A Review of Messay Kebede, Ideology and Elite Conflicts: Autopsy of the Ethiopian Revolution

Professor Theodore M. Vestal
“Messay Kebede has written an enormously important book. He definitively places the Ethiopian revolution as one of the twentieth century’s ‘great revolutions,’ on par with the Russian or Chinese in terms of scope of transformation. Messay provides a systematic and compelling argument on one of the key puzzles of the revolution: internal power struggles within the military junta known as the Derg, Messay argues, drove this movement of revolutionary change. Everyone interested in contemporary Ethiopia or comparative revolutions will benefit from this book.”

—Terrence Lyons, codirector, Center for Global Studies, George Mason University

“There are books, and then there are Books. Messay Kebede has written a Book. With sustained analytical brilliance, he demonstrates how understanding Ethiopia contributes to the understanding of the world. Ideology and Elite Conflicts represents a major achievement in combining comparative history with political and cultural analysis, all set within a philosophical frame.”

—Donald L. Donham, University of California, Davis

Ideology and Elite Conflicts provides a theoretical explanation of the major outcomes of Ethiopia’s social revolution, namely, the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 and the implementation of a far-reaching Marxist-Leninist revolution by a military committee (the Derg) and its collapse in 1991. Messay Kebede extensively discusses the question of whether existing theories of revolution shed light on the eruption of a radical revolution in Ethiopia and, most of all, whether they can accommodate the major anomaly of a socialist revolution being executed by a military committee that radicalized after the removal of the imperial regime. Hence the central thesis of the book: both the overthrow of the monarchical order and the radicalization of the Derg must be tied to social conditions that exacerbated elite conflicts for scarce resources, with the consequence that the espousal of radical ideologies (socialism and ethnonationalism) became the sole avenue for the exclusive control of state power.

Moreover, this book shows how the struggle of exclusive elites for the control of the state explains the Derg’s need to put its fate in the hands of a providential leader, to wit, Mengistu Haile Mariam. In light of the theoretical debate over the role of charismatic leaders in history, this book establishes how Mengistu’s narcissism led him to become the sole owner of the revolution and how his dictatorial rule brought about his own demise and that of the Derg, following the military defeat of the Ethiopian army at the hands of ethnonationalist insurgents. Another fundamental contribution of this book is a theoretical articulation of political conflicts and ideology that critically intervenes in the divisive issue of the primary cause of revolutions. Granted that ideology is more of a justification than a drive, the Ethiopian case illustrates how conflicts between mutually exclusive elites favor the path of political outbidding, mobilizing utopian projects so as to galvanize the support of the masses. The perceived transcendence of utopia from partisan politics gives proof that ideology is a predatory form of thinking in that it hijacks values belonging to different cognitive and affective realms for the purpose of empowering exclusionary interests.

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Image courtesy of Awramba Times in Ethiopia
Ideology and Elite Conflicts is the best and most thorough analysis of the causes and implications of the Ethiopian Revolution to date. Professor Messay has written a tour de force of the political theory of the Ethiopians who overthrew the imperial regime of Emperor Haile Selassie and instigated a program of socialism that endured for eighteen years (from 1974 through 1991) before utterly collapsing. In a carefully researched and logically crafted book, the author touches on a plethora of significant topics related to a seminal period in Ethiopian history and presents them in new and important ways. The arguments and insights presented are cogent.

From the start, Messay defines trenchantly his terms and lays out the objectives of the book. Noteworthy is the examination of current theories of revolution, making a distinction between social and political revolutions, and positing discrepancies in the Ethiopian experience. Messay does a masterly job of reviewing the ideological and sociopolitical origins of Haile Selassie’s regime with its history of political cooptation, social blockage, and creation of discontent leading to crises that brought about its demise. In evaluating the Emperor’s quest for personal glory and his success in foreign policy, he correctly notes that Haile Selassie’s international reputation enhanced his internal authority and absolutism sufficient to postpone the modern development of his country. It was in consolidating his centralized power and in rejecting limits to such power that the Emperor set up the very instruments (a national army, a system of education, and a modern bureaucracy) that would bring the imperial absolutism to an end. As the monarchy lost legitimacy with the people, it lost authority over its own guardians—especially the military.

Messay skillfully traces the precipitating factors that led to the collapse of the imperial regime and the political ascent of the military. Chief among these factors was the miscalculation of the educated and reform-minded members of the ruling elite who thought they would assume leadership of the social protests with an ensuing radical revolution without drawing in the Armed Forces into the center of the political battle. With Western educations proving of little value in getting around the blockage of social mobility, the educated elite found itself marginalized. In desperation, it turned to the then dominant ideology of Marxism-Leninism. This very disfranchisement of the educated elite became quite inspirational to the rebellious junior officers and NCOs of the military, who adopted the perspective of the outcast elite to justify their power. In 1974, it became apparent that the government could not effectively deal with the crises that engulfed the nation. As the author notes, without clear civilian leadership in the opposition, the military officers filled the vacuum and soon were making political instead of corporate demands. To oversee the implementation of these demands, the military formed a representative committee, the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army—the Derg, that took over the reins of government. There followed a bitter power struggle among individuals and opposing groups that resulted in the radicalization of the Derg which imposed a socialist revolution upon the country. Thus, the Derg hijacked the political revolution using a commitment to
utopian ideas that originated from the students and intellectuals. The Derg adopted Marxist-Leninist ideology because it justified the absolute power that it needed to eliminate all other contending groups.

While this was occurring, Cold War politics intruded into the Horn of Africa: Soviet-armed Somali troops invaded Ethiopia, and the United States proved reluctant to provide military support to the nascent Derg. The Soviets, encouraged by the Derg, quickly abandoned the Somali government, their former allies, and gave massive support to Ethiopia, which appeared to be a more reliable client implementing a genuine socialist revolution. Somali forces were driven out of the country, and the radicals of the Derg led by Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged under the protective wing of the Soviets with absolute power. During Mengistu’s reign civil war was continuous. Large numbers of people either lost their lives or were forced to flee the country.

At the heart of Messay’s analysis is the use of psychobiography in finding Mengistu’s narcissism essential in understanding the revolution. In a significant contribution to the study of the revolution, the author delves into the double-edged nature of the dictator’s narcissism: on the one hand, his decisiveness, authoritarianism, cunning, and manipulative ability so suited for seizing power; but on the other hand, his negative paranoia, quick temper, cruelty, and sense of invincibility that impeded his winning the civil war. Like Haile Selassie before him, the very measures that Mengistu took to safeguard his absolute rule turned out to be those that most weakened him.

Messay is also incisive in analyzing the rise of ethnonationalism leading to the concept of a nation within Ethiopia possessing the right to self-determination either in the form of self-rule or, if need be, independence. Ethnonationalism became the rallying point for the Tigrean elite in resisting government intrusions into its territory. Together with the Eritreans who sought independence, the two northern ethnic movements scored decisive military victories that brought about the collapse of the Derg. Troops of the Tigrean People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) marched into Addis Ababa while the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front captured Asmara. The TPLF then dominated the transitional government that adopted a system of ethnic federalism and supervised a referendum on Eritrean independence that created a new nation and left Ethiopia without an outlet to the sea. The TPLF’s rule ever since continues under the shadow of the Derg’s socialist revolution.

In his concluding analysis of the Ethiopian revolution using both a narrative method and ideological factors, Messay synthesizes a philosophic perspective that is excellent political theory and a major contribution to the literature of Ethiopian Studies. The narrative history of Haile Selassie’s era and of the Derg’s reign are splendidly presented. I strongly recommend this book to all who seek to understand Ethiopia’s turbulent transformation from a monarchy into a socialist nation during the 1970s.

---Professor Theodore M. Vestal, author of The Lion of Judah in the New World: Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and the Shaping of Americans’ Attitudes toward Africa
Overview

Why did reasonable demands of Ethiopian masses for change lead not only to the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie, but also to a radical revolution that caused civil wars, economic decline, secession, and ethnic politics, all in the name of socialist equality and freedom? The answer of the book is that elite conflicts over scarce resources promoted mutually exclusive struggles for power, and so mobilized ideologies suitable for zero sum politics, of which radical revolutions are typical expressions.

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While the concept of revolution ordinarily fills us with images of the masses protesting and clashing with government forces, this book moves the focus to elites and their conflicts. The change of emphasis assigns to this preface the initial task of specifying the notion of “elite,” given the widespread practice of a loose usage of the term.

I use the term “elite” in distinction to “class” to signify the competition for the control of state power by forces that are not defined by the ownership of economic assets. True, a ruling class is an elite group in that it controls power and enjoys status and prestige that are uncommon, but it owes its high social standing to its ownership of economic means. However, in Ethiopia and many Third World countries, elite groups control power and enjoy uncommon life-styles without having the direct possession of economic means. Such is the case with military, bureaucratic, or technocratic elites. The fact about such elites is that the control of state power, especially of its military and security forces, gives them a privileged access to economic wealth. Understandably, such elites compete over the exclusive control of state power, which they use to extract hefty revenues from an economic system of which they are not productive members. It is with this distinction in mind that this study often applies the term “class” to Ethiopia’s traditional nobility, given that its power was the direct emanation of land ownership. The word “elite” is reserved to military groups, officials of political
movements (including representatives of ethnonationalist or religious movements), the intelligentsia, the bureaucratic stratum, etc.

The preponderance of elites, political elites in particular, over economic classes is a direct consequence of a modernization process that was primarily introduced, as prescribed by the colonial paradigm of modernization, by externally induced super-structural means (to use a Marxist term) rather than through an internal process of social changes. According to the paradigm, modern economic classes and productive systems were to be progressively drawn from the institution of modern governments run by Western-educated elites, imprudently baptized agents of modernization. Because externally induced super-structural changes preceded internal evolutions, a social system that institutionalized the preponderance of noneconomic elites came into being, with the consequence that the economic apparatus turned into a ruling instrument of political elites. Accordingly, the goal of such elites is not to facilitate the growth of production and exchange; rather, it is to subsume the economic system to the political purpose of retaining state power—essentially by using the repressive forces of the modern state—and extracting resources to support their privileged status.

This book maintains that the subordination of economic modernization to the interests of political elites accurately defines modern Ethiopia. Though the country defeated all the challenges to its existence for many centuries, it found itself in an existential quagmire subsequent to a skewed encounter with modernity. At first the misfired modernization fostered a severe conflict between modernized elites and a traditional class defended by an autocratic system, the outcome of which was the overthrow of the political system by a revolutionary uprising. Unsurprisingly, the violent nature of the conflict favored the faction of the military elite that advocated the radicalization of the Revolution. However, no sooner had the military elite stabilized the movement by the institution of a repressive and intolerant system than it faced an even bloodier confrontation with ethnonationalist forces. Among the many consequences of this confrontation, the most salient are the defeat of the military regime, the secession of Eritrea, and the establishment of an ethnic federalism that is nowhere near lessening the confrontation of elite forces for hegemony.

To theorize a social movement as complex, massive, entangled, and eventful as a social revolution is a Herculean task that imposes modesty on the findings of this book. Moreover, whatever the thesis and the explanation, a theory of revolution cannot be anything other than a hindsight reconstruction, since to say otherwise would be to assume that events were predictable even before they actually happened. If anything, human history is a creative process; therefore, it defies any deductive claim before the actual occurrence of events. The best a theory of revolution can do is to attempt a retrospective construction after the fact.

Those who question the value of a reconstructive view should keep in mind that the purpose of a theoretical work cannot be to discourse on things that have already occurred, given that what has happened cannot be
redone or undone. By contrast, the future is in front of us: it is not yet done and is given to us as something that we can fashion. Is it not reasonable, then, to assume that the interest of a theoretical work that reconstructs the past lies in its possible contribution to the shaping of the future?

The future appears as a determined outcome when people are unable to set their lives in perspective. Each time people fail to extract themselves from the present—that is, to step back from what is currently occurring—they condemn themselves to react mechanically to events, thus rendering themselves incapable of developing choices and acting accordingly.

Insofar as to explain the past is both to uncover and streamline the hidden forces that determine history, a theoretical work restores the detachment and therefore the freedom that people need to engage the future rationally instead of reacting impulsively. Indeed, a rational reappropriation objectifies the past, and thus emancipates the future from unconscious forces, thereby inviting people to evolve from passive to active agents by presenting the future as an object of choice, and not as an outcome of an engulfing necessity.

Bearing all this in mind, I ask you, the reader, to judge this work by how well it exposes and exorcises the demons of the past and how zealously its therapeutic value encourages a fresh perspective for the future. What best protects against the famous saying that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” is a remembrance that liberates people from the hidden forces that control them, thereby changing them for the better.

My belief is that the depiction of Ethiopia’s modern history in terms of elite conflicts unravels the forces hidden in revolutionary and ethnonationalist ideologies and suggests the only way by which these conflicts can be geared toward a constructive path, namely, through democratic arbitration based on the principle of sovereignty of the people. Only when as free electors people assume the power of arbitration can Ethiopia find a nonviolent and inclusive method of resolving conflicts. What is detrimental is not the clash of interests, but the fact that the winner becomes both judge and party owing to the absence of an over-arching authority with the exclusive right to settle political disputes.