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The role of political elites in nation-building in contemporary Ethiopia, 1960-2020

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CHAPTER SIX

THE ELITE AND NATION-BUILDING UNDER *DERG*'S MILITARY RULE, 1974-1991

6.1 The 1974 Revolution

In 1974, Emperor Haile Selassie was removed from power by the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), also known as the *Derg*. Under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam from 1977, the *Derg*, a military junta, implemented significant political and social changes during its 17-year rule. The nationalization of all land in 1975 aimed at eliminating feudalistic practices and redistributing land ownership. The following year, the *Derg* officially adopted socialism as its ideology, resulting in the nationalization and state control of industries, banks, and foreign-owned enterprises. However, the *Derg* faced opposition both domestically and internationally due to its oppressive tactics, human rights violations, economic mismanagement, and the devastating famine of the 1980s. In 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the *Derg*.

Numerous academics and authors have conducted various studies on the nature and features of the Ethiopian Revolution. These studies include publications from the *Derg* period up to 1991 and beyond. Notable works from the 1970s to the 1990s include those by Halliday and Molyneux (1981), Markakis and Nega (1978), Addis Hiwet (1986), Ottaway & Ottaway (1978), Clapham (1988), Andargachew T. (1993), Keller (1988), Henze (1990), and Bahru (1991). These works provided commentaries and in-depth studies of the revolutionary period as it unfolded. Gebru Tareke's book, published in 2009, also contributes to this body of literature. Additionally, memoirs in Amharic have been written and published by former prominent *Derg* officials such as Fikre-Selassie Wogderes (2013), Fisseha Desta (2015), Tesfaye Dinka (2017), Berhanu Bayeh (2020), Fasika Sidelil (2021), and the former president Mengistu Haile-Mariam himself (2013). Most of these texts were written by participants in the events or by officials who had direct access to confidential archives and, in some cases, were transcripts of participant interviews. These works

shed light on the events leading to the Ethiopian Revolution in February 1974, its consolidation in November 1977, and its subsequent decline and downfall.

In this section, the study briefly explores the origins, impact, and distinctive characteristics of the Ethiopian Revolution and how it catalyzed the military's self-promotion into the nation's power elite, replacing the old one.

The Ethiopian Revolution of the 1970s was widely recognized as 'Africa's first revolution'. This label was attributed to the internal social tensions that ultimately resulted in the overthrow of Ethiopia's ruling class, the establishment of new political institutions, the emergence of new leaders, and the spread of an ideological fervor with significant consequences.

Comprehending the significance of the Ethiopian Revolution requires drawing comparisons with other historical revolutions, such as those in France, Russia, and China. In terms of historical scope and the radical transformations it brought about, the Ethiopian Revolution holds similarities to these iconic revolutions. Like its counterparts, the Ethiopian Revolution instigated sweeping societal, political, and governance changes. The overthrow of the established ruling class resulted in the dismantling of existing political institutions and the establishment of a Marxist-Leninist government led by Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam, replacing the old imperial system under Emperor Haile Selassie.

The Ethiopian Revolution was significantly influenced by the fervor of its ideological principles, particularly the adoption of Marxist-Leninist ideology as the guiding force of the new government. This ideology informed policies and governance structures and drove social reform, including socialist initiatives, the nationalization of industries, land redistribution, and a collective approach to economic progress. The revolution's impact has been extended beyond Ethiopia, and it has been inspiring neighboring countries and influencing political movements throughout the region. Somalia and Sudan, in particular, felt the ripple effect of the revolution, as it provided a model and inspiration for various revolutionary and opposition movements.

Unlike other African nations such as Algeria and Mozambique, where revolution was mainly achieved through anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, the Ethiopian Revolution was primarily fueled by internal social conflicts and a demand for significant social and political change. Although anti-colonial sentiments may have been a factor, the revolution primarily addressed internal dynamics and fostered internal transformation (Crummey, 1981).

However, Negussay Ayele (1993), a supporter of the *Derg* at the time, argued that the Ethiopian Revolution faced disproportionate criticism and insufficient understanding compared to other revolutions in modern history. On the other hand, academics and Marxist sympathizers like Halliday and Molyneux (1981) contended that the Ethiopian Revolution should be recognized as "Africa's first great social revolution". However, it was soon characterized by various negative terms, including "a betrayed revolution" or simply as a "coup d'état," "garrison-socialism," "bourgeois dictatorship," or a "fascist military dictatorship." These labels often exhibited a limited focus on specific aspects of the revolution rather than capturing the broader societal and political process it encompassed.

Numerous academics (see above) contributed to the scholarly understanding of the Ethiopian revolution's origins and its progression or demise. These scholars collectively argued that the Ethiopian revolution could be traced back to a deeply entrenched feudalist imperial system characterized by oppressive practices, which hindered meaningful political and economic reforms. The unresolved issue of land tenure, which led to the question of how to come to equitable land distribution (commonly known as the "land to tiller" question), played a significant role in triggering the revolution. Factors such as the alleged economic stagnation, the social disparities, the grievances among peasants, and, albeit with minimal peasant protests, contributed to the overall discontent.

Additionally, the mutiny of soldiers in 1974 and the discontent of urban residents added fuel to the revolutionary fervor. The revolution also included the push for equality among various ethnic groups, the address of national identity issues, and the opposition to cultural hegemony. These complex factors came together to bring about the Ethiopian revolution in 1974.

The Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) and the revolution of 1974 are closely connected, with the ESM playing a crucial role in sparking it. The globally inspired ESM ideological and social fervor significantly contributed to the revolutionary unrest, emphasizing the urgency for action (cf. Balsvik 1976). Extensive academic research has been conducted to comprehend how the student movement drove the revolution (e.g., Ottaway & Ottaway, 1978; Bahru, 2014). The ESM had a transformative vision for Ethiopia's political and economic landscape, drawing inspiration from international student protests in the 1960s that aimed to challenge authoritarian governments, imperialism, and inequality. The momentum gained from the global student

movement of the 1960s greatly influenced the emergence of the ESM as a potent political force capable of overthrowing the long-established imperial regime.

The ESM raised two crucial questions that posed significant challenges to the continued existence of the imperial regime. The first question revolved around the "nationalities" issue, drawing from Marxist discourse and advocating for equal rights for all ethnic groups. The second question centered on land reform encapsulated in the slogan "land to the tiller." The students' fight against imperial rule marked the beginning of a new era in Ethiopian history. Their movement swiftly garnered widespread support nationwide, leading to nationwide protests involving various sectors of society, including the military. It was these protests that eventually sparked the revolution in 1974.

The 1974 revolution in Ethiopia marked a significant turning point as it overturned the imperial power structure and brought about profound political and economic transformations. The revolution commenced by abolishing the monarchy and establishing a republic. In 1975, a crucial milestone was reached with land reform, which entailed nationalizing all land, a central demand of the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM). Furthermore, the revolution declared "ethnic and religious equality" for all Ethiopian citizens. A vital aspect of the revolution was the introduction of *Hebrettesebawinnet Ethiopia*. This socialist ideology aimed to reshape Ethiopian society and build a nation based on socialist principles, incorporating elements unique to Ethiopia. Lastly, the revolution led to a new ruling elite, primarily lower-ranking military officers, who assumed power in the political system.

6.2 The Rise of a Military Elite

Emperor Haile Selassie laid the groundwork for developing a modern army in the years following World War II. The emperor abolished the customary practice of raising troops through provincial levies and the antiquated military command structure. After his return from exile, he reformed the Ministry of Defense (then known as the Ministry of War) in 1942 and ratified a military pact with Britain. This pact established a British military mission in Addis Ababa charged with aiding the government in preparing a national army (Fantahun, 2014).

In its gestation phase, the Ethiopian army comprised ground, air, and naval troops, with the Emperor serving as the supreme commander. Four divisions constituted the army, with Division I

being the Imperial Guard stationed in and around the capital. Division II was stationed in Asmara and tasked with defending the northern part of the country. Division III was stationed in Harar and responsible for defending the eastern part of the country, primarily from potential Somali threats. Division IV, based in Addis Ababa, oversaw the south and west regions.

Ethiopia received technical and material assistance to establish or reorganize its armed forces from various countries, including the USA, Britain, Sweden, Norway, India, and Belgium. Sweden supported the creation of the air force in 1947 and continued to provide training until the late 1950s when the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) took over. Norwegians were involved in establishing the navy and provided technical support and training. The British Military Mission offered training to the ground army and the imperial guard until 1953, after which the US-MAAG took over training responsibilities until 1977.

The military elite was educated and trained at two military cadet schools: the Harar Military Academy and the Holeta Military Academy, also known as *Gennet Yet'or Timhirt Bet*'. Differences in recruitment practices and curriculum between the two schools led to the division of officers based on political, social, and educational views. This division prevented the ground forces' military elite from actively participating in politics and hindered their ability to form a cohesive and organized body. In contrast, the Air Force and Navy were organized and cohesive, recruiting cadets with similar educational backgrounds. The strong connections and close interactions among officers in these divisions played a crucial role in their rise to power (Markakis, 1974).

During the pre-revolutionary era, the military elites in Ethiopia represented a cross-section of society. Erlich (1983) identified four distinct categories within the military, with the generals being the most affluent and enjoying privileges that were the envy of civilians. The emperor handpicked some for various rewards, including promotions to governorships, diplomatic roles abroad, and grants of land and property. Loyalty to the emperor often outweighed professional qualifications regarding promotions, as many generals lacked formal training in military or non-military fields (*ibid*).

The second category consisted of colonels, most of whom were in their forties and aspired to join the esteemed ranks of the generals. While not all of them held the same unwavering allegiance to the imperial regime as the generals, they were highly skilled in their profession and refrained mainly from actively opposing it. The airborne and army aviation commanders wielded

considerable influence on par with the generals. During the revolution, many of these colonels were elevated to prominent leadership roles by the *Derg*.

The third category in the Armed Forces consisted of junior officers up to the rank of major, who were responsible for the day-to-day operations of the armed forces. This group was the most dissatisfied and frustrated within the Armed Forces, as they needed more control over crucial decisions such as training, organization, and unit rotation. Many of these junior officers received their training abroad. They pursued further education in subjects such as law, political science, management, economics, and engineering at Addis Ababa University, where criticism of the imperial regime was prevalent. The civilian elite and junior officers often engaged in discussions and debates at colleges, where the prevailing sentiment was that the imperial government could not implement necessary political and economic reforms. However, due to the fear of reprisal and the belief that their voices would only be influential with the support of senior commanders, junior officers and others were hesitant to express their concerns publicly. Despite attempts to mobilize younger officers, disparities in education, professional development, political viewpoints, and inter-service competition hindered their efforts. Nonetheless, most junior officers felt disillusioned with the government and the military hierarchy.

The final group consisted of non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and privates, among the lowest-paid soldiers working under a corrupt, ineffective, and unsympathetic military bureaucracy. This group consistently expressed grievances regarding quality of life issues, such as food and housing in the army. They were housed in overcrowded barracks in remote outposts with no rental homes available. The food they received could have been of better quality and delivered late. Surprisingly, these military leaders overthrew the imperial government and took control of the state during the 1974 revolution. Before the revolution in the 1960s, Emperor Haile Selassie believed that the newly organized professional army would support modernizing the nation and protecting his imperial interests. However, his actions inadvertently paved the way for lower-ranking military leaders to seize power.

When the *Derg* was established in June 1974, the Ethiopian military lacked developed political consciousness, and ideological distinctions were not made within the young and underdeveloped elite officer corps. The *Derg* drew inspiration from left-wing ESM parties, including the 'All Ethiopian Socialist Movement' (AESM or *MEISON* in Amharic acronym) and

the 'Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party' (EPRP), both of which were Marxist and served as ideological sources for the *Derg*.

At the beginning of their rule, the members of the *Derg* claimed that they were merely temporary caretakers of the popular revolution and would eventually hand over power to a civilian government. To reflect this intention, they adopted the name 'Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC)' after overthrowing the emperor. However, the civilian groups, particularly radical university graduates, students, teachers, and young bureaucrats, played a significant role in pushing the PMAC towards a more radical direction.

These civilian groups primarily influenced the PMAC's radicalization. University graduates and members of organizations such as the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) and senior bureaucrats gradually became part of the system and developed vested interests. Over time, they transformed into advocates for radical reforms within the government. These civilian groups, the so-called educated elites, brought fresh perspectives, idealism, and a desire for profound societal changes to the PMAC. Their involvement in the administration influenced the decision-making process and shaped the policies pursued by the military government. As they became more integrated into the system, they began to push for transformative reforms that aligned with their vision of a more egalitarian and socially just society. The evolution of these elite individuals into proponents of radical reform can be attributed to their exposure to the realities of governance and their first-hand experiences with the country's challenges. Their education and critical thinking skills allowed them to identify the deep-rooted issues that needed addressing and propose bold solutions. As they became more entrenched in the bureaucratic apparatus, they developed vested interests, further motivating their commitment to radical change. One former top *Derg* official repeated the common argument that was mounted against the *Derg* as a 'hijacker of the revolution'. He argued:

Even though the emperor's government was about to fall, no organized political force or group showed up to seize control of the situation. All the political forces, including EPRP, were unprepared to take the lead at the beginning of the revolution. Who should rule as the emperor's successor is still up for dispute amid widespread protest and unrest. We got together unexpectedly in the face of growing political unrest to prevent a catastrophic clash and perhaps war between army divisions that supported the ruling class or the people. Additionally, we believed that the nation was at a crossroads due to the threat to national security from internal and external sources. So, we just reacted in the capacity of state protectors of national security. We leaped into leadership because of this and soon found ourselves in a position of great political power and responsibility. Most of us were lower-

level officers with various backgrounds representing various army divisions. At the start of the revolution, we did not even share a common vision or position (Respondent no. 1, 2021).

It is clear from this statement, which looks reasonable and convincing, why the military seized power. However, this thesis has been contested and rejected by numerous scholars, including a prominent historian who was interviewed (respondent no. 31, 2022). He argued that the military officers did not intend to transfer power to a civilian government even though they came to control state power accidentally. However, civilian 'revolutionary' groups working closely with the military junta were also responsible for the PMAC's radicalization. Ideological factions influenced the internal power struggles within the military council, which played a significant role in their radicalization. Besides the ideological factions, external pressures from regional conflicts and internal pressures from economic challenges were considered drivers of the MAC's actions and radicalization tendencies. Some interviewed politicians also concurred that civilian groups pursued radical reform due to their vested interests and ideological stakes.

Additionally, these interviewees argued that eliminating political organizations like EPRP and AESM from the political landscape indicated the *Derg's* vital interest in consolidating its power rather than allowing a transition to civilian rule. These alternative explanations provide a nuanced understanding of *Derg's* intentions, the internal dynamics, the external pressures, and the limited influence of ambitious civilian revolutionary groups in the PMAC's radicalization. To sum up, the rise of the military elite to power in Ethiopia was driven by internal and external factors. Internally, the army's internal conflicts and students' demands for political change played a role. Socialist ideology, as voiced in the global political arena, clearly encouraged Ethiopian students, the intelligentsia, and military officers. Externally, the 1960 African independence movement and the decolonization momentum attracted the interest of Ethiopian army officers, while the legacy of post-independence coups in Africa demonstrated to them the military's ability to seize state power (cp. Fasika 2022; Fikreselassie, 2013; Fesseha, 2014).

6.3 Elite Recruitment, Placement, and Promotion under the *Derg*

In the years following the 1974 Revolution, the military officers, especially the NCOs, wielded absolute power. Military branches were the primary sources of the new elite groups that substituted the imperial rule. Some military sections and officers became the superstructure of the

new political system. One key respondent (no. 38, 2022) noted, 'The loyalty and interpersonal relationships were significant to the elite's recruitment, replacement and promotion. The pattern of elite recruitment relied on relationships and ideological commitments rather than the knowledge and skills of individuals. This also applies to other countries in specific ways, but it was a more deeply ingrained practice in Ethiopia's political and intellectual circles. Replacing the ruling elites in every tier of the political administration with new elites was extremely difficult. Since the power elite of the imperial government was portrayed by society as corrupt and ineffective, the *Derg* saw itself as justified in assuming responsibility for replacing the old governing elite with a new one. They invited senior bureaucrats to serve at various levels of the government structure and also recruited fresh university graduates. In addition, they moved military officers from different army divisions and put them in administrative and regional governor positions. The senior *Derg* official's view (respondent no. 34, 2022) supports the claim above.

The newly emerging elite had a range of backgrounds. The core elites were from the military, some power elite members were from the educated classes, and others were senior officers from the imperial government— a group with mixed political and social attitudes, from revolutionary to conservative to moderate. During the reign of the emperor, elite recruitment was more personalized and based on personal merit. The emperor's closest advisors, nobles, knights, and religious leaders were personal references for the recruited elites. Loyalty to the monarch and individual competence were the two main criteria for recruitment. Under the *Derg*, elite recruitment was done through political parties/movements. Political parties were not officially present in Ethiopia before the revolution, but several emerged months after Haile Selassie's administration was toppled. The All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (*MEISON*) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) were the most well-known political parties formed since the revolution. Both parties identified as leftist and appeared to have a similar ideological stance. In 1975–1976, the only difference was that one was more 'tactical' than ideological. While *MEISON* acknowledged that military rule might be 'progressive,' mainly if it carried out the fundamental objectives of the extreme left, the EPRP demanded the swift establishment of a civilian government (see Gilkes, 1982).

As noted by the *Derg* senior officials (e.g., interviewee 01, 2022), the military rulers officially invited political parties to be recruited for the potential elite through the Provisional Office for Mass Organizational Affairs (POMOA). The leftist political organizations, like AESM,

EPRP, *Woz* (Labour) League, ECHAAT ('Oppressed Peoples' Revolutionary Struggle'), MALERED('Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Organization'), and *Abyotawi Seded* (Revolutionary Flame') were given the duty of recruiting qualified elite members for various government positions. This was a new departure compared to the old practice during the imperial government, where elite members were recruited mainly by personal choice and individual decisions. The recruitment under the POMOA office unveiled a new practice of recruiting elite members through collective decision-making, seen as the optimum method for selecting 'superior' elites (Respondent no. 1, 2021).

The POMOA coordinated this recruiting for the ruling elite, which was in charge of forming a unified leading political party and enlisting promising elite members. However, open conflict broke out during the revolution between MEISON and, notably, the EPRP. Ultimately, the EPRP chose to leave the POMOA, and MEISON remained a staunch ally of the military rulers.

This elite recruitment through the POMOA went via a 14-member steering committee with EPRP and MEISON supporters. MEISON was in the lead with five supporters, while the EPRP had two. When the EPRP left POMOA in 1977, more MEISON backers took their place. After the exit of EPRP members of other leftist organizations mentioned above, such as the *Woz* League, *Echaat*, MALERED, and *Abyotawi Seded*, joined POMOA and served as channels of recruitment of new ruling elite members both at the national and regional levels of the administration (see Fesseha, 2014).

Later, *Derg* established a political school, Yekatit 66, to train middle-rank leaders, known as *cadres*. The school became the epicenter of elite recruitment and ideological indoctrination of the regime. One of the interviewees described the school's contribution as follows: Notably, Yekatit 66 School was founded because it gave rise to cadres, the top and middle echelons of the governing elite who are ardent political foot soldiers. This school produced cadres who were excellent communicators and knowledgeable about Marxist theory. They were gifted with great political communication abilities. Ethiopia's political culture was altered when the 'cadre' was introduced. Throughout the EPRDF and PP eras, cadres have been used as the base for massive mobilization (Respondent no. 47, 2021).

As noted by the above interviewee, the cadres emerged as profound actors from the grassroots political structure to the upper echelons. Apart from the Yekatit 66 School, the military rule sent the senior and groomed elite to top positions, both military and civil backgrounds, in

‘friendly socialist countries’ such as the USSR, China, Bulgaria, Romania, Cuba, etc. Furthermore, the *Derg* established committees to supervise the work of the various ministries to which new elites were assigned. These consisted of civilian groups from the government and university graduates who had returned from self-imposed exile in Europe and North America. Most of these new elites were the technocrats who engineered the radical socialist program. One of the interviews with a senior opposition political leader confirms this:

Recruiting, placement, and promotion strategies were hybrid under Derg. The political elites were disproportionately low-ranking officers drawn from the military to represent the defense forces. Most were recruited based on ideological loyalty and their commitment to the revolution. Over time, these low-ranking officers recruited in-demand jobs to professionally capable and influential officers from the national army and well-educated politicians from the political parties of ordinary citizens. As the Derg ruling class grew over time, intellectuals with capacities in their technical competence joined and strengthened it. Derg attempted to empower its elite by not just selecting members from the system's existing elites for political positions but also by educating newer generations through the use of scholarships from communist nations in addition to recruiting and promoting from among those individuals (Respondent no. 9, 2022).

As mentioned before, the *Derg* government considered an individual's competence when grooming them for official positions. However, several interviewees dispute the claim above and assert that the government gave more weight to allegiance than competence. One of the interviewees noted that when the *Derg* came to power, the elite's recruitment, placement, and promotion became based on ideological allegiance. As a result, low-ranking military officers were responsible for supervising educated professionals working for government institutions nationwide, from the top down to the lower structures. Professionals were assigned to positions in some highly technical fields based on their loyalty to the regime. The *Derg* introduced the new culture of a yes-men ethos, with a lack of political identification with any of the competing parties. *Derg* also successfully demolished the merit system, which was quite common in most institutions during the emperor's reign in both the civil service and the military, particularly in high-ranking posts (Respondent no. 47, 2022).

As indicated above, the recruitment, placement, and promotion practices of the *Derg* were similar to their predecessors in the way that they were based on political loyalty—but not to the state as a whole, but rather to the power structure of each particular leader. The recruitment of elites during the reign of the emperor took into account not just allegiance but also other factors that focused on competence. As a result, there were intellectuals with high levels of capability in

high-ranking positions due to merit. The meritocracy opportunity allowed for comparatively high standards of elites throughout this time. The low-ranking military officers who replaced the elite community after *Derg*'s purge negatively impacted the country.

Most of the elites were recruited from the previous government at the outset of the revolution. However, those in charge of the political authority at the front were drawn from the lower strata of society, including lower-ranked military officers. Ideological fidelity to the state served as the primary recruitment criterion. The ruling elites at this period were Marxists, militants, and fiercely nationalist. Later, the military rulers started recruiting the elites from higher education institutions, mainly from Addis Ababa, Asmara, and Haramaya universities. Universities gradually became a foundational basis of elite recruitment.

6.4 The Nature and Character of the Elite

Following the elimination of the old ruling elite and dismantling the radical intellectuals' groups from the left, *Derg*, which had come from the lower-ranking military officers and some workers from the lower classes of the society, came to control state power. Subsequently, a few 'opportunistic' intellectuals were also established as a new political elite without socioeconomic or psychological links with the old elite. The *Derg*'s 'revolutionary' measures entailed support from the working class or even more so from the peasants. It neither got support from the old elite nor from the radical-left intellectual groups, which faced massacres and mass detention. Thus, the *Derg* became the leading political force, based on a self-declared ideology of a 'Socialist-oriented, strong Ethiopian nationalism.'

When the *Derg* stabilized its grip on power and acquired confidence after the repressive and bloody 'Red Terror', violently suppressing all opposition, highly qualified technocrats and professionals based on merit joined the political elite in the civil services. This diversified the elite's composition. The remnants of the old elite and the radical leftist intellectuals were marginalized, if not eliminated, and became powerless in national issues (Ottaway, 1976).

The character of elites under the *Derg* administration could be summarized as radicals, loyalists, and 'patriots' but also largely incompetent. Unlike the emperor's time, the elite's character was widely observed during the *Derg*'s reign, which was political-ideological 'radicalization.' Most scholars and politicians saw radicalization as a new trend in Ethiopian

politics that emerged with the leftist political parties. Messay Kebede (2008) has argued that introducing the modern educational system into Ethiopia as part of the drive to modernization created a mood of alienation and cultural dislocation. This new trend of radicalization dislocated the old culture and prompted alienation, 'cultural pathology,' and mental disorientation in post-revolutionary Ethiopia. He said elitist education policy produced educated elites willing to embrace radical ideas. The new elite group became simultaneously radicalized and dislocated from their own culture. They were open and quick to embrace new ideas and thoughts from the external world. If one takes the spread of Marxism-Leninism as an example, it was sudden and rapid, disconnected young elites from anything that had gone before. The worst thing is that they rejected the argument and idea of other scholars and politicians who argue for an 'evolutionary' understanding of radical politics. According to one scholar from Addis Ababa University (Respondent no.17, 2022), the educated elite who originated from the student movement were radical in their political stand and orientation. They were rigid and brought a new culture of uprooting opponents and dying for goals. They called it 'Yealama Tsinate' in Amharic, translated as 'persistence of purpose.' Violence became a new accepted means of achieving political goals and was a manifestation of radicalization. Another former senior *Derg* official complemented the above points:

Even though most of the elites were considered leftist at the outset of the Ethiopian revolution and sought to implement revolutionary ideas that were directly adapted from the Soviet, Cuban, Vietnamese, and Chinese revolutions, they disagreed about which socialist sub-ideology should be chosen and adhered to. They most often [...] attacked each other. They did not share a common stance or vision (Respondent no. 33, 2022).

This radical mindset that was embedded in politics created a culture of violence, which took the shape of state-led terrorism (i.e., the 'Red Terror' (see Toggia, 2012; Wiebel, 2015), as the interviewee mentioned above noted. The nation was gripped by severe political and intergroup violence in the late 1970s. Ethiopia's major cities and towns, particularly Addis Ababa, Gondar, Jimma, Asmara, and Dessie, experienced an increase in violence in 1976. The military government that later adopted and promoted its own Marxist-Leninist idiom and plans and heavily relied on the use of force to stifle dissent was violently challenged by radical left opposition groups, notably the EPRP. The use of force, summary executions, torture, and confiscation of property became manifestations of the new radical political culture (Abbink, 1995) defined by violent exchanges and causing thousands of people to be killed.

Another typical elite characteristic was political loyalty to the regime. This feature persisted from the imperial era and became a standard norm of elite behavior during the *Derg* era. Both intellectual and military elites were expected to exhibit loyalty to the top leadership and ‘the revolution.’ Loyalty was thus considered the glue that held relationships together in times of difficulty. It induced and sustained cooperation among the ruling elites.

According to one opposition leader (Respondent no. 4), the *Derg* feared a backlash from imperial rule supporters. Several attempts were made to end the revolution and re-establish imperial rule. Because of this, loyalty was a pillar of the elite hierarchy that protected the revolution and the new political system from all internal and external threats. As a result, the majority of elites expected to demonstrate loyalty to the government. Loyalty became the norm, and a necessary quality for entering the ruling elite circles, as asserted by the opposition leader interviewed. It gave the elites a new kind of ‘personality.’ The majority of the elite members were reluctant to express their true feelings. To put it simply, they act like devoted followers of the government. This trend made the rise of authoritarianism and dictatorship following the revolution possible. It impacted the ruling elite's circle's inhibitions to have meaningful conversations or criticisms of the party program and policies.

Another typical elite characteristic was being opportunistic. Several scholars and politicians argue that the emerging power elite in the ruling circle are opportunistic, perpetually under the way of the ruling class. According to one interviewee, elites in the military have a reputation for being opportunistic. Most higher-education elites do not believe in military rule and join the government to exploit the opportunity. Opportunist tendencies, therefore, were a prevalent trait of elites in the military. Some educated and military elite members wanted to take advantage of all the opportunities that come with access to power.

Regardless of their stance, they cooperated with the regime and prioritized their own interests. The majority of elites with a higher education background joined the administration to take advantage of opportunities rather than have faith in military authority.

Being an opportunist remained one of the critical traits of Ethiopia's power elite even after the fall of the *Derg*, as indicated by the interviewee mentioned above:

Most elites with higher education backgrounds entered the political structure to help themselves and their kin. This sparked a trend that placed the more educated power elite below the less educated power elite. The educated elite were perceived as servants and

technical workers who worked for the less educated power elite (Interview with respondent no. 38).

Incompetence was another trait of the elite that was widely seen under the *Derg*. As it was emphasized above, the *Derg*'s core ruling elites were non-commissioned officers (NCOs) with lower levels of education. The long-lasting old culture was broken by the rise of the low-ranking officers to the top of the power structure. The old culture expected its leaders to be wise, well-educated, and experienced—the ascent of the low-ranking officers to power altered this culture. People believed anyone could head political and economic institutions and climb the power ladder. This negative precedent severely damaged The meritocracy ethos ingrained in the nation's bureaucracy and political system. As confirmed by one of the prominent opposition leaders:

The competence and quality of elites in Ethiopia progressively declined due to the political action of the Derg regime. During the reign of Haile Selassie, educated people were very professionally capable and involved in national social and political issues. At that time, numerous public intellectuals first debuted in Ethiopia. Furthermore, the education system was largely effective, from the primary to the higher levels. However, the Derg began to politicize education. It assigned cadres to the universities, ended intellectual debates, and politicized professional associations. Independent thinking started to worry people, and at that point, Ethiopia's educational system began to deteriorate (Respondent No. 8, 2022).

Most academics, politicians, military officers, businesses, and traditional leaders interviewed agreed that the caliber of elites seriously declined since the military's ascent to power. After the 1974 revolution, junior officers were responsible for installing inept leaders in various government posts. Moreover, the succeeding EPRDF government maintained this precedent, with the overall quality of elites staying at a low level (As, for example, noted by respondents no.18, 19, 23, 26, 27, 30, 35, and 37; in 2022).

6.5 The Power Structure and Elite Integration

The absolutist feudal-monarchical system that had existed for centuries with feudal and developing bourgeois relations predominating was brought down by the revolution of 1974. The emperor, his numerous family members, and court, other hereditary or, in Levine's words, "quasi-hereditary" and titled aristocrats, high-level bureaucrats, big compradors, and clergy formed the highest tier of the authoritarian social state political framework that had developed in the pre-1974 period. Semi-serfs, free peasants, nomads, laborers, minor bourgeoisie, and intellectuals comprised

the pyramid's base. Land ownership was a significant factor in the feudal upper crust's ability to rule.

The institutions established during the 1950s and the 1960s (such as the Parliament, Council of Ministers, High Court, municipal courts, etc.), fashioned after bourgeois Western parliamentary ones, were more symbolic than substantive. On the eve of the revolution, the upper echelons of Ethiopia's socio-political system were made up of noblemen, the middle ones of middle classes, and the lower ones of peasants. The old power structures continued, but they gradually lost their capacity to rule. As a result, the Coordination Committee of Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army, or *Derg*, was established. It consisted of soldiers democratically elected as noncommissioned and commissioned officers by their respective regiments. By coordinating the revolutionary forces' operations, the *Derg* effectively served as a military-revolutionary center.

The revolution signaled the dissolution of the previous power structure and sociopolitical order and the establishment of a new one. Crown Council, Parliament, Council of Ministers, Royal Court-Chief, and Royal Guards were abolished, along with the entire network of imperial intelligence and security apparatus. The Constitution was also abrogated, leaving only those laws that were not contradictory to the revolution in effect. After that, the superstructure underwent several profound changes, including restructuring the state's decision-making bodies, important fiscal institutions, industrial and commercial enterprises, and abolishing the monarchy and titles.

The PMAC, a collective state body that served as a revolutionary parliament,' had the most significant legislative authority. Soldiers and non-commissioned officers made up half of PMAC. The PMAC served as a super cabinet, an anonymous collective military, executive body to which the civil cabinet and public workers were accountable. This was true even though the administrative framework of the previous administration and the majority of its cadres were preserved. The PMAC Congress, which selected the Central and Standing Committee for daily operations, was the highest authority. Commissions linked with PMAC that deal with social, economic, legal, and administrative matters, as well as information and public relations, domestic and international policy, and security and defense were established. In addition to serving as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the PMAC Chairman also served as Chairman of the Council of Ministers. PMAC appointed the executive body—the Provisional Military Government—and increased the number of civilians on it by issuing decrees (also known as "proclamations") with the legal force of constitutional acts. The previous power structure,

comprised of the emperor, aristocrats, nobilities, clergy, and knights, was replaced by the new power structure that consisted of the military, technocrats, and representatives of the people.

The new power structure and the circulation of the elite had caused a crisis that had a significant impact not only during and after the revolution but also on the generations that followed. The power elite were severely affected by circulation and replacement. Numerous Ethiopian aristocracy members perished; some were imprisoned, and others were forced to flee their homes and immigrate abroad. Ethiopian power elites declined in number and quality because of the military regime's atrocities and isolation. *Derg* atomized the remaining elites and replaced the elite community with non-elite officers. If elites exist as a community, they may have more sway over society.

The economic elite was shattered, shrank in size, and developed weak capacities because of land reform, nationalization of properties, and limited capital engagement. However, some businesspeople connected to the government figures and operated through patronage networks. The socialist political ideology that emerged after the revolution put an end to the burgeoning private sector and the developing corporate and economic elites. The new socialist philosophy that emerged in Ethiopia opposed private property ownership and promoted collective property rights and a significant role for the government in the economy. Due to socialist economic policies, some of the nation's budding business elites left the country, while others fell into poverty. Government control was exerted over the banking, industrial, transportation, and service sectors. Petty businessmen gradually supplanted the corporate elites at the local and national levels. The economic elites, therefore, were not visibly incorporated into the government's power structure as of the emperor's reign.

The military rulers viewed traditional elites as a natural ally and ardent defenders of the imperial power both during and after the revolution. They were, therefore, hostile against the traditional elites and unwilling to co-opt them into the new political structure. Traditional figures from the Orthodox Church remain outside the system of power. Some well-known and influential Orthodox leaders were persecuted; some were imprisoned, and others were banished. Similar tactics were used to undermine and systematically exclude other traditional elites, including community leaders and practitioners of traditional dispute resolution (TDR), from participating in the nation's social, political, and economic life. Traditional elites were thus absent from the power

structure of the post-1974 revolution. Traditional elites were purposefully disregarded, uprooted, and left out of the power structure.

The intellectual or educated elite was partially expelled and absorbed into the new power structure. The educated elite faced hostility from the *Derg* and its highest-ranking officials. They have a distrustful gaze toward intellectuals. The reason was that intellectuals were quite vociferous and critical of the military taking over power. They agitated for the restoration of civilian rule. Some joined political organizations on the New Left, such as the AESM and EPRP. Between 1976 and 1978, there was an open battle between the EPRP and the military, which resulted in the persecution of intellectuals and the deaths of close to 40,000 committed young, educated class members. A new culture of violence and state-based terror emerged with the expulsion of the educated elite.

The power elites' core at the revolution's inception consisted of 120 junior officers. Gradually, most *Derg* members dropped out for different reasons, including the power struggle among the officers. Between 60 and 80 of the original 126 members, eight remained within the *Derg*. The vast majority of the *Derg* officers are graduates of the Holeta military academy. Almost all those from the senior academy at Harar were eliminated in the July 1976 and February 1977 purges. The ten-member Standing Committee was the core of the revolutionary government. Beyond this, there was a Central Committee with an estimated 32 members. The congress of all the surviving members is believed still to meet on an annual basis. While it has powers of discussion and ratification of some decisions, it no longer takes major initiatives against the will of the Standing Committee. Dozens of PMAC members not directly involved in the Standing Committee were distributed among civilian ministries or on the PMAC committees that oversee each ministry. Twelve have been appointed as provincial governors, and since 1980, four have held positions in the Council of Ministers.

As this study discussed above, military rule in the post-1974 period was characterized by elite disintegration. Elite disintegration occurs when loose cohesion and disunity are displayed among dominant elite groups in society. According to Putnam (1976) and Higley and Burton (2006), elite integration is a requirement for a successful democratic transition, political stability, the exercise of collective power, and making joint decisions abided by all members of the polity. Putnam (1976) identified six "integrative factors" or "dimensions of elite integration": social homogeneity, shared recruitment patterns, interpersonal interaction, value consensus, group

solidarity, and institutional context. He claimed that value consensus is perhaps the most important of these factors. Higley and Moore (1981) also argued that shared moral principles and interpersonal relationships are the most critical issues in elite integration. If members of an elite group share similar ideologies, social backgrounds, educational and professional experiences, and recruiting processes, they are considered integrated.

Considering the above explanation, we did not see elite integration under military rule. There were power scuffles among the power elites and hostile relations among different segments of the elite groups. There was a stiff power struggle from 1974 to 1976 among top PMAC leadership factions. This struggle resulted in the purge of one-third of the *Derg* members, mainly educated military officers, from the power circle. Moreover, the emerging power elite systematically excluded the educated, economic, traditional, and political elites from the power structure. Elite disintegration has been an observable phenomenon from the beginning—most elites from all political spectrums share a common ideological orientation during and after the revolution. The problem arose in connection with divergent educational backgrounds and diversity of origin. According to one of the top *Derg* officials, the elite disintegration resulted in a power scuffle among the Ethiopian leftists and other groups and gradually left a vacuum for ethno-elites rise and dominance of nation-building in the post-1991 period. The power struggle significantly debilitated the leftists. So, one of the significant hurdles in the nation-building process is the power struggle and lust for total power control by competing political forces. Ethnicity itself was part of this struggle and later surfaced as a means to control power (Respondent no. 1, 2022).

6.6 Elite and Nation-Building under Military Rule

Following the revolution of 1974, the military overthrew the monarchy and put on hold all of the nation-building initiatives the emperor had put in place within the larger framework of modernization. The military unveiled a new program for constructing a nation that emphasizes equality, justice, and self-reliance. This section looked at the military rule's efforts to construct a nation while taking ideology, organizational structure, public goods, communication schemes, and national symbols into consideration. I adopted these indicators from Andreas Wimmer's (2018) seminal work on nation-building and added indicators.

6.6.1 Ethiopian Socialism as a Source of Nation-Building

Under military administration (1974–1991), the nation-building process takes a new twist and follows a path of socialism. *Derg* announced socialism as a new ideology for reconstructing the nation in December 1974. It declared Ethiopian socialism, *Ye-Itiopia Hibrete sebawinnet* (translated as ‘Ethiopian Socialism’). It outlined "self-reliance, the dignity of labor, and the supremacy and indivisibility of Ethiopian unity" as core values of the new ideology. *Ethiopia Tikdem* (‘Ethiopia First’) was the political motto of the Ethiopian socialism. Under this motto, the government launched several economic reforms and policies, including the 1975 land reform and nationalizing vital economic sectors.

The *Derg* issued the Land Reform Proclamation of March 1975, which nationalized all rural land, abolished tenancy, and put peasants in charge of enforcement. No peasant was allowed to possess a plot larger than ten hectares, and no one could employ farmworkers. Farmers were ordered to organize peasant associations, one for every 800 hectares, which would be headed by executive committees responsible for enforcing the new order. In July 1975, all urban land, rentable houses, and apartments were also nationalized.

The grandly titled ‘Government Ownership and Control of the Means of Production Proclamation’ of March 1975 ordained a minimal role of private capital in the economy, after all major industrial, financial, and commercial institutions, comprising about 200 companies, were nationalized without compensation (in January and February 1975). There was not much foreign capital anyway, and there was hardly any mining, which made the wholesale nationalization of it simpler. Multinational involvement was mainly limited to trade, plantation agriculture (particularly sugar and cotton), and a small amount of industry. Although some of the nationalized assets were later given minimal compensation, and the government attempted to entice fresh private investment, none has yet to materialize (Clapham, 1987).

The *Derg* regime tried a novel approach to nation-building that marked a departure from the imperial government. The architect claims that because of the embedded economic and social inequality that existed in Ethiopian society for centuries as a result of feudalism, socialism was chosen as the best course of action. According to the architect, socialism alone can address the problem, as it did in Russia and China. In line with this, in 1976, the *Derg* proclaimed a program known as the ‘National Democratic Revolution Program’(NDRP). The NDRP focused on addressing the question of nationalities in Ethiopia. It gave the nationalities the ‘right to self-

determination,' but it was restricted to regional autonomy rather than independence/secession. Equal rights for all ethnic and linguistic groups were also acknowledged (cf. Gilkes, 1982).

The architects who insisted that Socialism was the best way to do nation-building based their argument on one of two contending schools of thought. According to the Ethiopian Leftist School, hierarchical class division was the main contradictory force in society. It placed a small, well-off aristocratic class at the top and the majority of poor, mass peasants at the bottom. It kept the unequal political and economic relations between them. The supporters of this group proposed that eliminating the small ruling class would solve the nation's fundamental political and economic problems. This school's proponents characterized their viewpoint as "the fundamental political-economy problem of Ethiopia is the class struggle." Ethiopian leftist groups like AESM, EPRP, and others mentioned above advocate this thought (see Fesseha 2014).

The second school is what came to be known as the 'ethnic-nationalists,' who contended that exploitation and inequality in Ethiopia were based on ethnic and linguistic disparities. Accordingly, they stated that the governmental and economic establishment of the country favored one ethnic group, the Amhara, and encouraged the dominance of its language and culture. They called for the abolition of Amhara cultural hegemony and the establishment of a kind of 'multiculturalism.' The protagonists of such an ethnic-elitist worldview characterized 'the core political and economic problem of Ethiopia' as an "unequal ethnic relation and cultural hegemony that favors northerners". When analyzing Ethiopian politics today, these competing claims still serve as ideological roots in the evolution of left-wing and ethno-national political viewpoints and competition. One of the former top officials articulated the argument in the following way:

We find these two sets of elites in the nation-building discourse. One set [.....] attributed the problem of nation-building in Ethiopia to the class struggle (መደበዊ ትግል) between the feudal lords (the ruling class) who control the means of production, mainly land, and peasants, [...]. This ruling class mainly originated from northern and central Ethiopia. There were substantial numbers of local feudal elites in various regions. The class struggle discourse analysis explores the problem of nation-building through the lens of economic exploitation and power relations between competing political elites (lords and knights) and the society (peasants). The other kind of discourse argues that ethnic oppression (የብሔር ጭቁና) causes the nation-building process problems in Ethiopia, and it emanates from unequal ethnic relations and domination of one ethnic group over other groups. The 'Amhara ethnic group' is depicted as the ruling and dominant elite group over others. This discourse claims that the Amhara used their privilege during modern state formation under emperor Menelik II and imposed their culture, language, religion, and values over other ethnic groups. The imposition of culture and language resulted in unequal relations between the Amhara and other ethnic groups. The Amhara are privileged to get access to

resources, power, and influence due to their ethnicity and are often considered the ruling elite (Respondent no. 18, 2022).

Another senior political figure from the opposition camp said:

Instead of advocating the assimilation principle of nation-building, Ethiopian elites had challenges because of a mentality that downplayed the value of managing diversity. However, they have a very extreme stance on violence. For instance, the General Mengistu Neway-led coup at the end of the 1950s, which caused the country to lose well-known patriots like Abebe Aregay and other high-ranking political and military elites, was regarded as a model of success and sowed the seeds of violence in the minds of the next generation, preventing them from serving their country. Forcible killings and detentions carried out by the Derg regime fourteen years later were made possible by the 1950s coup, which set a negative precedent in Ethiopian politics. The 1950s coup attempt set a bad precedent in Ethiopian politics for arbitrary killings and detention that happened fourteen years later by the Derg regime (Respondent no. 9, 2022).

As noted by the former official, this discourse takes a central place in mainstream politics. Some scholars (respondent no. 30, 2022) refuted socialism as the right choice for nation-building. There was no tangible capitalist class and a well-established working class since the country was predominantly agrarian and the political infrastructure was feudalistic. These academics questioned the decision to use socialism as the foundational ideology for the country's post-1974 political transition. However, the dominant viewpoint of socialism by leftist groups masked their voices. Even though the ideas of the leftist groupings predominated, there were differences of opinion among them about creating a socialist state. For instance, the disagreement over how to enact socialism in Ethiopia between the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) was a good example. Between 1975 and 1976, both sides argued about how to implement socialism in Ethiopia. According to Gilkes (1982), the EPRP advocated for the swift installation of a civilian government and supported a transition led by a civilian government. However, MEISON supported a transition led by a military government willing to provide "critical" and temporary support. The demand for immediate transfer of power to civilian rule was, according to a former *Derg* top official, difficult:

The previous governing class would likely win and regain government control if elections were held. An unstable threat to national security was added to the Eritrean issue. The military ruling elite arrived at the point of no return following the revolution. However, they decided to continue on political power against their initial plan, which called for a seamless transition and the transfer of power to political forces chosen by the people. However, we could not do so because of the people's unrelenting demands. The people demanded that issues regarding the land be answered immediately by the tiller and others.

Any political entity that emerged after the revolution must address the land as the tiller matter because it was a driving reason behind the revolution (Respondent no. 1, 2023).

Transferring authority to civilian government after the Ethiopian revolution seemed unfeasible for two reasons, as a former *Derg* top official explained. First, the military was forced to remain in power due to the lack of a strong political. Second, the absence of a united leftist political group indicated the possibility of defeat by political forces that supported or were loyal to the emperor. As I describe below, this topic is contentious in explaining the absence of organized political parties. As *Derg* officials repeatedly claimed in the interviews and some of their published memoirs, transferring authority or moving toward civilian government looked improbable (e.g., Fikreselassie, 2013). Ethiopian socialism, therefore, became an official ideology of nation-building in Ethiopia until 1991. However, it was not successful and did not yield the desired result. Scholars identified several reasons. However, the most fundamental reasons are summarized in two points. First, culturally speaking, there was a ‘dislocation,’ as contended by Messay Kebede (2008). Socialism was alien to Ethiopian society, and most of its values were hostile to the norms and values of Ethiopian social and religious life. Even if it gained wider acceptance and popularity in the early years, it gradually lost its acceptance and caused deep discontent. One of the top *Derg* officials reminisced:

The original nation-building strategy emphasized democratization, social fairness, and radical political reform for quick economic development. However, we were compelled to embrace socialist doctrine due to the impact of the outside world and pressure from leftist political organizations, notably EPRP and AESM. We lacked any other options. In fact, at the outset, we defined Ethiopian socialism in terms of the notion of ህብረተሰባዊነት or ‘sociability.’ Our goal was to adopt a socialist ideology compatible with our society’s cultural, religious, social, and other aspects and to make the socialist philosophy suitable to Ethiopian reality. However, proponents of AESM and EPRP rejected this revolutionary theory and urged the nation to switch to scientific socialism. They strongly argued that there is no Arab, African, and Ethiopian socialism. There is only one socialism, i.e., scientific socialism. So, we were forced to adopt scientific socialism without conducting any proper study and assessment. To me, the nation-building failure of our time is attributed to this problem (Respondent no. 34, 2022).

As clearly stipulated by the official, the major cause for the failure of socialism in Ethiopia is the incompatibility of the ideology with the cultural and social fabric of the society—the second factor associated with the economy. Socialism failed to transform the economy as anticipated at the outset of the revolution. Most scholars projected that the economy would become at least modestly industrialized after overthrowing the feudal system (ignoring the fact that agrarian

industrialization was already incipient). However, Socialism ruined the economy and, even worse, resulted in massive famine (partly due to economic mismanagement) and socio-political dismay. The third factor, as noted above, was that as the economy collapsed, socialism lost its credence. This paved the way for the rise of ethno-nationalists into power, with a new conception and venture of nation-building under the motto of ‘multiculturalism’.

6.6.2 The Political Parties and Civic Associations

This aspect focuses on the institutional dimension that promotes smooth relations between the state and society. It is known as organizational structure, as noted in the earlier chapter. Organizational structures support alliance, cooperation, and unification across ethnic and cultural divides of the society. They act as gathering and interest articulation units. They appear as networks of connections between government agencies and voluntary associations like political parties, trade unions, and the like. If there is already a substantial network of these civic organizations, it is easy to forge relationships beyond ethnic boundaries (cp. Wimmer 2018). They hold people's interests so that state officials or politicians can interact with them more effectively. It is significant to reflect on the evolution of these organizations, particularly in the early years of state formation. If a complex web of these groups has already developed, the new power brokers can use it to organize supporters and find political leaders. Under these circumstances, it becomes less probable that ethnic minorities or even majorities will be politically excluded because many civic organizations have already established branches in regions of the nation home to various ethnic communities. Thus, the new leaders' support base and the leadership will be multi-ethnic.

In post-1974 Ethiopia, Marxism gained a receptive audience. However, the institutions of political parties and civil/civic society were fragile and non-existent. The successive regimes, including the military, had not allowed political parties to exist and operate legally. They also systematically undermined civil society organizations from taking root. This trend created complications during and after the 1974 revolution. One of the major setbacks was the absence of political parties who could take a lead role in the revolution. Despite domestic repression at the beginning of the 1970s, the student movement sought to develop into a revolutionary movement. It started to build toward engaging in armed conflict and founding a Marxist-Leninist party. In Ethiopia and abroad, various party-like organizations arose, most of which operated clandestinely. They included the Ethiopian People's Liberation Organization (EPLO), its headquarters in Algiers,

the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement based in Western Europe, and several smaller organizations. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), officially founded in 1975 by the EPLO, merged several smaller groups and attracted tens of thousands of youths and laborers to its banners with the call for a "People's Provisional Government."

The vanguard communist party is theoretically the primary entity in a state-socialist society. The party's two main goals are to provide an authoritative interpretation of historical development laws and lead the revolutionary working class. The political power of the communist party also gains legitimacy in the process. Therefore, rather than being the enemy of the party, the state is, in theory and practice, an instrument of the party. The Ethiopian situation offers an intriguing and significant analog to this overarching rule of state socialist growth. The state, comprised of a military oligarchic ruling class, is the dominating institution, not the vanguard party. The state, as represented by the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), was in power since the beginning of the revolution. The *Derg* created an army and bureaucracy, which replaced the imperial era's king and sources of support and replaced the old guard and administrative officials. They were supported by a bureaucracy that carried out the orders of the top in the name of the rank and file. It appears that institutionalization will prevent it from playing a prominent role in social transformation. It is more likely to become just another tool in the hands of the (military oligarchic ruling elite), with its main function being to legitimize the dominant position of this new ruling class.

As explained above, the socialist-communist organizations could not form a political party in time for the revolution to begin. As a result, no strong and reliable political groups could be identified to represent the leftist side during the revolution. As previously indicated, the student movement gave rise to two political parties after the revolution: EPRP and AESM, which had little in common. The first political party in Ethiopia was the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party, formally established in August 1975. The Ethiopian Women's Organization, the Revolutionary Workers Union of Ethiopia, the Organization of Oppressed Soldiers, and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Army were just a few of the large-scale groups it backed. According to reports, it had tens of thousands of members and sympathizers. Ethiopian People's Liberation Organization and numerous other currents merged to form the EPRP.

Despite having its headquarters in Algiers, the radical student leaders who created EPLO in West Berlin in 1972, including Tesfaye Debessay and Berhane-Meskel Redda, were also active

at the time. The *Abyot* ("Revolution") group led by Getachew Maru, sometimes referred to as "the first Maoist in Ethiopia," and Red Banner were among the other revolutionary organizations that it absorbed within EPRP. *Democracia* ("Democracy"), which started publishing clandestinely in 1974, was the group's primary journal. From 1976 until the 1980s, the journal's name changed to *Abyot* and was distributed in Europe by its foreign department. The military regime was seen by the EPRP as having hijacked the revolution of 1974, and they swiftly turned against it. In 1976, the *Derg* began a campaign of brutal, deadly repression against the EPRP, to which there was armed resistance, including retaliatory assassinations under the Red Terror campaign.

Another leftist political party was the AESM above (Meison), clandestinely established in 1968 by Ethiopian intellectuals residing in Europe and led most notably by the academician Haile Fida. Meison⁴ remained a covert group until its leadership returned to Ethiopia in 1974. At that point, they started an underground newspaper known as *Ye Sefiw Hizb Dimts* or "Voice of the Broad Masses," distributed inexpensive Chinese Marxist-Leninist publications, and set up a bookshop. In contrast to the EPRP, Haile Fida collaborated with the *Derg* and became a top political counselor. Ironically, despite Meison being heavily affected by the anti-revisionist movement, the *Derg* advanced toward the Soviet Union under the guidance of Haile Fida. The initial wave of *Derg* persecution against EPRP was led mainly by Meison, making Meison a target for EPRP retaliation. Meison members became deeply ingrained in the *Derg*'s mass groups and the state apparatus, especially the state security apparatus. However, as the Soviet Union started to press the *Derg* to purge the nation of Chinese influences in the later months of 1977, Meison resisted growing Soviet dominance and joined the resistance. The "Red Terror" campaign of the *Derg* was extended against Meison, and its leader, Haile Fida, was detained and killed. The military's persecution of both parties put an end to hopes for a successful political transition utilizing a robust communist party as the vanguard. The break-up and purging of these parties not only weakened the leftist organizations in Ethiopia but also undermined the efforts of the military government to create a 'prosperous socialist nation-state.

During this time, when the proximate conditions for the 1974 revolution were set, there were many voluntary, loosely organized, semi-autonomous organizations. However, they were too apolitical and weak to form a cohesive civil society. These loosely organized associations were mostly used for social and some for economic purposes, such as *Edir* (self-help associations in

⁴ (In Amharic language) *Mela Ityoppya Soshalist Niqinaqē*.

time of death), *Iqub* (rotating saving and credit associations), and *Maheber* (associations based on kinship or religion), which predominantly served as self-assisting collectives. Some of these groups, like the Mecha-Tulema Association (an association bent on promoting development programs among the Oromo), which were perceived by the state as a threat to political society, were forced to be an outgoing ebb before their political wave gathered momentum. The modern civil society organizations initially appeared in the 1930s. Welfare agencies like the Red Cross began operating in the 1950s. Other local, national, and international CSOs began to thrive after the Red Cross was established. The concurrent famines in 1973–74 and 1984–85, under the Imperial and *Derg* governments, increased the number of CSOs and NGOs that provide humanitarian aid in Ethiopia (Clark, 2011). One prominent civil society and human rights advocate claims that:

The lack of a robust civil society in Ethiopia is a critical issue that most Ethiopian scholars do not acknowledge when discussing the nation-building challenges. Because there is no civil society, there is no accountability in politics, and there is no system of checks and balances. Without a robust civil society, Ethiopia's authoritarianism would not have been sustained. To me, the lack of effective civic organizations and political parties is the primary societal cause of the dictatorship in Ethiopia. The military deliberately obliterated all traditional and modern civic associations during its reign. It considers civic organizations a threat (Respondent no. 39, 2022).

As explained above, by the time the military assumed political power, no viable civil society could counterweight the military power. The military had an organizational advantage over other political organizations that surfaced after the revolution. Their political fate was not hard to forecast. Their “war of maneuver,” an attempt to take control of political power despite the backing of civil society, was doomed to failure, nor was the strategy of “war of position,” building civil society before state power is seized.

6.6.3 Public Goods as Glue of Nation-Building

For a nation-building effort to be effective, it is crucial to have the ability to offer public goods, and it will be an essential factor, as noted in the previous chapter. The term “public good” describes a good or service made available/accessible to everyone in a society (cf. Ostrom & Ostrom, 2019). Public goods, including national defense, infrastructure, education, and security, are provided for its citizens by the government in considerable amounts. The efficient operation of society—economically, politically, and culturally—requires the availability of public goods.

Without the physical and social infrastructure and their protection, society would have more difficulty sustaining itself. Governments typically provide these services, and taxes cover all of their costs.

According to Wimmer (2018), the capacity to provide public goods is another important indicator of nation-building. The more a government can provide public goods across all regions of a country, the more acceptable and legitimate to rule. The elite will be interested in establishing an alliance and integration with the political center. The ethnic composition of governing elites will reflect such encompassing alliance structures, and thus, the ethnic diversity of the population does not matter. The military government's ability to supply citizens with public goods was limited after the Ethiopian Revolution, which lasted from 1974 until 1991. The provision of essential services and social and physical infrastructure was subpar.

The military rule failed to provide public goods as expected by the public. It did not expand roads and other related facilities in its nearly two decades of rule. According to the records, in 1951, there were only 6,400 km of the total road network, of which 3,400 km were asphalt, and the remaining 3,000 km were gravel roads. Only urban regions contained the whole network. In 1973, while the Imperial monarchy was stumbling, the network had just expanded to 9,160 kilometers. Over the years 1951–1973, the network expanded on average at a pace of 2.05 percent per year. The stock road expanded to 19,017 km from 1974 to 1991 under the *Derg* dictatorship at a growth rate of 6.2 percent per year. There was a poor network of gravel and asphalt roads under the *Derg* reign. The poor road inter-linkage did not foster regional integration and connections between rural and urban areas (Worku Ibrahim, 2010). Even if the record showed growth in road expansion, the rate was inadequate and insufficient to contribute to successful nation-building.

Likewise, the elementary school coverage considerably outpaced imperial time, although not to the degree anticipated. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a significantly more significant expansion of basic schooling. The gross enrolment ratio of the primary schools rose from 15.8% in 1974 to 36.2% in the 1988–1989 school years. The number and placement of schools, as well as the size and makeup of the student body, all underwent considerable growth. The military government made a considerable shift in expanding the school by focusing on small towns and rural areas that had been ignored during the imperial administration. The aim was to ensure a more equitable distribution of schools in all geographical areas. According to Alemayehu and Lasser (2012), this move actually garnered massive support from the public during the initial phase of the

revolution. However, the collapse of the economy and failure to supply other public goods exacerbated the crumbling of the new nation-building endeavor.

Early on, the *Derg* had ambitious intentions to expand basic healthcare, including a program for community health workers, but the implementation of these plans was hampered by limited budget spending. The focus on primary healthcare and the expansion of rural health services are the cornerstones of the government's approach to healthcare, yet the budget allotted for it was just 3.5% of the overall budget. After ten years of the revolution, there were 87 hospitals in total, with 11,296 beds, or one bed for every 3,734 people. There were 141 health facilities and 1,949 health stations in the 20,000 rural *kebeles*. However, many of them lacked a doctor (Kloos, 1998). Accessibility to the health service for the majority of rural people was far from reality. People from rural areas traveled a day or half to reach the nearby health centers (Kloos, *ibid*).

The political economy aspect of the ties between the state and its citizens concerned the resources that they exchanged. Citizens were more likely to politically support a government that provides public goods in exchange for the taxes, dues, and fees collected from them. The more a government is capable of providing public goods across all regions of a country, the more attractive it will be as an exchange partner, and the more citizens will attempt to establish an alliance with it. The composition of government will reflect such encompassing alliance structures and thus the ethnic diversity of the population. Citizens who receive public goods in return for their political loyalty and their taxes are also more likely to embrace the nationalist rhetoric generated and propagated by governing elites and their intellectual aides (Chege, 1979).

People's confidence in socialist ideology and nation-building had been low and shaky as a result of the *Derg's* inadequate capacity to offer fundamental public services. The people's lack of trust in nation-building as a result of this constraint emerged as the primary factor in its failure.

6.6.4 Linguistic and Education Policy as Integrative Element of Nation-Building

The third key aspect of successful nation-building involves the development of effective communication strategies. Establishing a common language and script through linguistic and educational initiatives can transform a diverse society into a unified and cohesive one. This enables people to connect across ethnic and geographical boundaries, strengthening and enduring relationships. Additionally, a shared script facilitates the spread of political networks throughout a nation, reducing barriers to effective governance. For example, using a standard script in Ethiopia

has helped bridge linguistic divides and facilitates communication among its diverse population. This scriptural homogeneity has also allowed for the recruitment of the bureaucratic elite through standardized written tests, ensuring that no region is marginalized due to linguistic differences. A standard script has enabled diverse political groups to communicate and collaborate, fostering a more cohesive and inclusive society.

Hence, language and educational policies play a vital role in successful nation-building. In Ethiopia alone, more than 84 languages can be categorized under the language families of Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic, and Nilotic. The highest density of languages is found in the western and southwest of Ethiopia, while in the eastern parts, we observe a greater degree of homogeneity (Záhořík & Teshome, 2009). One notable effort during 1974-1991 was the policy decision to conduct adult literacy programs in fifteen ethnic languages (Mamo, 1982). The literacy program (campaign) started in 1979 and ended only at the fall of the socialist government in 1991. The other noteworthy language policy was transcribing various languages in the Ethiopic (Fidel) script, most of which were in unwritten form hitherto. However, the use of these languages was limited to the non-formal education sector. The government did not push forward to use them as instructional languages in the formal system. (Germa Amare, 2006).

Under the guise of socialist doctrine, the National Democratic Revolution program restored the equality of Ethiopian ethno-linguistic groups and their various languages. The statement "In the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, all ethnic groups are equal" refers to the equality of ethnic groupings (Shehim, 1985). The National Democratic Revolution Program of Socialist Ethiopia, which was published in 1976, states the following in Article 5: The right of self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since each nationality's history, culture, language, and religion will be recognized equally by the spirit of socialism. Each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic, and social life using its language.

The inclusion of "self-determination" of ethno-linguistic communities and equal governmental recognition of their languages and cultures were the main policy directions adopted by the military regime, as the article indicates. The *Derg's* language policy declaration, ordering equal recognition for all languages and speakers, was seen as a positive development for nation-building and a way to ease interethnic tensions. The founding of the then-Institute of Nationalities

in the middle of the 1980s- made up of illustrious linguists, economists, geographers, and political scientists- was one of *Derg's* additional progressive actions. The Institute's primary goal was to do in-depth research on the ethnic makeup of society, politics, and the economy of various ethnic groups, as well as on their languages. Additionally, the Ethiopian Language Academy was restructured in 1985 and given the mandate to monitor and research language-related issues in the nation, introduce a writing system for the previously unwritten languages, create dictionaries, grammar books, and literary works, expand language vocabulary, and create grammatical and sociolinguistic documentation (cp. Amsalu, 1982).

The new policy approach after 1974 helped to pave the way for multilingualism in Ethiopia's multiethnic setting. As a national adult literacy initiative utilizing numerous minority languages, the "National Literacy Campaign" began in 1975. Legalizing the literary use of fifteen indigenous languages was one of the clear benefits of the (1975–1990) national literacy drive. Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya, Tigre, Wolaitta, Sidaama, Haadiyya, Kambaata, Afar, Saho, Gedeo, Somali, Kafaanono, Silt'e and Kunama were among the languages spoken. The training was conducted in these fifteen languages, including Amharic, which comprise around 95% of the population. The Ministry of Information launched the publication of *Bariisaa*, a weekly Oromo newspaper, in 1975 (Zelalem, 2012). 1974, Ethiopia had an almost 93% illiteracy rate (*ibid*). It fell to roughly 23% in 1989 due to widespread adult education campaigns with the slogan "National Work Campaign for Development through Cooperation" and the use of multiple languages as instruction mediums. 1987, the PDRE constitution mentioned the government's overt language policy. The constitution's Article 2-Subsection 3 recognized the equal recognition of all languages and the right of speakers to advance their languages. The Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's working language is Amharic, according to Article 116 of the constitution. The constitution also affirmed that the ethnicities of Ethiopia, which mainly were classified according to language, had the right to self-determination. These rights rectify the freedom of preserving, practicing, and developing cultural, religious, and linguistic heritages of ethnic groups (Zelalem, 2012).

The *Derg* promoted Amharic as the country's official language, using a strategy similar to the imperial era. Amharic, the most widespread language, remained the primary language of instruction in the nation's schools. As a result, while the imperial authority was committed to creating an educated elite that spoke Amharic, the *Derg* tried to make Amharic widely used (Tekeste, 2006). In contrast to the imperial era, there were significant advancements in language

treatment difficulties between 1974 and 1991, as was already established (Alemu & Tekleselassie, 2006). The *Derg* policies were more progressive than those made during the imperial era. As stated repeatedly, the policy provided equal treatment for all ethnic groups, languages, and customs. In addition to lowering the illiteracy rate, another policy benefit was the literacy campaign's use of local languages, which resulted in a positive impression among diverse ethnic groups. The language policy often has the following two characteristics. Like its predecessor, it first promoted Amharic as the official working language. This decision continues the military government's policy of using Amharic as its primary language of communication throughout the nation's construction. However, this policy attitude had unfavorable effects. Amharic's continued uses as some ethnic groups see the national tongue as a sign of cultural exploitation and a disregard for other cultures and languages. Second, the policy continued to support Amharic as a language of instruction and other languages as a medium of mass communication. However, the military government's efforts did not receive enough recognition for its policy.

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6.6.5 National Symbols for Cement Nation-Building

National symbols such as flags and anthems are vital to nation and state building. States use a variety of symbolic representations to foster nationalism. They do this by using symbols to help all segments of the nation feel more united. However, competing ethnic and political groups frequently disagree with the flag, anthem, and other symbols. Usually, symbols split the country

instead of bringing it together. Therefore, national symbols representing the nation are the subject of disputes and debates (Kolst, 2006). In the Ethiopian case, the national flag is controversial and a source of conflict among competing ethnic groups. However, the national flag is one of the oldest and is considered by other African countries and Black societies in the Caribbean as a symbol of victory and a sign of emancipation (Stratford, 2011); domestically, it is painted as a symbol of exploitation and domination by ethnic-elites. The ethno-nationalists would prefer to avoid recognizing it as a symbol of the nation (Goshu & Castro, 2016).

According to one political leader:

Ethiopia's current flag, which is green, yellow, and red, dates back to the old imperial era. It is frequently used as a metaphor for inequality, exploitation, and dominance. A national dialogue should be held to bring about agreement among divergent opinions over the national flag. It is important to revive the story surrounding the flag. The flag should be a unifying factor, not a source of dispute (Respondent no. 14, 2022).

During the military rule, the government gave due attention to promoting national symbols as a means of effective nation-building effort. Throughout its 17-year reign, the military rulers promoted national symbols such as the flag, the national anthem, and specific artifacts as means of nation-building. According to one scholar:

The Derg put much effort into popularizing national symbols, emphasizing the national anthem and flag. The national flag ordinance had to be observed in government buildings, educational institutions, and security facilities. It was also required to salute the national flag and sing the national anthem. So, students sing the national anthem at school, and employees salute flags at work. This custom has fostered a strong sense of patriotism and Ethiopian nationalism. Additionally, by including Ethiopian history in the curriculum, the government has tried to instill a sense of shared nationalism and pride in the youth. However, this effort did not continue and stopped with the change of government in the post-1991 period (Respondent no. 47, 2021).

During the military rule in Ethiopia, there was a strong emphasis on teaching Ethiopian history at all levels of the education system. Ethiopian history was made a core part of the primary and secondary educational curriculum to foster a shared history and identity among the diverse ethnic groups in the country. However, this approach did not create a common consensus among the competing ethnic groups. The *Derg* regime's 'Ethiopianist' version of history was rejected by emerging ethno-nationalist movements such as TPLF, EPLF, OLF and ONLF, who argued that the history of Ethiopia was based on selective and biased narratives that glorified a few individuals while ignoring the diverse histories of the country. Despite these criticisms, courses on Ethiopian

history continue to be widely offered in all schools (Sisay & Enguday, 2022). According to one of the former *Derg* officials:

Ethiopia is a historic nation with a long and rich past. The state's formation and its continued existence have experienced ups and downs. Invasion and incursion attempts by foreign powers had been made on multiple occasions. We sacrificed blood and lives in order to overcome all of these obstacles. Here, we can highlight the Adwa triumph that freed our nation from colonial yoke and established us as the only sovereign nation in Africa. We are Africa's pride. We aimed to instill national pride in the next generation. For this reason, we placed primary emphasis on history education. We sincerely believe that history could be used to bring diverse ethnic groups together (Respondent no. 33, 2022).

As the former *Derg* official remarked, the government approach was not well received by ethno-nationalists, even though it emphasized history teaching to create a sense of shared identity. The ethno-nationalists frequently claim that Ethiopian history is convoluted, contentious, and lacking in general agreement. One scholar explains the controversy surrounding the Ethiopian history as follows:

Ethiopia is an ancient country with a lengthy history and civilization. This has previously been documented and is supported by academic study and a book that has been written. However, Ethiopia's ancient history is rejected by ethno-nationalists. They do not acknowledge it as a part of Ethiopia's shared ethnic past. Instead, they contend that the old history of Ethiopia only tells the tale of North Ethiopia and does not encompass the entire nation. They are adamant that the nation's history needs to be reviewed and revised to consider all Ethiopians' histories. How you disrespect and ignore your nation's past is abhorrent (Respondent no. 43, 2022).

In conclusion, national symbols like flags and anthems can play a crucial role in nation-building by fostering unity and shared identity. However, in diverse countries like Ethiopia, they often become sources of dispute among competing ethnic groups. The Ethiopian national flag is seen as a symbol of victory and emancipation by some, while others view it as a sign of exploitation and domination. Similarly, History education in Ethiopia has been a source of contention, particularly during the military rule of the *Derg* regime. While the regime aimed to instill a shared identity and patriotism through teaching Ethiopian history, ethno-nationalist movements criticized it for being selective and biased towards the imperial legacy. They demanded a revision of history that would be more inclusive and representative of all ethnic groups in the country. Achieving a balanced narrative that embraces the diverse experiences and perspectives of the population is essential for fostering unity and pride in the nation.

Summary

The Ethiopian Revolution of the 1970s, led by the *Derg* military junta, brought significant political, social, and economic changes to Ethiopia. Various factors, including the oppressive feudalist-imperial system, economic stagnation, and social disparities, triggered it. The revolution gained momentum through the Ethiopian Student Movement, which raised questions about ethnic equality and land reform and led to nationwide protests. The revolution resulted in the establishment of a republic, the nationalization of land, and the introduction of a unique socialist ideology.

Numerous scholars and authors have studied the revolution, providing insights into its origins, progression, and aftermath. Memoirs by former *Derg* officials offer first-hand accounts. While the revolution is considered a turning point in Ethiopian history, dismantling the old imperial system and giving rise to a new power elite, the *Derg* also faced massive criticism for its repressive tactics, human rights abuses, and the devastating famine of the 1980s. 1991, the *Derg* was overthrown, marking another new chapter in Ethiopia's political landscape.

The revolution led to a shift in elite recruitment, with the military, political parties, universities, and training institutions playing a role. The ruling elite during the *Derg* regime consisted of individuals embracing socialist-oriented Ethiopian nationalism and prioritizing loyalty to the regime. However, the decline in competence and quality of the ruling elite and the politicization of education had negative impacts.

The revolution had dissolved previous institutions and abolished old power elites, replacing them with the military, technocrats, and 'representatives of the people'. However, power struggles and purges disintegrated the experienced parts of the power elite, resulting in a lack of integration among different groups. The *Derg* regime implemented Ethiopian socialism as an ideology for nation-building, emphasizing self-reliance, labor dignity, and Ethiopian unity. However, socialism faced challenges due to its incompatibility with Ethiopian society, which led to economic decline, dislocation of cultural practices, and discontent among the population. The failure of socialism paved the way for a new venture of nation-building under the motto of multi-ethnicity/'multiculturalism'.

The military government struggled to provide essential public services, hindering nation-building. Inadequate infrastructure, healthcare, and education limited progress. Communication

initiatives aimed to bridge linguistic and educational gaps among diverse societies. Efforts were made to promote literacy programs in ethnic languages and recognize the rights of ethno-linguistic groups. However, the decision to promote Amharic as the official language faced criticism.

Disagreements arose among ethnic groups regarding national symbols and history education. The national flag and history curriculum were interpreted differently, with some seeing them as symbols of victory and others as signs of exploitation. Establishing a balanced narrative that acknowledges the diverse experiences and perspectives of the population is essential for fostering unity and pride in the nation, a goal that was not achieved under the *Derg*.