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The Elite and the Quest for Peace, Democracy, and Development in Ethiopia: Lessons to be Learnt

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Introduction

Donald N. Levine,¹ author of Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society, who has popularized Carlo Conti Rossini’s description of Ethiopia as “un museo di popoli”—a museum of peoples—characterized the evolution of multiethnic Ethiopia as an “Amhara thesis,” an “Oromo anti-thesis,” and an “Ethiopian synthesis.” Whatever the merits of Levine’s historical analysis, the country moved to a crisis of major proportions whose effect was a revolutionary reconstitution of both state and society that relegated the country’s ancien régime to the museum of history. This put to a severe test both his thesis and the celebrated historical evolution of the country as a whole. And now, in less than two decades, the Tigrayan antithesis, the negation of his “Ethiopian synthesis”—to use Marxist dialectics for want of a better term—is in full swing—a far-reaching agenda for the remaking of Ethiopia, in a manner that redirects, if not fully reverses, the historical evolution of modern Ethiopia.

The present experiment involves the objective of accomplishing two historical tasks: the tasks of creating a country that houses “nations, nationalities, and peoples” of equals and ending authoritarian rule by democratizing the Ethiopian state and society as a whole, as a precondition for peace and development. However, as the result of the five accumulated grand failures of the Ethiopian elite in the twentieth century, the perennial quest for peace, democracy, and development continues to
be as elusive as ever. The most fundamental question is, therefore, what lessons have to be learnt to move forward? This article, which sums up the political history of modern Ethiopia in terms of five grand failures, is a modest attempt to suggest these lessons.

The Expansion and Consolidation of the Empire-State: The First Grand Failure, 1850s–1900

When Kassa of Begemidir started the process of the creation of a modern multiethnic empire-state around the 1850s, historic Ethiopia (roughly the northern half of the country today and part of Eritrea) had been in feudal anarchy for about 80 years, and central authority existed mainly in name only. But the feudal anarchy that precipitated the weakening of the Abyssinian state had the effect of opening up the appetite of the aspirants for power to reestablish past imperial glory and a strong central authority. This was further facilitated by the vulnerability of the then dominant Yejju Oromo elite, which controlled the imperial seat at Gonder for about 80 years but was culturally and demographically far removed from the bulk of the Oromo population, which was then living outside of Abyssinian central control.

Kassa-Tewodros, despite his humble background, had both a sense of history and a sense of modernization, presenting him with two major tasks to accomplish. His sense of history had to do with the glorious past of the Christian kingdom, mainly weakened by the intrusion of the Oromos, whom he vowed to stop by reestablishing the country in its old glory. His sense of modernization had to do mainly with getting access to firearms, without which he could not reestablish past glory.

Tewodros’s rule was short-lived (1855–1868) and none of his goals were accomplished, but his legacy assisted in the creation by his successors of a far more grandiose empire-state than he had dreamt of. More paradoxically, his proto-Ethiopian nationalism was never reconciled with the competing nationalisms of the various ethnic groups of Ethiopia, nor could it defuse them, which a century later has produced an antithesis of the historical process initiated by Tewodros in the 1850s.

During the rise of Tewodros, the geographical extension of the Ethiopian state was limited to the northern perimeter of today’s Ethiopia.
But while his successor, Yohannes, was busy consolidating his authority over the area he had inherited from Tewodros and defending his domains against foreign intruders—the Egyptians, the Italians, and the Mahadists—a new power center was emerging around Shewa. It was this new power center, though peripheral to historic Ethiopia, that was destined to transform profoundly the history, geography, and demography of the Ethiopian state by the turn of the twentieth century.6

Benefiting from the political disorientation, economic exhaustion, and military weakness of the Tigrayan elite and the rest of the northern elite, the rising Shewan Amhara elite easily won the battle for hegemony. By then they were able to assimilate the elites of the conquered areas, especially the Oromo elite, whose members proved to be able military commanders (Ras Gobana, Fitawrari Gebeyehu, Ras Mekonnen, Dejazmach Balcha) and political “wizards” like Empress Taitu and Fitawrari Habte-Giorgis. And for a century to come, the Shewan Amhara elite, the embodiment of Orthodox Christianity, the Amharic language, and Abyssinian cultural values dominated multiethnic Ethiopia in a manner unprecedented in the country’s history.7

The Shewan expansion and the resultant politico-economic consequences were far more profound, far more brutal, and far more devastating in the south than in the north. In the north, it was the issue of reunifying regions that had constituted part of the Abyssinian polity for centuries and peoples who had shared the Christian tradition and Semitic cultural ethos for millennia.8 In the south, it was the issue of mostly bringing new lands and new peoples into the emerging empire-state on unequal terms. The resultant outcome was a dual oppression, national as well as class; one polity but two markedly different systems: thus, the dichotomous north-south relations emerged in the country’s politics.9

Both by design and by accident of history, Menelik’s empire-building project carried in itself the seeds of future conflict. Menelik connived with the Italians to get access to firearms and divide the Tigrayan elite.10 The outcome was the creation of Eritrea as an Italian colony and the relegation of the Tigrayan elite to a junior partnership in the expanding empire-state, a position the Tigrayan elite continually refused to accept. Menelik brought together several dozen ethnic groups to live under one polity. But the partners in Menelik’s polity were not equals.
The expansion and consolidation of the empire-state correspondingly created a new phenomenon, a phenomenon of elite competition and conflict in a far larger multiethnic polity. And the seed of future conflict was planted when the victorious Amhara elite of Shewa, led by Menelik and his successors, began to run the country as a personal fiefdom by imposing their language and culture, and in certain cases, their religion. More precisely, while the Amhara elite of Shewa was able to establish what seemed a permanent dominance, the rest of the other competing elites were reduced to inferior positions with permanent grievances. For instance, the historical rival Tigrayan elite, weakened and defeated, had to accept a junior partnership in the sharing of the spoils of the empire but with a permanent grudge.

The defeated Oromo elite were in a far worse position. Its members had to change their language, culture, religion, and even names as well as occupy a far lower status than the numerical strength of their ethnicity demanded. The members of the rest of the subjected elite of the south were largely reduced to local servants of the dominant elite, while their areas continued for decades to be a hunting ground for slaves. The first grand failure is, therefore, the creation of an empire-state of unequal members. This first grand failure is not so much the result of the bloody nature of the creation of the empire-state. The European historical experiences of nation-state creation, such as Napoleonic France, were no less bloody. The Ethiopian experience was different because of two historical limitations: the elite that provided the leadership was more motivated by feudal grandeur, while the material foundation of the expanding state was backward agrarian feudalism, unlike the case in the European experiences, which were led by the rising bourgeoisie in the interest of capitalism.

The “Nation-Building” Process during the Imperial Regime and the Second Grand Failure, 1900–1935

By 1900, the western, eastern, and southern frontiers of Ethiopia were almost entirely established, and northern as well as southern Ethiopia was brought under the control of one political center, based in Addis Ababa, which was fated to become the political and commercial capital of modern Ethiopia. The Shewan Amhara elite members, who took the
real command of the larger empire-state, were intoxicated with their double victories, both internally, through their waves of conquests, and externally, in the historic victory over the Italians at the battle of Adwa. Benefited by the ideal situation thus created, under the command of Menelik they proceeded with their “nation-building” project along two fronts: the creation of one Ethiopian nation out of diverse peoples and cultures and a modernization drive to catch up with industrialized Europe, an ambition hitherto limited to access to firearms.  

The first of the two fronts, the creation of “one Ethiopian nation,” was the continuation of the expansion process under what was then termed makina (which literally means pacification). The process of makina involved the evangelization of the local population, the institutionalization of a new system of political control, and the imposition of a new political class, culture, and language on the indigenous population. Above all, it was an establishment of new centers of political as well as military control, better known as ketemas or garrison towns. Moreover, the subjected peoples, especially the elites, were advised, encouraged, or even forced to take Christian names in order to be considered “civilized” and authentic Ethiopians. Thus, the “Gebre-Egizabehers” (slaves of God), the “Gebre-Mariams” (slaves of Mary), and so forth mushroomed across the south. This was to continue for generations to come as an important element in the so-called “nation-building” process. While this process continued as the unfinished business of conquest with a far deeper institutionalization of the new system of political control as well as cultural and linguistic domination, simultaneously the introduction of European education and technology had begun by the first decade of the twentieth century. An appetite for European technology had begun earlier with Tewodros, but it was Menelik who was able to put it into practice in a feasible and tangible manner. The railway, banking, modern education, roads and bridges, international trade, a semblance of a modern ministerial system, Addis Ababa as an emerging political and commercial center of the new empire, and other projects were all part of Menelik’s modernization drive in the post-empire-creation period. This modernization drive was initiated partly to facilitate the “nation-building” project and partly to catch up with Christian Europe, with which the Ethiopian rulers were then competing.
History did not move as planned. What came to pass was not modernization but a decades-long life-and-death power struggle, as the various elites began to jockey for power and influence. And in what appeared to be the first major postconquest power struggle, Empress Taitu, who was of Yeju Oromo extraction but had a Gonderite regional interest, lost the power struggle to a Shewan-Wollo alliance in 1910. The fractious Shewan-Wollo alliance did not last for long and in the confrontation that took place in 1916, Iyyassu, a young emperor of Oromo extraction from Wollo, lost his throne to a diarchy of Shewan representatives, Zewditu and Teferi. Iyyassu lost power both on religious and on regional grounds, but on no explicitly expressed ethnic grounds, as can be judged from the participation of Oromo elite members who played decisive roles on both sides of the fence. For instance, it was Habte-Giorgis, an Oromo from Shewa, who sealed the fate of Iyyasu both by leading the coup against him in 1916 and by defeating the large Wollo army, led by Iyyassu’s father, that came to restore the young emperor to power.

With the benefit of hindsight, the sad part of the 1916 coup was its termination of the balanced post-empire religious, regional, and ethnic policy of the Ethiopian regime, which, although not well articulated, could have charted a new path for the evolution of Ethiopia’s multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural polity and could as well have saved the country from some of its late-twentieth-century crises. And, if history is to judge Iyyassu, it is not difficult to argue that the country lost with him a historical opportunity of building a multiethnic Ethiopia on a balanced foundation. With his removal and as a result of the power struggle that lasted from 1910 to 1930, the quest for modernization was relegated to a secondary position. Sadly, in spite of the advice of the country’s emerging modern elite, compared to countries in similar situations such as Japan, the Ethiopian rulers chose to devote their energy, wisdom, and the country’s resources to a power struggle, while doing very little to transform the country.

This failure to face the challenge of modernization can be termed the second grand failure of the Ethiopian elite. Needless to add, the endless power struggle and the failure to modernize Ethiopia had the additional effect of exposing it to the Italian invasion and the easy defeat of Ethiopia by the Italians.
The Postwar Ethiopian Polity and the Third Grand Failure

The Italian invasion had a debilitating effect on the Ethiopian ruling class, part of which was physically eliminated in the course of the war. Furthermore, the Italians tried to exploit the religious, ethnic, and regional differences among the various peoples of Ethiopia to their own advantage. Although this did not work well for the Italians, it clearly exposed the fragility of the hoped for “nation-building” process. Some members of the Tigray, Oromo, and Amhara regional elites seized the opportunity of cooperating with the Italians, both lured by the material rewards offered by the Italians and in revenge for the domination of the Shewan Amhara elite.

Haile Selassie’s preoccupation after the war was to consolidate his power base by resuming his prewar centralization drive. To do this, he had to structure a new government out of the ruins of the war; this needed serious reorganization including the installation of a modern bureaucracy. The emperor, without losing much time, first with the help of the British who supported his restoration to power against some local resistance, and later with the help of the Americans, embarked upon building a modern civilian and military bureaucracy. As the staffing of modern institutions needed a large educated elite class, to meet the increased demand he initiated the building of modern schools at home and sponsored hundreds of young men to go abroad and get a foreign education. In other words, Haile Selassie was very conscious of the fact that his goal of institutionalizing absolute power against the resistance of the traditional elite could not be realized without the creation of a loyal modern bureaucracy and army whose raison d’être should be loyalty to him alone. Thus, with an eye on absolute power and loyalty, he opened schools and military training center that began to produce the desperately needed educated manpower for the staffing of the new institutions. To this end, old elementary schools were promoted to secondary levels while new schools were opened at all levels, including the University College of Addis Ababa in 1951 and a full-fledged university, carrying the emperor’s name, in 1961. Foreign scholarship also helped to meet the needs of the fast-growing modern state.
In the postwar period, alongside the burgeoning civilian bureaucracy, the national defense force was also expanded and divided into occupational divisions: the imperial bodyguard, the ground force, the police force, the air force, and, after the incorporation of Eritrea, the navy. Urbanization and commerce grew steadily side by side and Ethiopian towns no longer looked like the garrison towns of half a century earlier. And, in many major respects, postwar Ethiopia had become a much transformed modern polity compared to the situation just two decades earlier. But this was only one side of the story, because the changes that occurred helped to incubate other, explosive changes that exploded very soon thereafter.

The members of Ethiopia's ruling class who had survived the Italians were not moved by the shock waves of the war and once again occupied themselves with consolidation of power rather than facing the challenges of the twentieth century. The outcome was, on the one hand, a growing contradiction between the traditional elite, which was refusing to give way to the rising modern elite; while, on the other hand, the modern elite was caught in a contradiction of its own. The traditional political elite felt threatened by the modern elite and instead of giving way to the latter was drawn into an endless competition/conflict. The modern elite on its part entered the struggle with a serious contradiction within itself, that is, the multinational goal, which was aimed at changing the country as a whole, and an ethnic/regional agenda, which was aimed at ending the marginalization of the hitherto subject peoples. And thus began the new phenomenon of inter- and intraelite struggles that culminated in the demise of the country's ancien régime in 1974. This is basically because the lessons from the two grand failures as well as the lessons from the country's defeat at the hands of the Italians were not learnt. In other words, not only the modernization drive but also the whole nation-building project foundered, and this can be termed the third grand failure.

The 1974 Revolutionary Upheaval and the Fourth Grand Failure

By the beginning of the 1970s, various opposition forces were at work. Some were organized to defend the interests of the working class and the peasantry. Others were created to promote national and regional interests.
The most serious problem in this regard was that as their ideological orientation ran from pure nationalism to radical Marxism and their political agendas were contradictory, there was little coordination among the opposition forces, and each of them was fighting its own battle against the common enemy, the ancien régime.

The Eritrean movements were at the forefront of the national/regional struggles against the imperial regime, and they had begun to sap both its energy and resources by the early 1970s. By this period, protonationalism among the Oromos and Tigrayans had also begun to take some shape, despite its clandestine nature. The hitherto subdued Ethiopian Muslims also began to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with their secondary status in their own country. The most affected social sectors, peasants in Bale (1963–1970) and Gojjam (1968), had already risen against the arbitrary actions of the imperial regime and its agents. The Bale Oromo uprising especially had both ethnic and religious dimensions, as the peasants involved were both Oromo and Muslims. The uprising was a sustained struggle that reverberated among the radical Ethiopian students in general and the Oromo intelligentsia in particular. A far more inclusive and extensive struggle was, of course, the one fought by the students. Inspired by the then universally popular Marxist ideology and the socialist revolutions in Russia and China, the students assumed the role of a revolutionary vanguard in the all-out battle against the decaying imperial regime. Well-placed in the country’s major cities and towns, which were the locus of imperial power, and having the advantage of concentration around schools and colleges, with the selfless energy of youth they confronted and exposed the regime on their own terms.

In fact, it was the students’ defiance and determination in the decade that preceded the 1974 democratic upsurge that later moved the other sectors of the population—the teachers, the workers, the taxi drivers, the lower-grade government employees, and finally the army, hitherto the custodian of imperial rule—to revolutionary actions. And, in what appears to be the loss of the “mandate of heaven” by His Majesty, even the lower echelons of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, one of the pillars of imperial rule in Ethiopia, came out against the emperor’s government with grievances of their own, breaking the tradition of a symbiotic relationship between church and state in Ethiopian history.
The revolutionary upheaval came in 1974, but because of what could go down as one of the ironies of the Ethiopian revolution—despite the convergence of several factors and the activities of the forces of change since the foiled coup of 1960, in Leninist parlance—there was no maturity of the subjective factor; that is, there was no properly organized political party that could give the necessary leadership to the revolution. The two leftist political parties that were in existence prior to the revolution—the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (popularly known as MEISON), as of 1968, and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), as of 1972—had remained clandestine and limited their activities to the student constituency from which both originated. When the revolution broke out in February 1974, in the absence of a credible, organized civil opposition, the military, by exploiting the power vacuum, easily took over the leadership of the revolution. And in spite of little coordination between the military elite, which assumed the leadership of the revolutionary movement without past revolutionary credentials, and the civilian left, which claimed the leadership of the revolution as a matter of right, the revolution continued to deepen with the removal of the leading pillars of the ancien régime one after another. On 12 September, the man who had dominated Ethiopian history and politics for more than half a century and was believed to be quasi-divine and untouchable by the country’s subjects was deposed.

The Ethiopian military as an inheritor of imperial Ethiopia wanted to transform the country without making a major break with the imperial past in terms of the national question, and wanted to lead a revolution without the revolutionaries. As prisoners of the imperial past, the soldiers who turned into Marxist revolutionaries overnight failed to resolve the national/regional inequalities, the factors that precipitated the revolution itself. In its lust for power, the military elite mercilessly decimated the very people who had brought about the revolution in the first place, and instead began to manufacture half-baked cadres who could understand neither the intricacies of social change nor the complexities of Ethiopian society.

The end result was neither fully a positive social transformation nor a successful “nation-building” project, but one of the most destructive periods in the country’s long-recorded history, under what can be
characterized, for want of a better term, as “garrison socialism.” What happened was that from day one, Ethiopia’s military elite applied what can be termed military methods to solve all the country’s societal problems.

An observation I have made elsewhere needs to be quoted in detail here:

Mengistu: the man who emerged as the sole operator of the Ethiopian state machine; ended the ancien régime by a proclamation; with his fellow travellers transformed himself overnight to a proletarian revolutionary by a proclamation; established a socialist government by a proclamation; nationalized the country’s key economic sectors by a proclamation; destroyed the country’s best brains without the court of law as enemies of the people and revolution by a proclamation; organized the supportive mass organizations, peasants, workers, women, and youth associations, by a proclamation; carried out all the developmental policies including the cooperativisation, collectivization, resettlement, and villagization programmes by a proclamation; created his Workers Party of Ethiopia and elected himself its First General Secretary by a proclamation; instituted the national parliament, and in effect elected its members by a proclamation; established the Peoples’ Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and elected himself its first president by a proclamation. There were too many proclamations to include them all here. What should be stressed . . . however, is that the military method employed by Mengistu and his crew not only failed to solve basic issues such as political and economic development, but also miserably failed to solve military issues, which were within their profession. What they managed to do with all these earth-shaking proclamations was to cause incalculable damage to the country and its people by failing a popular revolution that promised the broad masses of Ethiopia freedom, social justice, peace, and prosperity in a just and democratic state.

Put simply, the military regime’s method, instead of solving daunting societal problems, provoked massive resistance from many quarters, which finally sealed the fate of the military regime itself in May 1991.
This can be termed the fourth grand failure in a series of attempts to transform the Ethiopian state and society.

The Emergence of an “Ethnocratic State” and the Fifth Grand Failure: The Post-1991 Period

The hoped-for Ethiopian democratic transition was publicly inaugurated with the accord reached at the London Conference of May 1991. At this conference, which was held under the chairmanship of the United States, which has begun to feel a new sense of historical mission to democratize the rest of humanity as a whole, a consensus was reached to establish a broad-based transitional government of Ethiopia whose responsibility was to oversee internationally monitored “free and fair” elections to the Constituent Assembly, a body that was to be entrusted to prepare a permanent constitution for the country within a year. And, in what appears to have been the first major step to implement this broad consensus, the July 1991 Conference of Addis Ababa was convened, and the representatives at this conference formed a Council of Representatives (COR), which approved the charter for the transitional period and established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE).

During the whole period of the transition, the ruling party’s main concern appears to have been not the building of democratic institutions and their institutionalization, but intimidation and marginalization of the opposition, repression of the emerging civil society and the independent press, and so on, on the one hand, and the building of its own institutions of control, all aimed at consolidation of power, on the other. In other words, alongside the constitution making, members of the free press continued to be harassed and detained, human rights violations continued unabated, and even Addis Ababa University, the country’s sacred institution, was attacked and its staff dismissed in large numbers.

Moreover, with the tacit support of the West, especially the Americans, who were eager to see a “new breed of leaders” who would follow Museveni as their role model, the constitutional engineering went ahead according to plan. And, despite the half-hearted calls by some Western powers for the political opening up to accommodate the opposition, as well as the calls by diverse sectors of Ethiopian society for
both national reconciliation and an all-inclusive political process, the
national constitution was drafted in a nontransparent way and the elec-
tion to the Constituent Assembly was held in a seriously flawed man-
ner. As usual, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
(EPRDF) won a landslide victory with 89.3 percent of the seats, a num-
ber that can be said to be higher when its unofficial affiliates are
included. Consequently, the constitution authored solely by the EPRDF
and the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) was ceremoniously
adopted and the basic tenets of the EPRDF political program, including
the “right to secession,” were sanctified as the supreme law of the land.
The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), which later left the coalition, was
also involved, as well as the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF).

Finally, after four years of expectations and suspensions, hopes and
despair, the lingering transition came to an end with the national and
regional election of 1995. As usual, the TPLF/EPRDF claimed to have
won a landslide victory with 90.1 percent of the seats. Neither the man-
nner in which this election was conducted nor its objective was different
from prior elections. In fact, the big “democratic” promise of the charter
on which the whole transitional process was hinged, the transfer of
power to a democratically elected party was pushed aside and a de facto
one-party state was further institutionalized. Moreover, under what
appears to be a “transition without change,” the old games continued
unabated: violations of human and democratic rights; repression of civil
society organizations, especially the Ethiopian Teachers Association and
the Ethiopian Trade Union; pressures on and harassment of the nascent
independent press; and so on. On the whole, it has become business as
usual, except during the interlude of the Ethio-Eritrean war, which
forced the TPLF/EPRDF government to be less repressive toward the
independent press, more due to its support for the war than to democ-
ruatic considerations.

The May 2000 election was held in a similarly unpriopitious political
environment: the administration of the election was as flawed as ever,
and the real opposition parties were given only 13 seats in the 547-seat
Federal Parliament. If we have to identify the pitfalls, in many major
ways, they have to do with the discrepancies between the policy initia-
tives on paper and their practical implementation. For instance, human
and civil rights were enshrined in the constitution, but there have been well-documented violations of them; both civil society organizations and an independent press have been allowed to operate, but have been working under very precarious conditions; the rights to association and multiparty democracy are constitutionally guaranteed, but not all parties have been allowed to operate legally and those that have been allowed to operate legally work under serious pressures, while all the elections held to date have been seriously flawed; the rights of ethnic groups are constitutionally recognized and the decentralization of power policy was initiated for their practical application, but the reality on the ground is a new “ethnocratic state” under the command of a Tigrayan minority; on paper there are all the trappings of constitutional rule, including the separation of powers with the existence of an independent court that oversees respect for the rule of law, but extrajudicial detentions, killings, and so forth are very pervasive in the country; Ethiopia’s economy has been freed from the old style of command, but the ruling party is controlling the commanding heights of the country’s economy, and hence, the ruling party’s business empire has replaced the classical state-controlled strategy.35

In a nutshell, what can be termed a dubious commitment to pluralistic democracy has derailed all the major initiatives to democratize the Ethiopian state and society. To put it in better perspective, what has been undertaken in Ethiopia certainly amounts to a political liberalization, despite serious contradictory moves, but it falls short of democratization. Hence, less kindly judged, what has really happened in Ethiopia is that the century-old hegemony of the Amhara elite and the concept of a unitary state, which continued to linger on even after its death blow as a result of the 1974 popular revolution, was finally consigned to history in 1991 and replaced by the hegemony of the Tigrayan elite, which has based its hegemony on a deformed liberal democracy trajectory: controlled devolution of power and a certain level of political liberalization. Here, the critical issue in the Ethiopian transition problem is to carry out what Harbeson36 has termed a “dual transition—from an ethnically dominated empire to an ethnically egalitarian nation-state and from authoritarian rule to democracy.” The TPLF/EPRDF regime seems to have failed on both counts in its efforts...
to sponsor the Ethiopian transition. To put our observation in perspective, for the TPLF, the hard core of the EPRDF, to succeed in its project of sponsoring the hoped-for Ethiopian democratic transition, it needs to undergo a triple transformation, namely, the transformation of the TPLF into a real EPRDF; the ideological transformation of the EPRDF from a revolutionary democracy to some form of pluralistic democracy; and the transformation of the TPLF/EPRDF from an armed movement to a democratic movement with all its implications.

The successful triple transformation as a whole involves the TPLF/EPRDF committing triple ideological suicide, that is, giving up the aspiration for hegemony, the modus operandi of the Marxist-Leninist democratic centralist doctrine, which is an ideological edifice and the foundation for leftist authoritarianism, and military strategic thinking. However, like the Marxian class suicide in history, none of these transformations is easy to accomplish. For instance, if we take the first transformation, from a Tigrayan liberation movement to an Ethiopia-wide movement, this implies the need to give up interests for which the TPLF was created in the first place. Several works directly and indirectly demonstrate that the creation of the TPLF was part of the history of the struggles of succeeding generations of Tigrayan elites to reclaim the central position they had lost to the Amhara elite in the last decade of the nineteenth century. And the TPLF is both the product and the embodiment of that history, and far beyond this, has made history by fulfilling the dream of the Tigrayan elites for generations. Consequently, it appears, the moving spirit of the TPLF leadership is not how to share their dream with other contenders for power, but how to jealously guard and sustain it for generations to come.

To make our points clearer, in many major ways, real power sharing and/or democratization undermines, may even totally reverse, the gains the Tigrayan elite achieved through blood and fire. This is simply because the TPLF’s Tigrayan interests may not be easily achieved in a democratized Ethiopia. Several reasons can be cited for this. First and foremost, the population of Tigray, the home base of the TPLF, constitutes only about six percent of the country’s population, compared to the populations of Oromo and Amhara, which are, respectively, about six times and five times larger than that of Tigray. And in a country where, as a result
of the competing ethnic nationalisms—ironically, nationalisms to which the TPLF itself has contributed more than any other political force in the country—demography has become almost the sole basis of democracy, the Oromo and Amhara elites would have the advantage of numbers. Conscious of this, the TPLF leadership seems to operate under a serious dilemma, whether to open up the political process to other forces to gain legitimacy or to close the political space to the contending forces at the cost of losing legitimacy. Seen from the TPLF leadership’s angle, this is not an easy choice to make, since it is an issue of a possible immediate loss of power and privilege in any “free and fair” election. In other words, this means the loss of the centrality that was achieved at great cost after a full century. And giving up the present primacy of Tigray as a state within a state appears to be a nightmarish scenario for the Tigrayan elite presently at the helm of state power in Ethiopia.

Second, the available resources in Ethiopia are not sufficient to develop war-torn Tigray and the rest of Ethiopia on an equal basis. Under conditions of scarce resources, the TPLF leadership’s choice very often seems to end up favoring Tigray, which cannot pass unnoticed in the atmosphere of rising ethnic nationalisms. This means that the TPLF leaders either have to continue with their project of developing their region of Tigray, which is poor even by Ethiopian standards, by turning a deaf ear to the opposition cry of “everything is going to Tigray,” or abandon it altogether. The implications of both choices are clear: the former is in direct contradiction to peace and democratization in the larger Ethiopia, while the latter would help democratization in the rest of the country but would negate the achievements of Tigray and its elite to date, and would have a serious impact on the future of both.

The third problem, which is a corollary to the second, is that, in relative terms, Tigrayan elites were the junior partner in the Ethiopian empire-state. And the “Amhara domination” the Tigrayan elites fought so vigorously was not so great that the Amharas were extracting surplus from Tigray, but the Amhara elites denied them equal access to the larger Ethiopian resources, especially to those of the Oromo and the rest of the south.39 The Tigrayan elite assumed state power at a point in time when ethnic nationalism was on the rise, and under any political structure that resembles democracy, the extraction of surplus,
especially without political consensus, has become increasingly difficult. This becomes more serious, especially as the Oromo and the rest of the southern Ethiopian elites have begun to advance their own interests and those of their respective communities without any patronage from the Tigrayan elite, whose members want to sell themselves as “liberators.” If anything, the OLF’s brief honeymoon with the TPLF/EPRDF and the SEPDC’s (Southern Ethiopia People’s Democratic Coalition) dismissal from the Transitional Government of Ethiopia are reflective of these changed circumstances.

Fourth, the Amhara elite, which knows well what marginalization involves and have had a better experience with the Ethiopian state and the resources under its command, would have little reason to accept a new marginalization under any cover. Hence, there is a reasonable fear, if not a paranoia, on the part of the Tigrayan elite over any further opening up of the Ethiopian state along democratic lines. And, as the risk of opening up appears to be real rather than imaginary, hanging on to some sort of authoritarianism as long as possible, rather than risking the costly democratization venture, seems to be the best alternative left to the Tigrayan elite. Finally, the legacy of the ideology of liberation, that is, commitment to a cause for which one has sacrificed one’s youth, does not die easily. The best-known TPLF leaders were young university students who gave up their education and other alternative futures and fought for 16 solid years to win political power in Ethiopia. To easily give up what they achieved by sacrificing their youth to their less determined and softer contemporaries who followed other avenues of life, which made the latter more advanced in education and more articulate in their democratic discourse, seems to be a most difficult decision to make. Thus, in fairness to them, this may be a permanent scar on the minds of the TPLF leadership, which generally has been paranoiac in its reactions to any move by the Amhara elite. Their alternative is, therefore, to devise a survival strategy for a minority, such as the ethnic-based decentralization policy, under the control of the People’s Democratic Organizations (PDOs), that serves the policy of divide and rule rather than the cause of democracy and ethnic equality. And, paradoxically, not democracy but authoritarianism has become a form of life insurance for the ruling minority.
Even more paradoxically, even since the meticulously built TPLF/EPRDF political structure began to collapse with the recent split in the TPLF leadership, there has been little change in their approach, and they continue to talk about their revolutionary democracy and its potential for quick economic development while they do not listen to the opposition’s call for national reconciliation.

To put it in a nutshell, the real issue and the most difficult part of Ethiopian democratization is what emanates from the contradictory interests and visions of a minority that controls the Ethiopian state without the consent of either majorities or other minorities. And, in the absence of agreement and a “new social contract” between majorities and minorities in Ethiopia, the TPLF seems to have failed to make a radical break with the country’s authoritarian past. Instead, what it has achieved is “a tyranny of a minority over majorities and minorities.” It appears that what is central in this failure to make a radical break with the authoritarian past is the failure to answer the perennial question in contemporary Ethiopian politics: which way is power to be transferred—through the barrel of a gun or the ballot box?

Also central to the current crisis of the Ethiopian state is ethnic nationalism, which easily gives rise to multiple competing interests, contradictory visions, and clashes of dreams, especially among the contending elites who are the moving spirit of ethnic nationalism. For instance, the hegemonic aspirations of the Tigrayan elite, the nostalgia for the imperial days among part of the Amhara elite, and the dream of creating an independent Oromia among part of the Oromo elite are excellent examples of the contradictory demands on the Ethiopian state. In fact, the contradictory perspectives of the competing ethnic nationalisms have impacted Ethiopian democratization in many major ways.

First and foremost, they have negatively affected the political will of the competing elites to reach a national consensus on the fundamental rules of the game of the democratic transition as well as on the future fate of the country as a whole. Second, they have fragmented the opposition, undermined its unity of purpose and action, while giving the chance to the ruling party to continue to divide the opposition, to harass, intimidate, and weaken it. Additionally, the contradictory perspectives have not only pitted one ethnic group against another but have also affected the
working of civil society movements and the independent press, which as a result of this are as fragmented as the political parties. In this regard, what Mesfin has observed, that “the crisis of national consensus, manifested primarily in the intra-elite cleavages, is bound to obstruct the process of democratic changes,” has already become part of the Ethiopian reality. The accumulated effect of all this is yet another grand failure, whose consequences may be the end of Ethiopia as we know it.

Concluding Remarks

Samuel Huntington in his work, which appears to be a guide for democratizers, has advised that history “does not move forward in a straight line, but when skilled and determined leaders push, it does move forward.” Be that as it may, my summary of Ethiopian history in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the whole of the twentieth century clearly indicates a lack of political will as well as the existence of little sense of history among the country's dominant elite of the day: its determination to play a zero-sum game of politics to the endgame, its lack of the art of compromise, blurred vision of the future regarding larger societal goals, propensity for hegemony, vanity of grandeur, and above all failure to learn from past mistakes and history are all hallmarks of the succeeding generations of Ethiopian elites.

The main thrust of this article is to show the need for a behavioral change by the competing Ethiopian elites, so as to reverse the perilous road to destruction that has long been the country’s problem. Soul-searching as well as serious rethinking about alternative futures and pragmatic politics of give and take should start without delay. Furthermore, neither securing international support through public relations exercises nor manufacturing internal support through dubious means can help the cause of democracy nor in the end be life insurance for a regime unresponsive to the plight of its citizens. What is more, crying for the lost opportunities of the twentieth century cannot help us move forward very much. The lessons of the lost opportunities of the twentieth century need to be taken seriously and soberly by the competing elite if we are to face the challenges of the twenty-first century with hope and confidence.
According to this study, two factors are critical to moving forward out of the present political impasse: the hegemonic aspiration and its zero-sum game of politics must be abandoned by the ruling elite; and the fixation on history as well as the extravagant claims of some elites with regard to the right to secession must be left behind in the globalized world of the twenty-first century. Without a national consensus on the modality of democratic governance and the "political rules of the game," democratization is an illusion at best and hypocrisy at worst.

A corollary to this is that the democratization of multiethnic polities needs a careful construction of those political structures and institutions that are able to mediate and accommodate diversities, not those that exacerbate differences at the cost of shared commonalities. Furthermore, to accomplish such tasks, political leaders who think and act on a broader scale than that of their own ethnic groups and who have a sense of history are needed. Finally, there are two critical issues that need to be underlined if Ethiopia's hoped-for democratization enterprise is to be put back on track. First and foremost, abandoning the infamous PDO policy and allowing real autonomy to take root among the country's diverse communities seems to be the greatest service the TPLF/EPRDF can provide, both to the peoples of Ethiopia and to democracy. Second, if there is a way to tie in our thesis of the five grand failures with the trends of Ethiopian history, the present reality of the country, and the challenges for the future, it is this: the attempt to build a nation by a dominant elite with hegemonic aspirations and a top-down approach for more than a century has failed to produce the desired result, be it under the philosophy of the "mandate of heaven" or under that of "garrison socialism." And the present dominant elite appears to suffer from the same political malady. Although this appears to be the sin of succeeding generations of the country's elites, which resulted in the vicious cycle of crisis of the Ethiopian state and society, some elites have fought for social justice, democratic rule, and the economic well-being of ordinary citizens. Hence an innovative way of salvaging the country's foundering democratic transition is to make the competing elites reach a national consensus that can lead to a new "social contract" for a New Ethiopia, where interelite competition is democratically regulated and ordinary citizens are empowered to
choose their own leaders freely. Needless to add, unless we are cursed by history to be confused, if we are to learn the lessons from both our grand failures and the historical experiences of those who succeeded in controlling their own destiny, this is the only proven path to durable peace, democratic governance, and material prosperity.

Notes

5. Tewodros started the historical process of creating a unified Ethiopia in 1850s, and this became a reality by 1900. In the process, ethnic and religious inequalities were created, and these in the 1960s and 1970s provoked the rise of various nationalist movements whose goals were the reversal of the historical process of the nineteenth century that led to the creation of the empire-state on unequal terms.
7. Many Amharas of Gojjam, Gonder, and Wollo used to feel that they were also marginalized by their Shewan brothers, and that they were not beneficiaries of the imperial regime. But, as they share the same language, cultural values, and Orthodox Christianity, the country’s marginalized ethnic groups usually do not differentiate between the Amharas of Gojjam, Gonder, and Wollo and their Shewan brothers, although they might have had a point on regional grounds.
9. Many observers of Ethiopian politics make a distinction between northern and southern Ethiopia in many major respects: the political institutions,
the land-owning system, and other instruments of oppression. See, for
Autocracy to Revolution*, on the extent to which the peoples of the south
suffered under dual oppression, in a markedly different situation from
that of the north.


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12. For Ethiopia's warrior class, it was the European firearms technology that
was important until the turn of the twentieth century, when this class rec-
ognized somewhat reluctantly the need for modern education and other
forms of modernization.

13. Most of the old southern Ethiopian towns were products of the garrison
settlements created for political as well as military control of the various
parts of the south. They soon developed as both administrative and com-
mercial centers of their respective areas.

14. Merera Gudina, “The Ethiopian Transition from Military Autocracy to
Popular Democracy? Some Major Issues for Consideration in Crossing the

15. After the conquest, the adoption of Amharic and/or Christian names was
directly and indirectly encouraged, especially at schools, where students
were made to feel inferior because of their original names. Thus, changing
their names to Amharic or Christian names became an unwritten rule for
the members of the southern elite, a means by which they could become
members of the club of the northern elite.


17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

1965); Bahru Zewde, “Hayla-Selasse: From Progressive to Reactionary,” in
Pre-Proceedings of the Sixth Michigan State University Conference on
Northeast Africa, East Lansing, 23–25 April 1992; and Andargachew
Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge
University Press, 1993).

1969); Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy*; and Harold G. Marcus, *Ethiopia,
(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983). From
1941 to 1952, it was the British who helped the emperor to consolidate his
power base, but the emperor quickly replaced the British in 1952 with the Americans, who were then the rising star. The Americans sustained the imperial regime until the revolutionary upheaval of 1974, which ended American hegemony in Ethiopia together with the country's ancien régime.


24. Ibid.


31. Merera Gudina, “Soldiers and Social Revolution in Ethiopia” (master’s thesis, American University in Cairo, 1992). Small-scale stylistic changes have been made to this quotation.


34. The 1995 elections were primarily aimed at consolidation of power by the EPRDF, which won power through the barrel of the gun. See for details, Siegfried Pausewang, Kjetil Tronvoll, and Lovise Aalen eds. Ethiopia Since the Derg: A Decade of Democratic Pretensions and Performance. (London: Zed Books, 2002).
35. For the workings of the ruling party’s business empire, see “Ethiopian Non-Governmental Business: A Preliminary Survey with Special Emphasis on Companies Controlled by or Associated with EPRDF-Member Organizations and the Al-Amudi Family” (unpublished survey, no author given, September 1996).


39. Historically, by and large, the flow of resources has not been from north to south, and Tigray has been a junior partner in the Ethiopian empire-state. See, for instance, Addis Hiwet, *Ethiopia: From Autocracy to Revolution*.
