

Research Proposal - the Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1978

Third World countries are besieged by a wide spectrum of problems which continue to bring havoc and destruction to their peoples. The factors behind these tragedies are numerous. Internal politico-military conflicts, ethnic and religious contradictions, armed and/or political conflicts between neighbouring states, natural disasters, famine, rivalry between regional and world powers, massive human rights violations by governments .. are but the most frequent causes.

The "specificity" of the horn of Africa in general and that of Ethiopia in particular is that all these factors intermingle and generate a seemingly endless series of disasters of which the famine problem is only the most dramatic manifestation.

Situated at the crossroads of Africa and the Middle East and at the juncture of the Red Sea, the Indian ocean and the black continent, the Horn of Africa is of strategic importance to both East and West. More significantly, it is a region at grips with persistent local conflicts : Ethiopia and Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan, Kenya and Somalia are more or less in a permanent state of conflict. In Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan, insurgent movements instigated by internal factors and supported by neighbouring states, have taken up arms against their respective central governments. The Horn is also a theater for neighbouring and wider conflicts like the Israelo-Arab war, rivalry between moderate and radical Arab states and the more global East-West conflict.

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The concentration of so many contradictions creates situations so intricate that it is often difficult to find one's bearings when it comes to explaining the basis for alliances that are sometimes perceived as "unnatural".

Never perhaps as during and in the aftermath of the Ethio-Somalian war for the Ogaden in 1977/78 has the complexity of the situation in the Horn been so amply brought to light.

This conflict touched off a series of shifts in regional and international alliances. The Soviet Union broke with Somalia, its most trusted ally in Africa, and switched to Ethiopia, previously the biggest single recipient of American military assistance in black Africa. This reversal led to a vast reshuffle in the patterns of alignment that had held sway to that point.

Active support by Libya and South Yemen, two members of the Arab "rejection Front", did not dissuade Israel from providing help to the former empire of the Negus which it considers as its only "strategic ally" in the region. The coming of a "pro-Soviet" government in Addis Abeba did not result in the termination of the mutual defense pact between this country and Kenya, which is considered by many as one of the most solid pro-Western countries in the continent. This pact is intended to contain territorial ambitions of Somalia which has the particularity of being an adept of "scientific socialism" and an ally of Saudi Arabia, a country known for its militant anti-communism ...

To better understand this embroglio, one has to keep in mind some salient features of the situation in the Horn :

1. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, ideological and religious considerations seem to give way to nationalist aspirations by the local contending forces. The region's problems cannot be simply dismissed by invoking "Soviet expansionist designs" or "American imperialist intrigues" as is often argued by the main protagonists. Regional and world powers have surely switched alliances. But the local actors continue old objectives with new allies. Conflicts in the Horn do not have much to do with ideology. They have their roots in the conflicting national aspirations of the peoples living

there. The Ethiopian government with its policy of national unity and territorial integrity continues to frustrate a no-less determined nationalism of Eritreans and Somalis.

2. The political situation in Ethiopia and the kind of regime in Addis Ababa determines to a large extent the course of events in the Horn. Not least because the present government is directly or indirectly involved in all the armed and political conflicts in the region.

It can safely be asserted that the present situation is largely a logical consequence of the Ethiopian revolutionary process or rather of the setbacks suffered by the country's democratic forces in the years 1977/78. It is the radical change in the balance of political forces in Addis Abeba which occurred at this time that opened the way for the disastrous famines, the massive population movements towards the neighbouring countries, Soviet intervention and the exacerbation of ethnic contradictions in the former Empire state.

3. We contend that in the final analysis the problems of the Horn of Africa in general and those of Ethiopia in particular will not find any solutions without the advent of a democratic government in Addis Abeba.

The internal vicissitudes of the Ethiopian revolution will be the main subject of the proposed study.

For outside observers, the years 1977/78 were the ones which witnessed massive Soviet intervention in the Horn. Not much attention is paid to the other developments that made this possible and paved the way for the negative developments in the Horn since 1978.

Our ambition is to trace the course of the Ethiopian revolution

by putting due emphasis on the internal struggle and to show how and why its "epilogue" became the dramatic situation not only for Ethiopia but also for the region as a whole.

The Ethiopian revolution -- at least during its ascending phase -- had no immediate and significant international and regional implications. Unlike the popular movements in the Third World where social and political upheavals occurred essentially within the process of the anti-colonial struggles, the one in Ethiopia was essentially an "internal affair". It came as a result of social, economic and political conflicts within the former empire state itself.

From 1974-1977, the revolution against the age-old order continued without provoking any significant change in the pre-revolutionary patterns of regional and international alliances. In spite of mutual and increasing recriminations, the United States continued to provide arms and other assistance to the revolutionary government. The Soviet Union, determined to maintain its foothold in Somalia and its friendship with Eritrean nationalists, kept away from a revolution which it suspected of being "Chinese oriented". While the official Soviet attitude was at best neutral, "anti-imperialist" forces under Moscow's influence continued to denigrate what they called a fascist military dictatorship "lacking of American imperialism".

It is only in 1977 - three years after the beginning of the popular movement and while the revolutionary decrees were transforming the economic, political and social set up of traditional Ethiopian society - that the Soviet bloc 'discovered' what a Cuban author, Raol Valdes Vivo, called "the unknown revolution".

By that time however, many things had changed inside Ethiopia. In early 1977 the Soviets started to gain a foothold in the country. At this time the most conspicuous change was the shift from the

revolution's declared programme of "non alignment" to that of "proletarian internationalism" which was to become the guiding principle of the country's foreign policy. This however was only one aspect of the series of reversals in the course of the revolution and certainly not the most important--at least for Ethiopians.

Coinciding with Soviet intervention and while the country was at grips with full scale wars on two fronts in the Ogaden and in Eritrea, forces which were at the forefront in the struggle against the old regime were caught in a fierce spiral of terror and counter-terror in Addis Abeba itself. A whole generation of progressives was lost in the turmoil. Those who survived, weakened and divided among themselves, were not to constitute a serious challenge to the rising military dictatorship and increasing foreign involvement which came with it. In any case, the outcome of this struggle decided not only the fate of the revolution in Ethiopia itself but also the course of events to come in the Horn of Africa.

During the past ten years, many works have been published on the history of the Ethiopian revolution. Many of these are by foreign scholars. The study that is being proposed is however original in many respects.

It will be among the first to be published by an Ethiopian who had the privilege of being closely involved in the country's political process for so long. It will be based on personal notes and reminiscences, hitherto untapped documents, student movement publications of the sixties and early seventies, abundant pamphlets of the first six months of the February movement, official publications of successive governments and political organizations. Most, if not all of these, are in Amharic and thus have remained inaccessible to foreign writers up to now. There will also be an attempt to interview people who played prominent roles in government and opposition movements

both before and after February 1974.

The approach to be used will be to put emphasis on the internal peripeteia of the political struggle in Ethiopia. The regional and international implications of this struggle will only be treated in so far as they played a role in the internal political process.

This approach is preferred not only because the author is most familiar with this aspect of the problem. There are also other and more fundamental reasons.

In the numerous works already published on the Ethiopian revolution the internal balance of political forces had not been given the importance it deserves. In dealing with the Somali invasion of 1977 for example, most observers explain this aggression by pointing to that country's long-standing claim to parts of Ethiopian territory. This is only half the story. The study will show how a faction of the civilian and military bureaucracy in Addis Abeba deliberately prepared the terrain for the Somali army in the hope of discrediting the revolutionary government. By giving a detailed account of the struggle between those who constantly played down the Somali threat and the "alarmists" who insisted on the imminence of the invasion and insisted that preparations be made to meet the challenge, the study will show the factors which made possible the invasion in the first place and its initial "lightning successes" once it was launched.

The same approach will be followed to explain the shift from "non-alignment" to "proletarian internationalism". Many observers attribute the reversal in Ethiopia's foreign alliances to "Soviet expansionism" or "mistakes in American foreign policy". This again is only half the truth. Soviet intervention came after 1977 as a result of a radical change in the political balance of forces in Addis Abeba and coincided with, but did not precede the

phase of agony and defeat of the democratic movement in Ethiopia.

The Washington area, as one which has a very large concentration of Ethiopians, is of particular relevance to the study's progress. My intent is to collect material (interviews, reminiscences, etc.) from Ethiopians of varying backgrounds. Discussion with American personalities who closely followed events in Ethiopia, consulting material on Soviet and American attitudes towards the revolution will also be part of the work in the Washington area. Part of the time there will be spent at the Library of Congress where a collection of Ethiopian newspapers--rarely available elsewhere--is to be found.

In addition to the above, some specific parts of the study will be completed at the center. While a few pages will be devoted to relations between the United States and the imperial government, the chapter dealing with international and regional implications of the Ethiopian revolution will be completed during my stay at the center.

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