ETHIOPIAN MODERNIZATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND DERAILMENTS

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Epigraph

The most beautiful constitutions and codes of law are empty words unless they are enforced. People do not have rights because their rights are natural, written somewhere, or flowing from group solidarity, or pledged by confidence-inspiring leaders. People have only those rights that they can effectively defend.

Author's Note

The desire to allow open access to a large number of Ethiopian readers explains the reason why this manuscript was not submitted to a normal academic publisher. At first, an academic institute in Addis Ababa agreed to meet the condition by publishing a limited number of hard copies while also posting an open access electronic version on its website. Unfortunately, the agreement fell apart following my resolution to include a chapter critical of Abiy Ahmed's policy, the current prime minister of Ethiopia. In light of the drastic political shift that carried Abiy from the promise of democratic changes to the too-familiar resort to dictatorial methods, a scholarly investigation could not leave out this turn of events without compromising its standing. All the more reason for including the shift is that it provides a decisive argument to the main thesis of the manuscript, namely, the active presence of a faulty dynamics within the Ethiopian state structure derailing the implementation of positive reforms since Ethiopia's encounter with the modern world. Aware of the closure of any possibility for open access posting in Ethiopia so long as the present government is in place, I decided to send out the manuscript to some of the websites stationed outside Ethiopia and regularly visited by Ethiopian intellectuals and a wide Ethiopian readership. I hereby extend my gratitude to the editors and webmasters of the websites I contacted for agreeing to post the manuscript in its entirety.

Contents

Abbreviations

EPLF   Eritrean People's Liberation Front

EPRDF   Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

EPRP   Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party

Derg   frequently used for PMAC (Provisional Military Administrative Council)

MEISON   Mela Ethiopia Socialist Party Niqinaqe (All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement)

TPLF   Tigray People's Liberation Front

WPE   Workers' Party of Ethiopia

Note on Ethiopian Names

Since the custom in Ethiopia does not use family names, the book identifies Ethiopians by their first name rather than their last name. The latter, which is the father's first name, is not used to identify a person; it is simply an addition to the real name, namely, the given first name.

Introduction

This book examines and theoretically articulates the various facets and crucial phases of Ethiopia's encounter with the modern world and the challenges its efforts to modernize faced during the course of three consecutive yet highly divergent political regimes.[1] These phases roughly correspond to Haile Selassie's and post-Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, with the post-period spreading over two milestones, namely, the revolutionary shift of the Provisional Military Administrative Council (the Derg) and the no less critical reshaping of the Ethiopian political system by an ethnonationalist agenda subsequent to the Tigray People's Liberation Front's (TPLF) seizure of state power. Despite their drastic differences, a main theme deriving from a shared feature unites these three regimes: using different ideological frameworks, they all promised modernization and social progress under the directive of a strong and centralized state. Not only did the promise never materialize, but it was also overshadowed by social conflicts and even civil wars, the severity of which has created doubt in the minds of many observers as to the viability of Ethiopia as a united country. The book exerts a major effort to analyze the cause and the different manifestations of the common feature tying the three regimes, with the view of laying out its detrimental impact and identifying the direction liable to remove it. To this end, the book extends its inquiry into post-TPLF Ethiopia to see whether the current Abiy Ahmed's government is putting in place the reforms needed to deal with the chronic problems of the country.

An important characteristic of this study is the problematization of Ethiopia's modernization through the grid of basic modernization theories, notably of their recurrent theme, "modernization versus tradition." The study argues that the theme itself reveals that modernization involves the goal of survival through changes enabling a given ruling class to cope with internal and/or external challenges. Unrests due to internal fractures or threats coming from belligerent neighbors are generally believed to trigger the need to acquire new and improved means through political and socioeconomic changes. In other words, the book proposes the following thesis: when ruling classes develop *the survival will conceding the necessity of reforms*, they initiate a promising change, the very one *synthesizing tradition with modernization*. By contrast, the option to simply uproot tradition brings about the revolutionary type of change, which has proven, more often than not, its inability to succeed in generating the basic features of modernity.

In addition to firmly binding modernization to survival, the assumption squarely places the failure to modernize on the refusal or impotence to change traditional features and norms. Such a failure considerably reduces the ability to respond effectively to the challenges and, therefore, to defend the integrity and continuity of the existing social system. Just as changes in heritable traits boost the survival chance of living forms in biological evolution, so too modernization is a societal change that upgrades a social formation's ability to overcome threats. The obvious differences with biological evolution are that (1) social changes do not implicate heritable traits, since they deal with institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural factors; (2) they are conscious and goal-oriented and, as such, they implicate human decisions and are transmitted through learning and acculturation. Still, the issue of survival through upgraded ability is their shared characteristic, all

the more so as modernization gives advantages, and so compels other countries to react defensively by implementing similar or equivalent changes.

The involvement of survival brings about a change of approach, for it questions the derivation of the motive to modernize from the natural aspiration of people to improve their conditions of existence. Not that the change of approach completely rejects the propelling impact of the aspiration to a better life, but because it maintains that, by itself, the aspiration cannot initiate and shoulder the necessary changes that modernization requires. It is better understood as a fallout of the means and opportunities generated by modernization. The order of causation does not go from the aspiration to social development, but from the growth of material forces to the desire for a more comfortable life. To reverse the order of causation is, as the saying goes, to put the cart before the horse. It is to create a false problem, that is, a problem that cannot be solved for, in the powerfully insightful words of Karl Marx,

> No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed, and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society. Therefore mankind always takes up only such problems as it can solve, since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.[2]

In other words, pure voluntarism ignores a basic social law, which is that a projected change, no matter its nature, cannot materialize unless the appropriate objective conditions are already in gestation.

The corollary of the precedence of aspiration over actual material possibilities is obvious: instead of supporting the effort of modernization, it will stand in its way, which is admittedly one of the problems of developing countries. The precocity of desire turns modernization into a fantasy rather than an objective reachable through hard work, sacrifices, and realistic planning. Some such warning reminds us of the guidance contained in the famous speech of Louis-Antoine-Léon de Saint-Just, one of the leaders of the French Revolution, when he said, "happiness is a new idea in in Europe."[3] The prospect of prosperity, born of Europe's technological and economic advancements, not only invented the idea of happiness on earth, but also presented it as an achievable pursuit. Precisely, in distinction to the gratification of desire, survival involves a motive entrusting members of a given social community with the duty to serve a higher cause, be it nationalism, a religious calling, cultural integrity, or any other cause. This kind of commitment elevates people beyond individualism and purely hedonistic pursuits, and so demands and obtains more from them. Equally important is the fact that survival calls for the kind of changes upgrading the defensive capacity of a given nation. As such, it necessitates the full mobilization of the nation's human resources, which mobilization calls for the implementation of a social change strengthening national integration through the recognition of equal rights, just as it commands the development of technological capability and a self-reliant economy, since the goal is to produce enough wealth to build a dynamic material basis and a sustainable military force.

When applied to Ethiopia, the main thesis of modernization school, to wit, the belief that the persistence of tradition is the major obstacle to modernization, fails to be sufficiently operational. In particular, it passes over the fact that some features of Ethiopia's traditions do not fit, as the following chapters will demonstrate, the qualification of being unfriendly to a

modernizing process. Since the framing of the failure to modernize in terms of modernity versus tradition proved to be insufficient, the other avenue, which is to blame colonialism for the failure, is found to be irrelevant as well in light of Ethiopia's success in repelling colonial attacks. Added to Ethiopia's long and epic history of independence in a hostile environment, the success highlights survival as the defining ethos of Ethiopian polity. Once the attempt to blame tradition is put aside, the remarkable record of survival calls for a change of perspective in the explanation of why Ethiopia's modernization is long in coming. Notably, it presses for the assumption that Ethiopia squandered its numerous modernizing assets because of deviation in the wrong direction. The assumption becomes stronger when we note that successive attempts to correct the direction, far from providing adjustments, increasingly plunged the country into a self-destruct momentum from which it seems unable to extricate itself. In short, Ethiopia's modernization was not, and still is not, so much blocked by inherited traits as derailed.

Let me be more specific. A derailment occurs when a train runs off its rails, even if it does not leave the track. Granted that it can have many causes, like mechanical failure, collision, and human error, its analogical use in this book specifically points to the conductor, that is, to the political leadership of the modernization project. Moreover, the blame for the derailment is put not on human errors, but on the deliberate usage of imported modern means and methods as enablers in the pursuit of a non-modern goal, the gist of which is the achievement of political absolutism. To the extent that means and methods are diverted from their original objective, the inevitable consequence of the deviation is the cumulative aggravation of social ills. What is more, the momentous nature of derailment appropriately captures the common feature that runs through the regimes of Haile Selassie, the Derg, and the TPLF. In a word, this study shows how the disjunction between means and goals, in installing political absolutism in the name of modernization, ruined the opportunities that brought the three regimes to power, each time leaving the country in greater shambles. In view of the overarching goal of political absolutism, another synonymous expression for derailment comes to mind, which is hijacked modernization, with the understanding that hijacking emphasizes the political aspect while derailment is more general in that it blends the political side and the underlying structural operations.

So analyzed, Ethiopia's failure to modernize takes a tragic connotation, given that the failure is nothing else than a self-inflicted incapacity. Moreover, the elucidation of the failure becomes a complex issue that defies the usual way of explaining the underdevelopment of African countries. So that, considering the long survival of Ethiopian polity and its numerous political and cultural assets, as well as its military resistance to repeated external encroachments, including those of colonial forces, the spectacle of a destitute and conflict-ridden "modern" Ethiopia remains a puzzle even if it is subsumed under the general concept of derailment. The effort to comprehend must, accordingly, mobilize different tools from various disciplines of social sciences as well as philosophy. Accounting for the Ethiopian failure is less about identifying obstacles and more about showing how the modernizing project repeatedly collided with itself.

The unfolding of this self-colliding process begins with Haile Selassie's launching of a program of modernization that prides itself on integrating modernity with tradition. Laudable as the program was, it did not deliver the promised benefits. Neither tradition was preserved, nor was the goal of modernization achieved. Instead, a political system counteracting the advances of modernization was put in place. All the same, it remains true to say that Haile Selassie's regime has laid the foundational components of modernization in Ethiopia and that all that followed can be construed either as a reaction against or a continuation of his legacy.

Widespread and profound frustrations over the promised benefits of modernization despite Haile Selassie's long reign led to a revolutionary uprising that demanded total change and the rebuilding of the country on the basis of the Marxist-Leninist ideology and principles of social organization. The conviction was that a tabula rasa policy was necessary to get rid of the two main obstacles blocking the progress of modernization: on the one hand, the imperial system, the landed class, and the burgeoning but outdated bourgeois class and, on the other, the system of inequality favoring one ethnic group over other ethnic groups. The revolutionary solution was believed to have the distinct advantage of killing two birds with one stone, that is, of eliminating class and ethnic impediments at the same time.

Even though the revolutionary phase was committed to rebuilding everything anew, it nevertheless remained unconditionally loyal to Ethiopia's unity, historical identity, and territorial integrity. The third deconstructive phase, which overthrew the revolutionary regime, saw a contradiction between the unconditional commitment to Ethiopian unity and the promise to end ethnic inequality. Its thinking was that the removal of ethnic inequality requires nothing less than the liberation of the various ethnic groups forcibly integrated into the "Amhara empire." Only thus can they recover their right to self-rule and develop their culture. Some such goal of liberation necessitates the creation of a new Ethiopia based on the free consent of sovereign ethnic groups, a sovereignty that includes, among other things, the right to secede if they so wish. And as though it were carried by an overpowering impulse toward a graver derailment, the promised liberation of ethnic groups turned into the absolute hegemony of the group claiming to represent the Tigrean minority ethnic group. This frustrating outcome led to a general uprising against the TPLF's rule.

The above consecutive and deep-going alterations denote a process breaking with the trend of normal social evolution, even by a revolutionary standard. The fact that the course of change went through such radical twists and turns shows, first, that Ethiopians have lost control of their modernization process; second, that there is an embedded derailing factor that prevented each regime from correcting the direction and engaging in a normal course of change. The common derailing factor stands out when one admits the disheartening idea that the reforms as well as the revolutionary measures taken to advance modernization were all introduced with one goal in mind: the retention and expansion of absolute power. Because such an absolute control over Ethiopian society counteracted the introduced changes, it naturally derailed the process of modernization. Thus, Haile Selassie's reforms were tied to the goal of instituting and consolidating imperial autocracy. The Derg's revolutionary measures were no different: in the name of socialism, all spheres of life came under a totalitarian system. In addition to fragmenting Ethiopia's social system along ethnic lines, the TPLF jealously preserved and even strengthened all the dictatorial restrictions put in place by the Derg, its ultimate objective being the institution of a lasting politico-economic ascendancy of the Tigrean elite.

To demonstrate the presence of a common self-inflicted inability in the three consecutive regimes, the book proceeds according to the following order. First, it analyzes some representative theories of modernization with the view of identifying concepts, historical experiences, and theoretical perspectives that would be relevant to understanding the case of Ethiopia. As mentioned above, two important issues emerge, namely, the link between survival and modernization and the theme of tradition versus modernity. A detailed study of the long survival of Ethiopia follows, with emphasis on its confrontation with colonial forces. The study's main goal is the identification of the forces that enabled the survival of Ethiopian polity in both precolonial and colonial times. The result is that these forces emanate from the geographical, cultural, and sociopolitical makeups of the country.

The identification of the forces logically invites a reflection on the contrasting paths of Japan and Ethiopia. While the two countries are comparable in their survival will, they responded differently to colonial encirclement and threats. The top echelon of Ethiopia's leadership, unlike the Japanese ruling class, did not feel the pressure to take far-reaching modernizing measures. The book identifies the reason as being the southern expansion, as a result of which Emperor Menelik considerably increased the size of his empire. The expansion made available significant additional material and human resources that were judged sufficient to ward off threats. This confidence reduced the urgency of profound reforms and encouraged the belief that an enlightened and pro-Western monarch, provided that he commands enough power, could very well modernize the country without too much disruption. Stated otherwise, thanks to a tight centralization and a policy of nation-building through assimilation, an enlightened and pro-Western imperial autocracy can put the country on the right path to modernization. As could be expected, the lack of deep-going reforms generated a hybrid system in which modern means were used to enhance some elements of the traditional system that were not in tune with modernization. In particular, it installed a powerful imperial autocracy and a parasitical landed class, with far-reaching consequences, especially in the southern part of the country.

Economic stagnation, ethnic inequality, rigid social stratifications, and an unabated policy of repression combined with the eruption of acute and topical socio-economic crises in the early 70s led to urban protests spearheaded by a highly radicalized student movement. The civilian protests quickly extended to military camps as a result of which a military committee known as the Derg was formed. The Derg started to imprison high officials of the regime and finally deposed the emperor and assumed full power. The turning point occurred when the Derg, abandoning its initial nationalist program, adopted the Marxist-Leninist ideology and social program advocated by the student movement. Soon after the adoption, a series of revolutionary measures that completely altered the socioeconomic foundation of the country followed, like the nationalization of all urban and rural lands, industries, and important services. The implementation of these measures and the installation of the organizations needed for their functionality strengthened the dictatorial rule of the Derg and its supporters. This dictatorial rule increasingly leaned toward the personal dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam, who ended up as the unchallenged leader of the Derg.

The main drawback of the consolidation of the military takeover was a persistent lack of peace subsequent to continuous wars in various fronts, especially against guerrilla forces in Eritrea and Tigray. This condition of incessant war drained the resources of the state, which became unable to finance and launch the planned development programs. Consequently, the expected economic growth stagnated and even turned negative with people experiencing a sharp deterioration in their material conditions of existence. Furthermore, in addition to completely losing its popular support, changes in the international alignments of forces deprived the Derg of the military assistance of the Soviet camp, which was going through a social and ideological turmoil at that time. The outcome was the complete military defeat of the Derg in the hands of northern insurgents, who marched on Addis Ababa and seized power on May 28, 1991.

Despite promises of democratization, it did not take long for the victorious TPLF insurgents to show their real face. Their leadership opted for a federal system, but based on the fragmentation of Ethiopia's national unity along ethnic demarcations. As mentioned above, the declared goal of ethnic federalism is to achieve equality by providing each ethnic group the right to self-rule. However, the system is so designed that the TPLF remains the hegemonic force at the federal level and, through it, in regional states. The openly undemocratic nature of this severe

political imbalance in the entire federal system enabled members of the TPLF and the Tigrean elite to exert full control over the national economy and the military and repressive apparatuses of the state. Obviously, the promised change proved to be nothing more than a Tigrean substitution for the denounced Amhara hegemony, with, however, the added feature of more troubles ahead, given that the TPLF represented the rule of a minority ethnic group in a federal system designed to foment continuous disunity among ethnic groups. The ethnic grievances against a highly repressive rule of an ethnic minority elite, combined with its disproportionate stranglehold on the economy and the distribution of wealth, ignited protests in various parts of the country and brought down the TPLF's rule.

In sum, the fate of the three consecutive regimes points to the same failure, which is their absolute inability to put Ethiopia on a steady and progressive course of modernization. Reflecting on the discrepancy between their declared goal and their actual performance, the final chapter underscores their shared reluctance to reform the state and the distribution of power. All of them used the state to control absolute power and exclude contenders, the end purpose being to get a firm grip on the economy, the distribution of wealth, and on other interests. One can extrapolate from their removal that the fate of the government that replaced the TPLF will also depend on its willingness and success to reform the state in the direction of inclusiveness. Alas, despite all sorts of reformist promises, the replacing government of Abiy Ahmed continued to operate within the same political structure and ideological framework as the TPLF, the only difference being the attempt to substitute an Oromo hegemony for the Tigrean one, thereby reconfirming the vigor of the underlying derailing force.

Needed, therefore, is the genesis of a political system that can tackle the challenges of modernization by calling on and activating the full participation of all the social forces. The strategy of a selected elite assuming the planning and implementation of modernization through the absolute control of a centralized political system simply reproduces a colonial model of development, the only difference being that native elites spearhead the process rather than white colonizers. This kind of development cannot be anything other than a dependent development, both in its international and internal dimensions, that is, a development inserted into a dominant neocolonial order aiming at profiting the metropolitan centers and their local, native agents. Evidently, an excluding system cannot design and implement a national strategy of development: in turning its back to a policy of national inclusiveness and participation and the building of a self-reliant economy, it shows that it is only interested in harnessing the country to the Western engine driving the neocolonial order. This interest is proof enough that a strategy of development sponsored by an exclusionary state is congenitally incapable of promoting and implementing a sustainable national policy of modernization. Hence the call in the final chapter of this book for a sweeping reform of the Ethiopian state in the direction of inclusiveness, the only way by which the derailed process of modernization can be put back on the right rails. Embedded in this call is the need to initiate culture change: without the right transformation of beliefs and values, the disjunction between means and goals caused by the pursuit of political absolutism can never be closed. Only when the mind operating the modern means nurtures the values and beliefs that go with modernity can modernization follow the path of success.

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[1] Many of the ideas developed in this book are drawn from the books and articles on Ethiopia that I wrote after the fall of the Derg. I ask the reader to refer to these books and articles for additional clarifications. To limit to books, they are: *Meaning and Development* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, Value Inquiry Book Series, 1994); *Survival and*

Modernization—Ethiopia's Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse (Lawrenceville, N.J.: The Red Sea Press Inc., 1999); *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-1974* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2008); *Ideology and Elite conflicts: Autopsy of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011).

[2] Karl Marx, "Excerpt from A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 44.

[3] Saint-Just, "A New Idea in Europe," *The Idea of Europe: Enlightenment Perspectives*, June 6, 2017, https://books.openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/obp.0123/ch1-61.xhtml