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**THE
ETHIOPIAN
REVOLUTION
OF 1974-1975:**

**STUDENT
MOBILIZATION
AND
THE POLITICAL VOICE
OF THE PEASANTRY**

Introduction: Historical Narrative

Instrumentalizing the Feudal System: A Catalyst for Social and Class Division

Regional discontent regarding state elites in Ethiopia stemmed from the feudal land tenure systems in the Amharic-Tigre northern provinces and the conquest of Southern lands during the late 19th century through the mid-20th century (Chala, 2016, pp. 111-112). Throughout the reigns of Empress Zewditu and Haile Selassie, the land was commodified to expand and sustain a patronage network (Chege, 1979, p.362). This allowed elites to amass vast tracts of land without compensating Indigenous communities in the South, while simultaneously undermining peasant landownership in the north during the reign of Haile Selassie from 1930 to 1974 (Chala, 2016, p.112).

The southern region, predominantly inhabited by the Oromo and Somali, was subjected to the Gult system. A land tributary system held by the ruling class subordinated direct land ownership, which reduced the southern population to gabbar status, compelling them to provide unpaid labor to settlers: “cultivating land, supplying services, and constructing houses” (Chala, 2016, p.112). Under the Gult system, land taken from southern communities

was redistributed to settlers through temporary grants, requiring southerners to pay rent, excessive taxes on cultivation gains, and providing military service when demanded by landlords (Chala, 2016, p.113). These burdens severely restricted freedoms, disrupted ethnic cohesion, and empowered ethnic entrepreneurs who amassed wealth by exploiting forced labor, predominantly leveraged against the Oromo ethnic population in the South (Chala, 2016, p.114). Till the end of the imperial regime, it led 80 percent of the rural population into poverty, leaving them with little to gain after fulfilling their indentured obligations (Chala, 2016, p.113). Ethiopia’s northern peasantry was governed by the Rist land system, which guaranteed communal access to land for rural communities (Crewett et al., 2008, pp. 8-9). It made land plots hereditary, prohibiting their commercial sale among peasants, yet not among elites (Crewett et al., 2008, pp. 8-9). Like the Gult system in the South, peasants were required to relinquish part of their land cultivation and subjected themselves to elite taxation and mandatory service, such as in the Southern region (Crewett et al., 2008, pp. 8-9). The tripartite of elites: the Church, the monarch, and the King represented 70 percent of all agrarian soil in the empire (Chala, 2016, p.112). Elite holdings represented

1 percent of the national population as the consequence of the enrichment of absent landlords thanks to the Gult system, marginalizing all regional ethnic groups as the demerit of the neopatri-monialism constituency (Chala, 2016, p.113).

This essay analyzes the fall of Haile Selassie's regime during the 1974–1975 revolution by examining Ethiopia's feudal system failure during agrarian commercialization and the role of the Ethiopian Student Movement in undermining Haile Selassie's legitimacy. The movement exposed state corruption, advocated for socialist state liberation, weakened U.S. support, and fostered cross-class mobilization. Symbolizing the voice of the voiceless, the movement represented the nationally oppressed peasant class at the demerit of the economically failing feudal system, paving the path for the creation of the military junta, Derg, to overthrow the imperial regime.

Ethiopia Economic Modernization

The Impact of Agrarian Commercialization on Tenants and the Intensification of Class Division

The enrichment of social division between the peasantry and the elites of the imperial regimes is particularly salient during the shift toward the capi-

talist commercialization of the agrarian economy. Following the framework of the feudal system, class divisions deepened as “the government had largely ignored reform of the peasantry sector, choosing not to tamper too vigorously with the feudal structure” (Keller, 1989, p.123). From the mid-1950s onwards, commercialization policies aimed at large-scale exportation to the global market further marginalized the peasantry, where the elite class monopolized fertile landholdings and governmental investments. Elites imposed significant financial burdens on the peasantry, demanding an average annual interest rate of 40 percent (Keller, 1989, p.123). Class divisions were further entrenched as only 25 percent of Ethiopia's soil was used for agrarian production, while absentee landowners represented a significant portion of uncultivated land (Keller, 1989, p.123).

The conceptual approach of the empire was to decentralize the economic state apparatus in the hands of the elites, which is further demonstrated by the state's lack of commitment to implementing land reform policies, rather than leaving power in the arbitrary hands of landlords. Such implementation is present following the aftermath of the Chilado Agricultural Development Unit (CADU), located in Ethiopia's geographical center near Chilalo Mountain (Keller, 1989, p.125). The

initiative was implemented in 1967 to create a commercialized farming system among the few small landowners (Keller, 1989, p.125). The implementation was so successful that after a few years, beneficiaries of the initiative were capable of “doubling their income” (Keller, 1989, p.125). The initiative’s success led to drastic increases in land prices and ultimately led to the eviction of tenants who were contracting the land under the Gult system (Keller, 1989, p.126). The initiative of fostering economic growth for small landowners led to 25 percent of all tenants under the Gult system being evicted following the consequential increase in land payment (Keller, 1989, p.126). In pursuit of making land affordable, de facto state policies had a limited and significant impact in the long run as the monopolization of land was used to instrumentalize enriching elites and marginalize peasants.

Marginalizing peasants occurred at the demerit of negative state criticism. A perpetual occurrence was the instrumentalization of the land against peasants to suppress land reform outcries, such as alienating peasant tenants through elite manipulation of land prices (Chala, 2016, p.114). During the Weyane revolt in 1943, peasants who returned home were quickly evicted under suspicion that they participated (Chala, 2016, p.114). The harsh sup-

pression caused a unification cascade of all ethnic groups following the socialist view by the student movement, liberation against the oppressed, which helped unify all ethnic groups for the sole purpose of eradicating the salient social division created by the feudal system.

Student Movement

The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM), initiated in 1960, became the first organized body in the empire to criticize the state. The Newway brothers’ coup against the state played an instrumental role in sparking the movement, as it created a cascade of information for postsecondary students, challenging the narrative of state resistance and ultimately leading to growing student opposition (Lemma, 1979, p.31). However, the seed that truly sparked the student movement concerning state oppression was the outcome of Haile Selassie’s international student body that created a sense of “relative economic and political backwardness of their country” that truly sparked a change in the minds of youth for advocating against the regime (Lemma, 1979, p.31).

Anti-Imperialism: Marxist-Leninist Ideology

The movement launched its first an-

ti-imperial protest in 1965, involving 2000 students, at the discovery of the Shola camps reserve for those living under the poverty line. The camp was described in the report spread across Ethiopia as a “semi-Nazi concentration camp,” aimed to conceal poverty under the guise of preserving state stability, leading to anti-westernized views: “Is Poverty a Crime?” (Lemma, 1979, p.31). The movement, at its inception, sought to represent the oppressed. However, in its later years, and in response to state resistance, it evolved into a politicized, ideologically driven force that aimed for the complete liberation of the oppressed, leaning towards a Marxist-Leninist ideology (Zewde, 2014, p.101). The Marxist-Leninist ideology-driven student body condemned the U.S. for supporting the imperial regime through foreign monetary aid and a strong military resistance: “Many students say the American military presence at Kagnev has ensured the continuation of the autocratic regime” (Lemma, 1979, p.39). The student movement continuously fought back, and its greatest achievement was reducing the military presence of U.S. support in the Haile Selassie regime (Lemma, 1979, pp. 39-40). Legesse Lemma argues that the United States could have easily reinstated the monarchical regime and thwarted the coup had this not been the case (Lem-

ma, 1979, pp. 39-40). The student body could do so through international recognition by invading embassies abroad, demanding imperial withdrawal of the Haile Selassie regime (Lemma, 1979, p.37). The student body did not singularly represent the voice of the voiceless. It did so at an international level with the help of its diaspora in pursuit of increasing international recognition of state oppressiveness. Their efforts also sought to cast doubt on U.S. state affairs, including the intentions behind programs like the Peace Corps. In 1969, students intensified their resistance by utilizing intimidation and violence, such as throwing “gasoline bombs” at the U.S. embassy, ultimately forcing the vast expulsion of U.S. state officials and expatriate personnel working in the private sector (Lemma, 1979, p.38).

Exposing Poverty and Corruption: Wollo Famine and Oil Prices

From 1960 to 1975, the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) emerged as a critical voice for the oppressed, exposing government mismanagement and corruption. In 1973, the students were the first to reveal the regime’s failure during the Wollo famine (Keller, 1992, p.611). The government downplayed the drought in northern Ethiopia, restricted non-governmental ac-

tivity, and allowed only the Red Cross to operate in the affected areas (Keller, 1992, p.611). Leveraging their popularity, students distributed pictures of the famine, highlighting the regime's corruption, with much of its E\$778 million budget allocated to elite salaries rather than relief efforts (Keller, 1989, p.102). These efforts galvanized public dissatisfaction, showcasing the state's neglect of the northern peasantry. The drought highlighted land inequality in the north, where 200,000 people died the following season, as large cultivation lands prioritized food exports over domestic relief (Keller, 1989, pp. 167-168). Conceptually, as literature concerning regional activism in the South following the 1973 drought is limited, the paper argues that the extensive effort of state inequality demonstrated by the ESM is in response to state censorship. It brought a sense of fear and hurry to the southern population as land inequalities were salient.

Additionally, corruption is a pluralistic variable that stagnated throughout the empire and was leveraged by ESM to gain popularity. In 1973, following the same year, drought in the north had caused the Wollo famine, and the OPEC (Persian Gulf Oil Supplier Council) oil embargo caused a hike in petroleum prices for all non-Arab states (Keller, 1989, p.171). As a response, the Ethiopian government increased prices

by 270 percent in the year, doubling the rate imposed by the OPEC embargo (Keller, 1989, p.171). The goal of the drastic increase in gas prices was to increase the revenue of the monopolistic state-owned petroleum supplier (Keller, 1989, p.171). As a result, taxi drivers were forced to maintain their rate while bus fares had increased (Keller, 1989, p.171). Consequently, it led taxi drivers to embark upon the student protest, highlighting the demand for a decrease in oil prices. It led to severe discontent among the middle and lower classes, posing significant threats to one's financial budget of a twofold increase. Additionally, without ownership of an automobile, rural individuals relied heavily on access to taxis. The lack of accessibility of the public system significantly spread discontent and criticism of Haile Selassie's regime. However, with the participation of taxi drivers, both groups came together, mutually legitimizing each other's grievances. The student movement set the stage for mass protests, which had been unprecedented before this period. Their activism created a space for broader resistance, enabling groups like taxi drivers to organize and challenge authorities effectively, inflicting significant pressure on state power and ultimately reducing gas prices.

Military Juntas: Derg

The Overthrow of the Imperial Regime: Feudalism Exiled

The economic crisis that occurred in 1973 was the result of the feudal system's limited economic state progression, which was reliant on an unachievable export quota for agricultural goods in the world market. Ultimately leading to reduced state investment in infrastructure, such as military institutions (Bellucci, 2016, p.2). The ESM movement bared the body of the empire, chanting in the capital, "Land to the Tiller," of Haile Selassie's corrupt bureaucracy and demanding representation of the people in view of its politicized ideology for state liberation (Zewde, 2014, p.101). The state was incapable of managing exogenous variables, such as the 1973 famine and increases in oil prices, leading to mass protests. Amidst social inequalities, the military in the southern region had experienced much of what the peasantry was experiencing: regional food shortages and undrinkable water (Keller, 1989, p.101).

In conjunction with the mass demand for change due to the empire's incapability, it led to the creation of a military junta in 1974 called Derg, and the overthrow of the regime in the same year (Bellucci, 2016, p.5). The student movement, representing social state oppres-

sion, legitimized the very much anticipated Guardian Coup by creating the Ethiopian Revolutionary Party (ERPR) (Bellucci, 2016, p.8). An underlying significance of the coup was the uncertainty surrounding its consequences. The military junta capitalized on the trust of the Ethiopian Student Movement by adopting a left-wing, antifeudal stance as part of their political agenda (Bellucci, 2016, pp. 5-7). Dissonance occurred within the EMS as many sought the coup to be a Guardian Coup rather than anything, delegating the political power to be chosen by the people. However, the coup was increasingly accepted as the Derg comprised low-ranking officers (Bellucci, 2016, pp. 5-7). It symbolized the lower-class individuals that the regime had oppressed. After disposing of the imperial regime, the Derg militia created the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC); the new state council head was Mengistu Haile Mariam (Bellucci, 2016, p.5).

The PMAC in 1975 brought left-wing social reforms, nationalizing the previous overwhelming feudal private sector, such as "banks, insurance companies, and most large private enterprises" (Bellucci, 2016, p.6). It eradicated all land owned by absentee landowners by nationalization (Bellucci, 2016, p.6). In less than a year, the Derg dismantled a significant portion of the previous feu-

dal system through an enormous land reform initiative, ultimately redistributing land to the long-marginalized peasant class, which had been oppressed under the Gult and Rist systems since Haile Selassie's rise to power in 1930 (Bellucci, 2016, p.6). All rural land fell in the hands of the Ethiopian people, under the socialist influence of Marxist ideology praised during the protests that led to the revolution (Chege, 1979, p.370). The reform created land dependency among peasants by granting them minimal land allocations in accordance with regional needs; the state retained administrative control over all land (Chege, 1979, p.370). A strong emphasis must be placed on utilizing rather than owning, as the reform did not provide a status of ownership to the peasantry class (Bellucci, 2016, p.7).

Socialist Regime: Turn Rogue

In 1966-67, the PMAC socialist constituency vetoed all other political parties wanting a piece of power (Bellucci, 2016, p.8). Following the Ethiopian coup, many, including the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), anticipated that it would function as a Guardian Coup, eventually transferring executive power to an elected body under a socialist or democratic framework chosen by the Ethiopian people. This expectation was fueled by Derg's slo-

gan, "Ethiopia Tikdem," Ethiopia Above All, which was widely interpreted as a commitment to a unified and inclusive Ethiopia under a regime believed to embrace freedom (Chege, 1979, p.378). Suspicion of political discourse regarding regime criticism led to widespread killing, such as the complete eradication of the coopted student political party, the EPRP (Bellucci, 2016, p.8).

Conclusion

Ethiopia's economic modernization played an integral role in the degradation of the regime, as it prominently exposed the failure of state apparatuses to properly modernize due to the regime's resistance to reforming the feudal system. The feudal system intensified social divisions as elites manipulated land prices to evict tenants and exploit the peasantry through excessive taxation. As the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit demonstrated, the *de jure* policy was null as the land policy instrumentation was used to enrich elites within the regime.

The Ethiopian student movement played an integral role in channeling the grievances of the oppressed peasantry by publicly criticizing the Ethiopian regime and exposing its corruption and illegitimacy. The movement was so successful that it counteracted the empire's ineffectiveness in censor-

ing information, which gave them even more popularity as it galvanized them as the voice of the voiceless peasantry class. The ESM was capable of highlighting weaknesses such as the government's inability to provide relief to the hundreds of thousands who died, while ministers' salaries consumed more than half of public expenditure that year. Additionally, the students successfully mobilized middle-class workers to protest and criticize the regime, as seen in the case of taxi drivers criticizing the regime for increasing gas prices. The students were the first to explicitly demand state liberation in the name of socialist political philosophers, leading to the influence of the Derg political ideology. The students played a significant role in raising international awareness through the efforts of the state diaspora, causing vast U.S. personnel and state officials to flee the empire after the subsequent violent vandalization of the U.S. embassy, which forced the United States to reconsider its involvement in Ethiopia.

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