



THE PROCESS OF CLASS CONFLICT  
IN ETHIOPIA

By

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This paper is a study of Ethiopia's experience in a process that every socialist revolution must traverse: 1) the political act of seizing state power and the subsequent conflict and, 2) the economic restructuring of class and productive relations. We will focus on the first because it is the most central phase in consolidating the gains that have already been achieved. In this paper, the simple term "socialist construction" is used to avoid the confusion that such African countries as Somalia, Libya and the Sudan have caused by claiming to be oriented towards socialism while taking absolutely no steps at transforming economic structures and transferring state power to the working class. In Ethiopia, a radical cataclysm is brewing beyond the point of mere orientation. The revolution is not simply ideologically buried with its "feet eastward" but is implementing material plans of socialist construction. It is necessary to start with the political upheaval of February 1974.

In 1974 Ethiopians found themselves bound to an ancient feudal monarchy dating back to the thirteenth century. The slave-holding state of Axum was cut off from the Red Sea coast, after several centuries of expansion by Moslem Arabia, allowing the feudal princes to seize both the throne and the land.<sup>1</sup> Eight centuries later, feudalism was to be dethroned and expropriated.

The central class opponent was the feudal landlord. A small comprador bourgeoisie existed, but direct colonialism never got much of a footing as a result of the relative absence of imperialist domination. "There was no major foreign invasion ...from early in the first millennium B.C., when people from Saudi Arabia settled around Axum, until the arrival of the Italians in the 1880s."<sup>2</sup> Ethiopia passed a brief interlude of domination with the Italian occupation of 1936-41. Eritrea, formerly called Midri Bahir (which means maritime province) before Italian Prime Minister Crispi renamed it, was invaded in 1885 and proclaimed an Italian colony in 1890; in 1941, the Italians were replaced by the British who remained until 1952.

The Ethiopians describe the antagonistic classes in the revolution as the counter-revolutionary feudal class, the comprador bourgeoisie and the bureaucratic bourgeoisie versus the worker-peasant alliance and its ally, the petty bourgeoisie.<sup>3</sup> Ethiopia, free of a history of direct colonialism, directed its revolution particularly against the domestic exploiting class, with the resultant intervention and defeat of international imperialism.

#### *The Army and Class Antagonism*

Considering the essential role of the Ethiopian men-in-uniform, a class inspection of the armed forces is fundamental to any analysis of the revolution. The division of power within the feudal monarchy included the hierarchy in the army which was responsible for maintaining the status quo. Historically, in western Shoa province, most landholdings were originally granted in parcels of eighty to one hundred acres called *gasha*. These were given mainly to men who served in the armies of Menelik II (1889-1913).<sup>4</sup> Those warlords who entered Shoa earlier in the sixteenth century obtained land and cattle through conquest and purchase and settled their followers on the land, thus gaining power and influence.<sup>5</sup>

Under Haile Selassie, tradition was maintained, and the army was systematically split along class, national, and tribal lines to lessen the threat of a united revolt, particularly after the aborted coup d'etat in 1960 led by Brigadier-General Mengistu Neway. The emperor went as far as arranging marriages between senior officers and members of the royal family.<sup>6</sup>

Feudal families were based in the military and many of the royal titles were of military nature and origin. According to Allan Hoben:

*The Amharic term "mekwannint"...comprehends all those men who hold or have held office in the secular or ecclesiastic elite at the national, provincial, or sub-provincial level. The mekwannint constituted the structure around which the military activity in Amhara society coalesced and through which it was sustained. It is keeping with this martial orientation that the most prized Amhara titles were in origin and reference to positions of leadership in the army.<sup>7</sup>*

The most important of these titles are: *Ras* (head of any army); *Dejazmatch* (commander of the palace doorway); *Fitawrari* (commander of the vanguard); *Gerrazmatch* (commander of the right wing); *Gerazmatch* (commander of the left wing) and, *Balambaras* (commander of a citadel). These titles were handed out by the emperor and by independent provincial rulers such as Rases and Dejazmatches. The deep ties of landownership to the traditional elite within the army made conflict over class interest natural. The bulk of the army is made up of the bulk of the Ethiopian population which is 85 percent peasantry. The deepest antagonism within the revolution was that between the exploiting landowners and the exploited peasantry who had no land. It is no coincidence that the army was turned on its head by the revolution and played such a vital role.

The absence of central authority, the limited development of trade which resulted in shifting military camps rather than the establishment of stable cities, and the continual strife over the expansion and growth of Ethiopia as a nation all fed the growth and organization of the military. Military service remained one of the few fields with financial reward for young men seeking fame and fortune. The inherent necessity of the army to maintain state power and the external threat of colonial invasion forged the army into an unchallenged organizational position in relation to other sections of Ethiopian society. The peasant in the field was isolated and illiterate. The proletariat was small<sup>8</sup> and faintly organized into trade unions. So, the only two sectors of society organized to the extent of wielding state power one way or the other were the feudalists themselves along with the other exploiting classes, or the military independent of the feudalists.

Antagonism in the army expressed itself when the Fourth Brigade, consisting of some 60 percent of the country's armor, mutinied at Neghelli, Borana because of poor living con-

ditions and their officers' negligence. The men arrested the brigade commander and other officers and petitioned the emperor to send the prime minister to hear their grievances. Instead of the prime minister, General Deresse Dubale, commander of the territorial forces, was sent. The commander was detained and forced to live under the same conditions as the soldiers. On returning to Addis Ababa, he had a severe case of the "Neghelli flu." It spread to the air force at Debre Ziet in Shoa province near Addis Ababa; the students, parents and teachers were demonstrating in the capital and one student was killed; the Second Division caught the flu and the symptoms were obvious when the noncommissioned officers and privates arrested their officers and seized the town of Asmara and closed the airport. The Fourth Division in Addis Ababa, the Signal Corps, Musician Corps and the Engineer and Transport Sections all were infected. Simultaneously an industrial flu was spreading.

### *Anti-Feudal Alliance*

The initial stage of the revolution had nothing to do with organization, but was spontaneous and supported by the masses. The exploited sections of society headed straight for economic targets so that by April of 1974 "...municipal workers, bus drivers, students, railway workers, hospital employees, garbage collectors, street cleaners, civil servants from half a dozen ministries, Moslems, Christians, army veterans, priests, university staff, prostitutes, imperial palace staff, industrial workers, and telecommunication workers all went on strike."<sup>9</sup> These strikes were instigated by the internal crisis of Ethiopia's economy as well as by the impact of international oil increases causing the prices of basic good in Ethiopia to rise by 80 percent and the domestic price of oil to rise by 50 percent. The mass revolt did not quite turn the trick:

*The workers were on strike, the students walked out, the teachers struck, and the peasants confiscated the land and cattle. The economy collapsed. Was this enough to transform society? Somebody had to say, "We must take state power."*<sup>10</sup>

State power was seized by the military which was organized into the *Derg* ("committee" in Amharic) and which was influenced by communists in the civilian politburo and remains an effective shield for those Marxists-Leninists working among the masses. This seizure of power was facilitated by a mass alliance of all anti-feudal forces in society.

The pressure of this alliance resulted in the first resignation of a prime minister in Ethiopian history. A number of aristocratic families, whose power and prosperity had been

undermined through Haile Selassie's reforms which had centralized power and wealth in his own hands and in those of his family, attempted to stagnate the revolution through promises of bourgeois reforms for their own class interests. The prime minister, Akililou Habte-Wolde, was replaced by the representative of these families, Lij Endalkatchew Makonnen; he was chosen by Haile Selassie as a compromise to these aristocratic groupings. Endalkatchew sought only to install a bourgeois monarchy and his cabinet was removed on July 22, 1974. During its six-month reign, the Endalkatchew cabinet attempted to secure the release from custody of former government officials who had been arrested under mass demand. It was during Endalkatchew's period of reform as it is called, that industrial strikes and other forms of protest escalated in the urban areas. The peasantry confiscated land and refused to pay the traditional taxes in open conflict with the landlords and the police. This phase saw the attempt of bourgeois elements to force the revolution into retreat; but they were stopped short by the coordinating committee of the armed forces, the police and the territorial army which had been formed in June of 1974. At this time, the throne of the emperor was retained and loyalty pledged when the coordinating committee adopted the name *Derg* and released a thirteen-point statement to the public explaining the aims and objectives of the revolution that had been spontaneous. Point number one reads:

*The Derg, whose motto is "Ethiopia Tikdem",  
pledges once again its loyalty to his Imperial Majesty the commander-in-Chief of  
the Ethiopian Armed Forces*11

At the same time, it was decided that the monarchy would be completely overthrown in the second phase of the revolution; that a provisional military government to "eliminate the feudal capitalist classes" could be established<sup>12</sup> and, that socialism was the goal of the final stage of the revolution.

Throughout this period, the emperor was being systematically isolated as leading members of the feudal class were removed from power and imprisoned. Still, the replacement of Prime Minister Endalkatchew was Lij Michael Imru, a cousin of the emperor and a known bourgeois liberal. However, during this period a freeze on house and shop rents was enacted and enforced. The National Resource Development Company was confiscated by the state, as well as the Anbassa Bus Transport Company. The St. George Brewery, along with the Haile Selassie Prize Trust, were transferred to the Ministry of Finance. These measures hit directly at the pocket of the emperor and were merely preludes to the overthrow of the "King of Kings" and the feudal class he epitomized. The Ethiopian weekly *Zereitu Ethiopia* published the first article declaring that Ethiopia did not need a monarchy.

On September 11, the Ethiopian people and their emperor watched "The Hidden Hunger," an expose on the Wollo famine, over nationwide television. This expose greatly aroused the Ethiopian masses, but it should be pointed out that as early as 1973 several hundred Wollo peasants, covering hundreds of miles, reached the outskirts of Addis Ababa and were given audience by university professors and students. The students collected money and food and went to Dessie in May of 1973 to arrange a meeting with the governor general. In reply, troops were called out to stop their activities and several students were reportedly shot dead.<sup>13</sup>

Haile Selassie's godly image was shattered through the widespread propaganda efforts of the revolutionaries. By August of 1974, he was sufficiently isolated by the earlier measures taken against his feudal entourage and by the alignment of the anti-feudal classes so that the deposition took place peacefully. The early stages of the revolution had their violent moments, but only after Haile Selassie's deposition did the revolution shift into its most radical stages, and temporary peace was to erupt into violent class war. The basis for the central role of the anti-feudal coalition was in effect disintegrating as other classes opted for state power.

With the deposition of Haile Selassie on September 12, 1974 and the radical land reform six months later on March 4, 1975, the feudal class was injured beyond recovery. Organized resistance from the feudalists, however, continued and even expanded in the countryside in the form of the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU). Influential in the formation of the EDU were Tigre's former governor, Ras Mengesha Seyoum, General Nega Tegegne, and General Iyasu Mengesha, a former chief of staff and ambassador to London where the EDU was based. All were members of the old feudal guard.<sup>14</sup> Inside Ethiopia the EDU was rooted in the provinces of Begemeder and Gojjam areas where feudalism was born and nurtured before branching out throughout Ethiopia. The EDU, in collusion with imperialism, sought to revitalize the feudal remnants in a desperate attempt to regain the property they had lost. Individual landlords also resisted the nationalization of land and reacted violently. The Dejazmatch Maskal Desta, at Lalibela, defeated government forces and temporarily set up a small fiefdom of its own.<sup>15</sup> These movements were sporadic and were inevitably annihilated by the overwhelming peasantry which was organized into 16,000 peasant associations which later grew to 24,000 after the nationalization of rural land took place. At this time the middle peasant, later to play the role of reactionary *kulak*, was aligned with the poor peasant against the large landowners. The urban proletariat stood behind the peasantry and demonstrated 800,000 strong, in support of the expropriation of the feudalists, during a rally in the capital city.

Around this same period Haile Selassie's oldest son, Crown Prince Asfa Wossen, was deprived of his appointment as king-designate and all titles of royalty were annulled. Five months later, in July, all land and extra houses in the urban areas were nationalized. This completed the collapse of the propertied classes. Prior to this measure, 80 percent of the land in Addis Ababa was owned by the nobility, the aristocracy and the business community. Nationwide, ten members of the Royal Family owned among them 8,852,476 square meters of land; the nobility owned 5,334,860 square meters and, twenty churches and monasteries owned 19,894,509 square meters of land.<sup>16</sup> The nationalization of rural and urban land did not result in the change of hands to another exploiting class, but was a revolutionary act changing class and property relations and thus surpassing mere reform. By striking at the very foundation of the exploiting classes, the proletarian nature of the revolution became fixed, to the detriment of many who had been revolutionary in the initial revolutionary phase.

*Realignment of the White-Guard Petty Bourgeoisie*

Frederick Engels said of class alliances that:

*...It is the fate of all revolutions that this union of different classes, which in some degree is always the necessary condition of any revolution, cannot subsist long. No sooner is the victory gained against the common enemy, than the victors become divided among themselves into different camps and turn their weapons against each other. It is this rapid and passionate development of class antagonism which, in old and complicated social organisms, makes revolution such a powerful agent of social and political progress... 17*

Ethiopia's Democratic Revolution Programme truly spoke of the petty bourgeoisie as its class ally. But, it did not anticipate at the time that the petty bourgeoisie would later split, with one wing countering the revolution, feeling that it moved against their own narrow class interests. The alliance that was so necessary in the embryonic stages of the revolution was to collapse as the petty bourgeoisie antagonistically faced a process too radical and too much in the class interests of the independent proletarian and peasant movement. Predictably the petty bourgeoisie fell "...back into abject despondency of fear as soon as the class below itself, the proletarians, attempt[ed] an independent movement."<sup>18</sup>

Violently the former alignment of classes broke up. The white-guard petty bourgeoisie was compelled by its class

interests to stop short of total transformation of class relations, and when they saw the opportunity to take the reins of the revolution, a struggle for state power emerged. The Red Terror-White Terror conflict was not a battle between the mind (civilian) and the gun (military), but rather a form of an antagonistic conflict between opposing class interests. The petty bourgeoisie was to wrap its claim to power in the words "civilian rule" and garbed itself as Marxist and anti-fascist. To claim to be anti-fascist was a propaganda lure cast by the petty bourgeoisie, in particular the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary party (EPRP), with the intent to play on the naturally anti-fascist sentiments that the Ethiopian masses had held since the invasion of Mussolini. It is interesting to note that the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution which emerged in response to the onslaught of the reactionaries were, in the beginning, comprised chiefly of those *kebele* (local governments) residents in the age group that had actually experienced and defeated real fascism under Italy's domination.

The students were largely on the white side of the terror and were deeply influenced by the rosy-colored but in fact reactionary line of the EPRP; but, the students were also split. On March 5, 1977, 600 workers and *kebele* leaders were armed at the Grand Palace gates to counter the White Terror.<sup>19</sup> Certain factories were also armed to counter sabotage. While the *Derg* found power in the organized proletariat, the main strength of the EPRP was based in a section of the students, teachers and trade-union leaders.<sup>20</sup> American influence was ingrained through the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU) from which the EPRP arose. The CELU was tied into "American organized and financed seminars."<sup>21</sup> The organized white guards in the petty bourgeoisie clashed among themselves in the struggle for power and the Red Terror-White Terror campaign was both a petty bourgeois revolt against a proletarian dictatorship and an interclass struggle within the petty bourgeoisie itself.

The realignment of the petty bourgeoisie began in that same period of consolidation of proletarian control in the state apparatus. After the feudal state structure had been destroyed by the proletariat and peasantry (the two classes which basically comprised the army), the white-guard petty bourgeoisie, in Engel's words, were eager to seize power and called upon the workers to calm down and guard against extremes. But the extreme they were concerned with was the extreme of independent proletarian power.

The proletarian-peasant consolidation of power expressed itself partially in the strengthening of the peasant associations at the end of 1975 and the expanding of *kebele* power in 1976. The *kebeles* (local governments comprised of localities in the urban and rural areas) have their own courts and defense squads.

Thus, they were essential to the maintenance of proletarian control and the counter-revolutionaries attacked them accordingly. Just as the peasant associations were responsible for the nationalization of rural land, so were the *kebeles* responsible for the nationalization of urban land. In the first few months of 1977, more than twenty *kebele* chairmen were victims of attempted assassinations. It was during this period of daily assassinations in the *kebeles* that the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution were formed.

A new power arose with the arming of the urban proletariat and the peasantry into a 300,000-strong peasant militia so that "increasingly, the defense of the revolution in the countryside is being left to the peasants."<sup>22</sup> The state apparatus, according to Lenin, is primarily the standing army, the police and the bureaucracy.<sup>23</sup> These came overwhelmingly under the control of the working classes and this was critical to the question, whither the revolution.

#### *Proletarian State or People's State*

Has a new state apparatus arisen? A fundamental criterion to determine the existence or destruction of the old state is to observe what class is supplanted by the functioning state apparatus. It is first of all necessary to understand that the state is an instrument of violence used by one class against another. In one case, the ruling capitalist turns the stick upon the proletariat. "But," Lenin said, "when the state will be a proletarian state, when it will be an instrument of violence exercised by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, we shall be fully and unreservedly in favor of a strong state power and of centralism."<sup>24</sup>

In Ethiopia, the state, under proletarian control, was turned against the propertied classes. The stick was in the other hand. When the petty bourgeoisie sought to grasp power, the stick was turned on the petty bourgeoisie. Centralism proved to be the central enemy of the petty bourgeoisie. And, centralism was embodied in the *Derg*. The suppression of the white-guard petty bourgeoisie was a bloody affair and not, to paraphrase Lenin, the peaceful calm, smooth and precise manner of the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway pulling into a station where the conductor opens the carriage door and announces: "Socialist Revolution Station." It was in such a manner that Lenin sarcastically criticized the Russian social revolutionaries who worried that "the situation is exceptionally complicated."<sup>25</sup> To the Marxist who has forgotten Marxism, the turning of the proletarian state on the counter-revolutionaries is too much to bear. The reality of the proletarian and peasantry--these revolutionary classes--violently smashing the petty bourgeoisie "revolution" and violently suppressing an unjust claim to power, is too close to the heart

for the forgetful Marxists to believe, and so they blame the Red Terror of the petty bourgeoisie. But these forgetful Marxists normally share the same class view and the theoretical error of the EPRP who believed that the concept of a People's State entailed a utopia where class conflict has somehow vanished although antagonistic classes continue to exist.

A telling sign of the EPRP's class nature is its demand for an "immediate people's provisional government."<sup>26</sup> This demand arises under circumstances and in a revolution where class conflict is the most salient feature, and where state power is wielded in the interests of the proletariat and peasantry. But, in accordance with history, the petty bourgeoisie claimed to embody the people's interest. As Marx wrote:

*The democrat, because he represents the petty bourgeoisie that is, a transition class in which the interests of two classes are simultaneously mutually blunted, imagines himself elevated above class antagonism generally. The democrats concede that a privileged class confronts them, but they, along with all the rest of the nation, form the people. What they represent is the people's rights; what interests them is the people's interests. Accordingly, when a struggle is impending, they do not need to weigh their own resources too critically. They have merely to give the signal and the people, with all its inexhaustible resources, will fall upon the oppressors.*<sup>27</sup>

"Civilian rule" and "people's government" are the catch words of the white-guard petty bourgeoisie. The oppressor is called the "fascist" *Derg* but comprises in reality the proletariat, peasantry and the men-in-uniform. And the oppressed are the petty bourgeois anti-revolutionaries who bemoaned, "Power belongs to the People. So what are you waiting for? Take over the tea houses, the transport, the mills, the shops and everything."<sup>28</sup>

It sounds very revolutionary. It even sounds like the proverbial "revolutionary" enthusiasts who wanted to pull up all the "capitalist railway tracks" in Russia and who Stalin had to calm down. In fact, the right-guard wing of the petty bourgeois left constituted a threat to the revolutionary process, and anyone who sees the countless shack-like teahouses in Addis Ababa will realize for himself the danger of these idealogues to the soundness of the revolution. While the *Derg*, in conjunction with those communists outside of the *Derg*, concentrated on those sectors of the economy such as land, banks, industry and extra houses--

the institutions owned by the exploiting classes--the EPRP was more concerned with slogans and demands that would only impede the revolutionary process. The petty bourgeoisie made a fatal mistake. The fact that power did not belong to the "people" was the very problem confronting the EPRP. Power belonged to the working classes.

It is because the working class was armed that the petty bourgeois bid for power failed. Today these white-guard groupings (EPRP in particular) still exist underground. The struggle against the petty bourgeoisie continues in the countryside against the *kulaks* who are resisting the expansion of state farms and the cooperative movement. With the recent formation of a commission to form a working-class party, Ethiopian revolutionaries expect these groupings to re-surface in the urban areas. There has already been a noticeable outflux of students from Addis Ababa to Gojjam and this is connected to anti-Derg activities organized on the campus by both the EPRP, Meisone and the Oromo Liberation Front. These groupings that have refused to join the process of building socialism are said to have united in opposition to the formation of the workers' party. It is no doubt with this reaction in mind that Ethiopian Chairman Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam for the first time publicly quoted Stalin in a speech on formation of the party commission. The reactionaries have understood the message and underground whisper of "Stalin's midnight knock." Indeed, the revolutionaries are moving against the counter-revolution before it goes on the offensive.

Politically the proletariat and peasantry are armed and in control. The state apparatus is organized in their interests. The revolution traversed a violent period of class confrontation where first the feudalists were deprived of state power and property; then the bourgeoisie and feudal remnants were defeated in their efforts to stagnate the revolution in a sea of reformism, and, finally the white-guard petty bourgeoisie in Marxist robes were violently countered in its historic claim and attempt to seize power after the revolution. Because of the successful seizure and maintenance of state power, socialism is in the long and difficult process of being built under the protection of an armed proletariat and peasantry.

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#### Notes

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