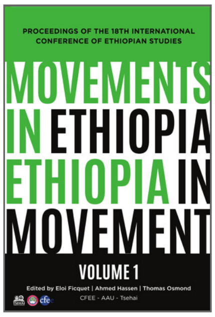

Éloi Ficquet, Ahmed Hassen Omer and Thomas Osmond (dir.)

Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement. Volume 1
Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies

Centre français des études éthiopiennes

The Dynamics of Political Succession in Ethiopian History

Bahru Zewde

Publisher: Centre français des études éthiopiennes, Tsehai Publishers, Addis Ababa University
Place of publication: Addis Ababa, Los Angeles
Year of publication: 2016
Published on OpenEdition Books: 22 June 2023
Series: Corne de l’Afrique contemporaine / Contemporary Horn of Africa
Electronic EAN: 9782111723139

OpenEdition Books

http://books.openedition.org

Electronic reference
BAHRU ZEWDE. *The Dynamics of Political Succession in Ethiopian History* In: *Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement. Volume 1: Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* [online]. Addis Ababa, Los Angeles: Centre français des études éthiopiennes, 2016 (generated 23 juin 2023). Available on the Internet: <http://books.openedition.org/cfee/1115>. ISBN: 9782111723139.

The Dynamics of Political Succession in Ethiopian History

Bahru Zewde[*]

More than once, the history of the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies has been intertwined with the vagaries of the country's political fortune. My most vivid recollection in this respect is the Eleventh Conference held in Addis in April 1991, about a month before the change of regime. As a member of the National Organizing Committee, I recall the sense of surrealism that pervaded our preparations. I distinctly remember in particular the foreboding felt by our Chairman, the Director of IES at the time, whose refrain after the end of each committee meeting was that we were all toiling in vain, the conference was never going to take place, given the turbulent political change that was on the horizon. As it turned out, the conference went on without a hitch, even as EPRDF forces were knocking on the gates of the capital. The only jarring note was the noticeable absence of the American constituency. Heeding a US State Department advisory, most American scholars had thought it prudent not to travel to Ethiopia at such an uncertain time.

This particular conference has also been preceded by a period of some uncertainty in the wake of the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. It would of course be far-fetched to compare the situation in 1991 with the current one. The former represented a change of regime, the latter succession within a ruling party. Nonetheless, although not to the same degree as in 1991, organizers of the current conference must have been assailed by some doubt as to whether the conference was going to take place as planned. Yet, once again, we are assembled here to commune on this unique experience called Ethiopian studies, which is marking its fifty-third anniversary.

What these two experiences indicate is the remarkable resilience of the Ethiopian polity. This has been witnessed more than once in Ethiopian history. The decline of Aksum culminated in the turmoil that is associated with the name Gudit. Yet, it was followed by the splendor of the monolithic churches of Lalibala and the might and glory of the medieval empire. In the sixteenth century, the Wars of Ahmad Grañ and the Oromo population movement appeared to signal the end of the Ethiopian polity as it was known. Yet, that polity, albeit in truncated fashion, was able to show remarkable resurgence and register the flourishing of art and urban culture that we know as the Gonderine period. The *Zamana Masafent* that followed it, conventionally depicted as a period of unmitigated anarchy, nonetheless exhibited remarkable institutional continuity. It lasted barely seven decades before full monarchical power was restored with the accession of Tewodros to the throne in 1855. The death of the powerful Menilek was followed by a period of struggle for succession that attained its resolution in two stages, first in 1916 and finally and more definitively in 1930. The long reign of Emperor Haile Sellassie raised the question of what would happen to the country after his departure. Yet, traumatic as the revolutionary years were, Ethiopia did not experience the political disintegration that so many pundits had predicted. Finally, in May 1991, Ethiopia was effectively without a government for an entire week and the capital was inundated with tens of thousands of fleeing but armed soldiers. Yet, to the surprise of many foreign observers, business went on as usual: international telephone service continued, Ethiopian Airlines went on operating from its new base in neighbouring Kenya.

---

[*] Emeritus Professor of History at Addis Ababa University.

What makes this resilience of the Ethiopian polity all the more remarkable is the fact that it came about notwithstanding the inadequacy of the institutional provisions for such political continuity. Even where elaborate provisions were made for political succession, as in the case of the 1955 imperial constitution, they were not strictly implemented. Thus, it is safe to conclude that it is the residual social assets of the country, much more than the institutional arrangements in place, that have ensured relatively smooth transitions and political continuity. With these preliminary remarks, we shall now proceed to examine in closer detail some of the landmark events in the history of political succession in the country.

The Kebra Nagast

The first important document that was designed to ensure political continuity is the *Kebra Nagast*, believed to have first been composed in Arabic and subsequently translated into Ethiopic at the beginning of the reign of Amda Seyon (r. 1314-44). The centerpiece of the document is the story of King Solomon and Queen Sheba, the offspring of whose illicit union, christened Menilek I, came to be regarded as the founder of the Ethiopian royal dynasty. Also intricately linked to this story of inadvertent matrimony is the equally powerful narrative of the advent of the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia and its permanent location at the Church of Mary of Zion in Aksum.

The *Kebra Nagast* achieved two things: it delegitimized the Zagwe rulers as usurpers and legitimized the new dynasty that came to power in 1270 as the true heirs of Solomon and Sheba. Thus, the continuity of Aksum and the medieval empire was established; correspondingly, the centrality of Aksum in Ethiopian monarchical tradition came to endure. This centrality was first asserted emphatically when the most powerful of the medieval Ethiopian monarchs, Zar'a Ya'eqob, held his formal coronation ceremony in that city, setting a precedent that was followed by so many of his successors, up to Emperor Menilek in the nineteenth century (TADDESSE 1972: 249-50). The Kebra Nagast heralded the birth of a dynasty that lasted nearly a millennium, until it was swept away by the 1974 revolution. In the meantime, every monarch tried to ensure his legitimacy by establishing a "Solomonic" lineage for himself. Even Tewodros, notwithstanding his constant refrain of having been raised from the dust by the power of God, had this lineage established for him by over-enthusiastic biographers.

The royal prison of Amba Gishen

While the *Kebra Nagast* set the rules for dynastic succession for nearly a millennium, there was still no mechanism for ensuring smooth royal succession. In theory, the principle of male primogeniture appears to have solved this problem. But, the question of what to do with the younger brothers of a reigning monarch remained an issue of serious concern. Another complicating factor was the habit of kings marrying several wives, as was the case with King Dawit (r. 1380-1412), with each queen plotting for the succession of her son. The institution that was deemed essential to avoid the succession strife that was likely to ensue was a rather heinous one: the royal prison at Amba Gishen, rather flatteringly called "Dabra Nagast" (TADDESSE 1974: 533). All younger brothers of a reigning monarch and sometimes other close male relatives as well were kept there until his death. The number of these unfortunate creatures confined, sometimes for life, in that stronghold had reached nearly six hundred by the time of Zar'a Ya'eqob (*ibid.*). On the death of the reigning monarch, what one would call members of the crown council would visit the *amba* to summon the next candidate to assume royal power. This did not always work perfectly well as, by then, the suitable candidate might be dead or physically too crippled to be fit to govern. In other cases, the sons of the dead monarch would put forward their own bid for the throne, complicating things even further (TADDESSE 1972.: 221, 275ff). The uncertainty of the process of transition was a fertile ground for the rise of powerful individuals who made decisive interventions. One such individual was the intriguing character of Amda-Mika'el (alias Amdu or Amdo), who became a king-maker after the death of King Ba'eda Maryam in 1478, in a style that was to create a precedent for *Ras* Mika'el Sehul in the 18th century. He deposed Ba'eda Maryam's successor, Naod, twice. When the latter finally managed to seize the throne for the third time in 1494, one of the first things he did was to have Amdu killed by having him buried alive and trampled to death by animals that were driven on him (TADDESSE 1974: 527-28).

The case of the above-mentioned Zar'a Ya'eqob clearly illustrates the medieval dilemma of political succession. As the youngest, even if arguably the brightest, son of King Dawit, he had no right of immediate succession to the throne. He was thus confined to the royal prison. Fortunately for him, his confinement was not overly long, his three eldest brothers (Tewodros, Yeshaq and Hezba-Nagn) ruling in succession for a total of some twenty-two years only, the first one for only nine months and the last for only three years. Thus, he could inaugurate the longest (thirty-four years) and most successful – if arguably most despotic – reign in the medieval history of Ethiopia (*ibid*: 221, 280). While the royal prison was terminated towards the end of the medieval period, the significance of Amba Geshen endured in two important ways. It inspired the famous novel by the English writer, Samuel Johnson, entitled *Rasselas* (subsequently translated into Amharic by Sirak Heruy). By virtue of the tradition that Amba Geshen is also the seat of the True Cross found by Queen Helena of Consantinople, it became an important shrine for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. The feast of St. Mary on 21 Maskaram in particular has become the occasion for a pilgrimage equivalent to that of St. Gabriel in Qulubi.

Might is right

The post-medieval period, while it witnessed the flourishing of the Gonderine civilization, also saw the decline of the monarchy and the ascendancy of regional lords. Nothing illustrated this change of power relations more than the dramatic intervention of *Ras* Mika'el Sehul in Gonderine politics in 1769. Within the space of a year, he killed the reigning monarch, Iyoas, and deposed the person he had chosen to replace him, Yohannes. Subsequent regional lords, while they exercised much greater power than the reigning monarchs, stopped short of influencing royal succession in such bloody fashion. As the common adage has it, the Gonderine kings reigned while the regional lords ruled.

The rise of Kasa-Tewodros is significant, among others, for terminating this divorce of power and authority. The last of the *masafent*, he also became the first of Ethiopia's modern emperors. At the same time, he inaugurated a tradition of acquisition of ultimate political power not through hereditary succession but by force of arms. A great deal of the aura and charisma that has surrounded that emperor has revolved around his plebian background, something that he was always keen to emphasize himself in so much of his correspondence. Engrossed in his domestic woes and threatened by foreign invasion of his own making, he never had much time to provide for hereditary succession, even if he was inclined to do so. When he died at Maqdala in April 1868, imperial power was there for grabs. The two major contenders turned out to be Wagshum Gobeze of Lasta and Bazbez Kasa of Tegray. Although the former managed to seize power first with the throne name of Takla-Giyorgis, his tenure lasted barely three years. He was defeated at the Battle of Assem on 11 July 1871 by his rival Bazbez Kasa, who ruled Ethiopia for the next eighteen years as Yohannes IV.

But Yohannes's ascendancy did not go entirely unchallenged. This was particularly the case with Menilek of Shawa, who continued to arrogate to himself the supreme imperial title, *negusa nagast*. He abandoned that pretension only after Yohannes had emerged with enhanced powers and prestige after his two brilliant victories over the Egyptians in 1875 and 1876. The Leche agreement of 1878, whereby Menilek formally acknowledged Yohannes's suzerainty in return for being recognized as the *negus* of Shawa, is generally regarded as the end of this struggle for supreme power. The other regional lord, *Ras* Adal of Gojjam, proved generally more respectful of Yohannes's imperial prerogative and was duly recognized by the emperor as *negus* of Gojjam and Kafa in 1881. Yohannes, however, had no illusion as to which of his two vassals was the more powerful one. That was why he tried unsuccessfully to ensure that the imperial throne will remain in his family by arranging the marriage of his son, Ar'aya Sellase, to the daughter of Menilek, Zawditu.

The delicate political equilibrium that Yohannes had crafted began to unravel around 1888. The defeat of Takla-Haymanot by the Mahdists at the Battle of Sar Weha early in that year was attended by the falling into captivity of so many of his people, including his daughter, and was followed by the sacking of the city of Gondar. Feeling that he had been left to face alone the full fury of the Mahdist onslaught, he sulked. Yohannes's own inconclusive campaign to dislodge the Italians from their stronghold at Sa'ati underscored his inability to eliminate the danger coming from the sea. Menilek, on the other hand, used the opportunity offered by the advent of the Italians to strengthen his military power with a view to emerging triumphant in the impending struggle for imperial power. He also exploited Takla-Haymanot's disgruntlement to create a common front of rebellious vassals against the emperor, leading the emperor to devastate the nearby Gojjam with a fury that surprised even himself.

Turning in frustration to deal with the third threat to his power, i.e. the Mahdists, he fell at the Battle of Matamma on 9 March 1889. Just as his predecessor Tewodros had attained iconic status through his dramatic act of suicide, Yohannes attained martyrdom in popular imagination by dying in battle against the Mahdists. On his deathbed, he designated his son Mangasha as his heir. But that remained a pious wish. For the power equation on the ground had made it perfectly clear that Menilek was the unchallenged contender for the throne. Much as the frustrated Mangasha coveted at the very least the title of *negus* of Tegray, Menilek did not oblige. Notwithstanding, the initial signs of disaffection among the princes of Tegray evaporated as the Italian menace loomed larger and larger. Thus, Menilek was able to lead a remarkably united Ethiopia at the Battle of Adwa. The Adwa victory enhanced his power and prestige, much more than the Gundat and Gura victories had done for his predecessor, for the former had also an international dimension.

Menilek's provisions

For about a decade after Adwa, Menilek enjoyed an unprecedented degree of power and fame. He had succeeded in this to such a degree that both nationals and foreigners began to worry about what would happen to the country if and when he passed away. Foreign powers began to make contingency arrangements ranging from strengthening the fences of their legations to drawing elaborate plans for the partition of the country. Ethiopians began to view his possible demise with considerable foreboding, which explains why his eventual death in 1913 was a kept a secret for something like four years.

Menilek himself appeared to share this concern, particularly after he realized the seriousness of the stroke that eventually claimed his life. In 1907 and 1909, he made two important provisions for the smooth transfer of power after his disappearance from the political scene. The first was the establishment of ministries. Whatever the inadequacies of the ministerial system that Menilek introduced, there is no denying the fact that it represented an important step towards institutionalizing government and ensuring continuity. Then, in 1909, in a document loaded with historical precedent, the emperor formally designated his grandson, Iyyasu, as his heir to the throne. He reminded his subjects of the tribulations that the country experienced following the death of Tewodros and Yohannes and urged them to avoid such an eventuality by curbing their ambitions and respecting each other. Internal strife, he warned them, can only lead to foreign intrusion (MARS'E HAZAN 2000 EC: 55-56).

These thoughtful provisions of the ailing emperor did not, however, avert the opening of a chapter of political succession struggle that was finally resolved only in 1930, with the coronation of Emperor Haile Sellassie. First, Empress Taytu, who did not find her spouse's designated heir to her taste, tried to exploit the political vacuum to promote her own political agenda. No sooner was she removed from the political scene in 1910 than the person chosen to act as regent to the minor prince, *Ras* Tasamma Nadaw, died, thereby ushering in a new period of political tension. The high point of this tension was the confrontation between palace guards loyal to the young heir and the Adwa veteran, *Ras* Abate Bwayalew, who was believed to have harboured his own ambition of being Ethiopia's overlord by marrying Princess Zawditu Menilek. His bid was thwarted by the combined might of the Shawan lords and Iyasu's father, *Ras* Mikael of Wollo. Iyyasu was now finally free to exercise the power that his designation as Menilek's heir had given him. But his rather unorthodox policies, particularly in the religious sphere, gave ammunition to his rivals. They conspired with the limitrophe colonial powers, who were also apprehensive of Iyasu's subversive influence over their colonial subjects, to depose him in 1916 on faked up charges of apostasy.

The 1916 coup, for it was little short of that, far from resolving the crisis of succession, introduced a new period of uncertainty by establishing an unprecedented system of dual rule – of Zawditu as empress and Tafari as heir to the throne and ultimately as regent. This formed the background to the series of power struggles that unfolded in the following decade and a half. Paradoxically, the first casualty of these struggles was the ministerial system that Menilek had introduced in 1907 to ensure institutional continuity. A public rally against the incumbents in 1918 led to their dismissal en masse (with the notable exception of the war minister, *Fitawrari* Habta-Giyorgis). The move not only removed the incumbents but also dispensed with the ministries for some time to come. The struggle for power peaked in the second half of the 1920s, when Tafari's inexorable rise to absolute power was challenged by one Zawditu loyalist after another, culminating in the Battle of Anchem on 31 March 1930, at which Tafari's forces defeated those of Zawditu's husband, *Ras* Gugsa Wale of Bagemder.

The Era of Constitutions

The coronation of Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1930 not only terminated some two decades of struggle for succession but was also followed by a move that tried to avert the recurrence of such struggle in the future. The emperor ushered in a new era of attempting to institutionalize political succession by promulgating Ethiopia's first modern constitution in 1931. The first fourteen articles of that constitution described in elaborate fashion the rules of royal succession. The first article reaffirmed the incontestable legitimacy of the Solomonic dynasty, more specifically that of the family of *Negus* Sahla-Sellase, who was declared the direct descendant of Menilek I, offspring of King Solomon and Queen Sheba. The second article stipulated that, subsequent to the death of Empress Zawditu, royal succession would remain within the family of Haile Sellassie I. Subsequent articles laid down the rules of succession to him. The cardinal principle underpinning those rules was that of male primogeniture. The convolutions that the authors of the constitution performed to avert female succession was little short of comical. Rather than envisage the succession of one of the emperor's daughters, they were prepared to entertain the idea of any close male relative of the emperor descended from *Negus* Haile Sellassie ascending the throne. The emperor's daughters were given a remote chance of indirect access to the throne only through their sons, who were fifth in line of succession after the eldest son, his sons, his grandsons, and the second eldest male. The search for a male successor could go on down two generations of the royal family, failing which uncles or other male relatives could ascend the throne. Articles 10-14 dealt specifically with the prerogatives and obligations of the crown prince. Already in 1930, the emperor's eldest son, Asfa Wasan, had been designated as Crown Prince after formally swearing an oath of loyalty to the sovereign. It was clearly laid down that the Crown Prince could only ascend the throne on the death of the emperor, exercising the power of regent only if the emperor could not perform his duties through illness or old age (MAHTAMA-SELLASE 1962 EC: 777-79).

The revised constitution of 1955 reiterated the sole legitimacy of the Haile Sellassie family to the imperial throne as lineal descendants of the Solomonic dynasty through *Negus* Sahla-Sellasse. While male primogeniture was once again underscored, the rules for succession were not as elaborate as in the 1931 constitution. Instead, a number of articles were dedicated to the provisions for regency in circumstances where either the king or the crown prince was a minor or invalid, including the setting up of a regency council presided by the queen mother (*Matshafa Hegegat*: 457-59). Why such elaborate provisions for a regency council were deemed necessary remains a mystery, as neither the king was invalid nor the crown prince was a minor at the time. As it turned out, the queen mother who was selected to preside over the regency council also died a few years after the promulgation of the constitution. The abortive 1960 coup, whose mouthpiece the crown prince became, drove the last wedge between sovereign and heir, making the question of succession an open issue.

In retrospect, the reign of Haile Sellassie represented a major step forward in the institutionalization of governance. In addition to the two constitutions discussed above, it gave the country the three major legal codes which remained in force long after the end of the imperial regime – the civil, the commercial and the penal. The two constitutions also appeared to define the rules of royal succession much more precisely than had been the case thitherto by limiting it to the Haile Sellassie family. But, the emperor failed to do the things that were necessary to perpetuate his dynasty, as distinct from the rather open-ended Solomonic dynasty. That was primarily converting the monarchy into a constitutional one, along the lines of the family of Windsor in England, for instance. Curiously enough, the prime minister was made a member of the regency council in the 1955 constitution. What was actually needed was to make him the real head of government and answerable to parliament, thereby at the same time elevating the monarchy above the tussle of day-to-day politics. Failure to do that meant that when the revolution came in 1974, it was not only the Aklilu government that was forced to resign but also the monarchy and the dynasty that was consigned to oblivion.

Revolutionary legitimacy

The 1974 revolution shifted the yardstick of legitimacy from dynastic purity to revolutionary authenticity. The popular demand at the outbreak of the revolution was for a "people's government". Sensing the inadequacy of the country's preparation for such a government, the popular forces subsequently modified their slogan to that of a "provisional people's government". But, real power resided in the group of junior military officers and NCO's who deposed the long-reigning emperor on 12 September and, taking a leaf from the popular demands, christened themselves the "Provisional Military Administrative Council". That became the formal name for the Darg that was set up on 28 June 1974.

True, at the beginning, the Darg had made a half-hearted concession to dynastic succession by designating the crown prince as a constitutional monarch in the proclamation that deposed Emperor Haile Sellassie and set up the PMAC. But, this was an empty gesture, as the prince was out of the country and could not assume his assigned role. Also a casualty of the ongoing political process was the new constitution that had been drafted by the commission set up in early 1974, notwithstanding the Darg's commitment in September 1974 to ensure its speedy adoption. As the initially "bloodless" change so loudly proclaimed by the Darg turned bloody, particularly after the executions of November 1974, the idea of the provisional nature of the Darg evaporated into thin air. United in blood, the Darg members can no longer contemplate giving up power. Returning to the barracks, however so often it was solemnly reiterated in the Darg's various pronouncements, became an unthinkable option. The sweeping reforms of early 1975 reinforced the permanence of the Darg's tenure. The Darg was now catapulted from the organized leader of the revolutionary movement to jealous guardian of the "gains of the revolution". The military, which had evolved as a professional force during the imperial regime, was thoroughly politicized, the political commissars gaining ascendancy over the generals. In April 1976, the Darg capped its long process of ideological schooling with the proclamation of the National Democratic Revolution as its credo, thereby taking a major step towards its ideologization and civilianization. The military officers became Marxist-Leninist cadres. The colonels became comrades (BAHRU 2008: 291-92).

Yet the consolidation of power by the Darg, or more accurately its strongman, Mengistu Haile Mariam, proved a rather protracted affair. The year 1977 proved a turning point in this respect. In that year, Mengistu not only eliminated his main challengers within the Darg but also liquidated the two major leftist parties – EPRP and *Ma'ison* – that had vied for revolutionary legitimacy. The next decade was devoted to the creation of the apparatus for total political control. This was first achieved in 1984 when that apparatus was born in the form of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE), painstakingly forged by the commission set up for its organization (COPWE) in 1979. Then, three years later, a new constitution was adopted setting up the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The constitution established WPE as the sole legitimate political force in the country. The president, who was also secretary-general of the party, concentrated enormous powers in his hands. Even if not so starkly articulated, "one country, one party, one man" became the motto. The country was expected to exist in its entire territorial integrity. The party was expected to rule for ever. The man was to remain permanently on the helm.

Ethno-Nationalist legitimacy

As it turned out, the PDRE did not last even four years. The country lost the northern province that it had tried to keep for the preceding thirty years. The party expired with PDRE. The man sought refuge in Zimbabwe. Such is the spellbinding character of one-man rule and the power of the personality cult that goes with it that the announcement of his departure left a sense of void and uncertainty, albeit for only a week. I still recall vividly the cry of desperation of a lady who, when she heard the announcement of Mengistu's departure over the radio, lamented: "Is he gone, leaving us at the mercy of daylight hyenas?"

In the last days of the Darg, there were some tentative talks of a transitional arrangement whereby the government and the insurgent opposition would share power until a permanent structure was formed. But, the total defeat of the Darg rendered such compromise solutions irrelevant, leaving the way to the ascendancy of ethno-nationalist organizations spearheaded by the EPRDF. In the first year of the new regime, power appeared to be delicately poised between the EPRDF and the OLF. But the exit of the latter following the controversial 1992 elections consolidated EPRDF's hegemony – hegemony that has remained more or less intact to this day.

The fundamental document that has shaped the post-1991 political regime has been the 1994 constitution that set up the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The governing principle of that constitution is "ethnic federalism". Just as the 1987 constitution began with "We the workers of Ethiopia ...", the 1994 one began with "We, the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia ...". On paper at least, the FDRE constitution initiated multi-party politics for the first time in Ethiopian history. Article 56 of that constitution ruled that "A political party, or a coalition of political parties, that has the greatest number of seats in the House of Peoples' Representatives shall form the Executive and lead it". In a situation where there exists a level playing field, that provision would have ensured genuine multi-party politics. But where state and party structures tend to merge, there is hardly anything that checks the ruling party from perpetuating itself. As it happened, multi-party politics received a rude shock in 2005. It was buried in 2010.

Instead, what we saw in the past decade is a replay of Ethiopian history with the growing emergence of one-man rule. The turning point in this regard is the split within the TPLF that occurred in 2001. That event marked the end of the collective leadership that had been a distinctive feature of the TPLF and EPRDF and led to the gradual concentration of powers in the hands of one person. This trend was accelerated with the total rout of the political opposition in 2005 and the host of legislations aimed at silencing all forms of dissent or independent opinion that was introduced in its wake.

Ultimately, one-man rule proved costly both to the nation and the individual concerned. Meles's unexpected passing away in August 2012 at a relatively young age was a tragic event even viewed in personal terms. It also left both the nation and the ruling party bewildered. So much so that the party had to initiate an all-pervasive personality cult that still continues unabated. Haile Sellassie and Mengistu were celebrated in life; Meles is being celebrated in death.

The rationale for this rather curious posthumous personality cult appears to be the determination to ensure that the party continues to ride on. Some years back, EPRDF initiated the principle of staggered succession (or *matakakat*, as the distinctly untranslatable Amharic word has it). This principle is predicated on continued EPRDF rule for an indefinite period of time and only provides for the changing of guards or the infusion of new (young) blood within the ruling party. Rather belatedly (after its leader had paid the price for over-extended tenure), it has also recently imposed a two-term limit on the post of prime minister. After some confusion over the rules of succession, the deputy prime minister has stepped in the shoes of the deceased prime minister. The assumption of what is theoretically supreme power by a southerner for the first time in Ethiopian history and the election of a person with Islamic religious background to be his deputy is not entirely bereft of historical significance. It remains to be seen whether this interim arrangement will endure.

Conclusions

What the above historical survey has shown is the lack of adequate institutions in Ethiopian history to ensure smooth political succession. The medieval rulers relied on a far from authentic story and a heinous penal institution to ensure dynastic and royal succession. In the modern era, political authority derived from military might. That was the case with all three emperors associated with the beginning of that era: Tewodros, Yohannes and Menilek. Haile Sellassie gave dynastic succession a more elaborate and focused constitutional basis by limiting it to his own family. But he stopped short of inaugurating the constitutional monarchy that would have guaranteed the continuation of his dynasty. After 1974, *the* party – be it of revolutionary or ethno-nationalist vintage – has held sway. In both cases, too, the party has been subsumed within the strongman, giving rise to a lot of confusion and uncertainty in times of his departure – in flight or in death.

What one can therefore conclude from the above survey is that Ethiopia is still in search of the robust, democratic institutions that can ensure change of governments rather than of regimes and of smooth succession within regimes. Such institutions would be above the dynasty, the family, the party or the strongman. Such institutional arrangements would save the nation from tribulation in times of transition and the individual political actors from undue deification or vilification, as no individual would be deemed so indispensable that his exit from power would inaugurate a period of political anarchy. These institutions would include: genuine multi-party, or at the very least two-party, politics; separation of party and state structures; an independent judiciary that holds all persons – irrespective of their political or social status – accountable; a robust civil society, including a truly independent but responsible media.

Only then can Ethiopia have leaders rather than rulers. Only then can we envisage a situation where political leaders, after they have served their limited terms in office, could brush shoulders with the average citizen, sipping macchiato or relishing beer. For, at the end of the day, we are all ordinary mortals.

References

BAHRU ZEWDE, 2008, *Society, State and History: Selected Essays*, Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University Press.

MAHTAMA-SELLASE WALDA-MASQAL, 1962 EC, *Zekra Nagar*, Addis Ababa.

MARS'E HAZAN WALDA-QIRQOS, 2000 EC, *Yahayagnaw Kefla Zaman Mabacha*, Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University Press.

No author, 1962 EC, *Matshafa Hegegat Abayt*, Addis Ababa.

TADDESSE TAMRAT, 1972, *Church and State in Ethiopia*, Oxford, Clarendon.

TADDESSE TAMRAT, 1974, "Problems of royal succession in Fifteenth Century Ethiopia: A Presentation of the Documents", *PICES*4, vol.1: 501-535.