Socialism and Law in the Ethiopian Revolution

Paul H. Brietzke
Associate Professor of Law, Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, Indiana

Most contemporary analyses of Third World affairs tend to replicate the patterns of scholarship laid down during colonial times by those who carried their ethnocentric predispositions intact from Europe. Studies written in reaction to this state of affairs are often little better, involving as they do uncritical transplantations of European notions of Marxism or social democracy. For example, Ethiopia just prior to the Revolution was depicted by academics and journalists as a traditional political system successfully and wholesomely perpetuating and modernizing itself. Little change was foreseen after the demise of the 82-year-old emperor, even by Ethiopian and foreign Marxists. The African “experts” also badly misjudged the Ethiopian military. Ernest Lefever (now US Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights) found a soldier’s dedication to promoting social stability under Haile Selassie which was “more patriotic than conspirational”, “Keynesian rather than Marxist”, and pragmatic rather than ideological. The Ethiopian military was denied an independent power base or policy voice by Pierre Von den Berghe; its role was seen as the historic one of supporting particular pretenders to the throne during succession crises. These extraordinary bad guesses—they were little more than that—warn us not to venture too far into the thicket of theory and pseudotheory from which they come. We must, rather, trace carefully the pragmatic, the accidental and, above all, the distinctively Ethiopian aspects of an intensely nationalistic military socialism. In order to do this, we must first look briefly at Ethiopia prior to the Revolution.

1. The Empire

Tom Farer concludes correctly that the “depth of Ethiopian misery is... invulnerable to exaggeration”; for most Ethiopians, life displays the Hobbesian characteristics of being nasty, brutish, and short. This is borne out by an examination of Ethiopia under criteria commonly used by development theorists. Ethiopians suffered cruelly under: 1) an average life expectancy of 35 years and infant mortality rates before one year of 16-30%; 2) a per capita income of US $90, one of the lowest in Africa—the poorest continent; 3) gross inequities in the distribution of land and other forms of wealth which exacerbated poverty; 4) an average daily shortfall of at least 400 calories, compared to what is deemed...
necessary to maintain minimal nutritional standards; 5) the lowest literacy rate in Africa; 6) the unavailability of the minimal urban services found in neighboring countries; 7) very low levels of productivity in traditional agriculture and commerce; 8) a manufacturing sector which accounts for only 6% of Gross Domestic Product and employs only 0.6% of the economically-active population while producing expensive import substitutes inefficiently (the value added in Ethiopia to finished products averages only 40%); 9) the lowest per capita consumption of energy in the world; and 10) a transport network grossly inadequate for so large a country. In the sixteenth century, Ethiopia was not far behind Europe in terms of development. If, as Walter Rodney argued so passionately, Europe underdeveloped Africa, by how much more was Ethiopia underdeveloped by her indigenous colonialists since the sixteenth century?

Ethiopia knew no European colonialism, apart from the brief Italian interregnum during World War II, but was effectively colonized through indigenous feudal arrangements. These emerged in seventeenth century Highland Ethiopia as the fallback position from premature efforts to centralize the government of a large territory, as in the Germanic Standestaat. Complex land tenure systems evolved to form the base of a large, hierarchical structure of claimants to the peasants' produce. A landed “gentry” moved increasingly from a preoccupation with military matters toward taxation and administrative activities; it functioned under a fragmentation of power resulting from grants of “fiefs” (gult) in lieu of salary and under the ultimate, if theoretical authority of an emperor. Just as this system began to die out, it was applied with new vigor in the vast areas to the south and east conquered by Emperor Menelik II late in the nineteenth century. A few years later, it was reimposed by Haile Selassie in its former homeland, as the basis of a political power secured through patron-client relations and through the domination of other ethnic groups by the Amhara. This kind of involuted imperialism has the effect of keeping the populace in a permanent state of underdevelopment and has been termed “despotism” by Wheeler, who maintains that this type of regime can only be changed through revolution.

Haile Selassie did, however, continue to press for centralization and, in the earliest years of his reign, modernization. He also made more or less futile attempts at a national integration by imposing the Amharic language and culture through educational, communications, and transport networks radiating outward from the capitol established by Menelik—Addis Ababa. The Emperor’s modernizations can be characterized as defensive because they constituted the minimum of response or adaptation that would permit a traditional elite to survive relatively unscathed. As in the political strategy adopted by the Kuomintang, there was a ritual avoidance of socio-economic problems and reforms stopped far short of altering the traditional elites’ control over local affairs. His few reforms were oriented toward the urban areas that, prior to the successes of Mao Tse Tung at least, were regarded as the loci of political stability. Changes