

1

Revolutions

This book seeks to explore the effects of the Ethiopian revolution on Ethiopia's people. It is thus, centrally, a book about revolution; and though one of its lessons is that revolutions and revolutionary regimes – like any other form of government – depend on the particular circumstances and societies in which they occur, some idea of what revolutions are, how they come about, and how they should be studied, must necessarily underlie it. That is what this chapter attempts to provide.¹

A revolution marks a fundamental and irreversible change in the organisation of a society; the destruction, often rapid and violent, of a previous form of social and political organisation, together with the myths which sustained it and the ruling groups which it sustained, and their replacement by a new institutional order, sustained by new myths and sustaining new rulers. Such a change has taken place in Ethiopia: a change indeed in many ways comparable to those experienced during the 'classic' revolutions of France and Russia. Since this change is the subject of this book, it will be detailed at many points in the pages that follow, but it may be helpful to indicate, right at the start, some of the features that mark Ethiopia's experience as unquestionably revolutionary: the overthrow of an ancient and well-established monarchy; the execution, exile or imprisonment of virtually all those who held high office under it; a period of intense and violent conflict for control of the new regime; the nationalisation of all major means of production, urban and rural; the abolition of private land ownership, and the organisation of rural production into peasants' associations and cooperatives, and state farms; the transformation of urban government, through the creation of urban dwellers' associations, and the nationalisation of urban land and rented housing; the expansion of the armed forces, including national military service and a militia several hundred thousand strong; the creation of a new and government controlled system of agricultural marketing and of food distribution in towns; the establishment of a Marxist–Leninist political party and associated mass organisations, allied to intensive efforts at ideological reorientation; the creation of a new constitutional system on Marxist–Leninist lines; the resettlement of some 600,000 peasants

Transformation and continuity in revolutionary Ethiopia

from the north and east of the country in the south and west; the organisation of several million scattered peasant homesteads into centrally located villages, as a prelude to the collectivisation of agriculture; and a reversal of diplomatic and military alliances from the USA to the USSR. In Africa, rhetoric has often filled the broad gap between leaders' aspirations and their very limited capacity to organise, control or change the societies which they govern, and pretensions to revolution are often greeted in consequence with well-deserved scepticism. This one is real. It thus takes its place, not only with France and Russia, but with that small group of third-world states which have likewise gone through an unquestioned revolutionary experience since 1945: China, North Korea, Cuba, Kampuchea, Vietnam. There are others – Iran, Mozambique, Bolivia, Nicaragua – whose status is still uncertain or debatable.

For such a revolution to be achieved, two basic conditions must be met. First, a set of circumstances must be present which prompt the collapse of the existing institutional order, and which amount in sum to a 'revolutionary situation'. Secondly, measures must be implemented to construct a new institutional order. The first condition has understandably attracted greater attention from political scientists and activists in non-revolutionary states, concerned with the question of whether a revolution is likely (or can be promoted) in their own societies; the second is correspondingly of greater interest to the rulers, and analysts, of revolutionary states themselves. The central part of this chapter will look at each in turn.

THE CONDITIONS FOR REVOLUTION

Revolutions are rare events. No state has experienced more than a single revolution in the sense defined above, and most have never experienced one at all. The conditions which promote them must therefore be exceptional. At the same time, there are sufficient similarities between those major revolutions which have taken place to encourage the belief that common causal factors are involved, even though these must obviously be subject to variations in local historical experience. In looking for such factors, this study parts company entirely with the classic Marxian theory of revolution – by far the dominant tradition in the field – which sees it as deriving from inherent class conflict, and especially the conflict between an industrial bourgeoisie and an exploited proletariat. Its reason for doing so is simply that this theory does not work. Whether it is of any value in explaining those few revolutions which have taken place in industrial states is arguable, though I would discount it. When it comes to third-world revolutions, it is of no value whatever.

Nor, more generally, does there appear to be any necessary connection between revolution and any particular form of economic structure. Some modern theorists have sought a link between revolution and the incorporation of third-world societies into a global structure of production and

Revolutions

exchange dominated by capitalist industrial metropolises.² There is no need to deny that such a structure exists, that it is often highly exploitative of third-world peoples, and that – should a revolution occur – the conditions of incorporation and the reactions of workers caught up in the global economy will strongly influence the form which it takes. The problem is that such incorporation does not seem to be of any significant value in explaining why or whether a revolution should occur in the first place. Cuba, for example, had been incorporated into the global economy under the intensely exploitative conditions of plantation slavery, and subsequent landlordism, for over four centuries before the revolution in 1959. This evidently does much to explain the nature of the Cuban revolution, notably its hostility to the United States, and the willingness of the revolutionary regime to aid fellow revolutionaries whose situation they view as similar to their own. The Nicaraguan experience is in many ways analogous. Yet many of the other plantation economies in the Caribbean have shown little sign of revolutionary upheaval, and even if one allows for the effects of American support for anti-revolutionary regimes, do not appear to be likely candidates for revolution. Equally, while Scott and others have identified some of the bases for revolution in South-East Asia in the exploitative conditions of the rice-exporting economy,³ these economies are both very different from the Caribbean ones, and are matched by equivalents in non-revolutionary states. When one comes to states such as Ethiopia, one of the least intensively incorporated of African or indeed of third-world states, the role of the international economy is little more than incidental. Revolutionary change in Ethiopia has indeed been eased by the very paucity of the country's external economic links.

This rejection of class, economic structure and international economic connections as necessary causal factors in the explanation of revolution does not, of course, mean that they are to be dismissed as irrelevant. Classes, like other social groups, will be caught up in the revolutionary process, and relations between classes will inevitably be affected by the general restructuring of social and political relationships that revolution entails. Particularly important in this respect are the relationships between urban and rural classes, and within the rural economy. Many of the more important recent theorists of revolution have identified the critical role of rural society and its relations with the political centre.⁴ The worldwide spread of markets, ideas and organisational techniques likewise provides an important part of the context within which all twentieth-century revolutions have taken place. The point is simply that these universalist categories provide no adequate criteria for distinguishing those states in which revolutions have occurred, from those in which they have not.

When one turns from the economic to the political sphere, however, the similarities between revolutionary states leap to the attention. Revolutions overwhelmingly take place in states where the existing regime has failed either to provide political opportunities for the urban intelligentsia, or to establish effective links with the countryside. It is political ineffectiveness,

Transformation and continuity in revolutionary Ethiopia

rather than economic exploitation, which leads to revolution. Skocpol is right to emphasise that revolution emerges from specifically political crises centred in the structures and situations of the old regime states,⁵ and her findings for France, Russia and China are in this respect entirely supported by the Ethiopian case. The two classic types of political system whose inherent weaknesses are liable to prompt revolutionary upheaval are first, a decaying traditional monarchy, and secondly, a colonial regime which refuses to decolonise; but equivalent situations may occur under a land-owning oligarchy or some types of military regime. In each case, a revolutionary modernising elite is able to gain access to a source of rural support which both sustains it (when the revolution is achieved through guerrilla warfare) during the struggle to overthrow the old regime, and also helps to ensure, once the takeover has been achieved, that the new regime does not simply degenerate into a restricted urban coalition.

The astonishingly high proportion of successful revolutions which have taken place in traditional monarchical states is much too great to be dismissed as coincidence. The revolution does not always, as in Ethiopia or France, overthrow the monarchy itself. It may, as in Russia or China, overthrow a regime which has directly succeeded the monarchy, but has been unable to organise for itself an adequate political base. The basic reasons for the success of revolution nonetheless lie in the legacy of traditional monarchy: its weakness as a source of political mobilisation, but also its strength (when appropriately transformed) as a source of centralised national government. The process of modernisation normally involves the centralisation of power in a monarch, who heads an administrative apparatus which in many ways resembles the state structure established elsewhere by colonial regimes. One of the ways in which this apparatus resembles the colonial structure is in its failure to make provision for political representation, except through traditionalist mechanisms which find their equivalent in the colonial use of indirect rule. Even these mechanisms may be suspect; in Ethiopia, as in France during the Versailles period, the monarch sought to consolidate his power by reducing the autonomy of local notables who had previously provided some kind of connection between the central government and political authority in the countryside, and in so doing undercut the basis for his own position. But whereas the new educated nationalist group in colonial territories can usually achieve its goals by mobilising support against a colonial regime which is ultimately prepared to relinquish power and depart, the same outlet is not available in states which are already independent. While it is always possible for the urban elite simply to oust the monarch and take over the central government, the new regime will then inherit the political weakness of its predecessor – further enfeebled by the destruction of what remained of monarchical legitimacy – and will either have to mobilise a broader base of political support, or like the Kerensky regime in Russia or the Kuomintang in China, fall to someone else who does.

Revolutions

Unlike other third-world revolutions, those directed against traditional monarchies often do not require any recourse to rural guerilla warfare. The revolution may, as in Iran or Ethiopia, follow what Huntington terms the 'western' pattern (in contrast to the 'eastern' or Chinese model), where the revolutionaries first seize power at the centre, and only afterwards go out to organise the countryside.⁶ This is simply because the regime is feeble enough, in terms of its inability to control its own cities, to be overthrown by a radical *coup d'état* or even by the urban mob. Where, as in China, the monarchy has already been replaced by a fairly effective urban government, the retreat to the countryside becomes the only possibility, and the mobilisation of the peasantry gains a critical importance.

This rural revolutionary strategy is commonly used against recalcitrant colonial regimes, as in Angola, Mozambique and North Vietnam, and against externally supported governments with a limited urban base, such as the Somoza dynasty in Nicaragua, the Batista dictatorship in Cuba, and the post-colonial regimes of Kampuchea and South Vietnam. In the distinctive circumstances of the Horn of Africa, it is important as the means by which alternative revolutionary elites, with regional bases especially in Eritrea and Tigray, have sought with considerable success to mobilise the countryside against the central government. Northern Ethiopia is indeed a battleground between rival revolutions based on opposed (but equally revolutionary) principles and techniques: a centralising and nationalist revolution originating in the towns, which has spread out to organise the countryside, and a decentralising and regionalist revolution organised in the countryside, seeking to surround and capture the towns. A further revolutionary technique, that of urban guerilla warfare, was also attempted in Ethiopia by urban elites opposed to the military regime. As in other areas of the third world, it was entirely unsuccessful.

Even where the revolutionary regime first seizes power in the capital, however, the extension of its organisation and support into the countryside is essential if it is not to become an essentially reformist government, dependent on established groups whose interests it dare not offend. Where, as in parts of Ethiopia, a high proportion of rural land is controlled by landlords, and especially where these are ethnically or culturally distinct from their peasants, land reform provides the essential means by which this extension of support can be achieved. To a large extent, though not entirely, the reaction of different rural regions of Ethiopia to the new regime in Addis Ababa can be related to the differential impact of land reform on the varying pre-revolutionary systems of land tenure. Where land reform succeeds, it can give the peasantry a vested interest in the revolution which no rival political programme can outbid. Where, on the other hand, it is seen as a threat to control by peasant proprietors over their own means of production, it can have the opposite effect. But land tenure, like other aspects of economic structure, influences the form which revolution takes, rather than whether it takes place at all. Both the exploited peasantry of southern

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39650-9 - Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia

Christopher Clapham

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Transformation and continuity in revolutionary Ethiopia*

Ethiopia, and the 'free' peasantry of the north, have been mobilised into revolutionary movements – but in one case, usually in support of the government, in the other, often against it.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A REVOLUTIONARY POLITICAL ORDER

The initial phases of a revolution are violent, spectacular, and destructive. If the revolution breaks out in the towns, it is likely to start with some act of mass popular insurrection – such as the storming of the Bastille, or the huge demonstrations against the Shah in Iran – which decisively undermines the authority of the old regime, and sets in train the sequence of events which lead to its collapse. This may well be followed by an equally dramatic, and in many cases still more violent, conflict for control among the heirs of the revolution itself. It is during this phase, indeed, that the terror is often at its worst; the overthrow of an old regime which everyone saw as discredited and ineffective may be achieved with very little difficulty, and without much need for bloodshed save in gratuitous acts of revenge. The conflict between rival leaders, organisations and ideologies, all of which see themselves as representing the future or the true revolutionary path, is one in which no quarter can be given, and which ends only once a Stalin or a Mengistu Haile-Mariam has established uncontested control. In the case of rural revolutions, leadership rivalries are not usually so salient, and much of the action takes place in the distant fastnesses of Yenan or the Sierra Maestra. But the 'heroic' phase of establishing the base areas, the often long civil war against the entrenched urban regime which follows, and the final triumphal entry of the guerrilla forces into Havana, Phnom Penh, Saigon or Managua exercise a fascination every bit as great as that of the heroic days on the streets of Paris or Petrograd.

Once the inevitable dictator has established control, or the forces of the old regime have decisively been ousted, the revolution seems to be over. In fact, it has scarcely begun. What makes a revolution is not the destruction of the old order, but the construction of the new one. This is unspectacular, even boring. Its violence, when it takes place (as it often does), is a matter of bullying helpless peasants rather than fighting the privileged and corrupt. But a revolution has no claim to the name unless the organisation of the new society is substantially different from that of the old; and such organisation can only be achieved by deliberate effort over a long period. Much of this process will inevitably be concerned with the management of the economy. In an age in which revolution is almost invariably associated with Marxism (quite regardless of the inadequacy of Marxist precepts in explaining its occurrence), the nationalisation of the principal means of production is normally one of the new regime's first actions; and the problem of how to manage the economy which it has taken over provides it with one of its first and most important lessons in government, and in the salutary differences between running a civil war or an urban insurrection on the one hand, and

Revolutions

running a bureaucratic machine on the other. But even more basic is the establishment of a new *political* order. The primacy of the political, which is as I have argued central to the understanding of why revolutions occur in the first place, is equally central to the process of post-revolutionary institutionalisation. It is organised political power, in the hands of the new rulers of the state, that has to be used in order to bring about a deliberate transformation of economy and society which could not take place on its own.

Far from leading to mass participation, equality or any of the other ideals propounded in the pre-revolutionary years, the most important outcome of revolution is thus the creation of a powerful state, which is then used by its leaders as an instrument for national integration and economic transformation. The destruction of the old class structure, and especially of those classes which control land and people in the countryside, is essential not in order to liberate classes which were previously exploited, but in order to enable the state to gain direct control over people and resources which were previously insulated from it by an intermediary layer of local notables who controlled them in their own interests. An initial upsurge of participation, fuelled by measures such as land reform, may be useful and perhaps essential in transferring peasant allegiances from their previous local-level attachments to a new attachment to the central government; but to allow this to lead to the creation of an autonomous peasantry controlling their own land would defeat the very purpose of the revolution – a fact which accounts for the reaction against ‘kulaks’, and the characteristic emphasis of revolutionary regimes on cooperatives, collectives or state farms, through which agricultural production can be brought under central control. In this way, the vast mass of the rural population can be organised for state purposes, not only as producers but also in other ways, and notably for military recruitment. Revolutionary leadership, in all the cases examined by Skocpol and likewise in Ethiopia, is drawn from educated marginal elites oriented to state employment.⁷ So far from seeking to promote the interests of broad social and economic classes such as proletariat, peasantry or bourgeoisie, their objective is to establish a centralised state machinery, autonomous of any social class save that of the state employees who run it.

It is in the creation of this new political order that those revolutionary states which are heirs to long-established monarchies often demonstrate their superiority over those which derive from collapsed colonial regimes. A large part of this order, after all, is there already. A territory which has been under common rule for a considerable period will almost certainly have acquired some form of state organisation, however weakly articulated or ineffectively managed this may have been. A complex of popular habits and ideas relating to the exercise and acceptance of authority will already be in place, and can be adapted to the rhetoric and ideology of the new regime. The nationalism which most revolutionary regimes assert in an intensified form is no mere negative anti-colonialism, but can draw on a historical

Transformation and continuity in revolutionary Ethiopia

tradition and sense of identity. Even colonised monarchies like Vietnam and Kampuchea can draw on pre-colonial identities which are lacking in states such as Angola and Mozambique. In Ethiopia, as in other multiethnic imperial monarchies such as Russia and China, the ultimately successful revolutionary leaderships have also been associated, much more than their rivals in the post-revolutionary struggle for power, with the ethnic and regional bases of the old imperial order.⁸ They could thus present themselves as the heirs of the core tradition of the state. So far from marking a totally fresh start, revolutionary regimes may find it much easier to succeed if they can draw on a substantial legacy from the past.

Part of the new political order is likely to consist in an expansion in the numbers, powers, and organisational complexity of the state bureaucracy. The bureaucracy is the first and most important instrument which rulers have at their disposal, and institutionalisation in many ways means bureaucratisation. Initially, there may be problems due to the mutually antagonistic perceptions of bureaucrats and revolutionaries. Revolutionaries who have come to power through rural guerilla warfare are particularly likely to see the established state machinery as representing all that they have been fighting against. In the extreme and limiting case of Kampuchea, they carried this hostility to the length of destroying the bureaucracy altogether, and physically liquidating a great many of its members; but this destruction in turn does much to account for the Khmer Rouge state's failure to survive, in the face of its own organisational inadequacy and the domestic and international revulsion which paved the way for the Vietnamese invasion and the establishment of the more 'orthodox' and bureaucratised Heng Samrin regime. Often, too, leaders who have proved effective at guerilla warfare (or the vicious infighting that may accompany an urban revolution) are quite unable to cope with the very different requirements of running a large organisation, and a period of friction with the bureaucracy follows, before they are purged or moved out to some honorific position. Even leaders like Castro, or most of all Mao Tsetung, who have adeptly managed the transition from revolutionary fighter to established government leader, may hanker for the simple glories of spontaneous action, in Mao's case going so far as to dismantle, in the Cultural Revolution, much of the system which he had created. Revolutionaries who, as in Ethiopia, were themselves mostly drawn from the state bureaucracy (in the form of the armed forces), are likely to share much of its elitist attitude and centralised organisation; though even here, strains occur as the revolutionaries seek to root out 'reactionary' elements, and reluctantly come to grips with the limitations of what can be achieved by issuing orders down the hierarchy. The constant attacks on 'bureaucratic capitalism' during the early years of the Ethiopian revolution reflected, not so much the hostility of the bureaucracy towards the revolutionary regime, as its sheer incapacity to carry out the multitude of tasks suddenly thrust on it. As the immediate aftermath of revolutionary takeover fades into the past, however, the role of the bureauc-

Revolutions

racy is bound to increase, and the most important danger which a revolution faces is not, as often appears to be the case in its early years, that of relapsing into anarchy, but that of degenerating into the sclerosis of bureaucratic privilege and torpor.

The bureaucracy, nonetheless, is by no means enough. One of the weaknesses of regimes overthrown by revolutions is often indeed that they have become little more than administrative states, run from the top by bureaucracies increasingly divorced from the societies which they govern. The revolution itself likewise involves an enormous upsurge in popular political mobilisation, which needs to be channelled and restricted in the post-revolutionary period, but which cannot be totally obliterated. The mechanism commonly chosen to achieve the central task of relating institutionalisation on the one hand to some form of popular participation on the other is of course the vanguard single party. While discounting entirely the Marxist conception of the causes of revolution, I would not in the least discount the Leninist conception of its organisation. Any revolution which is to succeed in establishing a new and lasting political order will need to create a party as the foundation of that order. The question mark against the revolutionary status of such states as Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau is due not so much to the upheavals which they went through during the period of the regime's establishment, as to the apparent inadequacy of their revolutionary parties once in power. In some cases, including both Cuba and Ethiopia, the revolution itself takes place without any guiding Leninist party, and this organisation has then to be created – a process, in the Ethiopian case, accompanied by numerous conflicts and traumas. Even when, as in Russia, the party itself existed prior to the revolution, its conversion from an instrument of agitation into one of government, involved radical changes in organisation, ethos and personnel. The process of party formation or adaptation is thus the most critical feature of revolutionary institutionalisation, and inevitably receives a good deal of attention in the chapters that follow.

The Leninist principle of democratic centralism appears to provide an extraordinarily effective mechanism for combining tightly centralised elite control with the co-optation of the able and ambitious, and at least a token level of mass participation and democratic accountability. The second major task associated with the party, the propagation of a new official ideology, is much harder to assess. Revolutions invariably involve a change not just in political organisation, but also in the official mythology through which government authority is legitimated. The main function of this mythology or ideology is then to justify the actions of the revolutionary regime, and especially its unrestricted use of state power.⁹ For a limited number of individuals in the thick of revolutionary activity, ideology can come to be a matter of extraordinary importance, exciting bitter conflict over issues which to the outsider may seem trivial. Even for revolutionaries, however, ideology is generally (as Marx quite correctly identified it) a mere rational-

Transformation and continuity in revolutionary Ethiopia

isation of the interests of its proponents, and issues which seem trivial in purely ideological terms can generally be explained by the real differences which they imply in power political ones. For the mass of the population, and even for many of those who take leading positions in the revolutionary regime, ideology is usually little more than prudential adaptation to a new rhetorical style. It may be that the role of ideology is limited in Ethiopia by the profound scepticism of the indigenous political culture; and the application of the Marxist theory of revolution to a society at Ethiopia's level of socio-economic development must raise severe incongruities. In any event, despite the impressive amount of effort that has been dedicated in the Ethiopian case to political education, I remain unpersuaded of the centrality of ideology to revolutionary reconstruction.

Along with the party come a set of auxiliary institutions linking it to the population at the most basic level. One of the features of a Leninist party, and one of its greatest sources of strength, is that it is not a mass organisation, but consists only of a carefully selected and organised elite. The principles on which it is constructed are quite different from those of the nationalist parties which, in many third-world states, managed the transition from colonial status to independence. There, party membership was entirely indiscriminate, and was expected from (and at times even enforced on) the population at large. In states where the party does not have this universalist character, other organisations are needed that do. The two most important kinds of auxiliary institutions are first those that organise the countryside and the process of agricultural production, and secondly those that organise the towns. In Ethiopia, this urban–rural distinction is formalised through the roles of peasants' associations on the one hand, and urban dwellers' associations on the other. These institutions, created since the revolution, provide the base level of local administration – in principle, self-administration – in countryside and town respectively. Trade unions have a secondary role as urban mass organisations, such importance as they possess being due mostly to their symbolic representation of the proletariat, which is smaller in Ethiopia even than in the great majority of non-industrialised third-world states. Finally, the women's and youth associations organise their own special sections of the population, with the effect – especially in the case of the women – of emphasising their separateness from the core institutions through which actual power is exercised.

A further set of revolutionary institutions also requires attention: the apparatus of physical control and especially the armed forces. From one viewpoint, the enormous expansion in the Ethiopian armed forces since the revolution provides the most impressive evidence of the increase in organisational capacity which the revolutionary regime has achieved by comparison with its predecessor. From another, it likewise indicates the increase in coercion which the establishment of the revolutionary order requires. These again are normal features of revolutionary regimes, going back to the original French example and the mass levies of 1792. Revolutions charac-