TRANSFORMATION AND CONTINUITY IN REVOLUTIONARY ETHIOPIA

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TRANSFORMATION AND CONTINUITY IN REVOLUTIONARY ETHIOPIA

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In memory of
Tibebu Deribe
1961–1987
Contents

List of tables
List of acronyms
Preface and acknowledgements
Glossary of Amharic words
Map of administrative regions of Ethiopia

1 Revolutions
The conditions for revolution 1
The construction of a revolutionary political order 2
The analysis of revolution 12

2 Monarchical modernisation and the origins of revolution
The bases of state and nation 19
The rise of a modernising autocracy 20
The origins of revolution 26
The debacle 32

3 The mobilisation phase, 1974–1978
The revolutionary option, February–November 1974 41
The great reforms, December 1974–July 1975 45
The control of the towns, 1975–1978 51
The conflict for the periphery, 1975–1978 57

4 The formation of the party, 1978–1987
The origins of party formation 65
COPWE 65
The Workers' Party of Ethiopia 70
The People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 77
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><strong>The Ethiopian state: structures of extraction and control</strong></td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The old regime</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The impact of revolution</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The structures of control</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The structure of production</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The external economy</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Surplus extraction and government spending</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The structures of distribution</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><strong>The control of the towns</strong></td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The kebelle</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The mass organisations</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Housing and the control of residence</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socialist distribution</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Industry, employment and the urban economy</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education and literacy</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The reaction from control</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><strong>Rural transformation and the crisis of agricultural production</strong></td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The peasants’ associations</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Land reform: its implementation and effects</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural marketing</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural producers’ cooperatives</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Villagisation</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The state farms</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The export sector: coffee, sesame and chat</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The origins of famine</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The domestic politics of famine relief</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><strong>The national question</strong></td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity and revolution</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Representation and control in regional administration</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regional opposition: the north</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regional opposition: the south</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><strong>The external politics of revolution</strong></td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The structure of foreign relations</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Revolution and the reversal of alliances</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The foreign policy of proletarian internationalism</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Western response</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Contents

- *Postscript to the paperback edition* 244
- *Notes* 259
- *Bibliography* 278
- *Index* 292
## Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Composition of the Central Committee of the WPE</th>
<th>page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Composition of the Central Committee of the WPE</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>WPE militants attending the Founding Congress</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This book was conceived during a visit to Addis Ababa in November and December 1984, to participate in the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies. I was then struck both by the enormous changes which had taken place in Ethiopia since the revolution, and by the framework of continuity within which many of these changes seemed to me to have occurred. The main fieldwork was carried out during a seven-month stay in Ethiopia, from September 1985 to April 1986, when I served as Visiting Professor at Addis Ababa University. While I am most grateful to the University for allowing me this opportunity, and to the University of Lancaster for giving me paid leave to enable me to take it up, I must make it more than usually clear that neither university, nor any section or individual within it, bears the slightest responsibility for the views that I have expressed. Following completion of the initial draft early in 1987, I revisited Ethiopia for four weeks in May 1987 to check and update it, and completed the final text in September 1987 – a date which conveniently coincided with the formal declaration of the People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Anyone who has undertaken research in Ethiopia will be aware of its peculiar rewards and difficulties, and especially of the secrecy which surrounds even the most apparently innocuous information, the multiple and contradictory accounts of any political event, and the extraordinary persistence even of myths which can clearly be shown to be fictitious. To take just one example, it is often claimed that at the beginning of this century, some 40% of Ethiopia was forested, a percentage reduced in recent times to less than a tenth of that amount. This figure is confidently asserted even in such authoritative documents as the UNDP/World Bank energy assessment report, while a map published by the Ethiopian government shows almost all land over 1,500 metres as having been forested in the recent past. Since the northern highlands have been under plough agriculture for about a thousand years, this seems unlikely, and early nineteenth-century prints show the highland areas of present-day Tigray and Eritrea as carrying only occasional scattered trees – though certainly more than now remain. There is, indeed, convincing biological evidence that most of the Ethiopian high-
Preface and acknowledgements

lands have never been forested. They contain, for example, no fewer than twenty-one endemic species of montane non-forest birds, found nowhere else in the world, which can only have evolved over many millennia; Ethiopia is by contrast exceptionally poor in montane forest birds. Deforestation may of course make an important contribution to erosion, environmental degradation, and agricultural decline in some parts of Ethiopia; but the very convenience of the deforestation argument has served to perpetuate myths which examination of the evidence shows to be unfounded.

Only the most foolhardy scholar would assert that his own work was free from similar misconceptions. The most I can claim is that I have examined the available (and often fragmentary) evidence as dispassionately as possible, and have tried to be both accurate and fair. This has inevitably meant using figures which may (especially under revolutionary conditions) be subject both to deliberate bias and to an understandable temptation to dream up a number where none exists. I can only say that I have done what I can, and that I apologise for any faults that remain. I should add that so far as I can judge, most Ethiopian official statistics on a wide range of topics seem to me to be generally honest and accurate.

When I first started to study Ethiopian politics, a quarter of a century ago, I could feel that I was venturing into almost untrodden territory. That is true no longer, and my most important academic debt is to those social scientists, a very high proportion of whom are Ethiopians, who have continued to work in revolutionary Ethiopia, often under very difficult conditions, and who have done by far the greater part of the research on which this volume rests. Individual sources are acknowledged in the notes and bibliography; but no work of this scope could possibly have been completed without the availability of a great deal of basic research, and at some points I am all too aware that I have done little more than take other people’s findings, and apply them to my own concerns. I have cited sources wherever possible, even when these may not be readily accessible, but must emphasise that none of these authors bears any responsibility for the use which I have made of their work. I have also relied on information given me by a wide range of informants in Ethiopia, who must perforce remain anonymous, and am particularly grateful to those who have read all or part of this book in draft, and corrected some of my mistakes. I have not always accepted their advice, however, and responsibility for a final text which has often had to rely heavily on personal judgement remains mine alone.

I am grateful to the Nuffield Foundation of London, for meeting the costs of travel, subsistence and research materials, and hope that they will feel, at a time when pressure on research funding is intense, that the result repays their confidence. I wish to make it clear that this research was not funded by any government body (whether British, Ethiopian or other), or by any international organisation.

My greatest debt, finally, is to two families – one in Lancaster who allowed me to abandon them for eight months, and one in Addis Ababa who looked
Preface and acknowledgements

after me when I got there. It is such that any further comment would be inadequate.

Tibebu Deribe, to whose memory this book is dedicated, was a third-year student in statistics at Addis Ababa University, who died of rheumatoid arthritis in May 1987.

Lancaster, September 1987

CHRISTOPHER CLAPHAM
Acronyms

AEPA All Ethiopia Peasants’ Association
AETU All Ethiopia Trade Union
AMC Agricultural Marketing Corporation
ANLM Afar National Liberation Movement
CELU Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions
COPWE Commission for Organising the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia
CPSC Central Planning Supreme Council
CPSU Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DPRK Democratic and Popular Republic of Korea (North Korea)
EDDC Ethiopian Domestic Distribution Corporation
EDU Ethiopian Democratic Union
EH The Ethiopian Herald
ELF Eritrean Liberation Front
EPA Ethiopia Peasants’ Association (formerly AEPA)
EPDM Ethiopia People’s Democratic Movement
EPLF Eritrean People’s Liberation Front
EPRP Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party
ETU Ethiopia Trade Union (formerly AETU)
GDR German Democratic Republic
NG Negarit Gazeta (Ethiopian government official gazette)
NRDC National Revolutionary Development Campaign
OLF Oromo Liberation Front
ONCCP Office of the National Council for Central Planning
PADEP Peasant Agricultural Development Extension Programme
PDRE People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
PDRY People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (Aden)
PMAC Provisional Military Administrative Council
PMGSE Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia
PNDR Programme of the National Democratic Revolution
POMOA Provisional Office of Mass Organizational Affairs
REWA Revolutionary Ethiopia Women’s Association
Acronyms

REYA  Revolutionary Ethiopia Youth Association
RRC   Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
SIDA  Swedish International Development Authority
TPLF  Tigray People’s Liberation Front
UDA   Urban Dwellers’ Association
WPE   Workers’ Party of Ethiopia
WSLF  Western Somali Liberation Front
Glossary of Amharic words

Abyotawit Seded  see Seded
awraja  province; the second level of local administration
birr  Ethiopian monetary unit ($1 = 2.07 birr)
chat  a narcotic leaf, widely chewed in the Red Sea region
chikashum  village headman under the imperial regime
Derg  the military committee formed in June 1974
Echaat  Ethiopia Oppressed Masses Unity Struggle, 1975–78
Emaledih  Union of Ethiopian Marxist Leninist Organisations, 1977–79
Emalered  Ethiopian Marxist–Leninist Revolutionary Organisation, 1976–78
enset  false banana; a plant which provides the staple food of parts of southern Ethiopia
idir  a cooperative association in Ethiopian towns
Ityopya tikdem  ‘Ethiopia first’, the revolutionary motto
kebelle  local urban dwellers’ association
keftenya  higher urban dwellers’ association
kifle hager  region; the highest level of local administration
malba  simplest form of agricultural producers’ cooperative
Meison  All Ethiopia Socialist Movement, 1975–78
neftenya  northern settler in southern Ethiopia
rist  system of land inheritance in highland Ethiopia before 1975
Seded  Revolutionary Flame, 1975–79
shengo  parliament or soviet, 1987
teff  a food grain widely grown in highland Ethiopia
Wazleague  Labour League, 1975–79
welanda  highest form of agricultural producers’ cooperative
welba  intermediate form of agricultural producers’ cooperative
Glossary of Amharic words

woreda  district; the lowest level of local administration
zemacha campaign; especially, the National Development Campaign, 1974–75
Administrative regions of Ethiopia, 1974–1987