

The Lost Opportunity for Ethiopia: The Failure to Move toward Democratic Governance

Theodore M. Vestal, Oklahoma State University

Abstract

During the critical five year period leading up to the velvet revolution and the overthrow of Haile Selassie's regime, there were missed opportunities to bring about peaceful change in Ethiopia's governance. This paper analyzes the events of this period that led to the rise of the Derg and the revolutionary changes that followed and speculates on when strategic steps could have been taken to avoid the catastrophic events that ensued in 1974.

The End of the 1960s

In early 1969, Haile Selassie was at the apogee of his power exercising undivided, absolute, single-handed rule. The governing structure, a tightly centralized state, continued apace. Government had grown so that there were more institutions--bureaucratic, financial, political, and military--created by Haile Selassie and staffed with personnel chosen by him. Ministries could carry out assigned tasks, but all were under the supervision of the Emperor who had designed them to concentrate power in his person. Haile Selassie, it was, who authorized major decisions of the government since no one else had authority enough to do so. He even was involved in less significant matters too-- meeting requests of petitioners, distributing charity, and proffering advice or reproofs to individual subjects.

In the descriptive term of U.S. President George W. Bush, the Emperor was "the decider." Decisions emanated from the palace. The organization chart of the governing process remained simple: a giant arrow going out from the central box representing the monarch to all ministries and other official entities, all of whom eventually were beholden to Haile Selassie. The system, in 1969, was working. The nation enjoyed internal peace, and there was nothing originating in the government that could be considered highly threatening to the regime. The Emperor seemed confident that governing would continue as it had for almost 40 years under his enlightened rule.

In his domestic rule, the paternalistic Emperor made just enough change in his masterly system of divide and rule to keep competing forces in delicate balance. The landed aristocracy, the church, the mainly Western-educated younger technocrats, and the military all fell under the overriding shadow of the personality of Haile Selassie. The Emperor could co-opt most of them through preferential treatments of grants of land or lucrative appointments. The privileges and interests of the nobility were protected in exchange for their support of royal absolutism. The Crown Council and feudal lords might grouse about the assertiveness of the modernizing elite with its new ideas and promotion of centralizing government operations, but they were content so long as the IEG kept conservative ideas in policy and in parliament at the forefront. The educated elite, growing in number, found Haile Selassie too tolerant of traditionalists but were mollified by such successes as the Emperor allowed them. The monarch did not strive for an open society based on merit rather than on personal allegiance and the sharing of power.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church remained a pervasive influence in society but its political significance was in decline. The military, having demonstrated its dangerous potential during the attempted coup of 1960, received special attention from Haile Selassie, who reinforced his control over the armed forces that were divided into separate and competing groups. The Emperor fostered interpersonal as well as inter-unit rivalries and mutual suspicion to keep the military from being capable of acting in a concerted fashion. Militant ethnic forces, despite occasional flare-ups, were kept under control. The great majority of the people, the peasants and laborers, were loyal supporters of Haile Selassie as the revered emperor who ruled by tradition and the will of God. They saw the stability of the government as due to the benevolent reign of Haile Selassie and a long period of peace. All of the groups were subsumed into the economic development of the country—enough to satisfy progressives who clamored for change but not too much to

antagonize traditional aristocrats and the Ethiopian Church, who preferred the status quo. What Haile Selassie failed to grasp was that the modern measures he took to consolidate his absolutism, such as the establishment of the national army, modern education, and a hierarchical bureaucratic system, would create new interests and demands that would be less accepting of the limitations of autocracy. Gradually, the Emperor's reforms were being perceived as inadequate by an increasing number of the country's young people. In each succeeding year, the government's inability to remove the causes of social discontent and the increasing reliance on the military demonstrated the growing fragility of the imperial regime.

The loudest dissidents in Addis Ababa were radical student activists at Haile Selassie I University, who were critical of the regime and espoused Marxism, the *de rigueur* philosophy of young protesters at that time. Young intellectuals (and unbeknown to the palace, some bureaucrats and junior officers in the military) were beguiled by the alleged quick solutions for Ethiopia's chronic problems of poverty, ignorance, and disease through Marxist-Leninism. To them, the moderates' slow but steady development strategy of demonstrating the virtues of freedom of choice and self-determination and explaining the accomplishments of democracy and capitalism lacked immediacy. In metropolitan areas the Soviet-financed Crocodile Societies were winning the hearts and minds of the students who lacked the maturity to appreciate the meaning of Jefferson, Madison, Mill, and Lincoln. Some conservatives accused Haile Selassie of being overly indulgent of them, but the Emperor had deftly put them in their place before and no one thought they posed an unsolvable problem.

The annoying insurgents in outlying provinces, armed with money from Somalia and radical Arab states, were held at bay by successful Ethiopian countermeasures. In the face of the might of Ethiopia's 40,000 man army, the largest, most efficient, and best trained and equipped in sub-Saharan Africa, the Emperor's foreign neighbors had backed down from aggressive behaviors. Somalia, under Prime Minister Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, sought détente with the IEG and was reducing aid and encouragement to ethnic Somalis in the Ogaden. In 1969, the insurgency in Bale had reached its peak and was defeated. Even Eritrea was quieter than it had been a year before. Military muscle came at a price, however. Money for defense remained the largest single item in the IEG budget, about a quarter of the total.

In foreign affairs, Haile Selassie was intent on maintaining his nation's sovereignty and the boundaries of Greater Ethiopia. Collective security was his *idée fixe*, with the United Nations as guardian of the concept. He garnered accolades as an elder statesman in founding the OAU and as a moderating force in mediating disputes between nations. He stood four-square in urging an end to colonialism, especially in Africa, and encouraged Pan-Africanism and African unity. The Emperor even managed to be an active player in the nonaligned movement at the height of the Cold War, trying to play down treaties with the United States and the presence of U.S. bases in his country while maintaining cautious relations with the USSR and Warsaw Pact countries. He further burnished his credentials as a world leader with continuing international travel in which he reveled. Since the 1950s, Haile Selassie had effectively cultivated the financial, military, and diplomatic support of the United States, a most beneficial and necessary arrangement for the IEG and one that the Emperor was sure would endure so long as he held the trump card of landlordship of Kagnaw Station.²⁷

His travels around the world raised Ethiopia's international image and kept him an international celebrity. His prestige in the United States was demonstrated in July 1969, when the Emperor was the first African leader invited to visit the White House by his old friend President Richard Nixon after his election in 1968. Haile Selassie was reassured that the new administration would continue to hold Ethiopia as its closest friend in Africa. In international politics, the Emperor was concerned with continuing crises in the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War and in the

²⁷See generally, Theodore M. Vestal, *The Lion of Judah in the New World: Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and the Shaping of Americans' Attitudes toward Africa* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

Israeli-Egyptian War of Attrition. Both crises were significant for Ethiopia: Biafra involving an ethnic group breaking away from a sovereign nation and the Middle East war engaging Haile Selassie's ally, Israel. Both would grind on until military might rather than diplomacy would force "solutions"—Biafra crushed and the United Arab Republic (UAR) and Israel in stalemate. The UAR under Nasser, at the time a client state of the USSR, was of special significance for it served as a base for Soviet vessels to penetrate the Red Sea and become an Indian Ocean power. The Emperor felt the Soviets with their growing influence in Somalia, Sudan, and parts of the Arabian Peninsula were the greatest danger to Ethiopia. To combat this threat, Haile Selassie sought increased U.S. military aid with state-of-the-art armaments and equipment. The Americans reluctantly complied, but never with as much aid delivered with such alacrity as the Emperor desired.

The relative calm around the palace in early 1969 was shattered later in the year by military coup d'états in neighboring states. Anti-Western, Soviet-friendly socialist regimes were installed in the Sudan by Gaafar Nimeiry and in Somalia by Major General Siad Barre. Once again, tensions on Ethiopia's border were exacerbated by Soviet-supplied arms to hostile neighbors who threatened war and aided rebels in Eritrea and the Ogaden. Indeed, the activities of the revitalized Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) caused the IEG to declare martial law throughout Eritrea.

In Addis Ababa, as the decade of the 1960s concluded, members of the modernizing elite began talking openly of the need for change in government policies and were clamoring for the end of the U.S. military presence at Kagnaw. Student demonstrations and strikes frequently interrupted instruction in the university and secondary schools. Anti-American sentiment extended to the harassment of Peace Corps teachers, who were demonized as part of U.S. support for the reactionary regime.²⁸ The IEG appeared unperturbed by the muted but growing dissatisfaction with the Emperor's arbitrary rule and the slow progress of modernization.

Chief among dissidents' demands was land reform. The Emperor had attempted to address this problem earlier in the mid-1960s by introducing a modern, progressive tax that included registration of land. This effort ran into strong opposition, especially in Gojjam where a landowners' revolt was suppressed. The revolt, however, succeeded in undermining enforcement of the tax and encouraged other landowners to defy Haile Selassie. Conservatives in the Imperial Court and Parliament balked at paying taxes on their substantial land holdings, and the result was that the IEG was strapped with remarkably low levels of government revenues from domestic sources. National development lagged, damaging the standing of the government and fostering resentment among the peasants. Dissidents played upon this resentment with rhetoric about the need for equality among people hoping to broaden their base of support beyond the educated elite. Efforts to weaken trade unions, legalized since 1962, also hurt Haile Selassie's image.

At 78 years of age, Haile Selassie was slowing down, and he no longer ruled as firmly as he had only a few years before. Those who worked closely with him noticed frequent senior moments interfering with his daily activities. In the past, he had survived by ignoring problems or suppressing them. The hubris and self-confidence of the king of kings, who was so sure that he knew what was best for the country, led him to benign neglect of his duties to govern. But a new, better educated elite was becoming outspoken in its criticism of the Emperor's gross disregard of domestic matters and his remoteness from their people. In the face of these frustrations, the Emperor increasingly left domestic issues in the care of Prime Minister Aklilu Habte Wold while he focused on foreign affairs.

The 1970s

In February 1970, he played host to U.S. Secretary of State William P. Rogers, who was on the first ever diplomatic tour of the African continent by an American secretary of state. In Addis Ababa, the Emperor again implored Rogers for more military aid in light of the increasing threat to Ethiopia's national security posed by hostile neighboring nations and the rejuvenated ELF. The

²⁸Vestal, *Lion*, 171.

Secretary replied that the solution to Ethiopia's problems was faster paced change and reform rather than more arms.²⁹

To mute criticism of the IEG's slow pace of reform, the Emperor recruited foreign advisors from Harvard and the World Bank and empowered younger men to take leading roles in economic planning and management. He also updated the investment law and planned to establish an investment center in Addis Ababa to attract foreign investors.³⁰

In September, Haile Selassie played a leading role at the Third Nonaligned Conference in Lusaka, Zambia. The Emperor, a founder of the movement, presented a proposal for specific measures against Portugal, South Africa, and Rhodesia if they did not conform to UN resolutions on decolonization and racial discrimination. He noted that superpowers are "no longer overwhelming" and that the third world had changed from a position of "fear of involvement" to one of taking an "independent approach" on important issues.³¹

On October 1, 1970, Haile Selassie attended the tumultuous funeral of President Gamal Nasser in Cairo, and later in the month, he went to New York to speak at the historic 25th anniversary session of the UN General Assembly. On October 23, the Emperor, referring to his disappointing experience at the League of Nations, said the UN was a vital organization, adequate to its task if the members so willed it. Haile Selassie, along with 17 presidents and 28 prime ministers, attended the next day's closing session that condemned colonialism and racism in southern Africa and adopted a 10-year program for the development of poorer nations. He enthusiastically joined in the General Assembly's unanimous declaration rededicating UN members to the charter and calling for peace, freedom and an end to the arms race.

In Washington, Haile Selassie was among 31 chiefs of state and heads of government who attended President Nixon's White House dinner in honor of the UN's Silver Anniversary. As the longest reigning ruler present, the Emperor responded to the President's call for his guests to work together for peace. Haile Selassie urged the world leaders to support the aims of the UN even though it had not fully lived up to its earlier expectations. In a private meeting with Nixon, the Emperor requested more U.S. military aid to counter the threats to his nation's security posed by the growth of Soviet and Cuban military activities in Somalia and the growing insurgency in Eritrea. Nixon said he would study the military situation, giving full weight to the Emperor's proposals.

In the following fiscal year, however, U.S. military assistance was reduced from \$12 million to \$10.8 million reflecting the tighter fiscal restraints brought on by the war in Vietnam.³² Also at that time, the facilities at Kagnev were being made obsolete by satellite technology, and the Nixon administration was reviewing the value of the listening post in a more technically sophisticated military establishment.

The Emperor's role in international politics was still so highly esteemed by President Nixon that he sent Vice President Spiro Agnew to Addis Ababa in July 1971 to inform Haile Selassie in advance of a significant change in U.S. policy: the diplomatic recognition of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) by the United States. Nixon encouraged the Emperor to advance Ethiopia's interests in the PRC.³³ On 8 October, Haile Selassie went to Peking to meet with Chairman Mao and Chou En-lai. There, they successfully negotiated a Trade Agreement and an Agreement for Economic and Technological Cooperation. In return for establishing diplomatic

²⁹Vestal, *Lion*, 173.

³⁰Vestal, *Lion*, 176.

³¹Marvine Howe, "Nonaligned Parley Ends; Liberation Groups Backed," *New York Times*, 11 September 1970, 5.

³²Vestal, *Lion*, 176.

³³Paul B. Henze, *The Horn of Africa: From War to Peace* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1991), 133.

relations, Mao promised to end support of Eritrean insurgents and began an economic aid program, including construction of an east-west highway.

In domestic governance, in 1971, the Emperor continued to maintain a delicate balance of competing forces within the nation. The Ministry of Education caused a stir by publishing "The Education Sector Review," a report prepared by high level consultants and funded by the World Bank, which aroused general indignation. Critics of the Review claimed that its recommendations blocked the path to higher education for the country's poor.³⁴ So great was the uproar over the document, the Government eventually announced suspension of the Review, an indicator that the IEG was responding to pressure from the dissidents.

In November, 1971, Haile Selassie was one of eighty world leaders in Paris attending the state funeral of Charles de Gaulle at Notre Dame. By that time, the United States had almost completed its 1960 agreement to equip a 40,000-man Ethiopian army. About half of Ethiopian armed forces were in Eritrea keeping ports and communications lines open. The ELF regularly challenged the IEG's authority in outlying rural areas. The enduring strife in the north, led the Emperor to continue pressuring the United States for assistance to fully maintain the army and also provide several million dollars for additional requirements.

More significant than the need for arms for Haile Selassie was the disaster unfolding to the north of his capital, the Wollo famine. Although the Northern provinces suffered from recurrent crop failures, food shortages, and risks of starvation, the plight of the people was remarkably severe by the end of 1971. To its discredit, the Government first ignored and then played down the catastrophe. Life in Addis Ababa seemed basically unaffected by the famine.

Early in 1972, Haile Selassie mediated a settlement between the Sudanese Government and the South Sudan Liberation Movement bringing an end to the 17 Years War. The Addis Ababa Agreement granted regional autonomy to Southern Sudan. Sudanese President Gaafar Nimeiry agreed to restrict Eritrean insurgents' use of Sudanese supply lines in exchange for the IEG's prohibiting Sudanese rebel bases in Ethiopia.³⁵

In Eritrea, things were going better for the Emperor. With the help of Israeli counterinsurgency experts, the IEG regained ground in Eritrea. As the fortunes of the ELF declined, another rebel group came into being in February 1972 when the Ethiopian Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) was formed. The nascent EPLF was bolstered by weapons and funds from the USSR. Haile Selassie had failed to resolve the problems caused by the Eritrean and Ogaden separatist movements, but he managed to keep both under control. None of these movements threatened the Emperor's grip over his government. Indeed, a majority of Ethiopians supported the defense of the country's national unity.

More distressing, but hardly noticed by the IEG, was the deep dissatisfaction of urban populations over conditions of life, especially in Addis Ababa, and the slow pace of development. Haile Selassie and his retainers failed to see just how strong and widespread opposition to the old order had grown. Repressive actions and the closed nature of the imperial regime pushed the educated elite to identify with the lower classes and to see the complete destruction of the existing order as prerequisite to its empowerment. Ethiopia slowly was becoming an arsenal of explosive political charges waiting to be detonated by any sudden or precipitating negative occurrence.

When the country celebrated the Emperor's eightieth birthday on July 23rd, 1972, many observers hoped that Haile Selassie might voluntarily abdicate his throne in favor of Crown Prince Assfa Wossen, who would be more favorably disposed toward a constitutional monarchy. A *change du regime* did not occur, however, and only a few months later, the Crown Prince suffered a debilitating stroke.³⁶

³⁴Taffara Deguefe, *Minutes of an Ethiopian Century* (Addis Ababa: Shama, 2010), 302-8.

³⁵Henze, 133.

³⁶Tekalign Gedamu, *Republicans on the Throne: A Personal Account of Ethiopia's Modernization and Painful Quest for Democracy* (Los Angeles: Tsehai, 2011), 222.

The ultimate question for the nation, still unanswered after decades of pertinence, was whether change would come to feudal Ethiopia at a fast enough pace to ease the pressure mounting for a drastic reordering of the entire system? The Emperor often said that, to be sustainable, change should be introduced gradually. From his perspective, economic development was slow, but not liable to bring about widespread discontent. True, segments of the population were growing restless with the status quo, but as Robert Kaplan observed, “pushing [Haile Selassie] for reform would have been like tinkering with the divine order.”³⁷ Thus, there was no major challenge to the government of Haile Selassie in 1972. Had there been some unexpected trouble, the self-confident Emperor would, as he had done so often in the past, be quite capable of handling it. Haile Selassie rested assured that the majority of his countrymen and his mighty military would not let him down, even if a few young agitators might cause trouble.

The Emperor had endured “by a combination of skillful diplomacy abroad, ruthless political repression at home, and good luck in terms of a passive population” who venerated the throne.³⁸ The monarch still exercised his power to send vocal opponents in the government to provincial exile through *shum-sheer*.³⁹ The accumulative disappointment of those whose human capital appeared to be underappreciated and unrewarded was mounting, however, and increasing numbers of the educated elite, at least among themselves, were complaining about these restraints. In the past, Haile Selassie had successfully ignored problems or suppressed them. Why should he abandon such a winning formula of governance?

Events of 1973, an *annushorribilis* of Haile Selassie, however, were to bring a dramatic decline in the fortunes of the Emperor. By early spring, the famine in the nation’s north was claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of peasants of Tigray and Wollo. Thousands more had sought relief in Ethiopian towns and villages. This was duly reported by university students and faculty (notably on April 14 by Professors Abraham Demoz, Alula Abate, and Getachew Haile).⁴⁰ Yet the IEG refused to act and engaged in a cover-up operation and a conspiracy of silence that would not be forgotten by the Ethiopian masses when the truth was revealed. Intellectuals and officials were embarrassed by the government’s prevarication that was indicative of the deterioration of imperial authority. The Wollo famine had created a crisis that divided and weakened the ruling elite. Many Ethiopians, who once waited hours in line just to catch a glimpse of their beloved Jan Hoy, were disillusioned too.

Discontent with government policies in the Oromo areas had spawned the organization of the Oromo Liberation Front while trouble continued to boil in the cauldrons of Somalia and Eritrea. Increasingly, various ethnic communities railed against what they perceived as Shoan-Amhara-Christian cultural and political domination of their traditional homelands. Soviet and Cuban military intrusion in neighboring states and growing insurgency posed real threats to Ethiopia’s security. In May 1973 Haile Selassie met Nixon on his final state visit to the United States (his sixth to Washington, establishing a record for the most state visits by a foreign head of state). Haile Selassie importuned Nixon with a \$450 million shopping list of military hardware that included F-4 Phantoms, M-60 tanks, surface-to air missiles, and air-to-ground missiles.⁴¹ His timing was abysmal because of U.S. plans to withdraw from Kagnev by the end of FY 1974. The Nixon Administration was more concerned with war in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal than

³⁷Robert D. Kaplan, *Surrender or Starve: Travels in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 16.

³⁸Newsweek Feature Service, “Haile Selassie Rules 19th Century Empire,” *Arizona Republic*, 6 July 1969, B9.

³⁹Ross K. Baker, “The Ethiopian Army and Political Stability: Prospects and Potentials,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 6:3 (October 1970), p. 333.

⁴⁰Paulos Milkias, *Haile Selassie, Western Education and Political Revolution in Ethiopia* (Youngstown, NY: Cambria, 2006), 165.

⁴¹Vestal, *Lion*, 180-1.

the plight of the ancient Emperor and gave a basically unfavorable response to the IEG's requests for arms. The United States did agree to continue to grant military aid and training at agreed upon levels and to supplement the program with credits for military sales, but this was far less than what had been requested. The rebuff by the United States made Haile Selassie's last attempt at personal diplomacy at the White House "an unqualified disaster."⁴²

The Emperor's returning home from America with little to show for the effort and the shutdown of Kagnew were added to the litany of woes engulfing the monarchy. At the very time Haile Selassie's attention appeared riveted on international affairs, his domestic scene, a cauldron of cooling melt, was deteriorating badly. Ethiopia's frustrated intellectuals, students, teachers, technicians, civil servants, labor leaders, police, armed forces, farmers, and businessmen from a newly emerging sector were all alienated and objected to the government's botched handling of the devastating famine in Wollo, a stagnant economy, and the lack of reform in Ethiopia. All these groups that Haile Selassie had fostered enjoyed new found autonomy and freedom of action and contended for power as his government fell into disarray. The nation's ruler was besieged with allegations of graft, egregious grandiosity, and greed. Haile Selassie's government obviated the obvious: the very groups that the Emperor as a man of vision had created or elevated in his policy of modernization stretching over several decades accused him of holding back the country's progress and the Emperor seemed at a loss to respond. Faced with a country keening for reassurance and reinvention, Haile Selassie turned out to be a pragmatist Emperor who could not learn from his mistakes and adapt. The Emperor's achievements had been many but were irrelevant to the growing throng of disgruntled citizens. The once invincible regime had become politically inept.

On May 24th, only a few days after his return from Washington, Haile Selassie began the 10th-anniversary celebration of the OAU by declaring that all of Africa would be liberated from foreign domination in the next 10 years. Later at Africa Hall, he spoke to 23 African heads of state or their deputies at the 10th anniversary meeting and advocated a system for the mutual defense of the 41-member nations and the creation of a permanent Africa peacekeeping force. The OAU meeting was marred, however, by vitriolic exchanges between the Ethiopian delegation and representatives of Libya and Somalia, who accused the IEG leadership of warmongering and of supporting Zionists and colonialists. The Emperor was disappointed by such rancor. After ten years, the OAU, the organization that Haile Selassie took such pride in, was strained, but not torn, by bitter disputes.

It would be foreign affairs of another sort that soon would light the fuse of Ethiopia's cache of explosive domestic issues. In October, the Yom Kippur War in Israel had a direct and devastating effect on Ethiopia. The ensuing closure of the Suez Canal and OPEC's quadrupling the price of oil triggered an international economic crisis. This produced a dramatic rise in the price of imported goods in Ethiopia and adversely affected exports. In order to alleviate the government's financial crisis caused by the purchase of expensive oil, the IEG raised the local cost of petrol by 50%. This contributed to severe inflationary pressures that resulted in a sharp deterioration of the conditions of life in urban centers. The cost of food shot up and unemployment escalated.⁴³ Crisis had become a chronic condition. Money may not be at the heart of all revolutions, but it is at most, and it played a major role in the discontent that pulsed throughout Addis Ababa in 1973.

It was during this time that radical students and teachers forged an alliance with the rank and file members of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions. Together they attacked the deteriorating political scene: alleged corruption at all levels of government, low salaries and poor working conditions of employees, the spiraling cost of living, the unequal distribution of

⁴²John H. Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Selassie Years* (Hollywood, CA: Tsehai, 2006), 323; Paulos, *Haile Selassie*, 194-213.

⁴³Tirfe Mammo, *The Paradox of Africa's Poverty* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1999), 103.

educational opportunities, and the exploitation of landless peasants.⁴⁴ The peasants, however, were not inspired to join in the uprising.⁴⁵ The protests of 1973-1974 and the ensuing velvet revolution essentially were urban in nature and did not involve massive unrest among the peasants.

The inability to remove the causes of social discontent and the increasing reliance on the military demonstrated the fragility of the imperial regime. The government's use of repressive methods polarized the populace and brought attention to radical elite groups rather than to those counseling moderation. The civilian left quickly assumed the leadership of the protest and rationalized it in terms of Marxist-Leninist theories.⁴⁶ Their commitment to socialist egalitarianism was central to the ensuing loss of legitimacy of the monarchy and nobility as well as the rejection of moderate reformism.⁴⁷ The tragedy was that there was not a large enough constituency of moderate reformers championing temperance and reason to counter the extremism of the outspoken radicals. The moderates were attacked on one side by the *ancient regime* for daring to criticize the government and on the other, by the aggressive leftists who viewed opposing radicalism as capitulation to the monarchy.

Also in October, 1973, British filmmaker Jonathan Dibleby made a video program, "The Unknown Famine," about the suffering in Wollo. The program was broadcast in the U.K. on October 18 and stimulated a massive influx of aid while at the same time putting Haile Selassie's government in a bad light. The Soviets weighed in too with Kremlin propaganda depicting Haile Selassie's Ethiopia as backwards and inept.⁴⁸ Radicals distributed pamphlets reflecting student unrest and accusing the regime "of imprisoning students in labor camps, torturing political prisoners, massacring peasants, breaking strikes, and arbitrarily raising taxes."⁴⁹

Even Ethiopian popular culture was infiltrated by the radicals. The lyrics of one of the country's most popular songs of 1973, "I Can't Take It Anymore," were infused with wax and gold, containing a political slogan disguised as a love song.⁵⁰ So fortified in a revolutionary environment they had helped forge, student protestors pressed on in their demands for changes by the IEG as the year came to an end.

The Rise of the Derg

Members of Haile Selassie's military started a cascade of revolutionary events in early 1974 that would sweep the IEG into the depths of change from which it could not emerge intact. On January 12, rank-and-file soldiers of the Negele Boran garrison in the southern part of the country mutinied over bad food and the lack of drinking water. This was followed on February 10 by a mutiny of Air Force NCOs and technicians at Debre Zeit Air Force base near the Emperor's weekend retreat, "Fairfield." Spurred on by NCOs, the mutiny spread to other units whose servicemen were disgruntled over low pay and unsatisfactory barracks conditions. Also at this time, a group of lower-level officers organized an armed forces coordinating committee with representatives from major military units. The Emperor responded by raising salary levels by 33% and improving pensions and allowances, apparently muting the armed forces protests.

⁴⁴Paulos, *Haile Selassie*, 190-1.

⁴⁵BahruZewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1974* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1991), 220.

⁴⁶MessayKebede, *Ideology and Elite Conflicts: Autopsy of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Lanham, MD:Lexington Books, 2011), 350-51.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Krishna Kumar, *Postconflict Elections, Democratization, and International Assistance* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 114.

⁴⁹UPI, "Ethiopians Protest Arrival of Selassie in Washington," *New York Times*, 8 July 1969, 2.

⁵⁰Jonas Lennermo, "AmhaEshete and the Rise of Modern Music in Ethiopia," *Selam*, October 2009.

Concurrent with the military unrest, university students, supported by professors and high school teachers in Addis Ababa, went on strike against proposed reforms contained in the Education Sector Review. A few days later, school teachers went on strike for better pay and were joined in protest by taxi drivers striking over the proposed 50% increase in gasoline prices. The numbers of demonstrators swelled with street vendors and urban poor and jobless attracted to the cause. In Addis Ababa, the police were unable to maintain control, and the insurrection spread to other towns. After four days of serious riots, four people had been killed and many others wounded. Property of high ranking government officials was badly damaged, and scores of vehicles were destroyed. In response, the government arrested a thousand people including 350 taxi drivers and charged them with sedition. The landed aristocracy put the blame for the ongoing unrest on Prime Minister Aklilu Habte Wold and his followers and pressured the Emperor to remove them. Haile Selassie called an extraordinary meeting of his cabinet and the crown council and decided to raise teachers' salaries, suspend the Education Sector Review, reduce the price of gasoline and other essential services, and institute a freeze on the cost of basic commodities. On 23 February, the Emperor announced these decisions on state television. This calmed the public momentarily. The Marxists, however, were nonplussed, for they could not have anticipated the success of having their demands met so readily. This was the moment when the activists might have seized power, but they were unprepared. Protesting against the IEG was easier than having a plan to put into place when the government stumbled. The radicals had called for a socialist revolution, but they lacked the organizational structure and unity to bring it about. The radicals likewise lacked leadership capable of directing the country out of its chaos. This opened the way for the Armed Forces to take center stage in the political battle and quickly neutralize, co-opt, or circumvent all potential opposition. In doing so, the Derg became the de facto government while the legal government was exercising little power.

Meanwhile, mutinies in the military resumed. The promised military wage hike was not substantial enough to pacify the enlisted men and NCOs of the Army's Second Division in Asmara who mutinied on February 25 and occupied most of the city. Pledges of support and solidarity flowed in from other units all over the country. On February 28, Haile Selassie again went on television to agree to the army's demands for still greater pay—a most unusual action by the Emperor and indicative of the soldier's increasing clout at the palace.

Up until this time, the military had made only demands benefiting the armed forces. But sensing a power vacuum, on 1 March, radical military officers circulated leaflets stating political demands affecting civilian society: land reforms, the creation of political parties and the holding of free elections, the release of political prisoners, guarantees of press freedom, and the trial of former ministers for corruption and dereliction of duty.⁵¹ The officers formed a representative committee to oversee the implementation of their demands. In the absence of opposition political parties and the weakening of the regime, the officers who initiated the demands decided to organize such an opposition and to legitimize it by seeking a mandate from the armed forces, who were asked to send to Addis Ababa three representatives per unit: a junior officer, a NCO, and an enlisted man.⁵² The officers believed such a scheme of organization would prevent a division within the armed forces that had undermined the 1960 attempted coup. It would be four months before this new representative military organization would be convened, however.

On 28 February, only eight hours after the Emperor had acceded, Prime Minister Aklilu and his cabinet *submitted requests for resignation* (following what was thought to be proper palace protocol). The Emperor quickly granted the requests.⁵³ None of the rebellious groups had asked the P.M. to step down, and the resignations were seen as signs of panic and ineptitude. The

⁵¹Messay, *Ideology*, 205.

⁵²Mulatu Wubneh and Yahannis Abate, *Ethiopia: Transition and Development in the Horn of Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988), 45.

⁵³Tekalign, 178.

Emperor named the Oxford-educated, progressive aristocrat Endalkachew Makonnen as Prime Minister. Although Endalkachew “called upon some of Ethiopia’s best educated, western-trained and reform-minded elites to form a cabinet that would generate wide-ranging reforms,” his choices, almost all of aristocratic background with ties to leading families of the traditional nobility mostly from Addis Ababa or Shewa, were not popular with the general public.⁵⁴ Their connections to the Palace were irrevocable in the eyes of many. Endalkachew attempted to address demands of the protesters by presenting reforms, some of which would have changed the autocratic nature of the monarchy.

The Emperor also appointed General Abiye Abebe chief of staff and Minister of Defense and empowered him to use the armed forces to maintain law and order and to take strict measures against troublemakers. The armed forces pledged their allegiance to the Emperor’s government, a propitious loyalty that thwarted a plot against the government by Air Force officers in late March.

In response to continuing demonstrations and demands by students and teachers, on 5 March, Haile Selassie announced that the 1955 Constitution would be revised to make the Prime Minister responsible to parliament. Some people still hoped that the “transition to a more open political system would go smoothly and a liberalized government could be in place before Haile Selassie departed the scene.”⁵⁵ Most wanted a more open society, a democratic political system, broadened educational opportunity, and faster economic progress. As if to squelch such possibilities, the Emperor announced his plan to revise the constitution on the same day, the Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions called a general strike that paralyzed the nation for four days. Student agitation and workers’ militancy flourished unabated.

Indeed, the most widespread strikes in the history of the nation took place in April. Labor, students, teachers, civil servants, military veterans, municipal employees, railroad workers, bus drivers, medical personnel, garbage collectors, priests, and even Imperial Palace servants went on strike.⁵⁶ Revolutionists were no longer just a few young intellectuals but a cross-section of Ethiopian society.

On April 20, one of the nation’s largest demonstrations took place when 100,000 Moslems and their supporters marched in Addis Ababa demanding religious equality and separation of church and state. Six days later, Haile Selassie I University was shut down.

At Easter, perhaps to shift public attention from the turmoil in the capital, Haile Selassie proclaimed his grandson, Zara Yakob, the eldest son of Crown Prince Asafa Wossen, next in succession after his father. By then, however, widespread skepticism about the viability of the monarchy was rampant throughout the country. The Emperor’s combined probity and vigor had gone missing. One can speculate about what might have happened, had Haile Selassie stepped down at that time and a well-thought-through transition to a constitutional monarchy put in place.

The Prime Minister tried to restore order and help bolster the legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of the general population. But instead of initiating liberalizing reforms, Endalkachew attempted to appease the protestors with vague promises of change. His actions were once more too little, too late. At a time when the Emperor’s once unassailable personal popularity had dipped and the country was demanding change, the new cabinet failed to move decisively toward a genuine reform of the government.

In the midst of the crises, with tensions running high, Haile Selassie, in his marmoreal grandeur, maintained grace under pressure. When Endalkachew held an urgent meeting with the Emperor, he was struck by “the old man’s quiet dignity and calm.” The P.M. later reported to his Cabinet, “That man is made of steel.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ John W. Harbeson, “Socialism, Traditions, and Revolutionary Politics in Contemporary Ethiopia,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 11, (2) (1977): 217-34.

⁵⁵ Henze, 260.

⁵⁶ Paulos, *Haile Selassie*, 211.

⁵⁷ Tekalign, 162.

Unable to appease the social unrest, the new Prime Minister, on 23 April, called on the military to help establish law and order. On 27 April, the Armed Forces Coordinating Committee (AFCC) under the command of the moderate Colonel Alem Zewde Tessema issued its first statement, announcing that 19 ministers and former officials of the IEG had been arrested. On 30 April, Endalkachew announced the creation of a joint military-civilian National Security Commission under General Abiye Abebe to deal with growing lawlessness and the numerous wildcat strikes crippling the country. Many on the Commission worried that the failure to quell the serious disruption in the social fabric might lead to anarchy that could only encourage secessionist groups. The National Security Commission replaced the Armed Forces Coordinating Committee that radicals in the military accused of having too close ties to the aristocracy. The creation of the Commission, however, called attention to the civilian government's inability to institute law and order and "prematurely provoked the Armed Forces to play a more active role in harnessing the political upheaval to their favor."⁵⁸ It also inspired radicals in the military to create a competing organization to counter the one supporting the Prime Minister. Ambitious members of the armed services realized that the military was the only organization capable of running the country. But which group within the military would wield power?

On 26 June, members of the Chamber of Deputies petitioned the Emperor to release some of the ministers and officials that had been imprisoned by the AFCC for corruption, pending an investigation. To the radicals, this action signaled that the ruling elite "had no intention of bringing those arrested to justice."⁵⁹ This set the stage for the formal establishment of the new representative military organization.

The Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army officially came into being on 28 June 1974.⁶⁰ This secretive organization came to be known as "the Derg," the Ge'ez word for "committee" or "council." At its first session, there were 109 members actually in attendance, a majority of them NCOs and enlisted men, and only 49 officers. By that time, it was obvious that Endalkachew was unable to establish law and order, and the vacuum in governance provided an irresistible invitation for the military to usurp power. Sadly, the government's inability to effectively deal with the crises of 1974 and the atmosphere of radicalism created by the educated elite drew the teeth of the extremists and facilitated the formation of the new Coordinating Committee.

The nation's traditional leadership from the ranks of the aristocracy and young technocrats that Haile Selassie had raised to positions of responsibility and influence and who advocated gradual change offered little challenge to the Derg. Likewise, the civilian left calling for immediate and radical revolution lacked a proven leadership capable of directing the country out of its chaos. Thus, the Armed Forces were drawn into the center of the political battle and cleverly neutralized, co-opted, or circumvented all potential opposition.⁶¹ In doing so, the Derg became the de facto government while the legal cabinet was exercising little power.

A little-known army major, Mengistu Haile Mariam, emerged as elected leader of the Coordinating Committee. Mengistu had impressed the group with his plans for action and astute oratorical skills.⁶² The Derg set about vetting the grievances of various military units and investigating abuses by senior officers and staff to root out corruption in the military. Soldiers occupied strategic places in the city, and the Derg used the public broadcasting system to routinely issue orders and to bombard listeners with martial music. "*Ethiopia Tikdem*" (Ethiopia first) became their rallying cry and nationalist manifesto.

⁵⁸Teferra Haile-Selassie, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1991* (London: Kegan Paul, 1997), 121.

⁵⁹ Edmund J. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1988), p. 183.

⁶⁰Tekalign, 202.

⁶¹Messay, *Ideology*, 188.

⁶²Tekalign, 202-3.

The new Derg moved swiftly and on 30 June, demanded that the Emperor appoint a new Prime Minister and a new defense minister and arrested 50 more officials who were either accused of corruption or of opposing implementation of reforms. The Derg then was empowered by the Emperor to arrest military officers and government officials at every level. Many prominent figures in the IEG came voluntarily into detention in June and July. The Derg assured them that their alleged misdemeanors and financial irregularities would be systematically investigated and fairly judged. In the following two weeks, 150 more members of the former government and current government, provincial administrators, and the nobility were incarcerated. On 9 July, the Derg announced a new revised constitution was being drafted, a belated stab at trying to take credit for an effort already well under way.

The Emperor complied with the Derg's demands and dismissed Endalkachew on 22 July 1974 and replaced him on 3 August with Michael Imru, a cousin of Haile Selassie and another aristocrat with a liberal reputation. Shortly thereafter, Endalkachew was arrested and joined his predecessor Aklilu Habte-Wold, most of their cabinets, regional governors, many senior military officers, and officials of the Imperial court in custody.

For his Cabinet, the new Prime Minister chose ministers who for the most part were members of the previous government. Among them was General Aman Andom, a popular military hero and a Sandhurst graduate noted for his successes against Somali invaders, who was Chief of the General Staff and Minister of Defense. The Imru Cabinet tried desperately to exercise power but found itself hamstrung by the Derg's controls.

On August 10, the proposed revision of the 1955 constitution finally was published and presented to Haile Selassie. It called for the replacement of the absolute monarchy by a parliamentary regime with the Emperor as a figurehead and for the division of powers and the disestablishment of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Civil rights and liberties were to be protected, universal suffrage instigated, and the Prime Minister made responsible to Parliament. To take public attention away from such possibilities, the Derg promoted open discussion of the future of the monarchy. Vitriolic anti-feudal and anti-monarchical views were aired by the agitated public. Haile Selassie was personally vilified and government-controlled newspapers published scathing attacks on the monarchy and the fallen governments as replete with corruption and incompetence. The Emperor was maligned for the huge landholdings of the imperial family, second only to those of the church, and for what was described as his unlawfully enriching himself through business enterprises such as part ownership of the country's largest bus service and the St. George Brewery. The outrageous accusation was made that Haile Selassie had stashed over 2 billion pounds sterling in gold bars in a Swiss bank, a charge never substantiated.⁶³ The Emperor even was accused of treason for leaving the country during the Fascist occupation. The press also exposed attempts by corrupt local officials to cover up the extent of the Wollo famine from the IEG, illustrating how the system of government kept officials shockingly out of touch with the lives of ordinary people.

While the radical civilians ranted, the Derg acted by dismantling the imperial government and numerous public institutions. On August 16, the crown council was abolished, as was the Emperor's own appeals court, the Chilot, and the office of the chief of staff in the Emperor's cabinet. The Commander of the Imperial Bodyguard and the Emperor's senior aid-de-camp were arrested. The office of the Emperor's exchequer was removed on August 24. The Emperor's main residence, Jubilee Palace, was nationalized and renamed the "National Palace." On August 26, the National Resources Commission, which took care of the Emperor's private holdings and the disbursement of money, gifts, and favors, was abolished and its functions taken over by the Ministry of Finance. The CIA-trained and -equipped Office of the Imperial Security Apparatus

⁶³Taffara, 360-72; Tekalign, 238-9.

likewise was eliminated. The loss of allegiance among the military was tearing asunder Haile Selassie's government.⁶⁴

On August 27, a special commission of inquiry held hearings on the Wollo famine. Haile Selassie was directly linked to the cover-up of the disaster by the testimony of a former governor of the province who attested that he had warned high ranking officials, including the Emperor, in August 1970 that the famine might affect large numbers of people in Wollo. The prime minister, the crown prince, and the Emperor, however, ignored the warning and refused to take action to meet the emergency. A week later, students paraded in Addis Ababa shouting, "Haile Selassie is a thief!" and "Hang Haile Selassie!"⁶⁵ Leaflets were posted on the streets showing photographs of the Emperor feeding his dogs from a silver tray, alongside pictures of famine victims. Although the Derg had forbidden slanderous personal attacks on the Emperor, the students went unpunished and there was no public outcry about their actions.

As the Ethiopian New Year approached, on September 11, soldiers in tanks, armored personnel carriers, and jeeps with mounted machine guns took up strategic positions throughout the capital. The Derg arrested the Emperor's only surviving daughter and close personal adviser, Princess Tenagne-Worq, as well as other members of the Royal Family. Late in the day, Abune Tewoflos, patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, gave his annual New Year's Address on national television and radio. In his speech, "the Patriarch likened Ethiopia to a ship in stormy seas, charting a new path into the future." To the shock of Haile Selassie's supporters, Tewoflos concluded without giving his traditional blessing of the Emperor and the royal family and seemed to endorse the revolution by wishing success to the mission of the ruling Derg.⁶⁶ The fate of Haile Selassie was sealed.

That evening, Ethiopian National Television aired a disturbing documentary on the Wollo famine. Scenes of starving children, women, and men taken in April 1973 were interspersed with footage of the royal family and the aristocracy feasting in the palace and other elegant settings.⁶⁷ Many Ethiopians in the capital were shocked by the distressing scenes of suffering. The film provided a strong indictment of the Emperor for his nonfeasance in ameliorating the tragedy. Students and radicals were already demanding a public trial of Haile Selassie for his alleged crimes, but the Derg had backed away from such action in light of the Emperor's continuing prestige in the international community.⁶⁸ The television program provided a trial in the court of public opinion for the Emperor, who had been so spectacularly unable to fill the leadership void in Addis Ababa, far more effective than any the judicial process might have produced.

Haile Selassie Deposed

Early in the morning of New Year's Day, September 12, a heavily armed thirteen-man delegation from the Derg went to what had been Jubilee Palace and read a short statement to the Emperor telling him that he had been deposed. According to an eyewitness, Haile Selassie responded, "We have carefully listened to what you have said. If you have been motivated by the nation's interests, it is impossible to place personal interests above those of the nation. We have so far served our country and people to the best of our abilities. If you are saying that your turn has now come, you should make sure that you look after Ethiopia."⁶⁹

⁶⁴Messay, *Ideology*, 160.

⁶⁵Paulos, *Haile Selassie*, 230.

⁶⁶Imperial Ethiopia Home Page, "Emperor Haile Selassie I, Part 3," <http://www.angelfire.com/ny/ethiocrown> [angelfire.com/ny/ethiocrown/HaileIII.html](http://www.angelfire.com/ny/ethiocrown/HaileIII.html).

⁶⁷Taffara, 351.

⁶⁸Paulos, *Haile Selassie*, 231.

⁶⁹GuenetAyeleAnbessie, *YeletenaColonellMengistu Haile-Mariam Tizittawotch(Recollections of Lt. Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam)* (Addis Ababa: Mega Publishers, 2002), 28 and 168; cited in Tekalign, 229.

Another version cites the Emperor's giving a more typically sangfroid reply: "We have heard what you have said. Being 'Emperor of Ethiopia' is more than a name. [We have worked] for the nation and the people in peace time, and in preparing the country to defend itself against its enemies [in times of war]: we have no doubt that these are known by our armed forces. Yet, when changes take place that are in the interests of the nation, they should prevail. We have heard what you have just read. You should now stop."⁷⁰

The Emperor submitted while maintaining his customary stoicism and air of authority, but before being led out of the palace under guard, he said: "You are all children; and as such, you have engaged in a childish act. You do not know your country. The danger is you will lead her down the road to destruction."⁷¹ Accompanied by a single servant, Haile Selassie was unceremoniously driven in a Volkswagen beetle, a far cry from his accustomed *Concoursd'Elegance* of the imperial garage, to his initial place of imprisonment in the barracks of the 4th Division.⁷² At the same time, most of his family was incarcerated at the late Duke of Harrar's residence in the north of the capital.

That morning, an announcer on National Radio broadcast Proclamation No. 1 of Meskerem 2, 1967 (September 12, 1974), issued by the Derg:

Considering that, although the people of Ethiopia look in good faith upon the Crown, which has persisted for a long period in Ethiopian history as a symbol of unity, Haile Selassie I, who has ruled this country for more than 50 years ever since he assumed power as Crown Prince, has not only left the country in its present crisis by abusing at various times the high and dignified authority conferred on him by the Ethiopian people but also, being over 82 years of age and due to the consequent physical and mental exhaustion, is no more able to shoulder the high responsibilities of leadership.⁷³

Emperor Haile-Selassie was deposed, read the announcer, and would be succeeded by Crown Prince AsfaWossen, who was to be a titular monarch, the "King of Ethiopia," the Conquering Lion of Ethiopia, with no political power. The Prince, who was undergoing medical treatment overseas, would be crowned upon his return.⁷⁴ But there could be little doubt that the revolution had ended the feudal system of Ethiopia, a whole mythology of social cohesion around anointed authority and mystery, headed by its long-lived monarch. Haile Selassie's government was no more.

The 1955 Constitution was abrogated and would be replaced by the new draft constitution requested by the Derg. Parliament was suspended, and the armed forces, the police, and Territorial Army assumed full government power until elections were held under the new constitution. Strikes, unauthorized peaceful demonstrations, opposition to the motto of "*Ethiopia Tikdem*" and any act aimed at disrupting the country's peace and security were prohibited.⁷⁵ On that same morning, the Derg chose General Aman Andom, a strong advocate of Ethiopian nationalism, to be its chairman and acting head-of-state until the Crown Prince could return. General Aman was a logical choice for head of state. In addition to his military bona fides, he had strong support from Eritreans.

Also on September 12, the Cabinet was called to a morning meeting. The objectives of the Derg were explained and the working relationship between the Cabinet and the Derg made clear. The Council of Ministers would carry out its functions working under the Derg. There was no doubt about which group was then in charge. Thus the short-lived power of Michael Imru's Cabinet came to an end after tenure of only 44 days. The Cabinet's legitimacy stemmed from that

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Paulos, *Haile Selassie*, 236.

⁷²Tekalign, 229-30.

⁷³Taffara, 353.

⁷⁴Tekalign, 228.

⁷⁵Ibid.

of the Emperor, and when Haile Selassie was deposed, it ceased to exist except as a pro forma sounding board of the Derg.⁷⁶

The United States accepted Haile Selassie's deposition without disruption of relations with Ethiopia. The Derg focused on internal issues and declared it would follow a non-aligned foreign policy. U.S. officials viewing the transformation of government with regret but not rancor looked to moderate military officers, many of whom had trained in the United States, to counter the Marxist-Leninist ideology espoused by extremists of the revolution. They grossly underestimated the ruthlessness of the radicals of the Derg.

On September 15, the Derg renamed itself the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) and took control of the government. Some Ethiopians still were optimistic that under the direction of General Aman, a bloodless transformation of the government might take place. Soon, however, Chairman Aman clashed with radical elements in the Derg about a new military offensive in Eritrea and a proposal to execute high officials of the Emperor's former government. The Derg neutralized units loyal to Aman--the Imperial Bodyguard, the Air Force, and the Engineers--and removed the charismatic general from power. Mengistu had Aman executed in a shootout at his home but made his murder appear to be part of a larger security operation, the massacre of 60 senior officials of the previous Imperial government on November 24, 1974. The Derg, acting as a kangaroo court, charged the imprisoned civil and military officials with abuse of power while in office that had resulted in loss of lives during the Wollo famine. Then, the Derg, red in tooth and claw, summarily found all the officials guilty of crimes against the nation and sentenced them to death. The detainees were chained in pairs and brutally killed by machine gun fire at the Addis Ababa central prison. Their bodies were bulldozed into a common grave. The executed, later known as "the Sixty," included two former Prime Ministers, Aklilu Habte Wold and Endalkachew Makonnen. On the following morning, Radio Ethiopia announced the massacre, later to be called "Bloody Saturday," to a stunned audience in Addis Ababa.⁷⁷ Fear thereafter garroted hope. In a single day, the revolution had turned bloody. The *Times* of London called the murders "a lapse into savagery." The subsequent savagery of the Derg during the following seventeen years marked one of the most tragic eras in Ethiopian history.

Mengistu served as interim president for five days until the Derg appointed Brigadier General Tafari Bente of the Fourth Division as the new Chairman and head of state. Tafari presented himself as the public face of the ruling junta, with Mengistu and Atnafu Abate as his two vice-Chairmen with the new ranks of Lieutenant-Colonels.⁷⁸ On December 20, the Derg proclaimed the establishment of "Ethiopian socialism," based on the declaration of *Ethiopia Tikdem*. The Derg had quickly adopted Marxist-Leninist ideology because it justified the absolute power that it needed to eliminate all other contending groups.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Ethiopia technically remained a monarchy until March 1975 when the Derg declared the Crown Prince's "failure" to return from London and assume his throne had brought the Solomonic Dynasty to an end.⁸⁰ The monarchy was formally abolished in May 1975, and Marxism-Leninism was proclaimed the ideology of the state. By late 1977, Mengistu had orchestrated the deaths of Tafari and Atnafu and ruled as a ruthless dictator until he was overthrown in 1991.

Conclusion

The Ethiopian Revolution followed several failed opportunities that the IEG might have pursued to move toward more democratic governance. In early 1969, Ethiopia enjoyed a relative

⁷⁶ Tekalign, 227.

⁷⁷ Tekalign, 243; Taffara, 420-3; Zaude Hailemariam, *Ethiopian Introspection* (Privately Published, 2008), 379-81.

⁷⁸ Marina and David Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution* (New York: Africana, 1978), 134.

⁷⁹ Messay, *Ideology*, 335.

⁸⁰ David H. Shinn and Thomas P. Ofcansky, *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 44.

calm, being at peace with its neighbors and with the internal insurgencies in outlying provinces under control. The army was large and well-equipped, the U.S. Government appeared content to continue to provide military assistance as rental for Kagnew Station, and the newly elected American President, Richard Nixon, was a longtime friend of Haile Selassie. The Emperor was in his late 70s and slowing down. It would have been a good time for him to retire or at least to announce a line of succession with a firm timeline for its realization. He could have gone out on a positive note and planned for a constitutional monarchy to come into being. The moment passed, however, and by the end of 1969, the calm was shattered by changes in external and internal actors. Taking care of the new challenges gave Jan Hoy a rationale for staying in power.

In October 1970, the Emperor played a significant role in the Third Non-Aligned Conference, the 25th anniversary of the founding of the UN, and the tradition-shattering gathering of world leaders at Nixon's White House. International accolades showered down on Haile Selassie upon his triumphal return home. Ever the consummate practitioner of astute public relations, the Emperor might have announced his plans for a new era in Ethiopia and departed gracefully. Jan Hoy could have introduced constitutional monarchy from the top down and that might well have led to gradual democratization and even land reform. Instead he remained on the throne while domestic problems festered.

The last chance for Haile Selassie to step down while still enjoying support from most of his subjects was during his eightieth birthday celebration in 1972. There was no change of regime on that occasion, and shortly thereafter, a "revolutionary environment" had developed to the point that events throughout the country were reeling beyond the control of the monarchy. The Emperor's opportunities for peaceful change had passed him by, and revolution was about to take a horrendous toll on the Solomonic Dynasty and the land of its reign.

Much of the life-cycle of a revolution described in Crane Brinton's classic *The Anatomy of Revolution* is a useful tool in analyzing Ethiopia's velvet revolution. According to Brinton, in most revolutions, the Old Order passes to a moderate regime that falls to a radical regime that finally is replaced by *Thermidor*, a period of relaxation from revolutionary policies characterized by the establishment of a tyrant, an unconstitutional ruler brought to power by revolution.⁸¹ If the early Derg can be titled a "moderate regime," it was followed by a radical reign of "Terror and Virtue." Terror was exemplified by the many summary executions, civil war, and a struggle for power within the Derg. Virtue took the form of correcting the vices of the monarchical regime and its society with the establishment of "Ethiopian socialism," based on the declaration of *Ethiopia Tikdem*.⁸² On taking power, the radicals ruled through dictatorship and "rough-and-ready centralization." Brinton notes that "the characteristic form of this supreme authority is that of a committee."⁸³

The *Thermidor* of the Ethiopian Revolution did not produce what Brinton called "convalescence" from the "fever" of radicalism. Indeed, throughout the reign of the Derg, radicalism flourished in a ghoulish way with e.g., its Red Terror, devastating civil war, failed mega-famine relief, and villagization. But the Ethiopian *Thermidor* did establish a tyrant, Mengistu, who shot and murdered his way to the top of government.

Brinton could have been depicting events in Ethiopia in his summary of the revolutionary process as moving from "financial breakdown, [to] organization of the discontented to remedy this breakdown ... revolutionary demands on the part of these organized discontented, demands which if granted would mean the virtual abdication of those governing, attempted use of force by the government, its failure, and the attainment of power by the revolutionists. These revolutionists have hitherto been acting as an organized and nearly unanimous group, but with the attainment of power it is clear that they are not united."⁸⁴

⁸¹Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, revised ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 207.

⁸²For Brinton's description of "Terror and Virtue," see *The Anatomy of Revolution*, 180.

⁸³Brinton, 171.

⁸⁴Brinton, 253.

In 1973, dissidents led by university students challenged the Emperor's monarchical power structure which had ruled for decades. Haile Selassie and the aristocracy resisted the sharing of power and the loss of their special privileges. They failed to share power with moderate dissidents and then lost control completely. Moderate leadership, which never really came to the fore, was repudiated, and the IEG was confronted with a series of crises which it could not resolve, emergencies that divided and weakened the ruling elite. The crises resulted in a loss of control by the government and a temporary political paralysis marked by a breakdown in accustomed order and stability.

Within the ranks of the revolutionists, leadership was notably missing. With little meaningful experience in representative institutions which might have provided the mechanisms for the establishment of a new order capable of minimizing conflicts and realizing the achievement of liberal goals, most of the revolutionists lacked leadership skills or experience. The monarchical system did not encourage such learning and development. The student dissidents were better Marxist ideologues than compromisers and "doers." Experienced moderate leaders who might have been able to accomplish things were marginalized by accusations of their having lingering stigmata of the old regime. This left the military as the one organization among the dissidents with a history of being able to act decisively when necessary—and even the military initially led only reluctantly. Eventually the ruthless in the uniformed services provided activist leadership and fought it out amongst themselves to see who would become the top dog in the new power arrangement.

The actual overthrow of the Emperor was accompanied with a minimum of violence, although the bloody consolidation of power by the Derg, especially in the slaughter of "the Sixty," aborted any "honeymoon" period following the fall of the old regime.