and incompetence, and these charges are given at least some credence by the frequent changes and short tenures in office of many leading officials in the region.

Achieving legitimacy in the south will also depend on the success of the regional and zonal parties in carrying out the EPRDF's programme of instituting indigenous languages in government and educational institutions. Because of the diversity of languages spoken in the zones Amharigna is the official language at the regional level. At the lower zonal levels Amharigna is being replaced and governments must confront the daunting problems of preparing textbooks in indigenous languages, transcribing material into Latin script, and providing training for instructors teaching in schools. Introducing indigenous languages into government administration is proving equally difficult and will take some years. In the relatively more developed Hadiya zone 56% of government professionals are currently non-Hadiya speakers, and Amharigna necessarily remains the language of discourse.[14] Merchants and traders in the southern towns, even if not ethnically Amhara, have long relied on the language, although in some areas popular demand and government encouragement are making indigenous languages those of the streets. The extent of indigenisation varies from region to region and zone to zone and probably roughly corresponds to the availability of resources and the political pressures governments face. In that respect the OPDO administration may be expected to press harder for indigenisation because of its need to appear strongly nationalist in response to OLF pressure.

The emphasis on indigenous languages in the schools has raised the ire of many Amhara and others from the north living in the towns of Oromia, the south, and other parts of the country who do not want their children educated in 'local' languages. Some regional and zonal governments have shown a measure of sympathy for these concerns and schools using Amharigna as the language of

instruction are being permitted. But with future employment in government, which constitutes the bulk of the modern sphere, increasingly favouring those with fluency in indigenous languages, the Amhara and other northerners who settled in the south and Oromia will lose many of the advantages they have had since Menelik's expansion into these areas a century ago. Moreover, there are already indications that the growth of national consciousness in some parts of the country is leading to expressions of resentment against non-indigenous government employees, teachers and merchants. Because of these changes some Amhara and other migrants to these areas appear to be leaving the regional and zonal centres. Their numbers in turn are being replaced by local people from the countryside who see greater opportunities for employment in trade and government in the towns.

In addition to concerns about indigenous languages, there are many other issues which are challenging these governments and raising questions about their competency and legitimacy, and nothing is more important in a society where peasants make up the overwhelming majority than the availability of productive land. In Wallega, Oromia, the regional and zonal governments are confronted by a problem inherited after the Derg resettled peasants from drought-prone Wollo and Tigray on state farms in the northern lowlands during the 1984–85 famine. After 1990 the Derg, and subsequently the EPRDF, began breaking up the state farms and encouraging commercial farming. In post-Derg Ethiopia other land-starved peasants, mostly Amharas from neighbouring Gojjam, began (and are still) moving to the Wallega lowlands and have now almost completely destroyed the virgin forests which the highland-inhabiting Oromos used to complement their economies and hold to be their birthright. Indigenous Oromos are further aggrieved that, because of large numbers of Amhara in the area, there is wide use of Amharigna in the schools and administration, and the language plays a major role in local government. Added to this unhealthy mix, lowland-settled peasants are engaged in a dispute over access to land with the pastoralist Gumuz people who also inhabit these areas. This conflict has taken an increasingly violent form. Although these problems are long-standing and explosive, neither zonal, regional nor national governments have taken them up. Such difficulties in balancing the interests of minorities and majorities within regions are common throughout Ethiopia and can be expected to continue to come to the fore.

Conflicts between regions have also emerged, such as that between the pastoralist Boran Oromo and the neighbouring Garre Somalis after the regional boundaries established by the national government unduly favoured the Somalis, a situation now apparently recognised by the government. The difficulty is that, while the national government caused the problem, under the constitution changes to internal boundaries have to be settled by the regions involved. Confronted by the discontented and historically militant Boran, the Oromia regional government has every reason to seek a quick settlement. The Boran alone among the Oromo have retained a highly respected system of traditional government known as the *gadaa*. This has a long history of governance and practice of negotiations with its neighbours and could take up this problem with the Somalis, but has not been permitted to do so. The fact that the officially sanctioned local governments have not been able even to start the process

leading to a resolution of the conflict emphasises their weakness and increases the danger that the problem may at some point lead to violence.[15] This problem also demonstrates the conflict between traditional institutions which sometimes have greater legitimacy than the modern forms of government the EPRDF is trying to introduce.

The weakness of the OPDO and Southern Front governments have been emphasised because of their size and importance in the Ethiopian federation. The performance record of the peripheral regional governments, such as those of the Afar, Somali, Gambella, and Beneshanghual is far worse, a fact openly acknowledged by the EPRDF. However, two points should be borne in mind. First, many of the people inhabiting these areas are pastoralist, with no tradition of indigenous settled administration, and indeed little experience with central governments, apart from largely tribute-demanding regimes, before the Derg. Second, while it is unrealistic to expect such territories to establish effective governments quickly, their present extremely low levels of development are largely the result of the failures of past centralised regimes. What remains unclear is whether the highland, Orthodox Christian and peasant-focused leadership of the EPRDF will prove to be more responsive and sympathetic to the concerns of the largely lowland, non-Orthodox and pastoralist peoples who inhabit the non-core areas of Ethiopia than were their Amhara counterparts. Three recent cases give cause for scepticism.

In the lowlands of southwest Ethiopia, between the towns of Konso and Jinka, the Derg established a large state farm devoted to growing cotton which almost immediately raised the anger of resident pastoralists who lost valued grazing lands. Later this farm was privatised and the new owner's property rights were respected by the incoming EPRDF government which did not, however, do anything to resolve the outstanding claims of the pastoralists. As a result, in late 1994 the pastoralists attacked the farm. The army responded by killing eight of them and jailing many more. This problem as well remains unresolved. Even in Tigray, where during the revolution, the TPLF attempted to overcome highlanders' prejudices against the lowland Afar and gave legitimacy to the *Abagore*, a traditional institution used to resolve Afar–Tigrayan conflicts over grazing and water rights,[16] violent struggles between the two peoples have not noticeably declined. Finally, while armed clashes in the Somali-inhabited eastern region of Ethiopia involve a host of international and religious issues, the extensive and continuing (if not fully acknowledged) engagement of the national army in the area necessarily raises questions as to whether the EPRDF does—as it claims—have a more progressive approach to dealing with lowland and pastoralist peoples than past Ethiopian governments which also had troubled relations with these peoples.

Problems of legitimacy and continuing examples of authoritarian practices are a product of Ethiopia's lack of democratic traditions, a weak civil society and an underdeveloped economy where most benefits continue to flow from involvement in the state. Added to this legacy, it took the TRLF EPRDF 16 hard fought years to achieve state power and it is not clear that it is willing to share the rewards of that power with opposition forces. Moreover, the EPRDF continues to see the state as the best means to pursue its programme and maintain a dominant

position in the largely fragmented Ethiopian society. As a result, state and party power in Ethiopia is still formidable and expressed in both new and old ways. The ways of the past include the virtual hegemonic position of the ruling party. The state retains sole authority over television and radio, possesses many newspapers, and in addition the EPRDF has its own radio stations and newspapers. The Front also has journalists based throughout the country who provide stories to the official media on a profit basis, yet another means for its positions to be spread, while at the same time having the costs of what is highly partisan journalism paid.

Significantly, the Derg's 1975 Land Proclamation which nationalised all rural land has not been altered. While peasant insecurity at the prospect of an open market in land can serve as a rationale for continuing nationalisation,[17] government control over rural land, home to 85% of the country's population, gives it enormous power. Although the EPRDF is espousing and pursuing market-based policies and carrying out a privatisation programme which has won the praise of the IMF and international donors, at the same time agents, associates and organisations created by the ruling party are actively purchasing and managing some of these privatised companies, and at the same time establishing new enterprises.[18]

While Ethiopia's constitution contains the politically correct terms and phrases concerning democracy and respect for human rights that are now expected in the post-cold war period, real conditions in the country, particularly outside Addis Ababa, are less reassuring. Apart from the Somali and Afar areas, which are experiencing high levels of criminal and political violence, and isolated parts of Oromia where the OLF is attempting (and to date failing) to mount an insurrection, there would now appear to be less concerted efforts by the government in other parts of the country to harass opposition forces committed to peaceful change than was the case three years ago. However, this seems to be largely thanks to the continuing impact of the government's recent practice of jailing and intimidating the opposition, rather than the result of any fundamental change in policy. Little is being done to reduce distrust between government and citizens. Mention has been made of the problems in the Boran-populated area. Zonal officials, as well as Boran elders, for example, agree that few members of this community currently hold senior positions in their local administration and both accept why this is the case—distrust by the government of the Boran because of supposed past support for the OLF.[19] Formally legal parties are harassed, independent meetings forbidden and opposition newspapers are generally not permitted far beyond the boundaries of Addis Ababa. As a result, almost everywhere outside Addis Ababa people are afraid to engage in political activities outside government parameters. There are indications, particularly in the south, that people are withdrawing from political participation and seeking solace in religious pursuits and this in turn is leading to growing tensions between the large Protestant community and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

A lack of transparency is evident at every level of government. Whether as a product of Ethiopia's feudal traditions, wherein the country's leaders lived apart from their fellows, or as a result of the patterns of secrecy that were necessary to ensure survival during the EPRDF's years of armed struggle, or because, after

seven years in power the government does not feel entirely secure, the EPRDF leadership appears remote and has little interaction with those beyond a select group of political allies, many of whom are Tigrayans. Communications with the public are limited, largely ritualistic and almost completely restricted to expressions through the government-and party-controlled media, since the EPRDF usually refuses to meet the private by owned media. Indeed, the national government operates as if under siege, something it again demonstrated when on 21 March 1997 a peaceful demonstration was broken up, and some 200 students from Addis Ababa University were arrested and subsequently beaten after they had marched in support of Gojjami peasants aggrieved at the manner in which the Amhara regional government was carrying out its land reform.

While many are highly critical of the EPRDF's lack of transparency, it must be borne in mind that Ethiopians, particularly those from the north, typically do not oppose secretive and distrustful behaviour, and see openness as akin to innocence and simplicity. Perhaps for this reason, as much as because of the country's weak democratic traditions and institutions, there has been far more criticism of the government's secrecy and evasiveness by foreigners than by Ethiopians. And this raises the question of the extent to which cultural, as much as political and development factors, can be considered major barriers in achieving transparency and democracy. These barriers may also figure in the clearly declining EPRDF interest in overhauling the still largely authoritarian central state that it inherited six years ago.

Conclusion

Generally comprehensive systems of local administration were bequeathed the newly independent countries of Africa by departing colonial powers over 30 years ago, but were quickly eliminated by central governments not prepared to accept countervailing focuses of power. Subsequent failures of centralised administrations led to renewed, but weak, attempts to resurrect systems of local government in the 1970s. At best the achievements of such governments were minimal, their costs prohibitive. They rarely expanded the sphere of political participation and instead typically took the form of deconcentrated administrations which left centralised governments, and frequently ethnic hegemonies, in place. The experience of non-colonised Ethiopia, whose governments until the final days of the Derg were consistently devoted to centralised and statist forms of governance, is in marked variance with this pattern. Also differently from other states in Africa, in Ethiopia decentralisation and national-self determination were the principle demands of an incoming and revolutionary party that had militarily defeated, or politically marginalised, all forces that might challenge its approach to regional government.

Moreover, decentralisation and the establishment of local governments in Ethiopia was not, as in much of Africa, primarily a response to administrative weaknesses of central governments and their inability to implement and adequately monitor programmes. Instead, they were largely a means to overcome Amhara hegemony, provide a structure through which the EPRDF could govern, and for the Front to achieve legitimacy by the promotion of a convincing

alternative to a centralised state with its record of past failures and war. As a result, local governments, in spite of the problems discussed above, are experiencing significant growth throughout Ethiopia. In addition, this massive expansion of government seems to suggest first, that the ruling party assumes it has a place in Ethiopia in the long term; second, rhetoric for the benefit of the international community notwithstanding, the Front sees a continuing significant role for the state in Ethiopia, and last, the expansion of the state and the provision of employment in the modern public sector are perhaps the quickest and most effective means to acquire regional allies and neutralise dissent among the otherwise frequently critical educated and urban middle classes.

Although in part designed to meet the political needs of the TPLF, the establishment of ethnically based local administrations appears historically and politically sound despite their current difficulties. The policy also reflects both the cultural aspirations of Ethiopia's many long oppressed and neglected minorities and their right to an acceptable role in the state. Both the constitution and the practice of the more politically developed regions suggest that the devolution of powers are significant and growing with the expanding administrative capacities of the regions. Indeed, it is clear that, having been given legitimacy, powerful ethnic and regional forces will make demands for much greater local autonomy than presently exists. Tempering these processes, which could otherwise produce the dismemberment of Ethiopia so feared by centrists, lies with the authority the EPRDF exerts over its component elements and the regional public bureaucracies. The TPLF core of the EPRDF has thus far shown remarkable resiliency, pragmatism and unity, but the break-up of the once strong Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the current difficulties facing the Communist Party of China must give pause for thought. And were the EPRDF to break into factions it could be predicted that the regional parties and governments would quickly step into the breach.

One of the biggest obstacles to Ethiopia benefiting from the EPRDF's devolutionary policies does not lie, as the government's actions seem to suggest, with Amhara chauvinists wanting to resurrect a past ethnic hegemony which is surely buried, but with the Front's contumacious implementation of the policy, and its effort to control virtually every facet of the political process. The EPRDF government is confident, capable, generally well led, and much clearer than most governments in Africa about its policies and the means by which they can be achieved. However, its frequently dismissive approach to those outside the ruling circles is not a positive harbinger for the future development of a sound democratic administration that has popular legitimacy.

Nonetheless, when set against the country's turbulent past, a generally smooth transitional period, and perhaps most significantly, a regional context wherein Ethiopia appears all the more stable in relation to some of its neighbours, the EPRDF government reaps the benefits of a high degree of international tolerance. These benefits include first, a measure of autonomy to pursue its policies; second, access to considerable international financing; and last, the unwillingness of Western governments and agencies seriously to challenge the government on a range of human rights abuses and the growing role of the party in the economy. While possibly transitory, these benefits must be considered remark-

able for a country which is one of the poorest in the world, which has little strategic significance with the passing of the Cold War, possesses no exports of any consequence, and is to a considerable degree dependent on Western largesse. The government thus faces few significant political barriers, either internally or externally, to pursuing its innovative policy on regionalisation. It alone must assume responsibility for its success or failure.

Notes

[1] R Balsvik, Haile-Selassie's Students: the Intellectuals and Social Background to a Revolution 1952–1977, East Lansing: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1985, p 285.
[2] Asmelesh Beyene, former member of the Institute of Nationalities, 4 June 1996.
[3] J Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front 1975–1991*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
[4] Vaughan, 'The Addis Ababa Transitional Conference of July 1991: its origins, history and significance', *Occasional Papers*, Edinburgh: Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh University, 1994, p 45.
[5] *Ibid*, p 58.
[6] For a more detailed expression of the processes and debate which led to this conclusion see J Young, 'Ethnicity and power in Ethiopia', *Review of African Political Economy*, 70, 1996.
[7] An administrative directive was later issued in 1994 which reduced the number of regions to 10 when five of them were joined into the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region.
[8] 'Ethiopia: constitutional dilemmas', *Africa Confidential*, 36 (19), 22 September 1995, pp 5–6.
[9] Beyene Petros, leader of the Southern Coalition, has said that because of the level of government harassment it could not participate in the election. Interview with Dr Beyene Petros, Addis Ababa, 26 May 1997. In any case in early 1993 the Southern Coalition was removed from the TGE after it met a number of opposition parties in Europe.
[10] P Britzke, 'Ethiopia's leap in the dark: federalism and self-determination in the draft constitution,' paper presented to the Horn of Africa Conference, Trento, Italy, December 1994, p 22.
[11] *Ibid*, p 18.
[12] J Cohen, 'Ethnic federalism in Ethiopia', *Northeast African Studies*, 2 (2), pp 164, 168–170.
[13] Indicative of the internal problems faced by the OPDO was the announcement in the state press by Kuma Demksa, leader of the Oromia regional government, of the 'purge' of 250 party members and the putting 'under control' of 80 others for 'lacking work initiative, opportunism'. See *Ethiopian Herald*, 4 April 1997, pp 1–2.
[14] Interview with Belayneh Teshome, Hadiya Zone Planning and Economic Development Department, Hossana, 14 February 1997.
[15] Although angered at the delays, Boran elders told me that they respect the promise of the government to find a solution, and would not be drawn on how long they would wait for that solution. Interview with Boran elders, Yabello, 1 February 1997.
[16] For a more detailed discussion of this problem see J Young, 'Peasants and revolution in Ethiopia: Tigray 1975–1989', unpublished PhD dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 1995.
[17] For a more detailed expression of these developments see J Young, 'Development and change in post-revolutionary Tigray', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 35(1), 1997.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] See interview with Boran elders, Yabello, 1 February 1997; and interview Jarso Gollo, administrator Yabello woreda, 3 February 1997.