CHAPTER 16

Students’ Participation in and Contribution to Political and Social Change in Ethiopia

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Introduction

The future of any society depends on the next generation. Thus, providing individuals access to education and opportunities for participating in a country’s development should be considered a necessity. In Ethiopia until the end of the 19th century, however, there was only traditional education, which was virtually controlled by the Orthodox Church. Modern education was introduced at the beginning of the 20th century when Emperor Menelik established the first secular public school in 1907. Later, Emperor Haile Selassie, who had recognized himself as the father of modern education in Ethiopia (Balsvik 1985; Wagaw 1990), expanded access to primary and secondary education. This created a demand for higher education to which the government responded by establishing the first higher education institution in the country in 1950, the University College of Addis Ababa (UCAA). In 1961, the UCAA was renamed Haile Selassie I University (HSIU) and the Emperor became its first chancellor. At this time there was very little access to higher education but those who got the opportunity had actively participated in various national affairs.

Students’ active participation in their countries’ political, social and cultural issues can be considered a global phenomenon that emerged in the mid-1980s (Zewde 2014). University students comprise one youth group that has been striving to bring political and social changes across post-colonial Africa, described in a study titled, Student protest – university and state in Africa 1960–1995, (Balsvik 1998). Demonstrating their contempt for the capitalist system as a strategy for development, and their leaders’ abuse of power, “[t]he students took upon themselves to be the conscience of the nation and the spokesmen of the downtrodden”. In their self-image they were “more responsible for the future development of their countries than other groups” (Balsvik 1998, 316). This indicates university students’ firm aspirations to be present in the process of social and political change.

The Ethiopian student movement became one of the strongest of its kind in Africa, and one of the vanguards of the international wave of student activism...
in the 1960s (Balsvik 2012; Zewde 2014). Although the undemocratic rule of the Haile Selassie government system was the main reason for its conception, there were also other contributory factors: Ethiopian student activism abroad, the global student movements, the anti-imperialist and pro-socialist movements in some Western countries, the presence of students from different African countries on Ethiopian government scholarships and the inculcation of Western ideologies through the curricula. The students that came to study in Ethiopia were politically mature and increased the political consciousness of Ethiopian university students (Zewde 2014), helping them in their attempts to express their opinions and unite the student population. Moreover, in Ethiopia all public higher education institutions are residential colleges (i.e., food, accommodation and health services are provided by universities) and this has given students an opportunity to create unity and solidarity through frequent intergroup contact.

This chapter examines student activism in Ethiopia, a country which, together with other Sub-Saharan African countries, has the lowest number of students in higher education in the world. While in 1995, 58 per cent of the relevant age group was enrolled in tertiary education in high income countries, this was true of only three per cent on average in Sub-Saharan Africa. Women comprised only 15 to 20 per cent of the student population in higher education in Ethiopia in the 1990s. The low number of women and their low standing in the Ethiopian culture explain why female students were far from numerous among the activists. But from the early 1970s a few individual female students were willing to sacrifice, even their lives, for the cause for which the student movement fought (Balsvik 2007, 4–10).

Although there are studies which discuss the Ethiopian student movement in the 1960s and 1970s (see Balsvik 1985, 2007, 2009; Darch 1976; Kebede 2008; Tiruneh 1993; Zewde 2014), there is less scholarly discussion regarding university students’ participation in, and contribution to, political and social change over time. Therefore, the following sections illuminate university students’ participation in this field and advance the discussion of problems they faced during different regimes in Ethiopia. Moreover, comparative analysis across the regimes contributes to a better understanding of the issue of student activism in the country from social and political perspectives. It will be argued that students strongly influenced the political developments and social changes in Ethiopia until their unity was undermined by ethnic divisions. To better understand these issues, the next three sections of the chapter focus on students’ participation in and contribution to political and social change during the preceding two and the current regimes – (1) the Haile Selassie (Imperial) regime; (2) the Derg (Military) regime; and (3) the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE).