

## **The Ethiopian Experience of Devolved Government CHRISTOPHER**

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*Given that Ethiopia has from the earliest times comprised an exceptionally large and diverse territory, some mechanism for accommodating diversity has been central to Ethiopian governance. In 'historic' Ethiopia, before 1855, this was achieved by the effective devolution of power to regional governors who remained formally subordinate to the emperor, though the effective level of devolution varied widely, and the power of the emperor was in principle absolute. The following century produced both a massive expansion of the country's territory and consequent diversity, and a steady increase in centralised imperial power, which allowed only limited autonomy for some regional governors. The imperial system proved entirely unable to manage the sole formal exercise in federalism, the federation with Eritrea created under UN auspices in 1952, and its relentless suppression of Eritrean autonomy paved the way, at tragic human cost, for armed resistance and eventual Eritrean independence. At the same time, growing opposition to the imperial regime was in part expressed in recognition of the deeply unequal basis for Ethiopian governance, which privileged Shoa and the northern Christian highland zone, and Marxist students in particular started to look for a solution by reference to Stalin's writings on the 'national question' in the USSR. The Derg regime opted however for a highly centralised approach to revolutionary governance, despite some token concessions, and this in turn played a major role in prompting the armed opposition that overthrew it in 1991. The resolution of the 'national question' was therefore one of the major challenges facing the incoming EPRDF regime.*

### **Introduction: accommodating diversity**

The accommodation of diversity has been at the centre of Ethiopia's long experience of governance. Although the country has never until recent times had any formal federal arrangement, and the one experience prior to 1991 – that of the Eritrean federation between 1952 and 1962 – proved an unmitigated disaster, some means of managing a large and at the same time highly diverse population, the critical issue which federalism has been devised to accommodate, has been

essential. Even before the massive expansion of the territory and population controlled by the Ethiopian state in the late nineteenth century, Ethiopia was both exceptionally large and extraordinarily long-lasting among precolonial sub-Saharan political entities. Its population has likewise been multi-ethnic since the earliest times, and governing that population was made vastly more difficult by the spectacular topography of the northern Ethiopian plateau that formed the original heartland of the state. With most of its people inhabiting relatively densely populated plateau areas separated from one another by deep ravines, even travel between different regions was difficult at the best of times, and virtually impossible during the heavy annual rains; it could normally be accomplished only on foot, or by mule. The late nineteenth century expansion incorporated into what was then the Ethiopian empire territories that were for the most part less mountainous and more accessible than those from which the state originally derived, and coincided with the introduction of roads and wheeled traffic, but at the same time greatly increased the physical extent of the state, and the diversity of the peoples living within it. A survey of the country's experience of managing this diversity, mixed as this has been, correspondingly provides the essential background to any appraisal of its current federal arrangements.

Broadly speaking, one can characterise the Ethiopian political system before the modern era as constituting, in fact if not in form, a kind of federalism. Power had necessarily to be devolved, simply because it could not effectively be exercised from a distance. The constituent units of this federation were defined by topography, and the individual plateau areas acquired, as a result of their relative isolation, a measure of identity of their own. Within these areas, particular individuals and dynasties – even if the latter were usually relatively short-lived – enjoyed a measure of authority among local populations, and although governors were formally installed and recognised by the emperor, he needed (to a varying extent, depending on local political conditions and the level of imperial power at any given time) to take account of this authority in appointing individuals who could exercise power. The unity of the system as a whole was maintained by a high level of cultural cohesion, defined especially by adherence to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, and an awareness of difference from neighbouring peoples who around much of the periphery of the empire were characterised by differences in ecology and consequent social structures and lifestyles (with lowland areas calling for pastoralism rather than arable agriculture, and for clan systems of one kind or another, rather than territorial governance), and by Islam. A further important element in binding the system together was the distinctive practice of imperial mobility: rather than maintaining a fixed capital, the emperor and his entourage moved around the imperial domains in a great

tented city, maintaining and if possible extending the frontiers, and imposing his presence on subordinate rulers. This also had the effect of preventing the central power from becoming associated with any particular area of the country, and thus prompting alienation and potential separatism among more peripheral units. There was always a measure of tension between regional and imperial authority, and some regional governors – such as the Bahr Negash, ruler of the area north of the Mareb in what is now Eritrea, on the most sensitive of the country's frontiers – acquired a substantial autonomy of their own. With the decline of imperial authority from the sixteenth century onwards, largely as a result of external factors including Islamic invasion, Oromo encroachment, and the first significant contacts with Europe, the distribution of power between central and devolved governance shifted markedly towards the latter, leading eventually to the virtually total breakdown of imperial authority and the period characterised as the *zemana mesafent* or era of the princes. As this name implies, the collapse of imperial power led not to general anarchy, but rather to a structure in which power continued to be effectively exercised, but on a regional rather than empire-wide basis. This process also promoted the formation of regional dynasties, notably in Shoa which, as the result of Oromo immigration, became largely detached from the rest of the historic empire. Nonetheless, the sense of Ethiopia as a common cultural and ideally political unit remained unchallenged, not least as a result of the continued authority of the Orthodox Church, which in turn was exercised through a single bishop or *abun*, who as a result of being recruited from Egypt, stood apart from the local power structure. Provincial rulers may have exercised effectively independent power, but never claimed any

formally independent status.

It is nonetheless critical to recognise that this informal federalism was never accompanied by any formal or conceptual basis for dividing powers between the central government and its regional subordinates, let alone by any written specification of where authority lay in terms of a constitution or equivalent document. In principle, at least, the authority of the emperor was absolute, indivisible and unchallengeable, and was ritually reinforced by various symbolic devices including anointment by the *abun*, imperial seclusion (in the medieval era, ordinary subjects were not even allowed to set eyes on the emperor), and the removal to an isolated mountain top of princes who might otherwise seek to establish rival centres of power – a practice that was recorded by, and that fascinated, the earliest European visitors. Nor was this non-separation of powers just a matter of form: the indivisibility of authority has been a lasting theme in the political culture of highland Ethiopia, and at no point of which I am aware has it been possible for a subordinate publicly to oppose or disagree with his

superior on specific issues, without at the same time publicly challenging the superior's authority – or on effect, engaging in revolt. Subordinates held office as the agents of their superiors, and were expected to demonstrate total subservience to them. As in the Roman Catholic Church, or the 'democratic centralism' of Marxist-Leninist states, decisions of a higher authority were binding on all lower ones. This conception of authority, which continues to carry a great deal of weight through to the present day, was a key obstruction to the emergence of any formally federal system of government.

What stood in the way of centralisation was thus simply the practical difficulty of imposing uniform imperial administration over the whole of the territory, rather than any recognition of the value or legitimacy of diversity, let alone any idea that governance should derive from the culture and consent of the governed. On the contrary, the direction of legitimacy was strictly from the top downwards, from God through the emperor as his regent on earth, through to the local rulers whom the emperor had (at least in principle) appointed, and who ruled (again in principle) on his behalf. It was a system of devolved autocracy, rather than of regional autonomy. Still less was there any recognition of cultural diversity: even though the Ethiopian empire encompassed great cultural diversity, which again in some degree had to be acknowledged as a matter of practical necessity, there was a single governing culture, expressed through Orthodox Christianity, the Amharic language, and the cultural mores of the northern plateau with their heavy emphasis on hierarchy, obedience, and territoriality. Though regional rulers, especially of outlying provinces, could be accorded a measure of cultural difference, engagement with the imperial authority involved acceptance of the bases for its rule. It would be a mistake, therefore, to read any precursor to the current federal structure into the arrangements for governing the pre-modern empire.

### **The creation of a centralised state**

The re-emergence of a central Ethiopian government from the accession of Tewodros in 1855, signalling the end of the *zimana mesafent*, was necessarily defined as a process of centralisation in which the imperial government and regional lords were viewed (not least by successive emperors) as rivals, and it became the mission of the emperor to subdue and subordinate local rulers. This, to be sure, was a long drawn out process, which lasted through to the revolutionary government after 1974. Though Tewodros conquered each of the major regional lords in turn, he was unable to establish any lasting structure of control, and once he moved elsewhere, his appointed governors either asserted their own power, or else were overthrown by notables with stronger claims to

local legitimacy. By the time he was eventually defeated by the British in 1868, he controlled only the area around his fortress capital of Magdala, and local rulers readily collaborated with the invaders in securing his downfall. His eventual successor, the Tigrayan lord Kassa Mercha who assumed the throne as Yohanes IV, secured the formal subordination of his main rival, Menilek of Shoa, but was obliged to concede to Menilek effective power over Shoa and much of southern Ethiopia. When Yohanes was killed fighting Mahdist invaders in 1889, no one was in a position to contest Menilek's accession in his place. What we see here is a process by which the most powerful regional lord proclaimed himself emperor, and other lords, while formally recognising his authority, continued to exercise considerable autonomy within their own domains. In that process, in contrast to the non-territoriality of the medieval 'Solomonic' monarchy, the emperor became associated with the regional power base from which he came – the central Amhara regions for Tewodros, Tigray for Yohanes, Shoa for Menilek, Shoa and Harar for Haile-Selassie, creating a centre-periphery dynamic with profound implications for the territorial distribution of power, and hence for the structure of any future federal system. The creation of a permanent capital in Addis Ababa – at the southern tip of the historic empire, but in the centre of the newly expanded state, reinforced this dynamic.

The balance was tipped decisively in favour of centralisation by a number of key developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, Menelik was able to conquer vast areas to the south and west of the core area of historic Ethiopia, most of which came under direct imperial control, and which greatly expanded the revenues available to the central government. Whereas the zone of highland arable agriculture was very largely given over to subsistence production, and established social structures limited the capacity of rulers to extract a surplus from it, the newly conquered regions could be far more ruthlessly exploited, and provided much more productive territory for export crops, of which coffee soon emerged as by far the most important. The imposition of a settler class of *neftenya*, characteristically drawn from retired soldiers in the imperial army, assisted both economic extraction and political control, at a very heavy cost in terms of legitimacy and public welfare. Second, skilful diplomacy and the external recognition resulting from the defeat of Italian colonial invaders at Adwa in 1896 enabled Menilek to draw on the resources of the international system to reinforce domestic control. These resources notably included modern weapons, access to an increasingly globalised world economy, and the benefits of technological developments such as transport systems, education, and bureaucracy. No mere provincial *ras* could match this combination.

Even so, substantial opportunities for devolved authority remained. ‘Traditional’ rulers in the historic provinces largely retained control over their local populations, even though they were no longer in a position to present much threat to the central government. Both in 1895/96, and at the time of the second Italian invasion forty years later, provincial levies went to war in time-honoured fashion under the command of their regional governors. Governance even in the newly acquired southern provinces varied significantly according to whether these had resisted annexation by Ethiopia and been ruthlessly suppressed, or whether their rulers had come to some accommodation with the expanding power. In the most striking case, the Moslem Oromo sultanate of Jimma, Sultan Aba Jiffar was able to reach an agreement with Menilek under which he not only remained on his throne, but was able to prevent the imposition of such symbols of conquest as the erection of Christian churches. It was very different in Harar, which resisted, and in which a large Orthodox church was erected with brutal symbolism in the centre of the old Moslem city. The Oromo rulers of Welega also submitted peacefully, and as Christians were able to establish marital relations with the Shoan imperial family. These arrangements carried through into the 1950s and 1960s. Even in some of the conquered regions, the governors imposed by the victorious imperial armies were able to carve out fairly autonomous regimes of their own. Menilek’s cousin Makonnen became virtual viceroy of the strategically critical Harar region that controlled access to the coast at Djibouti, and although he remained unshakeably loyal, his son Tafari was able to draw on the resources of the region to challenge Menilek’s grandson and successor Iyasu. Most striking of all, Menilek’s general Dejazmatch Balcha was able to maintain a virtually independent principality in Sidamo through into the 1920s, until he over-reached himself by marching his army on Addis Ababa. Nonetheless, the partial tolerance of indigenous provincial rulers, or the delegation of a wide degree of latitude to governors like Makonnen or Balcha whose status derived from the centre, is not to be equated with any recognition of autonomous authority or cultural diversity.

The post-war government of emperor Haile Selassie (1941-1974), and its revolutionary successor, the Derg (1974-1991), though dramatically different in many ways, were similar in their desire to impose uniform central rule on the whole of Ethiopia, and in the process drove the quest for a centralised Ethiopian state to, and beyond, its limits. The five year Italian occupation (1936-1941), while it had forced Haile Selassie into exile, undermined the power of local rulers, and led to the imposition of a centralised system of colonial control, including the construction of at least a basic road network. For the patchwork of traditional provinces inherited from ancient times, it also substituted six large

regions, which insofar as they were broadly based on ethnicity, might be seen as the precursors to the system of ethnic federalism introduced after 1991: Eritrea (including both the Italian colony of that name and the Tigrinya-speaking area of northern Ethiopia; Amhara (bringing together all of the Amharic-speaking regions); Somalia (merging the Italian colony with the Somali-speaking part of southeast Ethiopia commonly known as the Ogaden); Harar (covering the non-Somali zone south of the Awash, west of the Webe Shibeles and east of the Rift Valley), Shoa (the region around Addis Ababa), and Galla-Sidama (encompassing both Oromo and other southern peoples from the Abbay river south to the Kenya frontier).

One of the first acts of the restored imperial government was the establishment of the Ministry of Interior, which for the first time subordinated the twelve newly established provinces, which partly corresponded to traditional units, to a bureaucratic structure in Addis Ababa<sup>1</sup>. Previously, even though provincial rulers had been subject to the emperor, they had been left to govern their provinces without any formalised system, though a few 'model provinces' had been designated in the early 1930s, governed by supposedly more enlightened rulers appointed by the emperor. At a stroke, in principle at least, governors were turned into salaried and supervised officials of the central government, within a hierarchical structure in which provinces were sub-divided into awrajas, and beneath them woredas. Some members of ancient dynasties were reinstated, notably Ras Seyoum in Tigray, though he was actually kept out of the region for long periods. Increasingly, provincial and awraja governorships became bureaucratic appointments, in which officials drawn from Shoa occupied a massively disproportionate number of posts. Under the Revised Constitution proclaimed in 1955, the Chamber of Deputies was from 1957 elected by universal suffrage in two-member geographical constituencies, but since the parliament in any event had negligible powers, this provided little if any counterweight to imperial power. Far more striking was the ringing endorsement of imperial absolutism provided by article 4<sup>2</sup>:

By virtue of His Imperial Blood, as well as by the anointing which He has received, the person of the Emperor is sacred, His dignity is inviolable, and His power indisputable.

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<sup>1</sup>These were Tigray, Begemder, Wallo, Gojjam, Welega, Shoa, Illubabor, Kaffa, Gamu-Gofa, Sidamo, Arusi and Hararge; Eritrea was added as a thirteenth province after the abrogation of the federal system in 1962.

<sup>2</sup>The Revised Constitution of Ethiopia, *Negarit Gazeta* 15th Year No.2, Addis Ababa, 4 November 1955, art.4.

As the basis for any constitutional order marked by shared powers, of the kind that any federal system requires, this was unpromising.

### **The Eritrean debacle**

The incapacity of the imperial order to manage any such system was illuminated with brutal clarity by the federation with Eritrea instituted in 1952. This derived from the attempts, first by the victorious allied powers and subsequently by the United Nations, to dispose of Italy's former colonies after the Second World War. Given that much of highland Eritrea had historically formed part of Ethiopia from the earliest times, that there was at least some support for union with Ethiopia especially among Orthodox Christian Eritreans, and that on two occasions Eritrea had formed the launching pad for Italian colonialist invasions, there was certainly a strong case for the territory to be 'reunited' with Ethiopia, and a Unionist Party was formed in Eritrea to press this case, with strong support from the government in Addis Ababa. At the same time, many Eritreans, including notably but not only the Moslems who formed about half of the population, were deeply (and justifiably) sceptical about the takeover of the territory by a monarchical regime with absolutely no record of democratic governance. The UN came up with a compromise, under which Eritrea was to be federated with Ethiopia, with the government in Addis Ababa taking responsibility for functions such as defence, currency and diplomatic relations, while a separate and elected Eritrean government should take care of internal affairs, with 'the widest possible measure of self government'.

This was a peculiar federal system, which could scarcely stand comparison to other such systems throughout the world. For a start, it was imposed by external power, and accepted by the Ethiopian government – which had pressed for outright annexation – only because this was the sole basis on which it could gain control over Eritrea. Even this untidy compromise was achieved only with the strong support of the United States, which in an informal quid pro quo was allowed a military communications facility near Asmara which until the advent of satellite technology occupied a key position in the global US military command and control system. Second, it was not even a federation in the normal sense of the word, but rather an autonomous administration embedded within what was otherwise a unitary state: the rest of Ethiopia had no federal structure, and the 'federal government' was simply the imperial government in Addis Ababa, which exercised direct control over the rest of the national territory. Furthermore, it soon became perfectly clear that the imperial government had no intention at all of respecting the federal arrangement – any more, to be fair, than the governments of newly independent post-colonial states in other parts of



Africa respected analogous arrangements that they had been obliged to accept as part of their own independence package. The central government representative in Asmara, Haile Selassie's son-in-law Ras Andargatchew Mesay, announced in 1955<sup>3</sup>: 'There are no internal or external affairs so far as the office of His Imperial Majesty's Representative is concerned, and there will be none in the future. The affairs of Eritrea concern Ethiopia as a whole – and the Emperor.'

The relentless subversion of the federal system that followed, culminating in the 'unanimous' vote of the Eritrean Assembly in 1962, under very heavy Ethiopian pressure, to dissolve itself and relegate Eritrea to the status of an ordinary province within the empire, paved the way for the Eritrean resistance that resulted nearly thirty years later in the defeat of the Ethiopian army and the emergence of Eritrea as an independent state. It also led, in the process, to a massive level of human death and misery, especially in Eritrea but also in the rest of Ethiopia, and made a major contribution to the levels of conflict from which the Horn of Africa as a whole has suffered since the early 1960s. Though one might plausibly argue that the Derg regime that seized power in 1974 would not have respected Eritrean autonomy, even had the imperial one done so, this has to rank as one of the most catastrophic decisions in modern Ethiopian history. It also contrasts very sharply with the subtlety and skill with which Haile Selassie, especially in his earlier years, had managed diversity within his domains. At one level, this difference may simply be the emperor's increasing age, arrogance and rigidity, and the attitudes of the overwhelmingly Shoan courtier-officials who surrounded him. At another, a democratically-based and formally autonomous Eritrean administration posed a challenge very different from that presented by regional lords operating within the familiar setting of Ethiopian feudalism. Most of all, however, it reflected an entrenched Ethiopian inability to divide authority, and the expectation that, formally at least, subordinates owed total deference to their superiors. The culture of authority in Ethiopia, every bit as much as inept decisions by particular rulers, would continue to deeply affect the practice and even possibility of Ethiopian federalism.

### **New approaches to diversity**

At the same time, the Eritrean debacle made a very significant contribution to the emergence of new ways of thinking about what came to be known as 'the national question' in Ethiopia during the later years of the Haile Selassie regime, especially among the university students who provided the main intellectual

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<sup>3</sup> Cited from Richard Greenfield, *Ethiopia: a new political history*, London: Pall Mall, 1955, p.304.

challenge to the imperial government<sup>4</sup>. It was at this time that the intellectual foundations were being laid that were eventually to result in the establishment of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, and the constitutional structure that it introduced. Ethiopian students in the 1950s and 1960s, like their counterparts elsewhere in Africa and around the developing world, were broadly nationalist in political orientation, and sought to subordinate and overcome the complex ethnic divisions that affected Ethiopia, as they did virtually every other state in post-colonial Africa. At the same time, it was difficult to escape the deeply unequal construction of the historic Ethiopian polity, and the role that was played in this by broadly ethnic, cultural and religious considerations, especially once the massive territorial expansion of the empire under Menilek had brought within it many peoples who had little if any historical association with Ethiopia, and who were at the same time the principal victims of the often intensely repressive and exploitative structures of rule imposed on the southern regions. Though the common characterisation of Ethiopia as an ‘Amhara’ or even ‘Amhara- Tigrayan’ state was simplistic and inaccurate (Oromos, for instance, had been prominently engaged in government since the seventeenth century, and Haile Selassie himself was half Oromo and merely a quarter Amhara), nonetheless the Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity were prominent markers of social status and political power, association with which was an important part of the process by which outsiders could become assimilated or incorporated into the national elite. Haile Selassie’s own ethnic diversity was not a means through which he sought to acquire legitimacy among the subject peoples of his empire, but rather an accident of birth which he ignored or suppressed.

The expression of sub-national identities, whether ethno-linguistic or religious, was thus regarded, at the level of imperial government, as an affront to ‘national unity’. Though Oromos such as the long-serving finance minister, Yilma Deressa, were prominent in the regime (and were widely regarded as favouring other Oromos in appointments within their ministries), in no sense could these be regarded as ethnic representatives. Conversely, however, as opposition to the regime developed from the mid-1960s onwards, this left ethnic and regional diversity as a means of confronting in-built issues of inequality and exploitation, which could be tied into a much more basic critique of imperial governance. In this way, the Eritrean struggle – which by the late 1960s had emerged as a major threat to the country and to the regime – could be treated as an indicator of grievances that were much more widely shared. In approaching these problems, Ethiopian students were very heavily influenced by the Marxist-

4. A much more detailed and original examination of this critical development will appear in Bahru Zewde’s forthcoming history of the Ethiopian student movement.

Leninist ideologies that were by this time coming to monopolise their attitude to the challenges facing the country. The ‘British model’ by which Ethiopia might be expected to evolve into a democratic and constitutional monarchy seemed hopelessly inadequate to the country’s needs, not least as intensifying repression of dissent demonstrated that the regime itself had no commitment to such an outcome. Only a revolutionary upheaval seemed capable of addressing the issues, and at every level, the Soviet Union provided a model for a regime which had transformed a decrepit Orthodox Christian monarchy into a leading global power, and which might be expected to show the way to Ethiopia. The very term, the ‘national question’, by which the issue of ethnicity was commonly referred to in Ethiopia derived directly from the Soviet example, and carried connotations very different from those of the term ‘tribalism’ used in much of the rest of Africa. Placing ethnicity within a Marxist-Leninist frame of reference necessarily involved an emphasis on economic exploitation, and identified socialist revolution as the means by which both class struggle and ethnic conflict could simultaneously be resolved. The Soviet leader Stalin – a Georgian, be it noted, not an ethnic Russian – had identified two elements in it: on the one hand, ethnicity (or ‘nationality’) might serve as a marker of economic exploitation, and at that level pose a major threat to the state; on the other, once the problem of exploitation was rectified and resolved, ethnicity would decline into a mere ‘superstructural’ manifestation of cultural variety, with no connection to the economic base, and could readily be incorporated into a socialist regime. The idea that ethnicity might serve as a political driving force of its own, quite independent of economic considerations, was simply excluded by the peculiar emphases of Marxist ideology. It was this vision that guided the division of imperial Russia into a socialist federation of ‘union republics’ organised on the basis of ‘nationality’, and came to assume a similar role for Ethiopia.

It was inevitable that at some stage, the ethnic divisions within Ethiopia would serve as a basis for political mobilisation, as they had done in many other African states in the period leading up to independence, with the emergence of ‘nationalist’ parties with differing regional centres of support to contest leadership of the soon to be decolonised territory. What distinguished Ethiopia in this respect was, first, that the whole process was delayed until well after independence had been achieved in most of the rest of Africa, as a result of the lack of opportunity for political expression under the imperial regime; second, that the political dynamic of ethnicity was very different from most of the rest of Africa, given that it followed from a process of internal state-building orchestrated from a core region of the country, rather than from the almost haphazard imposition of colonial territoriality as happened elsewhere; and third, that it was articulated not

by party leaders seeking both to build an electoral base and to assume positions at the head of the state, but by students with a far more intellectual approach to the issues involved, and with no evident path before them (save for an inchoate conception of ‘revolution’ as the answer to all of Ethiopia’s problems) by which they might move from their current subaltern status to leadership roles. While much of the original ferment was driven by clashes between Eritrean students and others, as the Eritreans became increasingly conscious of a separate sense of identity, it soon spread to the issues aroused by the position of Oromos and others within the Ethiopian state. A projected Oromo self-help association, named *Metcha-Tulama* after two of the founding ancestors of the Oromo people, and therefore explicitly pan-Oromo in orientation, was forcibly suppressed in 1967. By the outbreak of the revolution in 1974, the call for ‘self-determination’ for nationalities within Ethiopia, often with the explicit provision ‘up to and including secession’, had become part of the rhetoric of student protest, both within Ethiopia and among the influential Ethiopian student organisations in Europe and North America. It was readily assumed that by granting a right to secession in principle, and thus removing the coercive element in Ethiopian territoriality, the different nationalities could be accorded an equal stake in the continued existence of the country, and the threat of actual secession would be defused. The origins of the federal system introduced after 1991 thus lie in the period immediately before 1974.

This goes a long way towards explaining the paradox of the ‘national question’ in Ethiopia, in the context of developments in Africa as a whole at this time. It seems extraordinary that almost throughout colonial Africa, the often ludicrously artificial territories carved out by arbitrary colonial rule should provide the basis for confessedly ‘nationalist’ movements that sought to create a common identity among the subjects of the colonial state, whereas the one indigenous African state to maintain its independence through the colonial era should be riven by demands for its dismemberment. There was certainly extensive mobilisation of ethnic identities within colonial territories during the nationalist era of the 1950s, because these provided a readily available constituency through which opposition parties could build a base from which to challenge the front runners in the struggle to gain control over the post-colonial state after independence, but only in very rare cases – notably Congo and Nigeria – did these contemplate any challenge to the colonial territorial partition. It was the colonial state that embodied legitimacy, the indigenous African cultural unit that was regarded as a source of ‘disunity’. ‘Liberation’ involved simply the displacement of alien rulers by democratically elected leaders drawn from the indigenous population. It was very different in Ethiopia, where authoritarian rule

was embedded in the domestic political structure, and in a specific ethnic and regional culture, and could not be ejected in the same way.

There were, of course, Ethiopian nationalists as well as supporters of the rights of self-determination for individual 'nationalities' in the Ethiopian student movement. Given that students were disproportionately drawn from elites with privileged access to education, it was not surprising that many of them should identify with the historic traditions of Ethiopian centralism, or that their commitment to radical causes should clash with their family background. In one of the most striking cases, the student leader Tilahun Gizaw, whose assassination was a the key moment in the development of radical student consciousness, was the brother of Haile Selassie's daughter-in-law Princess Sara Gizaw. These and other differences were to split the student movement into competing factions, the conflicts between which were to become deadly after the 1974 revolution.

### **The failure of central rule**

Despite intellectual support for the principle of self-determination for nationalities, the immediate impact of the revolution was greatly to intensify the centralising mission of the late imperial regime. For this, several factors were responsible. First, the violence and trauma of revolutionary upheaval were completely antithetical to the devolution of powers, with its associated habits of compromise and bargaining, that federalism necessarily involves. Every fight was a fight to the death, and no autonomous source of authority could be tolerated. Even within the student movement itself, differences of opinion were marked not by discussion and respect, but by vicious conflict between factions each claiming exclusive ideological rectitude. Second, the leadership of the revolution was rapidly assumed by elements within the armed forces, which embodied both the top-down authoritarianism characteristic of all military organisations (and, indeed, of the Ethiopian state), and a rigid conception of Ethiopian nationalism geared especially to protecting the territorial integrity of the country. This was not a regime capable of tolerating any concessions of autonomy in Eritrea or anywhere else: indeed, the critical moment at which the revolution turned to violence was with the killing of the first chairman of the Provisional Military Administrative Council (or Derg), the Eritrean general Aman Andom, who had sought just such a concession. At the same time the army, more than any other institution in the country, provided a model for the kind of non-ethnic national state that the Derg sought to create. Its leader, Mengistu Haile-Maryam, was commonly believed to be a Kulo-Konta, from one of the more obscure groups in south-western Ethiopia, and yet no one could for a moment have questioned his nationalist credentials. Other leading members of the regime included Amharas,

Oromos and Tigrayans. Third, the Ethiopian revolution – like its predecessors in France and Russia – involved a massive expansion in the administrative capacity of the state, which acquired an ability to regulate the lives of ordinary citizens down to the lowest level that the imperial regime had never possessed. The key to this was the nationalisation in 1975 of all land, urban and rural, and the creation of community-level structures, kebelles, through which access to land could be regulated. These made possible the effective implementation of government programmes at the local level, including for example military conscription.

Even in the Derg regime, there were some token concessions to the agendas of the student movement, including its concern for the issue of nationalities. In the early years after the revolution, these presumably derived from the continued presence in the government of individuals drawn from the student movement, notably the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (Me'ison), for which they were an article of faith. Later, the very close alliance between the Derg and the Soviet Union was reflected in tentative steps to create a system modelled on the ethnically-based federal system in the USSR, resulting in the formation of the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities. This institute was indeed to have a far greater impact on the structure of Ethiopian federalism than its members can either have expected or intended, given that its preliminary survey of the identities and territories of the different nationalities within the country was to provide the basis for the demarcation of the regional states created by the EPRDF regime after 1991.

The ultimate 'lesson' of the Derg regime was that no simple authoritarian structure, no matter how sincerely promoted by those in charge of it, or how ruthlessly implemented on the ground, could manage a country as diverse as Ethiopia. Indeed, the effect of carrying the centralisation policies of the Haile Selassie period to what looked to be their logical conclusion, was not to create a single and effective state, united around the idea of an Ethiopian nationhood equally open to all, but rather to intensify resistance to a level that even the Derg with its massive armies was unable to suppress. This resistance was most effective in Eritrea, where by the late 1980s it had obtained a momentum that could only lead to full independence, and in Tigray. It was paradoxical that the movement that was to overthrow the Derg and establish the principle of self-determination up to and including secession for all of Ethiopia's nationalities should have been drawn from the heartland of the ancestral state built around Axum that was to culminate in the modern Ethiopian empire, but there was nonetheless a certain logic to it. Tigray, more than any other region of the country, embodied a very strong sense of regional identity that at the same time co-existed with an equally strong commitment to Ethiopian statehood: the idea that one could embrace

ethnic federalism without rejecting an Ethiopian identity made more sense there than anywhere else. The programme of ethnic self-determination also enabled an insurgency drawn from a small, poor and distant part of the country to make common cause with, and recruit allies from, other parts of the country with much weaker links to the historic Ethiopian state. Even in areas where alienation from the regime had yet to break out into open conflict, it was enough for the TPLF to face no effective resistance as it marched south from Tigray to seize Addis Ababa in 1991, and then peacefully took over the rest of the national territory. Given the complete failure of the Derg, the only option open to the new regime – and one which chimed very readily with its own regional base, and the need to recruit allies from other areas of the country – was that of the student radicals who had championed the cause of self-determination for the ‘nations, nationalities and peoples’ of Ethiopia some twenty years earlier. How that experiment, which led to the formation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, was to turn out lies beyond the scope of this paper.

