# Chapter VII

# The Overthrow of the Imperial Regime

In distinction to the tendency of imputing the delay of Ethiopian modernization to the lack of social peace, which was used as a pretext to institute and justify imperial absolutism, the radicalization of students, in line with the unadulterated principle "modernity versus tradition, blamed the presence of traditional features, notably the impeding role of the "feudal" class, the anachronism of the imperial state, and the obscurantist influence of the church, for the general failure of Ethiopian modernization. The students' standpoint assumed the ideological leadership of the social protests and spread the conviction that Marxist-Leninist socialism is the only remedy to put Ethiopia back on the track of rapid modernization. The equation of modernization with socialism became all the more compelling as the theory consistently denounced the stifling and economically crippling impact of imperialism on developing countries. The choice of socialism as the only solution, in addition to underpinning the opposition between modernity and tradition, shifted the model to follow from the West to socialist countries, in particular to the then Soviet Union.

## On some Necessary Distinctions

To explain the removal of the imperial regime is (1) to analyze the reasons that caused wide social upheavals and (2) to elucidate the rapid and thorough overthrow of a long-lived regime that looked secure. Moreover, the consensus characterizing the overthrow as a revolution must pay attention to two distinct phases: a first short and moderate phase and a second more radical phase. Even though there is a clear continuity between the two phases, the second phase, which commenced with the rise of Mengistu Haile Mariam and other leftist members to the leadership of the Derg, is qualitatively distinct both in terms of depth of changes and consequences. The distinction between the two phases is important to avoid confusion between the causes of Haile Selassie's downfall and the auxiliary and adventitious dynamics that led to the second radical phase. A third point is that the student movement succeeded in radicalizing a large part of the Westernized educated elite, but failed to produce leaders able to seize power. Instead, a military committee known as the Derg first seized power, and then appropriated the ideology of the students and implemented a socialist program adapted to its needs.

Theoreticians often appeal to the distinction between the structural causes of revolutions and accelerators. Structural factors refer to the deep-seated and enduring causes of revolutions, which are all consequences of a prolonged lack of reforms, like persistent economic stagnation or the political dominance of a retrogressive class. Accelerators are immediate precipitating events and, as such, "are discrete events and they occur at specific points in time."[1] Among the accelerators, we find such occurrences as military defeat, a sudden severe and widespread economic crisis due to a natural disaster or an inflationary burst, a sharpening of conflicts within the ruling class, etc. The structural factors indicate not only why a regime is overthrown, but also

why it became vulnerable to accelerating factors. Circumstantial setbacks can paralyze a regime only when long-standing contradictions weaken it.

The structural causes emanate from Haile Selassie's implementation of a modernizing program that was exclusively designed to expand and sustain his autocratic rule. The narrow limits of autocracy could not but block expectations, thereby causing a generalized discontent, especially among the rising educated elite. As a rule, the general context of the modern world persistently highlights the unfitness of societies that pursue a selected and limited modernization program. The blockage of political modernization is the method that traditional ruling elites often use to limit the penetration of modernization and protect their interests and privileges. The consequence is that the blockage creates a characteristic disjunction between components of the social system that are supposed to work in harmony. Some such disjunction naturally puts a severe brake on economic progress and social advancement. Accordingly, "the most fertile ground for revolution is found in 'societies which have experienced some social and economic development and where the processes of political modernization and political development have lagged behind the processes of social and economic change."[2] In particular, the conflict between modern sectors managed by Western-educated natives and political institutions that traditional forces largely control mutates toward an increasingly acute fracture, thereby raising the likelihood of revolutionary uprisings.

The condition of revolutionary movements is thus not the economic deficit per se, but the perception that institutions designed to protect the interests of outdated elites are blocking changes and social advancement. The blockage ignites and spreads the psychological state of frustration, which in turn breeds the revolutionary mood. Indeed, according to the theory of relative deprivation, the main catalyst of revolutionary social movements is the "cognitive state of 'frustration' or 'deprivation' relative to some set of goals."[3] When people do not get what they expect or what they were promised, they experience frustration, and so become angry and susceptible to violent protests. Notably, the political blockage impacts negatively on the possibility of social mobility, which further vexes the expectation of rising groups to be incorporated into the elite class. Hence the following definition of revolution: it is "a method of unclogging the channels of social mobility."[4]

Here, a reminder is in order. In previous chapters, we indicated that the term "derailment" is more appropriate to describe the failure of Ethiopian modernization than terms like "obstacle" and "blockage." Three reasons buttress the appropriateness of the term "derailment." First, as shown in previous chapters, Ethiopian traditions cannot be categorized as wholly inimical to modernization. Second, the failure seems to repeat the same downward trend, since successive regimes proved unable to disengage from it despite their awareness of the problems. In repeating the same mistakes that they swore to avoid or remove, what else are these regimes confirming but their inability to reverse the off-course current that carries them along? Third, Haile Selassie did not use traditional forces to block modernization; rather, it altered them in such a way as to turn them into accomplices of his untraditional imperial autocracy. That is why, instead of obstacle or hindrance, this study opted for terms like derailment, deflection, and diversion, to convey the momentum of a resurrecting trend born of the alterations to tradition.

I grant that the consequences of derailment can be coined in terms of blockages, but with the understanding that they are effects, not causes. The cause is the derailment, that is, the deliberate subordination of modern features to the political goal of absolutism. Deflection does more than hinder or obstruct; it enables in that it makes possible what the mere preservation and opposition of tradition could not accomplish. At the same time, depriving modernization of the necessary accompaniments, like a suitable political framework, naturally holds back economic and

social advancements, and so ignites a growing state of frustration among rising elites as well as among working people.

In sum, both the restrictions on social mobility and the lethargic state of the economy are outcomes of the hijacking of modernization, that is, of the use of some modern means and institutions, such as modern schooling, bureaucracy, standing army, centralization, ministerial form of government, to enhance and protect a longing that is not modern. The sidelining of civil liberties, the use of repressive methods, the predominance of ascription over achievement, etc., testify to the lack of a genuine modernizing inspiration. The lack brings us back to what we said regarding the role of culture in Chapter I, in particular to the attribution of the failure to modernize to the shunning of culture change, a phenomenon typically expressive of traditionalism or the path of articulation between traditional and modern elements. This study goes further than articulation, which still thinks in terms of traditional elements obstructing modernization, by using terms expressing an active doing like deflection and hijacking, that is, a rerouting toward a non-modern goal. In other words, the goal of autocracy that was behind Haile Selassie's modernizing changes denotes the appropriation of modern means by a mind that remained unchanged, a mind that did not therefore undergo an alteration of its values and beliefs in a direction suitable to an appropriate use of modern means. Needless to say, Haile Selassie was not alone in bypassing culture change; most high officials and people composing the class of nobility were in the same condition. The sluggish economic development, the severe restriction on social mobility, and the inconsistent policy of southern tenancy are all products of rerouting, that is, of the subjugation of modern elements to an unchanged culture. Designed to protect outdated or, more specifically, discrepant privileges against the nascent society of merit, the deflection backfired into wide social discontent and finally into revolution.

## Deflected Modernization

The imperial diversion was most upsetting because it went against the traditional attachment to social mobility. Its ethnic dimension was even more frustrating as the imperial system seemed to be heavily biased toward the protection of an all-round hegemony of Amhara ruling elite. Indeed, we saw that traditional Ethiopia had survived for so long because the channels of social mobility were open so that ambitious and talented individuals were able to rise to leadership positions. With the consolidation of Haile Selassie's autocracy, the channels of social mobility narrowed considerably: the Showan nobility disproportionally dominated the political and economic establishments and any position of authority in Ethiopia was just a delegation of imperial power. Moreover, even though the opening of modern education allowed some mobility to educated and ambitious people of humble origins as well as to some people of non-Amhara provenances, the system did not allow their integration into the elite structure. Notably, non-Amhara people could not hope to climb the social ladder unless they fully acculturated into the dominant Amhara culture. In short, the renewal of elites was severely curtailed so that the ruling elite, acting as a closed caste, dominated the political and economic systems and, through this domination, prevented the implementation of necessary reforms.

An objection comes to mind: Is not this emphasis on social mobility and the subsequent competition between the old class and rising educated elites too restricted to explain a process as complex and broad as a social revolution? Does it not downplay the discontents of the working masses, all the more so as there is no social movement and, hence, no revolution without them? Sure enough, large social uprisings are necessary, but they are not enough to bring down a regime,

and even less to replace it with a revolutionary one. Only when rival elites competing for power tap into popular discontents and uprisings do revolutionary situations emerge. In addition to weakening the state from the inside, rival elites bring two indispensable elements to change insurrections into revolutionary movements, namely, the vision of an alternative social order and the requisite leadership.

When an old ruling elite retains and uses political power to defend its interests against rising elites, the first victim is the economy. The protection of privileges hinders the realization of even modicum reforms as well as the implementation of efficient and productive methods in the economic sector. To be sure, the nobility and high bureaucrats would like to increase their incomes by adopting efficient methods. The state, too, would like to boost its revenues so as to keep its vast repressive power and bureaucratic apparatuses satisfied. But none of these wishes can come true, as the protection of privileges prevents the reforms necessary to increase production. Thus, regarding the land tenure system, not only did the imperial autocracy preserve outdated rights, but it also added new privileges associated with the enforcement of tenancy to secure the support of the nobility and high state officials, thereby diverting the modernization of the vast agrarian sector toward a landholding system that mimicked some feudal aspects, while also expanding privatization. I say "mimicked" because the imperial transformation of *gult* rights into private possessions of land, while it gave nobles and high officials a feudal stature, conflicted with the simultaneous tight centralization of power. By countering the fragmentation of power, which is one of the defining attributes of feudalism, and instituting privatization, the imperial transformation gave birth to a hybrid system.

The reason why the much-needed land reform was postponed several times flowed from the need to safeguard and increase privileges. A commercial or industrial class increases its income using efficient means, not by the amount of land it controls. Not so with a "feudal" class: as the improvement of productivity requires the use of technology and modern methods of work that the class resents, the protection and increase of its wealth depend exclusively on the expansion of land ownership and the increment of its exploitative ties to the tenants. What happened under the imperial rule is well summarized in this general presentation of the methods of landed classes:

> The landed upper class inevitably develops some set of special land tenure privileges denied the rest of the population. The privileges may involve control of land through conquest, extortion or theft by a militarily dominant elite, systems of special land concession granted to metropolitan nationals in colonial dependencies, and systems of ethnic stratification which exclude most of the population from any access to the political and legal institutions controlling the ownership of property.[5]

The possession of tenure privileges through the control of conquered lands and the attendant systems of ethnic stratification perfectly describe the Ethiopian case.

Because its economic success depends on the competitive rules of the free market, the industrial or commercial class is categorically opposed to political restrictions. The reliance on the free market establishes its need for a free labor force, that is, for a relationship with the laboring class that is based on economic ties promising jobs and better wages rather than on political coercion. Different is the need of the "feudal" class: not only does it restrict market forces by the institution of land ownership privileges, but it also needs a subjugated or servile labor, given that the extraction of its income depends, not on increased productivity, but on the laboring class being deprived of rights, such as the rights of mobility, ownership, organization, and expression of

discontents. Since the landed class draws its income from subjugation rather than from improved productivity, the system requires extensive use of the repressive power of the state. As previously said, this requirement sealed the agreement between the imperial state and the landed class in Ethiopia: in exchange for the protection of tenure privileges, the landed class recognized the absolute power of the emperor. In other words, the vast rural sector was shielded from the invasion of modern forces with the drastic consequence that economic growth was sacrificed on the altar of outdated privileges and unlimited personal power.

In sectors other than the rural sector, the consensus among scholars admits that some development has taken place in the fields of transportation, power production, and manufacturing. Thus, according to Assefa Bequele and Eshetu Chole, "transport and communications have expanded at a satisfactory rate of 9.2 percent per annum between 1961 and 1965," while power production "grew at a rate of 18 percent a year since 1965."[6] Equally noticeable was the rate of growth in manufacturing:

> The bulk of the increase in industrial production, about 75 percent of the value added, came from textile and food industries. Manufacturing is mostly concentrated in import substituting industries engaged in the production of sugar, cement, oil, textiles and the like. This period, 1961-1965, also witnessed increases in the production of handicraft and small scale industries where production increased at a rate of 7 percent.[7]

Sadly, a major flaw tarnished this somewhat rosy picture: despite a noticeable increase of products from commercial farms, the stagnation of the vast rural sector and of the overall system of income distribution significantly slowed down the rate of economic growth. For example, in his study of the pattern of income distribution from 1960 to 1974, Robert S. Love shows a widening distribution gap despite some steady but unremarkable economic growth. Thus, concerning urban areas, scarce available data show that "average annual earnings per employee in manufacturing industry did not grow as fast as did gross output per employee."[8] Both in the public and private sectors, the general picture is that the lower strata of society did not benefit at all from the meager economic growth that took place. As emphasized by theories of revolution, nothing is more conducive to an outburst of frustration than the belief that the system of distribution is deliberately skewed in favor of the rich and the powerful. Add to this unjust income distribution the fact that the growth was not fast enough to absorb new graduates from high schools, universities, and technical colleges, and you have all the ingredients for politicization and the explosion of uprisings. Moreover, the repressive nature of the regime prevented people working in urban sectors from presenting demands in an organized manner, just as it did not allow them to be politically represented owing to the ban on political parties. There was really no other way for people to protest and demand justice than through a generalized uprising.

**Fragility of Autocracy**

The truth about imperial regimes is their extreme vulnerability to revolutionary uprisings. On the strength that no consolidated democratic regimes have ever been overthrown, even when they faced severe economic crises, scholars tend to consider democracy as a bulwark against revolution. The reason is that "democracy 'translates' and channels a variety of social conflicts—including, but not limited, to class conflicts—into party competition for votes and the lobbying of representatives by 'interest groups.'"[9] In so doing, it makes the recourse to revolution unnecessary,

as opposing parties hope to peacefully defeat the contested government in future elections. Moreover, in a system that allows the right to organize and demonstrate, people have been able to "win important concessions from economic and political elites."[10] Whereas in open and decentralized societies, protests and opposition can obtain changes without seeking to topple the government, in autocratic regimes, the problem of change is presented in terms of all-or-nothing, and so make any change conditional on the violent overthrow of the ruling class.

Another important reason why democracy dramatically reduces the likelihood of revolution is that it prevents the rise of conditions empowering radicalized groups. Besides institutionalizing social conflicts into peaceful competitions between political parties, democracy tends to "isolate and render ineffective radical revolutionary challengers."[11] In democratic societies, moderate elements tend to retain the leadership of social protests to the detriment of radical groups. By contrast, a repressive regime weakens or eliminates moderation so that social protests easily come under the influence of professional and radical revolutionaries. What is more, the use of repressive policy radicalizes many segments of society, especially intellectuals and students. Apart from empowering radical groups, the frequent use of violent repression makes the state highly dependent on its repressive forces, especially on the military. This increasing reliance on the military does no more than make the state vulnerable to a coup.

The above characteristics and vulnerability of autocratic regimes were also those of Ethiopia's imperial regime. Like all dynastic states, Haile Selassie's rule looked strong, stable, and well-defended, so much so that nobody predicted the imminence of revolution. Yet, the regime collapsed quickly and easily, so easily that some authors seriously maintain that it was overthrown by students. Only the intrinsic fragility of the regime can explain its sudden and rapid collapse. The refusal to implement necessary reforms, the increasing reliance on repression to silence civilian discontents, with its potential radicalizing consequence, and the use of military forces to put down guerrilla insurgencies in Eritrea and other parts of the country combined to produce the fragility of the imperial regime. Rather than the strength of the opposition, this internal inability to tackle the mounting problems with adequate solutions explains the ease with which Haile Selassie's regime was overthrown.

The emperor's increased use of repressive forces actually reflected the growing disenchantment of a large number of Ethiopians with his modernizing will. He rose to absolute power on account of his promise to modernize the country at a time when Ethiopia, encircled by colonial forces, could no longer continue to trust the conservative stand of the anti-modernist section of the nobility. To counter the staunch resistance of anti-modernist forces, Haile Selassie underlined the need for a central government strong enough to impose modernization. Centralization, the creation of a bureaucratic system of government, the establishment of a professional army, and the support of some European countries gave Haile Selassie the means to achieve supremacy over the traditional nobility. However, once supremacy was achieved, he followed a path that was little supportive of modernization. Instead of intensifying and deepening modernizing reforms, he shifted toward the establishment and consolidation of a system of solitary and autocratic exercise of power. Additionally, to secure the support of the landed nobility for his absolutism, he pledged to protect and even enhance its interests and privileges. In short, as already said, modernization was sacrificed on the altar of imperial absolutism.

This contradiction between Haile Selassie's persona of a modernizer and his actual performance naturally led to the progressive loss of his legitimacy. As it became clear that the imperial protection of outdated privileges was curtailing the modernization of the country, growing elements in the modern sector, especially students, intellectuals, and some junior officers in the

armed forces, began to voice their opposition. When a discrepancy occurs between the promises and the actual reality, "existing authorities lose their legitimacy and have to rely more and more upon coercion to maintain order. Yet they can do this successfully only for a while," says one author.[12] Consider the protest against the land ownership system: it had huge repercussions because it showed a glaring conflict between the official value system of imperial Ethiopia and the social reality. One defining feature of Haile Selassie's regime was its commitment to nation-building through the integration and equal treatment of the various ethnic groups. This ideology of national integration conflicted with the preservation of tenancy in the south and the overwhelming dominance of the Amhara elite, especially of the Showa region, in all sectors of social life. The discrepancy presented the regime as inconsistent, deceptive, and even cynical. Once this level of disenchantment with the regime is reached, precipitating factors find a fertile ground to hasten its downfall.

## Precipitating Factors

The structural contradictions of Haile Selassie's regime, however acute they may have been, would not have led to its overthrow in the manner and timing it happened without the intervention of precipitating factors. The society would have probably stomached these contradictions a few more years "if conjunctural factors, each affecting the others, had not triggered off a crisis that was made insoluble by the weakness and divisions of the authorities, thus opening up a vacuum that the army was to fill in the end."[13]

As previously mentioned, chief among these precipitating factors was a sharp deterioration of the conditions of life, especially in urban centers, due to a severe inflationary pressure. The inflationary pressure that gravely affected urban conditions of life in Ethiopia was a direct consequence of the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict. As a result of the closing of the Suez Canal and OPEC's decision to quadruple the price of oil, the value of imported goods rose dramatically in Ethiopia. To alleviate the financial crisis caused by the purchase of expensive oil, the government doubled the local cost of oil. The new price provoked a strike of taxi drivers in Addis Ababa. University and high school students joined the protest shortly after. The protest further expanded to include factory workers and government employees in and around Addis Ababa. Interestingly, during the protests of high school students against rising prices, "for once the police did not interfere. Themselves victims of the price rises, they stood passively."[14]

The widening protest obtained some results: the government lowered the price of cereals and bus fares; it also revised and reduced by ten cents the price of oil. But, far from abating, the protest intensified as more and more workers joined the movement. Still, however widespread the civilian protest had become, it would not have been a serious threat to the regime, were it not for the fact that agitations had also spread in the Armed Forces. The deterioration of conditions of life following the increase in the price of oil and the seemingly unending guerrilla war in Eritrea had multiplied dissatisfactions among the rank and file of the armed forces. These discontents led to various mutinies: for instance, revolts erupted in the Fourth Army Division in the town of Negale and Dolo on the 12 of January 1974 and in the Second Division in Asmara on February 26.

It is important to keep in mind that the military and civilian protests triggered by the economic crisis rapidly spread and developed into a rebellious movement because they occurred in a social context in which the loss of legitimacy had already undermined the authority of the imperial state. As a matter of fact, an important factor that was conducive to a sharp decline of the imperial authority was the manner the government handled the 1972-73 severe famine in the Wollo

province and in some parts of Tigray. Though a natural drought caused the disaster, the government's attempt to cover up the famine—forcefully exposed by students—infuriated a growing number of people. Another proof of the depreciation of imperial legitimacy was the protest over the 1971 government's plan to reorganize education in Ethiopia. Known as "The Education Sector Review," the document provoked outcries: teachers, soon joined by university and high school students, led the protest demanding the suspension of a plan proposing nothing less than a reduction of enrollment, notably in higher educational institutes. Despite the fact that the proposal contained some positive recommendations, such as the emphasis on practical education—as opposed to purely academic teaching—through the expansion of technical education, most people saw the plan as an attempt to block the path of higher education to students of poor families. To the extent that the plan conflicted with Haile Selassie's reputation as a champion of modern education, it further eroded his authority.

Many authors have included senility as one of the precipitating factors for Haile Selassie's downfall. For instance, Andargachew Tiruneh writes that he "had become too old and senile to employ even his old skills effectively."[15] The old age of the emperor impacted political developments in two ways. First, it deprived the emperor of the necessary strength to vigorously defend his regime against mounting civilian and military protests. Second, with the designated heir being incapacitated by a stroke, it created uncertainty that encouraged factional conflicts within the ruling class. The drawback of old age must be assessed in connection with the mode of operation of autocratic regimes. Unlike political systems based on the workings of institutions, an autocratic regime becomes paralyzed when the leader appears weakened. Since the autocratic ruler decides everything, his entourage is unable to make the necessary decisions, even when circumstances require them. So that, Haile Selassie's hesitations in dealing with the military and civilian unrests have undoubtedly crippled the top echelon of the government, and so contributed to the breakdown of the state, especially of the military chain of command.

The hesitations of Haile Selassie further aggravated the already bubbling internal division within the ruling class.  As one scholar said, "revolution frequently reaches its climatic stage in a period marked not by rigid, unyielding absolutism, but by concessions, divisions, and indecision on the part of those in power."[16] Unsurprisingly, the division in Ethiopia was between the camp of the conservatives and the camp of "reformists," mostly represented by the top bureaucrats of the regime. Confronted with growing unrests, the aristocratic camp defended a conservative policy and advocated a repressive response to reinstate law and order. Contrarily, the camp of the bureaucrats, led by Aklilu Habte Wold, the then Prime Minister, favored the implementation of some reforms. The point is that internal disagreements over how to resolve the ongoing crisis, in addition to intensifying already existing rivalries between factions, had the characteristic effect of creating confusion and indecision. This state of affairs weakened the government and its repressive apparatus and opened the door for the intervention of the military.

## Ethiopia at a Crossroad

Escalating uprisings in military camps and urban areas coupled with the indecisiveness of the government generated a situation cornering Ethiopia into making choices vital for its future. Three possibilities were presented: (1) the rise of a reformist group from within the ruling class; (2) a classical military coup by senior officers; and (3) the empowerment of a new ruling elite from outside the government representing a coalition of the various groups calling for change. What all these possibilities had in common was their advocacy for a moderate, reformist path, even if the

occurrence of a military coup would have excluded the liberal type of reformism. The fourth possibility of a successful conservative reaction did not appear realistic, given that the repressive forces of the state had clearly sided with the protesters. In other words, change was inevitable, but there was uncertainty about the group that would be empowered to lead the change.

The surprise here is that none of the three possibilities materialized, more exactly translated into a lasting option. The reformist alternatives were quickly sidelined and, after some uncertainty, the military rebellion took an unexpected course that drifted away from the path of moderation. The group responsible for the change is an elected military committee known as the Derg: composed of 120 members comprising junior officers, non-commissioned, and enlisted soldiers, the committee, after heated debates that lasted some months over the right direction for the country, came up with a socialist program, the very one advocated by the student movement, and managed to obtain the support of the rank and file of the armed forces for the implementation of the proposed program. Since the radicalization of the Derg proposed socialism as the sole remedy to the social problems, there occurred a momentous turn of events, namely, the convergence of the rebellious military with the highly vocal leftist civilian movement. Thanks to this convergence, the call of the student movement for a socialist revolution had finally and unexpectedly found the organizational and material force capable of implementing it.

Let it be said immediately that the design and execution of a reformist policy would have better corrected the botched modernization of Ethiopia than a drift toward a radical form of socialism. The reason is obvious: whereas reformism attempts to correct the flaws and deviations of the imperial system so as to put the country back on the right track of incremental modernization, the requirement of socialism for a clean slate deemed necessary to build everything anew is nothing but a replay, in a much radicalized and destructive form, of the basic premise of modernization theory opposing tradition to modernity. Indeed, why would one consider socialism as the best remedy if not for the uncompromising determination with which it will wipe out both the remnants of past legacies and the imperial regime? As suggested earlier, one of the attractions of Marxism-Leninism is that it appears as the most consistent and consequential implementation of the very principle of modernization theory. Once it is admitted that Ethiopia's drive toward modernization failed because the cleanup of obstacles inherited from the past was not drastically carried through, it becomes difficult to resist the spell of Marxism-Leninism. The absolutism of the imperial system, the privileges of the nobility and high bureaucrats, the obscurantist influence of the church, the unequal treatment of the southern peoples, etc., are all past and anti-modern features co-opted into the modernization process where they act as derailing factors. In unison with the civilian left, the radicalized faction of the military said that Ethiopia needs a radical cleanup, not a patching up of the old.

As argued in the previous chapter, Ethiopia's Westernized education was a major catalyst for the infatuation of young officers and the civilian left with Marxism-Leninism. The opposition between tradition and modernity as well as the uprooting effect of a Westernized education could not find a more consistent application than via the conversion and commitment to the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Through their moderation and compromising policies, liberal and moderate politicians and scholars fail to be consistent with the principles they are preaching. Only the Marxist-Leninist doctrine takes seriously the goals of freedom, justice, and equality of modernization. The reason for the global ideological dominance of Marxism-Leninism in the '60s and '70s was the belief that it completely eradicated obstacles, and so released the movement of history toward its final goals. The modern educated elite of Ethiopia could not remain indifferent to this global appeal for consistency. To say it one more time, Marxism-Leninism fired up

Ethiopian students and intellectuals because it deeply resonated with their Westernized intellectual formation.

The advantages credited to Marxism-Leninism go a long way in explaining its supremacy in the ideological battle against reformism and conservatism in the wake of the teetering imperial regime. As a result of the global dominance of the ideology, it became easy for leftists to convince many members of the educated elite that there was no reformist alternative for Ethiopia. The Leninist principle according to which "imperialism is the eve of the proletarian social revolution" turned liberalism and reformism into outdated political and ideological stands on a worldwide scale[17]. Moreover, since imperialism has put an end to competitive capitalism, neither the ruling class nor liberal groups outside the government can successfully bring about a bourgeois revolution in the classic manner, even if we assume that they have the will to do so. The Leninist ideological framework enabled leftist circles to argue that the age of solutions by reforms has ended. Included in this dismissal of reformism is the argument that the entrenched and explosive contradictions of Ethiopia, especially those involving land reform and the national question, are beyond any reformist solution. The sad thing, however, is that very few people would have endorsed this conclusion if the social uprising had occurred two decades later. Even though the contradictions would have been the same, in the face of the disgraceful collapse of the socialist camp, most people would have rejected the necessity or inevitability of a socialist revolution in Ethiopia. Not the objective reality, therefore, but the ascendency at that time of the socialist doctrine dictated the conclusion and fomented the receptivity to the revolutionary appeal.

## The Game-Changing Role of the Derg

Besides the fact that objective conditions did not require a socialist revolution, one must not omit the weakness of the Ethiopian civilian left. Undoubtedly, the fantasy according to which a socialist revolution was inevitable in Ethiopia highly exaggerated the strength of leftist forces. True, leftist groups were quite visible and most vociferous, but this did not mean that a majority of the country was behind them, especially in a country where the peasantry represented the overwhelming majority. Even in urban areas, the fact that people participated in demonstrations organized by leftist groups does not mean that the majority shared their ideological convictions. More importantly, a surprising characteristic of the Ethiopian social uprising was that no organized parties existed when it exploded. Though people with leftist convictions infiltrated various sectors of the working forces, they were scattered and devoid of organizational unity. Leftist political parties per se emerged after the outbreak of the crisis of the imperial regime. Under these conditions, it is not feasible to argue that a socialist revolution was inevitable; it is even less feasible to suppose that the revolution would have occurred without the ad hoc intervention of the Derg, whose conversion to socialism was anything but predictable.

Scholars tying the occurrence of the revolution to the rise of the Derg precisely emphasize the weakness of the Ethiopian left as well as the lack of radical demands on the part of many protesters. In so doing, they present the revolutionary orientation as an outcome of a military coup, with the consequence that it has been imposed on the country. Thus, according to Paul Henze, the prospect of peaceful and gradual change was suddenly interrupted when in February 1974, "a group of lower-level officers . . . organized an armed forces coordinating committee."[18] Henze is not alone in thinking that the formation of the Derg and, with it, the rise of Mengistu Haile Mariam principally explain the revolutionary drift toward the overthrow of the monarchy and the rejection of a reformist course.

In light of the patent weakness of the civilian left and the initial moderate demands of the social protests, Henze's position reflects one undeniable truth: the revolutionary direction was indeed unthinkable without the Derg. However, it is equally true that, without the anti-monarchial and anti-liberal agitation of students and intellectuals, the Derg would not have taken the path of socialist revolution. Even though students and intellectuals did not have the material and organizational power to trigger and successfully lead a radical revolution, the popularity of the socialist ideology, which the Derg used to claim legitimacy, especially in the eyes of the soldiery, was their work. The hesitations of the Derg and its internal ideological divisions during the early days of its formation indicate that the continuation of the civilian unrests and the radical discourse of students and intellectuals were quite instrumental in ensuring the triumph of radical elements over moderates within the Derg itself.

Another factor that facilitated the rise of radical elements within the Derg, notably of Mengistu, is the series of mistakes of the reformist camp, in which some educated aristocrats were also included, and its lack of determination. Even though a new cabinet headed by a new prime minister, Endalkatchew Makonnen, promised reforms, concrete measures that could create some confidence were not taken. Rather than responding to a challenging situation with appropriate measures, Endalkachew preferred a policy of appeasement, because he thought that he could persuade the military to help him restore law and order. Once order was restored, the government, he believed, could engage in the peaceful and gradual task of reforming the regime. To this effect, he encouraged the formation of a military commission led by his close associate and kin, Lieutenant-Colonel Alem Zewde Tessema, Commander of the elite Airborne Brigade stationed near the capital.

The policy of buying time instead of engaging quickly in the task of dismantling the old structures was indeed a miscalculation. The primacy given to temporary appeasement created the impression of a cabinet little committed to serious reforms. Where bold measures were needed, the cabinet's demand for patience sounded discordant and out of touch with reality. The promise of reforms in lieu of actual actions did no more than heighten the suspicion that the government was dragging its feet. Above all, the creation of the military commission was a momentous blunder. How else could it be perceived but as a divisive stratagem and, inadvertently, as an invitation for the military to seize power? Once the prime minister himself had sanctioned the breakup of the military chain of command by empowering an ad hoc commission, the path was open for the formation of the rival informal group, to wit, the Derg.

The blame for inviting a military coup should not be put exclusively on Prime Minister Endalkatchew. The civilian left, too, committed many mistakes: its internal divisions and exaggerated perception of its strength enabled the Derg's takeover and the victory of its radical members. In undermining through radicalized demands the formation of a large reformist movement, was not the civilian left asking for a military takeover? Its call for a Leninist type of socialist revolution, even as it had no organizational structure and unity to lead such a revolution, ignited the belief that there was no alternative to military rule. The invitation for the military to step in was even more direct, since the civilian left criticized and rejected any attempt to initiate a democratic process that would prepare the ground for national elections and the installation of an elected government. Against bourgeois democracy, *Challenges* writes, "the democracy of the people is new and antithetical to bourgeois electoral democracy. Aside from the fact that bourgeois democracy is banal, cheap, and superficial, it is also a direct antithesis of democracy by the people."[19] In thus abandoning legitimacy gained through liberal electoral victory for the much more premature goal of a "people's democracy," the civilian left was both sanctioning the seizure

of power through unconstitutional means and justifying a dictatorial type of government. The military could not but see this denigration of "bourgeois democracy" as a blessing for their political ambition.

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[3] Jack A. Goldstone, "Theories of Revolution: The Third Generation," *World Politics* 32, no.3 (April 1980): 427.

[4] Hagopian, *The Phenomenon of Revolution*, 54.

[5] Jeffrey M. Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 18.

[6] Assefa and Eshetu, "The State of the Ethiopian Economy: A Structural Survey," *Dialogue: A Publication of Ethiopian University Teachers' Association* 1, no. 1 (October 1967): 37.

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[11] Misagh Parsa, "Will Democratization and Globalization Make Revolutions Obsolete?" *The Future of Revolutions: Rethinking Radical Change in the Age of Globalization*, ed. John Foran (New York: Zed Books, 2003), 74.

[12] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 12. Skocpol is commenting on Chalmers Johnson's functionalist approach.

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[17] V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2011), 14.

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[19] "Editorial: Our Principles and Tasks in the Ethiopian Revolution," *Challenge* 12, no. 1 (March 1972): 6.