Student Politics in Traditional Monarchies
A Comparative Analysis of Ethiopia and Nepal

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Student political behavior ranges from zealous regime support or opposition to acquiescence and inactivity (see Koplin, 1968: 375–76). In this article, we explore the contrasting patterns of student political behavior that emerged under two distant but similar monarchical regimes experiencing roughly parallel rates of social mobilization. In the late 1950's, students in Ethiopia manifested little political awareness and initiative. By 1970, most of those in school were firmly committed to the overthrow of the ruling monarchical regime. And, in 1974, Ethiopian students played a central role in events that precipitated the arrest of Emperor Haile Selassie, the institution of military rule, and radical transformation of official social and economic policies. During the same period, students in Nepal consistently supported the monarchy. Why did students violently oppose the Ethiopian monarchy and support the regime in Nepal?

We contend that the most significant independent variables affecting the form and direction of student political activity in the two states were political. Two variables were of primary consequence: regime legitimacy and the pattern of political control. Our effort to assess the impact of these two political variables is facilitated by the fact that we are comparing student activity in two states with many similar structural characteristics. At the beginning of 1974, Ethiopia and Nepal were governed by traditional autocratic regimes. The people of both countries were ruled by conservative monarchs. Neither country had experienced sustained exposure to colonialism, an intensive independence struggle, nor infusion of massive amounts of foreign capital. Both societies are overwhelmingly rural and nonliterate1 and rank among the 15 poorest nations in the world (Taylor, 1972: 318, 328).

In Ethiopia and Nepal, monarchical authority is founded on a long history of rule by royal families and myths of divine authority. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church affirms the divine nature of imperial authority. In Nepal, the king is considered a reincarnation of the Hindu good Vishnu (Greenfield, 1965: 39–44, 70–72; Perham, 1969: 69–70; Clapham, 1969: 9–10; Jaiswal, 1971: 1–3; Hayes, 1975: 619–622). The coronation day investitures of the

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1 According to recent estimates, 93 per cent of Ethiopia’s population and 84 per cent of Nepal’s population are illiterate.
Emperor of Ethiopia and the King of Nepal fuse political and sacred elements. The title "His Imperial Majesty, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God and King of Kings of Ethiopia" is bestowed upon the Emperor by the archbishop (abuna) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and an extensive Hindu ceremony accompanies the crowning of the King of Nepal.

In both systems, monarchs exercise absolute, personal authority. Other government officials carry out policies initiated by the Emperor or King whenever they are designated specific tasks by his majesty or are directly selected and appointed by the monarch to fill particular posts (Clapham, 1969: 10; Levine, 1965a: 275). The rulers reinforce their traditional autocratic authority through the strategies of reassignment, demotion and/or arrest of those considered a threat. The modern guise of a constitution cloaks both ruling monarchical systems. Under the constitutions of 1962 (Nepal) and 1931 (Ethiopia), the monarchs are sovereign. They gave the constitutions as gifts to the people. Ultimately, therefore, they are not bound by formal rules of the political system (Perham, 1969: 71–76; Greenfield, 1965: 169; Malla, 1968: 1 ff; Markakis, 1974: 208).

Striking similarities also exist in the educational structures of the two countries. Education receives great emphasis. The need to train an indigenous cadre of technical, professional, and administrative experts is of paramount concern. Emperor Haile Selassie held the portfolio of Minister of Education in his own hands until 1966 (Markakis, 1974: 334–35). Prior to the death of King Mahendra in February 1972, supervision of the development of a comprehensive educational plan was in the hands of the Crown Prince. He introduced a new system of education upon assuming the throne in 1972.

Public educational systems are of recent origin and small in scale. Compared to school-age population figures, the rate of actual participation in the schools of Ethiopia around the start of this decade was 16 per cent at the primary level, 4 per cent at the secondary level, and .2 per cent at the university level (Taye Gulilat, et. al., 1972: 27, 10, 28–35; Markakis, 1974: 150, 182). In Nepal, less than 2 per cent of school-age youth attend secondary and higher educational institutions.

In the formative stages of both educational systems, expatriates taught most secondary school classes. French Canadian Jesuits founded the University College of Addis Ababa (later renamed Haile Sellassie I University and now Addis Ababa University) in 1950. With the infusion of U.S. aid for higher education, beginning in the early 1960's, the American state university became the model for the curriculum and methods of instruction adopted at Haile Sellassie I University [H.S.I.U.]. Expatriates constituted a majority of H.S.I.U. faculty until the early 1970's (Knipp, 1974: 4–7; Markakis, 1974: 151–52, 188). Trib-