



Repression in Ethiopia

prepared by

The Ethiopian Students Union

in North America

REPRINT
INRPER

5



africa research group

REPRESSION IN ETHIOPIA

prepared by

THE ETHIOPIAN STUDENTS UNION IN NORTH AMERICA

January 1971

Ethiopia is often portrayed as a country with a glorious tradition of a rich and enduring civilization. Except for the brief Italian occupation, it is known as a nation which has maintained its independence for over three thousand years. There is much we are proud of in this heritage. But this image leaves out too much. Beneath the picturesque medievalism of kings and queens lies the overwhelming reality of the misery of our people who have borne the burden of this pageantry. The Ethiopian masses who made heroic sacrifices to safeguard the nation's independence have become subject to the most oppressive internal domination. It is this dismal story of the hardships suffered by the vast majority of Ethiopians that needs to be told.

Politically, Ethiopia remains a despotism. Power is exclusively held by the feudal nobility, presently headed by Haile Selassie. No political parties are allowed. The only similarity the parliament bears to a democratic institution is its name. Members of the Upper House are personally appointed by the emperor who is free to overrule any decisions of the Lower House. The emperor's decisions and legislation on all matters are binding and are not subject to review by the parliament.

The parliamentary bodies, also called 'deliberative chambers' in the constitution, cannot legislate without the emperor's consent. Even their powers to initiate legislation are limited. (U.S. Army Handbook for Ethiopia, 1964.)

The prime minister and cabinet members are imperial appointees. Discussing the uncontested power of the emperor, the government's official Guide to Ethiopia proclaims:

... in practice, despite the structure of democratic government, most policy questions of any importance are referred to the emperor.

But the constitution which provided for the establishment of parliament is not without a point. The purpose of the constitution is to consolidate the emperor's power over all other feudal institutions, such as the nobility and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The U.S. Army Handbook states:

Both as regent and as emperor, Haile Selassie has tried to increase the power of the throne by designing a broader, more constitutional framework within which traditional concepts of government might be adapted and the nobility and the Church brought more closely under the throne's leadership.

In light of this objective, it is not surprising that more than a quarter of the articles of the 1955 Revised Constitution concern the emperor.

The autocratic regime bears full responsibility for the devastated economic and social life of the nation. Ethiopia is an underdeveloped country standing lowest among the poorest countries. The per capita income is estimated to be between \$35 and \$50, a rate unparalleled by most African states. When allowances have been made in this figure for the incomes of the feudal nobility, the peasant's income is barely at the subsistence level. Periodic famines are rampant throughout the countryside; annually at least one major province suffers severe starvation. The primitive state of the economy can be seen in the fact that 90% of Ethiopia's population is engaged in agriculture which contributes about 70% of the gross domestic product. Modern industry, including electricity and construction, constitutes only 5% of the total output. Modern manufacturing industries make up only 2% of the total economy. The contribution of mining is so small as to be negligible. Ethiopia is a perfect example of a one-commodity export economy. Coffee accounts for between 1/2 and 2/3 of the nation's total value of exports. The country has been suffering from a rapidly growing trade deficit which has reached such proportions in 1969-1970 that it threatens the collapse of the national economy.

The situation in health is alarming. The infant mortality rate is among the highest in the world.

Between 50% and 60% of the newborn children die in the first two and a half years after birth. (U.S. Army Handbook)

Approximately half of the nation's adult population suffers from syphilis. In some urban centers, syphilis has reached epidemic proportions. Leprosy is endemic throughout Ethiopia. In the province of Gojjam alone there are an estimated 110,000 to 125,000 lepers (Army Handbook). Of the 25,000,000 Ethiopians, approximately 10 million live in malaria areas. Death from malaria alone is estimated at 20,000 persons yearly. "In 1958, for example, 400,000 persons are believed to have died in a malaria epidemic in Tigre" (Army Handbook). Typhus is rampant; amoebic and bacillary dysenteries are widespread. Smallpox has long been endemic and few steps have been taken toward its prevention. To meet the urgent needs of the rapidly dying population, there is but one hospital bed for every 3500 people, and the majority of these are concentrated in Addis Ababa, catering to the ruling class. Less than 300 doctors provide services for the country's 25 million people. The first five-year-plan allocated 2.3% of the total budget to public health. The government's concern for the people's health can be seen in its military expenditure which, in contrast to health expenses, amounted to 30%-35% of the total under the same plan.

Three decades have passed since Haile Selassie announced that "a free public education is the right of every child." A UNESCO study shows that between 95% and 98% of the Ethiopian population is illiterate--a figure once again unequaled by any other country. Of the estimated 6,093,000 school-age children, only 186,200 or 3% are in school. Of potential students over 15 years of age, 0.3% attend school. The very few who manage to attend school in the cities occupy classes with an average of 58 students; in the countryside, the average class size is between 79 and 94.

Such misery abounds in a country whose economic potential is considered great. Of Ethiopia's 450,000 square miles, much is plateau land which possesses one of the most fertile agricultural soils. According to the Ethiopian Planning Board only 15% of potentially arable land (not including vast areas which could be utilized through irrigation) is presently cultivated. Even under these conditions, Ethiopia is one of the major producers of millet in Africa. It is the second largest wheat producing area in Africa south of the Sahara, and the most important barley producing area in the continent. Its coffee production exceeds that of most coffee-growing nations. An American economist has estimated that, if properly cultivated, Ethiopia can produce enough food to feed Western Europe. According to a U.N. study, Ethiopia is second only to the Congo in Hydro-electric potential among African countries. Although minerals and oil resources have not yet been fully ex-

plored, it is known that Ethiopia has large potash and iron ore reserves.

Part of the reason for this disparity between the potential and actual is given in the official Guide to Ethiopia:

There have as yet been no basic changes in the structure of Ethiopian society. The Emperor is the hereditary ruler. Then there are the great land-owning families whose heads bear titles of nobility and who serve as ministers, officers of state, governors of provinces, military leaders and Church officials. Below the Imperial family and the nobles are the Amhara and Galla landed gentry who have been the major beneficiaries of educational opportunities abroad and make up much of the government personnel.

When the emperor in a speech in November 1961 declared, "It is our aim that every Ethiopian own land," the imperial family and the feudal nobility owned 65% of all the land and the State Church held between 20%-30% of the most arable land. Article 2991 of the Civil Code provides that rent in kind levied on a tenant shall in no case exceed 75% of his crop yield. However, at the same time, the article provides that the landlord may evict any tenant who is unable to surrender 75% of his produce--in effect setting the rent at exactly 75%. In addition, this law allows that a new landlord may expel tenants of the former landlord when the land is transferred. On the other hand, the code holds that a peasant is allowed to terminate his services if he is too ill to work, providing that he gives four years notice, or if he dies. The latter condition needs no further comment. In connection with the first provision, however, it is significant to note that on the average it takes three years before land can be cleared for cultivation; thus the landlord is guaranteed productive land before the tenant is released from his obligations.

Aside from the payments in kind, the tenant is required to render various unspecified services to the landlord. It is estimated that the peasant's obligations in this regard amount to one out of three working days. Since the 1960 Civil Code, a Ministry of Land Reform and Administration has been established to further streamline the feudal property relations. In a 1966 study prepared by this Ministry, it was found that most peasants in the Province of Sidamo made cash payments although the law states that tenants are expected to pay their rents in kind. In addition, 60% of the province's tenants were required to provide cash for government taxes normally paid by the landlord. Under the new administrative provisions, the peasant is increasingly burdened with the demands of an unstable economy.

The feudal regime has increasingly made common cause with American imperialism. Part of the United States economic hold on Ethiopia can be seen in a New York Times, January 17, 1967, report.

Ralph Pearson Co. operates a \$45 million mining project in the Danakil Desert. Dozens of American businessmen have already discovered Ethiopia, from a bookstore to a \$100 million potash mining project, from a spice firm to two of the world's largest oil companies. More than 200 American companies also have agencies in Ethiopia. Among the reasons, one of Africa's most liberal investment policies, generous duty-free and tax exemption provisions, special laws protecting U.S. firms against expropriations and vast potential in agriculture, industry and mining.

The United States sent one of its largest Peace Corps missions to Ethiopia. Haile Sellasie has often claimed that he is a champion of Pan-Africanism. However, a report in Africa (1965, No. 18) states:

There is evidence that the present Ethiopian government is an imperialist agent... The OAU has asked all member states to remove all military bases... The fact that there is an American base in Ethiopia threatens the independence of Ethiopians. The American MAAG military advisors, the Mapping and Geographical Institute, and the Peace Corps' presence--all these strengthen the hold of imperialism in Ethiopia.

The importance of the American base is underlined by the New York Times (May 15, 1965):

The Kagnew Station... is in a relatively interference-free area, and has many advantages as the African and Middle East link in the world-wide system of U.S. communications. It is one of the most important stations of its kind in the world.

The number of Americans active in the various agencies in Ethiopia is over 10,000. In addition, the number of their dependents is between 25,000 and 30,000. Apart from stations in the countryside, large residential urban areas are American colonies. The continental significance of U.S. imperialism in Ethiopia can be seen in a report in the Illinois State Register (January 12, 1964):

One of the most important showdowns between East and West is in the making in Ethiopia... Upon its outcome may depend whether the U.S. loses Africa. The U.S. must stand behind those who have supported it in the past--in this case, Emperor Haile Sellasie.

The benefit for the feudal government under the agreement on maintaining the military base is the American promise to keep the decadent regime in power. United States assistance to the regime since 1953 comprises about half of the total United States military expenditure for the whole of Africa. United States military aid to Haile Selassie's government in 1970 represents two-thirds of the American arms aid to the entire African continent (Los Angeles Times, October 19, 1970). American support of the feudal regime is not, however, limited to these vast outlays, and to contributions in sophisticated arms such as supersonic F-5 jet fighters. The United States government also provides Special Forces units to train troops in counterinsurgency (New York Times, October 19, 1970). The military equipment and personnel furnished by United States imperialism are not awaiting use in some future eventuality. Thousands of Ethiopian peasants, workers and students have already been victims of the planes, bombs and counterinsurgency forces. And as the struggles against the regime intensify, there is hardly any doubt that United States troops would enter in an attempt to rescue the feudal order. As Senator Fulbright pointed out during a recent Senate hearing, the 1960 pact between the American and Ethiopian governments suggests "that the U.S. would come to the aid of the Ethiopian Emperor in the event he was faced with an internal insurrection" (New York Times, October 19, 1970). Given the nature and depth of United States commitment to the archaic regime, it can be said that Haile Selassie, "the patron of African Unity," has not only leased Ethiopia to America, but he has also turned the country into a base for the neo-colonization of the entire African continent.

However, this feudal oppression and imperialist exploitation have not gone unchallenged. Since the return of Haile Selassie from his sanctuary in Europe at the end of the Italian occupation, there have been a host of rebellions against the regime. In fact, a number of the patriotic liberation forces mobilized to resist the return of the feudal tyrant. The most important of these attempts took place in the provinces of Gojjam and Tigre. The peasant-nationalist revolt in Gojjam was suppressed by the British imperialist forces, who came in support of the man they had preserved during the occupation. Bellay Zelleke, a leader of the Resistance, and the organizer of the revolt against the feudal regime, was publicly hanged. The revolt in Tigre province was crushed by the feudal army. Immediately after the rebellion in Gojjam, the Weyanne revolt broke out and lasted for over a year. It was finally suppressed with aerial bombardments by British Royal Air Force planes stationed in Aden. Yet another rebellion in Ogaden was crushed by British forces in 1948. A peasant uprising in Wollo in 1958 was met with "the eradication of a whole chain of villages from the map of Ethiopia" (New Left Review, 1965). In April 1960 peasants in Southern Ethiopia protested the dispossession of their land by the emperor's daughter and some of

her children (Africa Today, May, 1961). This protest led to the massacre of more than a thousand peasants. In December, 1960, an attempted coup by the Imperial Bodyguard was put down by the army with the aid of planes flown by American pilots. All the leaders were subsequently hanged, including the corpses of a few who were killed before capture.

Since the 1960 insurrection, the struggle for liberation from the oppressive feudal regime has reached a new stage. Students, workers and peasants are carrying on nation-wide resistance and have begun to consolidate their forces. The last eight years have been a period of extensive armed peasant struggles, initiated in Eritrea and Balle. Workers have continually staged strikes in protest of exploitive labour conditions. During the last few years, this national progressive struggle has been intensified. The heightened fight follows upon important developments in the political and social conditions of the country. The economy is undergoing a serious crisis. The characteristic incompetence and obscurantism of the huge bureaucracy has made matters worse for the autocracy. To cite on example:

The 1958-59 budget was disclosed in the July 1959 issue of the Negaret Gazeta, published and circulated at the end of the summer a few weeks before the end of the fiscal year of September 9, 1959. In any event, budgets are in effect rendering of accounts rather than planning of state expenditure. (U.S. Army Handbook)

The present problems, however, cannot be masked by paper solutions. Since 1963, the price of food has gone up by 35.6% and the price of clothing has increased by 26.8%. In the same period, wages have risen less than 5%, while in some areas they have decreased by 12%. In 1969, the government issued a directive prohibiting the employment of new personnel in government agencies for the next two years. Of those already in government service, employees in a number of provinces did not draw salaries for over three months. In a hopeless attempt at survival, a series of new taxes were imposed by the government. On imported food, for example customs duties have increased by 50%. Yet more taxed were demanded of the peasantry.

The regime's restrictions on education are indicative of its desperation. Of the 12,000 students who sat for college entrance examinations in 1969, the government decided that there were places available for less than 2,000. In 1970, the government announced that of the 19,000 who took the entrance examinations only about 1,000 has passed. A new annual school fee of Eth. \$10 per child has been made compulsory. In addition, a fee of U.S. \$10 is required for school entrance examinations. The effect of these fees on education in a country with a per

capita income of \$35 to \$50 is self-evident.

This state of intensified oppression and exploitation has given rise to a national uprising of workers, peasants, students and other progressive elements. Workers have staged numerous attacks in various provinces demanding wage increments and the rights of labor organization. Among those engaged in the struggle are transportation workers, printing employees, and workers in the sugar factory. In some of these industries, leaders of the labor movement have been arbitrarily dismissed or physically eliminated. The workers have responded by going out on strike until the men are reinstated and reparations have been made.

In protest of the new taxes levied on land, peasant uprising have spread to other regions in addition to those already underway in Balle, Borrena and Eritrea. The province of Gojjam has taken up arms against the regime. Similar uprisings are underway in Arussi and Harar. In retaliation, the government has mobilized its brutal military and counterinsurgency forces against the peasant population of Ethiopia. Eritrea, Gojjam and other areas of peasant struggle have been under constant attack by army divisions which have been moved there. Air bombardment of these regions has been constant and severe. In many areas, whole villages have been wiped out, and their inhabitants brutally murdered.

The Ethiopian Student Movement is in the forefront of these struggles. Students are waging the struggle under the banner of Land to the Tiller and Anti- Imperialism. The goal has become the building of a new Ethiopia based on a complete social transformation of the society. For over six years now, the Student Movement has given voice to the national struggle against feudalism and imperialism through a series of important public actions. Thus in the early months of 1969, reaffirming its resolute opposition to feudalism and imperialism, the Student Movement at home drafted specific demands with respect to the arbitrary measures imposed by the regime. The demands included: the withdrawal of school and examination fees instituted by the regime; reforms of the corrupt educational system; expulsion of American Peace Corps teachers, whose function is to serve as agents of cultural imperialism in Ethiopia; immediate termination of vast expenditures on extravagant entertainment of foreign guests and visits abroad by Ethiopian officials; the removal from office of those officials directly responsible for the state of the education system. The students also demanded that various officials responsible for the killing of students during peaceful demonstrations be brought for public trials.

University, secondary, and elementary school students throughout the nation staged peaceful demonstrations to voice

these demands. They were joined by other youths, parents and teachers. The government retaliated by closing all schools and colleges for over a month. Later, when the institutions were ordered open, students refused to attend classes and continued to demonstrate until their demands were met. Since the autocracy made no gesture in this direction, almost all of the nation's schools and colleges remained closed for the rest of the school year. The Ethiopian Student Movement overseas joined in condemnation of the regime and in support of the demands of the compatriots at home. Demonstrations of solidarity were held at Ethiopian Embassies in various capitals including Belgrade, Moscow, Paris and Washington, D.C.

Throughout this struggle, the government employed the full force of its repressive machinery. Many students were killed and hundreds seriously injured during the peaceful demonstrations. Many others were held in various provincial and district prisons. Hundreds of students were expelled from schools and colleges. The first group, consisting of four students and a teacher, to appear before a court were sentenced to five years imprisonment and hard labor for alleged acts of defamation and endangering of national security. A second group of three received sentences of seven years of imprisonment for trumped-up charges including inciting insurrection and forming alliances with "foreign elements." The numbers of students and other progressive elements incarcerated for varied periods of up to one year were in the hundreds.

Students and other persons held in connection with the struggle of early 1969 were subjected to extremely brutal treatment in prison. Some were fatally beaten; others were tied to cars and dragged over pebble roads. Prisoners were kept in ice or stagnant water for days on end. The use of electric shock as torture was widespread. In March, 1969 the regime decreed a Detention Act setting a three-month imprisonment for any subject with a provision that the period can be extended at the discretion of the security arm of the government. Armed with this fascist law, the reactionary regime proceeded to subject thousands to the brutal practices it has perfected in an effort to forestall its downfall.

In the face of this immense persecution, the struggle continued undaunted. Progressive forces throughout the country protested the inhuman treatment of students. The struggle against repression was not confined to Ethiopia alone. The Ethiopian Student Movement in Europe and the United States also registered its support for the cause of the student struggle at home. In June, 1969 when Haile Selassie visited Washington, D.C. to request yet more military assistance to subdue the national insurrection, and economic aid to check the disintegration of the economy, the Ethiopian Students Union in North America staged a

series of demonstrations in Washington, D.C. To highlight the demand for the freedom of political prisoners, to underscore the urgency of meeting the demands set by the compatriots at home, and to underline the opposition to imperialist support for the autocratic regime, the Ethiopian Students Union in North America liberated the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, D.C. and destroyed all propaganda materials of the decadent regime on the day of Haile Selassie's arrival. Other demonstrations exposing the true colors of the neo-colonial regime were held in front of the White House. Similar expressions of solidarity with the student struggle at home were made through the liberation of Ethiopian embassies in European capitals including Stockholm, Paris and Moscow.

The regime soon realized that its attempts to subdue the uprising had issued in new waves of insurrection. To avoid an even less manageable state of affairs, it made a show of reconciliation in the summer of 1969. Many of the students and others imprisoned earlier in the year were granted "amnesty." Provisions were made for the opening of the schools and colleges in the following fall.

However, as soon as the new school year began, it became clear that the feigned capitulation was designed to set the stage for a more thoroughgoing repression of the Student Movement. In the fall term of 1969, the government initiated an extensive anti-student propaganda campaign in its newspapers, radio and television media. Students were charged with fostering ethnic and religious conflicts. The government's media claimed that there was no question that students were working in concert with alien powers aiming at the overthrow of the government. If the country is to be saved from an imminent bloodbath, it was urged that the students had to be dealt with forthrightly. The students, on the other hand, fully recognizing that the regime was engaging in this provocative campaign to draw them into actions whereby they would once again fall prey to its vicious troops, refrained from responding. Instead, they held fast to a program of consolidation which was necessary so that they may recover from the repression that had followed the confrontations of the previous academic year.

The government, in turn, adopted more aggressive steps. Struggle, the only organ of the Student Movement at home was banned. Soon after, an official government newspaper declared in its editorial:

Last week's suspension of the student publication is a step in the right direction. This step must be followed to its logical conclusion." (Ethiopian Herald, December 19, 1969.)

The government then abolished all student organizations. The

students even resisted the obvious provocation of these measures which put an end to public student organizing.

Frustrated by the failure of its efforts to instigate a student uprising and hypnotized by its own prophecies concerning the impending doom that was to befall the students, the regime finally undertook a desperate and murderous act. On December 29, 1969, Tilahun Gizaw, a popular leader of the Student Movement and President of the University Students Union of Addis Ababa, was assassinated by a gunman while walking in the streets. On the morning of the 29th, 25,000 Addis Ababa students and other city residents gathered on the University campus to pay final tribute to the fallen leader of the Student Movement. As the funeral procession was about to proceed, government troops allegedly present to see that the march was orderly opened an attack on the unarmed assembly. Students were mercilessly assaulted with bayonets and machine guns. The massacre took the lives of 25 students. 157, including teachers were seriously injured. The student massacre was not restricted to Addis Ababa. In Harrar where a funeral service was held for Tilahun, students, teachers and parents were attacked by the police. Similar brutality was visited upon students in other towns including Makalle, Adowa, Axum (Christian Science Monitor, January 22, 1970).

The strong protests against the regime's inhuman acts were not limited to Ethiopian students, parents, teachers and workers. Many foreign residents who witnessed the tragic events spoke in full condemnation. The Director of the Peace Corps in Ethiopia, Joseph Murphy, resigned in protest against what he characterized as "the repressive dictatorship which cannot establish a social order with better answers to its problems than shooting and beating young people" (New York Post, February 17, 1970). L.X. Tarpey, Dean of the College of Business Administration, urged that silence before the nazi practices of the regime is indefensible. He was deported from the country on January 24, 1970. About a third of the Peace Corps teachers in Ethiopia resigned explaining that conditions in the country no longer made it possible for them to teach.

The prevailing conditions in the country following the December massacre can be gleaned from the terms set by the government for the re-opening of the University. According to the directives issued on February 26, 1970, all student publications are to remain banned. All student organizations are permanently dissolved. All students who were "pardoned" the previous summer, and who were present at the events surrounding the funeral ceremonies for Tilahun are to be expelled and returned to prison to serve their sentences (Ethiopian Herald, January 26, 1970). A military force shall be permanently stationed on the campuses of the University (Memorandum from the President of HSIU, January 26, 1970). In short, all forms of dissent are forbidden. Even

nominal recognition of the rights of speech and assembly has been denied. Under these provisions, many have been expelled from the schools and colleges. Others remain in prison without trial. New arrests among students and other progressive elements are being made every day.

In spite of such unmitigated repression, the national uprising continues. With full support of their parents, many students have vowed never to return to the government schools. It has become clear to all that even limited education is impossible as long as the regime survives. The student papers have been replaced by underground publications. Despite the growing persecution, student organizing continues with renewed strength. The Ethiopian Student Movement is, therefore, resolved to struggle until victory.

The people and students of Ethiopia are too familiar with the oppression of the feudal and neo-colonial regime in Ethiopia. But the diabolic nature of the government and the true condition of the Ethiopian masses remains unknown to world public opinion. That such a regime should continue to hide its despicable practices through control of the press and censorship does not come as a surprise. It is all the more imperative, therefore, that all well-meaning and progressive peoples everywhere make their voices heard in condemnation of its inhuman acts.

The present popular uprisings constitute but a stage in the protracted struggle of the people of Ethiopia; ultimately, the struggle will free Ethiopia from feudalism and imperialism, and allow the masses to build a nation whose history is their own.

The Africa Research Group is a movement research and education project that focuses on analyzing the United States' imperialist penetration of Africa. The group hopes to promote a more informed concern with and protest against the role the US plays in the domination of Africa and to contribute to sharpening and extending an anti-imperialist and anti-racist consciousness within movements for social change. The group wants to hear from people or organizations with similar research interests. For a list of available publications including "Armed Struggle in Southern Africa" (20c) and "How Harvard Rules" (\$1), write P.O. Box 213, Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

