

ETHIOPIA AND THE HORN OF AFRICA*

by

Fassil Demissie

The specificity of a historical conjuncture is always identified in terms of two inter-related fundamental factors: the internal factor(s) that generate the conjuncture from the point of class struggle and external factor(s) which influence the conjuncture and relate it to other processes.

The primacy of the internal factor in the constitution of a historical conjuncture cannot be reduced to a few observable structural casualties nor to a mechanistic conception. To enunciate the primacy of the internal factor under conditions of imperialism, it means that the external factor, however decisive, does not operate autonomously from outside independent of internal factor. The articulation and determination in the last instance of the internal factor is mitigated by the constantly pulsating global balance of forces characterized by acceleration and brake, advance and retreat. To talk then of the primacy of an internal factor is to discover the multifaceted role of *imperialism* in the evolution of the national and world dimension of *class struggle*.

In order to apprehend the articulation of a historical conjuncture, the specificity of the nature of the class struggle, the power blocks and the supportive classes have to be identified in their contradictory motion in order to determine the tactical and strategic orientation of a peoples' class struggle.

The problems of revolution in Ethiopia, the specific forms it would take and the class forces that could lead it and its ultimate goals has increasingly loomed larger with the birth and development of the February 1974 democratic and revolutionary movement. It is not my intention to give a full account of the Ethiopian peoples' class struggle since February 1974. Instead, I shall confine my discussion to those issues that are cardinal to the consummation of the national democratic revolution in Ethiopia.

* This is an abridged version of a paper presented at the school of Architecture and Urban Planning, U.C.L.A. entitled "Africa and the New International Economic Order: Problems of Transition in Ethiopia" March 1978.

The first is of course the historic and momentous February 1974 democratic and revolutionary movement. The February 1974 movement was a historic culmination of a vast but sporadic movement which has been shaking Ethiopia since 1960's. A second item relates the importance of the 1974 movement to the political development in the Horn of Africa. Specifically, I shall attempt to demonstrate imperialist tactics used to contain and subvert the scope and depth of the February movement. Here I shall briefly touch upon the *warm support* given by *socialist, progressive and democratic* countries to the Ethiopian people and its implication to the national independence of Ethiopia.

The powerful and many-sided revolutionary and democratic movement of February 1974 was a decisive historical event in the Ethiopian peoples' struggle. To say it is decisive is not by itself sufficient to apprehend its specificity and uniqueness. It is essential and imperative to go beyond the transient and immediate manifestation of the movement and examine its underlying causes at the specific conjuncture in which Ethiopia found herself.

To do this, it is exigent to examine the February movement in the context of the crisis of imperialism that has generated and continues to generate exploration and underdevelopment. It is not necessary for our purpose here to recall in detail the crisis of imperialism since the Second World War, its stages or its possible outcomes. However, it would be useful to recall its main outlines.

The reconstitution of capital after the Second World War was carried out on a more advanced technological base to rejuvenate the productive apparatus of capitalist countries, particularly Europe. Massive investment in housing, education, health and public works was carried out for the reproduction of labor. This phase was carried out to the 1960's with a substitution of capital for labour rather than the rapid growth of labour itself. However, by the beginning of the 1970's, this growth pattern came to a halt with, (a) a trend towards over-accumulation and a declining rate of profit, and (b) the impossibility of counteracting these structural tendencies in a lasting way either by redistribution of income or more generally by the expansion of the market according to the same trend which had led to the expansion of the 1950's and the 1960's.

The generalized inflationary process of the 1960's in the capitalist countries reached its upper limit with a double digit inflation accompanied with staggering unemployment, monetary instability and the growing risk incurred by national and international financial institutions.

For the peripheral dependent capitalist countries of the Third World, the situation was even more grim. The generalized inflation worsened by the deterioration of the terms of trade increasingly jeopardized their *development plans* as the balance of payment constraints became more acute. Galloping inflation, a staggering increase in poverty, famine, permanent and growing unemployment, increasing inequalities in income distribution coupled with a consumption pattern and ideologies of the dominant capitalist countries have been the outstanding experience of many Third World countries during this period.

The political and economic problems which arose from this pattern of dependent development - a by-product of the expansion and prosperity of the dominant capitalist countries of Europe and North America led to the emergence of an *anti-imperialist* movement committed to national democratic and socialist revolution in ever increasing areas of the world dominated by imperialism. The major example and symbol of these struggles has been the struggles of the people in Indo-China and Africa. The victories won by the people in Indo-China and Africa is a heartening vindication of the relative weakness of imperialism and a fresh proof that the victory won by these people is primarily the outcome not of the size of terrain or sophistication of technology but of a peoples' *unity* and *determination* of national self-reliance plus the international solidarity, and above all else of a correct leadership and political line.

The post-war in Ethiopia is a direct outcome of Ethiopia's integration into the international capitalist system. The decisive change within the Ethiopian economy came with the gradual but steady penetration of foreign capital which increased rapidly after 1960 both in industry and agriculture. Initially, foreign capital was primarily oriented to infrastructure development necessary for commodity production. Later, foreign investment was geared to the small industrial sector which became dominant within the economy as a whole. Between 1946-1972, the total value of aid and loans from the United States and World Bank Group amounted to U.S. \$715 million of which 59.5% went to transportation, 13.4% industry and mining, 10.7% banking and financial institution, 9.9% to agriculture, and 2.7% for miscellaneous purposes. United States capital thus swiftly came to dominate foreign investment in Ethiopia.

The lopsidedness of the agrarian structure, the monopoly of power over land by the landed aristocracy, the exorbitant rents paid by peasants and sharecroppers as well as the insecurity of tenure gravely restricted the productive potential of the country. The ruthless exploitation of peasants by landlords, the pattern of surplus-appropriation from the peasants and its unproductive utilization, coupled with a devastating famine reached a dramatic point in the beginning of the

1970's. By 1973, the country was in a hopeless crisis. Social and economic deterioration was reinforced by the effects of the war in Eritrea and other provinces. Famine and galloping inflation aggravated the crisis further which deeply touched the rural masses and the urban petty-bourgeoisie. For the first time the imperial government and the ruling classes appeared to be decomposing, losing their entire social base and unable to control the mounting crisis. At each stage in the development of the February movement, the ruling classes attempted to block it by conceding various reforms all of which did not satisfy the popular masses.

In the facing of the mounting crisis within the ruling classes and their inability to impose their class hegemony politically, a stage was set in for the intervention of the *Armed Forces Movement (AFM)*: by abolishing altogether the monarchy itself - thus opening a new phase in the history of the Ethiopian people.

Initially the limited political development of the popular masses enabled *AFM* to oscillate between their aspiration on one hand and the ruling classes on the other. This vacillation partly reflected the political and social heterogeneity of the *AFM*. For our purpose here, it is sufficient to note that two tendencies were present from the beginning within the *AFM*, (1) a progressive tendency of the lower ranking officers and rank file soldiers who desired to see a progressive social order and (2) a rightist tendency whose class interest was tied with the landed aristocracy and imperialism.

Limited by its petty-bourgeois class vision, the *AFM* clearly could not on its own take the new role unless it appeared as a coherent power. To justify this, the *AFM* developed an appropriate ideology - *Ethiopian Socialism* - to guide its action. The notion of *Ethiopian Socialism* like other petty-bourgeois socialism of the "Arab" and "African" variety were rejected by the popular masses. Instead progressive forces within the *AFM* and other revolutionary groups outside the *AFM* (by summing up the historical experience of other countries and the Ethiopian peoples' class struggle) put forth the program of the *national democratic revolution* as the only way through which the Ethiopian people could assume their historical role in building up a self-reliant and independent people's Ethiopia.

The *AFM* and its leading body, the *Dergue* since September 12, 1974 have taken both progressive and reactionary measures. The progressive measures such as the agrarian reform, nationalization of banks, industries and foreign commercial properties, schools and extra urban houses, were a historic humiliation to the exploiting classes. All these achievements

were viewed by the people as their own victory - a first stage victory in their liberation from a stagnating society caught up in the web of semi-feudal and semi-capitalist fealties.

Beyond these progressive measures, the popular masses took independent action on their own in dealing with reactionaries both in the urban and rural areas. At times, *the Dergue* attempted to suppress their independent initiatives and left them immobilized without an offensive orientation in the face of internal and external reactionaries.

The overall situation leading to February 1974 in the country was characterized by a series of attempted coups, and the other counter-revolutionary activity primarily in Addis Abeba, all of which was directed to reverse one way or the other the Ethiopian peoples march towards liberation. During this period, the State power grew more repressive by attempting to suppress the independent popular organization set up in the urban areas to defend the revolution. It accomplished this by disarming them, by shifting their spontaneity and creativity towards a fabricated "foreign aggression and invasion" and the regime called in the popular masses to reconcile class conflict and class struggle.

While professing to be responsive to the demand of the popular masses, the State power headed by General Teferi Banti crushed and stifled all independent class reflection on the part of the popular masses. While attacking the chief enemies of the Ethiopian people, the State power justified the need to avoid internal class struggle considered detrimental to the cause of national unity in the face of "foreign aggression and invasion."

The attempted coup on February 3, 1977 was a culmination of a complex contradiction that was generated by the zig-zags of class struggle in the country, particularly in the urban centers. The attempted coup d'etat itself both in its class alignment and coordination reflect the final attempt to seize State power from within *the Dergue* by diverting the attention of the popular masses to external enemies. However, the failure of the coup in Addis Abeba shifted the theater of the struggle to the rural areas.

The situation within the State power apparatus was characterized by a constantly shifting balance of forces. At different times the popular masses did control some centers of power, particularly in the political and ideological apparatus of the State albeit without real parallel power. Thus the formal control of certain apparatus of the State did not result in a rapid and significant shift to real power since the politici-

zation, organization and arming of the people and the founding of a working class party to centralize formal power outside and independent of the State power was developing unevenly. However, it is important to note that the urban and rural associations and their relative autonomy from the State power, in taking independent action as an organ of popular power, frightened the State power and the ruling classes. These associations as well as the various workers councils were at an embryonic stage and to a larger extent fragmented without any central coordination by a working class party. It was at this conjuncture, a moment which defined the relative strength of various classes, their consciousness and relation with the State power, that set in motion the well coordinated *imperialist* aggression of Ethiopia through *Somalia*. It is also this specific conjuncture that defined Ethiopia's relation with socialist, progressive and democratic countries in winning international support to the defense of the country from an imperialist coordinated aggression.

The specificity of imperialist aggression of Ethiopia through Somalia cannot be fully grasped in the abstract and generalized imperialist strategy in Africa. An examination of the matrix of inter-imperialist, inter-African and class contradictions within which it is firmly and inextricably logged determines the specific characters of its particular initiatives and responses. In this respect, United States imperialism and its regional allies in the Horn and the Arabian Peninsula defined a set of tactics which recognized "officially" the present boundaries of Ethiopia as platform to carry out an ever increasing intervention. These tactics ranged from direct military aid to Somalia through a third party to political, economic and diplomatic interventions in order to isolate and subvert the Ethiopian peoples struggle. In a nutshell, the tactics used by the United States in the Horn consisted of a systematic encouragement of the ruling classes in the region, in particular Sudan, Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, Egypt and Iran to intervene directly and indirectly to subvert the Ethiopian peoples struggle.

The outcry by the Carter Administration about Ethiopia's intention to invade Somalia and the various statements by the administration officials were intended as a propaganda tool to arm the various ruling classes in the region. This was evidenced by the fact that the Carter Administration's efforts to get approval to sell arms to Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia. President Carter even rationalized that sale of arms to Egypt as intended to strengthen Egypt's security from Ethiopian invasion.

Behind this well-orchestrated public travesty, United States policy toward the Horn and the Southern rim of the Ara-

bian Peninsula is geared to accomplish the following tasks:

- (i) to isolate, contain and subvert national liberation movements
- (ii) to encourage Saudi Arabia and Iran through strengthening their military apparatus so as to enable them to maintain hegemony in the region.
- (iii) to use and adopt different tactics, sometimes contradictory in order to isolate popular governments of the region.

The escalation of imperialist intervention in Ethiopia after the summer of 1977 and the direct invasion by Somalia increased the international support given to the Ethiopian people by socialist and progressive countries to safeguard the fruits of the Ethiopian peoples struggle. While this support has been of great value to the cause of the Ethiopian people, it cannot be the primary and decisive factor for the victory of the Ethiopian revolution. International support is only secondary. The primary and decisive factor for the success of the Ethiopian revolution is the self-reliance on the ability and creativity of the popular masses. Without going further into this question, the judicious combination of these factors to safeguard the interest, unity, and independence of the oppressed Ethiopian people today assumes a wider significance in the Ethiopian peoples struggle.

In conclusion it must be stressed that, large scale military aid from outside will not *in itself* assure any significant success to resolve the political problems faced by the Ethiopian people. In fact, it might even lead to the transformation of secondary contradictions among the people to an all out civil war which will benefit only the imperialist powers.

In order to strengthen the national independence of Ethiopia today and to protect the gains made by the Ethiopian people, the participation of the broad masses in the defense of their country and revolution requires their politicization, organization and arming to speed up the implementation of the National Democratic Revolution Program. This requires *primarily the unrestricted democratic rights of the oppressed masses now* in order to strengthen the popular base of the revolution and allow progressive forces to organize the broad masses independent of the State power. Toward the realization of this objective and to speed up the consummation of the national democratic revolution in Ethiopia, the sympathy and whole-hearted support of the progressive and peace-loving forces of the world becomes indispensable.