

Stalinism and the Derg

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With the new Ethiopian government still trying to establish its authority over the whole of the country and discussing plans for a 'return to democracy?', Andy Simmons examines the lessons to be drawn from the revolutionary overthrow of the Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 and the dictatorship that followed it.

In 1974 the Emperor Haile Selassie, or 'King of Kings, Power of the Trinity, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, Defender of the Faith, 225th descendant of the dynasty born of the biblical loves of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon' as he was known for short, presided over one of the last feudal empires in the world.

His regime, complete with a feudal court and nobility, ruled over a country where 90% of the people were peasants, 95% of the population was illiterate, where there was only one doctor for every 75,000 inhabitants and where the average caloric intake was lower than for the population of India.

The peasants were held in serf like subjection to their feudal lords, scratching a living on inadequate plots while almost half the cultivatable land remained unused, owned by the crown and the state. While millions of Haile Selassie's subjects starved in the 1973 famine he continued to feast in his palace and salt away millions in Swiss banks.

By 1974 due to sharply increasing prices and with a growing realisation of the extent of the famine across whole swathes of the country the working class and students in the capital, Addis Ababa, began to protest openly against the government.

Students marched through the capital singing the Ho Chi Minh march. The Ethiopian trade union confederation, CELU, increased its membership by 40% in two weeks to 120,000 and on 7 March 1974 it launched Ethiopia's first ever general strike.

Paralysed

The regime was paralysed by a series of army revolts against the appalling conditions of the soldiers, led by NCOs and junior officers. Power fell into the hands of a politically heterogeneous group of junior army officers, the Derg (an Amharic word for committee of equals). In September 1974 the Derg finally moved against the Emperor bundling him away from the palace in an old Volkswagen.

The Derg came to power as a Provisional Military Government, promising a people's assembly to decide on a new constitution. They faced a radicalised and mobilised student and workers' movement in the towns specially in the capital, Addis Ababa. That they were able to defeat the masses in the years up to 1977 was largely due to the Stalinist misleadership of the masses.

One of the main forces on the left in Ethiopia at the time was the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON). The Derg was forced at an early stage to make alliances with MEISON as the only way of cementing a new regime. The founders and leaders of MEISON had had their political training with the French Communist Party and, using the classic Stalinist stages theory, defined the Ethiopian revolution as

a petit bourgeois and democratic one.

They argued that classes were not fully crystallised in Ethiopia and that the masses were not yet ready for a struggle for power. The Derg, they claimed, was the social force which represented the leading arm of the revolution at that time. Giving critical support to the Derg, the Stalinist influenced MEISON began to turn its fire on all who opposed the military regime or demanded democratic rights, especially the left.

Certainly the depth of the popular revolution meant that the regime had to carry out some of the most radical measures ever seen in the African continent. All land was nationalised and a Zemacha campaign was launched in which thousands of students were despatched into the countryside to organise the peasants into associations. The main sectors of industry and finance were nationalised. But perhaps the most far reaching move was the nationalisation of all urban land and the setting up of co-operatives to confiscate urban land from the landlords, set rents and build houses.

But at the same time that these progressive reforms were being carried out the inner military clique around Colonel Mengistu, aided by the MEISON, was consolidating its hold on power by progressively eliminating the opposition. It could only finally cement its rule by destroying the independent organisations of the workers and students.

Welcoming

The Ethiopian Trade Union Confederation, after initially welcoming the coup, found its leaders arrested for supporting moves to democracy. In September 1975 it launched a second general strike demanding an elected assembly and the immediate constitution of a democratic republic.

Workers' demonstrations were met with gunfire and CELU was dissolved by the government in December 1975. The thousands of students sent into the countryside were returned to the cities because they were stirring up too much trouble by agitating for equality and the end of landlordism.

From 1975 onwards the Derg came increasingly into conflict with the mass movement on whose crest it had ridden to power. To remain in power it had to decisively break the civilian resistance.

In 1977 the students and workers who were by then fiercely resisting military rule were attacked by the Derg. Thousands were hunted down and murdered, especially members of the Maoist oriented Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party. A series of purges and killings within the army itself, especially of tendencies which looked to a compromise negotiated settlement with the Eritreans, further consolidated Mengistu's power. With no serious threat left to his rule Mengistu was able to turn on his former allies of the MEISON and liquidate them as well at the end of 1977.

From 1977 on Mengistu was the Kremlin's man in the Horn of Africa. He visited the USSR to get support against a Somali invasion and came back a 'Marxist-Leninist'. They supplied him with arms to suppress the population and the western Stalinist parties duly painted Mengistu as a benign and enlightened ruler who had come from the belly of his people to liberate the nation.

The chief political lesson the Mengistu regime learned from the Soviet bureaucracy was how to use a bureaucratic party and state apparatus as a means of repressing and controlling the population. The land reforms were carried out in a bureaucratic Stalinist manner contributing to the alienation of the peasantry, while the Eritreans were joined by the Tigreans and Oromos, who also rose in revolt against what they saw as increasing Amhara domination from Addis Ababa.

Tragically for the masses of Ethiopia the revolution meant few positive changes and with the continuing secessionist wars disrupting agriculture even more, their lot has continually worsened over the years to the

extent where once again millions face famine. It is not surprising therefore that the numerous rebel forces have been able to find support amongst the peasantry for their successful struggle against Mengistu. The new government of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and its main component, the Tigrean People's Liberation Front, while professing to be Marxists, suffer from the same fatal political weaknesses as their predecessors.

Influence

Meles Zenawi, leader of the new government, is also secretary general of the Marxist Leninist League of Tigray. Under its influence the programme of the EPRDF in January contained the usual Stalinist mixture of references to the 'broad masses', with explicit guarantees of a place for the 'national bourgeoisie' in a provisional government. Workers' and peasants' councils, democratic planning and internationalism are all conspicuous by their absence. The only thing that is guaranteed from this government is that it will follow the trend of 'perestroika Stalinism' in promoting the 'free market' at the expense of the living standards of the workers and peasants.

Similarly the rebels of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) have, over the past two years, ditched much of their formal commitment to socialism. Their main strategy for achieving independence is to gain international acceptability for a UN supervised referendum. In order to get this backing they are explicitly down-playing all their old style 'Marxism'.

This strategy is paying off. Faced with the fact that the EPLF now controls most of Eritrea anyway the USA has just reversed over twenty years of foreign policy. It is now backing the Eritrean demand for self-determination. In return there is the promise from the main rebel groups of a free market and democratic reforms.

It is vital that the workers and peasants in Ethiopia organise independently of the EPRDF and the EPLF if they are to prevent a repetition of the events of 1974-77. They must reconstruct their union and student organisations on a genuine democratic basis. They must demand the immediate convocation of a constituent assembly which must deal with the demands of the workers, peasants and nationalities in a revolutionary, not a Stalinist, manner.

This means rejecting Amhara chauvinism and the system that spawned it. Despite the promises of the new government to respect the right of the Eritreans to decide whether they wish to remain within Ethiopia there are many within the EPRDF, especially those recruited from Mengistu's general staff, who are implacably opposed to this. Neither have any such promises been given to the Oromo people.

Demonstrate

The proletariat must demonstrate its internationalism through its opposition to any manifestation of Tigrean or Amharan chauvinism by supporting the right of all the nationalities ruled over first by Selassie and then Mengistu to self-determination, up to and including the right to secede.

A constituent assembly must not only grant democratic rights to the nationalities but also the workers: the right to strike, to demonstrate, to organise trade unions; the right to run and control the state industries through their own committees; the right to form their own militias to replace the EPRDF forces which will become, if it is allowed, the new repressive arm of the state to be used against the workers and peasants. The assembly must immediately address the question of the land and the famine-land to those who work it. Peasant committees must be formed to redistribute the land and start to lay the basis for genuine co-operatives supplied with proper facilities and credit from central government.

Only through fighting for these demands and mobilising committees of workers and peasants to carry them out in practice, can the road to a genuine workers' and peasants' government in Ethiopia be opened. Only a government carrying through such a programme will represent a real break with the bankrupt history of Ethiopian Stalinism and petit bourgeois nationalism.

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