

Ethiopia, a country study

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Introduction

FEW AFRICAN COUNTRIES have had such a long, varied, and troubled history as Ethiopia. The Ethiopian state originated in the Aksumite kingdom, a trading state that emerged about the first century A.D. The Askumites perfected a written language; maintained relations with the Byzantine Empire, Egypt, and the Arabs; and, in the mid-fourth century, embraced Christianity. After the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the Aksumite kingdom became internationally isolated as Arabs gradually gained control of maritime trade in the Red Sea. By the early twelfth century, the successors of the Aksumites had expanded southward and had established a new capital and a line of kings called the Zagwe. A new dynasty, the so-called “Solomonic” line, which came to power about 1270, continued this territorial expansion and pursued a more aggressive foreign policy. In addition, this Christian state, with the help of Portuguese soldiers, repelled a near-overpowering Islamic invasion.

Starting about the mid-sixteenth century, the Oromo people, migrating from the southwest, gradually forced their way into the kingdom, most often by warfare. The Oromo, who eventually constituted about 40 percent of Ethiopia's population, possessed their own culture, religion, and political institutions. As the largest national group in Ethiopia, the Oromo significantly influenced the course of the country's history by becoming part of the royal family and the nobility and by joining the army or the imperial government. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, religious and regional rivalries gradually weakened the imperial state until it was little more than a collection of independent and competing fiefdoms.

Ethiopia's modern period (1855 to the present)—represented by the reigns of Tewodros II, Yohannis IV, Menelik II, Zawditu, and Haile Selassie I; by the Marxist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam; and, since mid-1991, by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia under Meles Zenawi—has been been

characterized by nation-building as well as by warfare. Tewodros II started the process of recreating a cohesive Ethiopian state by incorporating Shewa into his empire and by suppressing revolts in the country's other provinces. Yohannis IV battled to keep Ethiopia free from foreign domination and to retard the growing power of the Shewan king, Menelik. Eventually, Menelik became emperor and used military force to more than double Ethiopia's size. He also defeated an Italian invasion force that sought to colonize the country.

Struggles over succession to the throne characterized the reign of Zawditu—struggles won by Haile Selassie, the next ruler. After becoming emperor in 1930, Haile Selassie embarked on a nationwide modernization program. However, the 1935-36 Italo-Ethiopian war halted his efforts and forced him into exile. After returning to Addis Ababa in 1941, Haile Selassie undertook further military and political changes and sought to encourage social and economic development. Although he did initiate a number of fundamental reforms, the emperor was essentially an autocrat, who to a great extent relied on political manipulation and military force to remain in power and to preserve the Ethiopian state. Even after an unsuccessful 1960 coup attempt led by the Imperial Bodyguard, Haile Selassie failed to pursue the political and economic policies necessary to improve the lives of most Ethiopians.

In 1974 a group of disgruntled military personnel overthrew the Ethiopian monarchy. Eventually, Mengistu Haile Mariam, who participated in the coup against Haile Selassie, emerged at the head of a Marxist military dictatorship. Almost immediately, the Mengistu regime unleashed a military and political reign of terror against its real and imagined opponents. It also pursued socialist economic policies that reduced agricultural productivity and helped bring on famine, resulting in the deaths of untold tens of thousands of people. Thousands more fled or perished as a result of government schemes to villagize the peasantry and to relocate peasants from drought-prone areas of the north to better-watered lands in the south and southwest.

Aside from internal dissent, which was harshly suppressed, the regime faced armed insurgencies in the northern part of the country. The longest-running of these was in Eritrea, where the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and its predecessors had been fighting control by the central government since 1961. In the mid-1970s, a second major insurgency arose in Tigray, where the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a Marxist-Leninist organization under the

leadership of Meles Zenawi, opposed not only the policies of the military government but also the very existence of the government itself.

In foreign affairs, the regime aligned itself with the Soviet Union. As long as the Soviet Union and its allies provided support to Ethiopia's armed forces, the Mengistu government remained secure. In the late 1980s, however, Soviet support waned, a major factor in undermining the ability of government forces to prosecute the wars against the Eritreans and the Tigray. Gradually, the insurgent movements gained the upper hand. By May 1991, the EPLF controlled almost all of Eritrea, and the TPLF, operating as the chief member of a coalition called the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), had overrun much of the center of the country. Faced with impending defeat, on May 21 Mengistu fled into exile in Zimbabwe; the caretaker government he left behind collapsed a week later. The EPLF completed its sweep of Eritrea on May 24 and 25, and a few days later EPLF chairman Issaias Afwerki announced the formation of the Provisional Government of Eritrea (PGE). Meanwhile, on May 27-28, EPRDF forces marched into Addis Ababa and assumed control of the national government.

After seizing power, Tigrayan and Eritrean leaders confronted an array of political, economic, and security problems that threatened to overwhelm both new governments. Meles Zenawi and Issaias Afwerki committed themselves to resolving these problems and to remaking their respective societies. To achieve these goals, both governments adopted similar strategies, which concentrated on national reconciliation, eventual democratization, good relations with the West, and social and economic development. Each leader, however, pursued different tactics to implement his respective strategy.

The first task facing the new rulers in Addis Ababa was the creation of an interim government. To this end, a so-called National Conference was convened in Addis Ababa from July 1 to July 5. Many political groups from across a broad spectrum were invited to attend, but the EPRDF barred those identified with the former military regime, such as the Workers' Party of Ethiopia and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement, as well as those that were opposed to the EPRDF, such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party and the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces. A number of international observers also attended, including delegations from the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Nations (UN).

Although it received accolades for running an open conference, the EPRDF tightly controlled the proceedings. The conference adopted a National Charter, which was signed by representatives of some thirty-one political groups; it established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE), consisting of executive and legislative branches; and it sanctioned an EPLF-EPRDF agreement that converted Aseb into a free port in exchange for a referendum on Eritrean self-determination to be held within two years. The transitional government was to consist of the offices of president and prime minister and a seventeen-member multiethnic Council of Ministers. To ensure broad political representation, an eighty-seven member Council of Representatives was created, which was to select the new president, draft a new constitution, and oversee a transition to a new national government. The EPRDF occupied thirty-two of the eighty-seven council seats. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) received twelve seats, and the TPLF, the Oromo People's Democratic Organization, and the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement each occupied ten seats. Twenty-seven other groups shared the remaining seats.

The National Charter enshrined the guiding principles for what was expected to be a two-and-one-half-year transitional period. The charter called for creation of a commission to draft a new constitution to come into effect by early 1994. It also committed the transitional government to conduct itself in accordance with the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to pursue a foreign policy based on noninterference in the internal affairs of neighboring states. Perhaps its most significant provisions concerned a new system of internal administration in which the principle of ethnicity was to constitute the basis of local and regional government. The charter recognized the right of all of Ethiopia's nationalities to self-determination, a right that was to be exercised within the context of a federated Ethiopia, and called for creation of district and regional councils on the basis of nationality.

Essentially, the National Conference was a first, basic step in the reconstruction of a viable, legitimate central government. With the end of civil wars all over the country, the aim was to create a balance of competing ethnic and political groups at the center of the state that would allow the wounds of war to heal and economic recovery to begin. Additionally, there was the task of reconciling some segments of the population to the impending loss of Eritrea and of Ethiopia's Red Sea ports.

As the new order got under way, the Council of Representatives elected Meles Zenawi president of the TGE. Then, in order to implement the administrative provisions of the National Charter, the TGE drew up twelve autonomous regions based on ethnic identification and recognized two multiethnic chartered cities—Addis Ababa and Harer. The largest nationalities—the Amhara, Oromo, Somali, and Tigray—were grouped into their own regions, while an attempt was made to put culturally related smaller groups together. Each region was composed of a number of districts (weredas), intended to be the basic administrative unit. The largest region—that of the Oromo—contained some 220 weredas; the next largest region—that of the Amhara—contained 126, out of a total of 600 weredas in all of Ethiopia. Under this system, each wereda exercised executive, legislative, and judicial authority over local communities, while the central government remained supreme in matters of defense, foreign affairs, economic policy, citizenship requirements, and currency.

In order to staff these new administrative units, the TGE scheduled national elections. Originally foreseen for later 1991, these elections were postponed for administrative and political reasons into 1992. By then, the authorities had registered almost 200 political parties; few of them, however, had a significant membership or any real influence in shaping government policies. The TGE held preliminary elections for local governing committees beginning in April and for wereda and regional councils on June 21, 1992.

Security problems prevented elections from being held in some areas, notably among the Afar and the Somali and in Harer. More important, a corps of some 250 UN observers concluded that the June elections suffered from a number of serious shortcomings, including an absence of genuine competition, intimidation of nongovernment parties and candidates, closure of political party offices, and jailing and even shooting of candidates. Numerous observers also claimed that various administrative and logistical problems impaired the electoral process and that many Ethiopians failed to understand the nature of multiparty politics. As a result, several political parties, including the OLF, the All-Amhara People's Organization, and the Gideo People's Democratic Organization, withdrew a few days before the elections. On June 22, the OLF withdrew from the government and prepared to take up arms once again. Nonetheless, the TGE accepted the results of the elections, although it appointed a commission to investigate irregularities and to take corrective steps.

In the economic arena, the TGE inherited a shattered country. In his first public speech after the EPRDF had captured Addis Ababa, Meles Zenawi indicated that Ethiopia's coffers were empty; moreover, some 7 million people were threatened with starvation because of drought and civil war. Economic performance statistics reflected this gloomy assessment. In Ethiopian fiscal year (EFY—see Glossary) 1990/91, for example, the gross domestic product (GDP—see Glossary) declined by 5.6 percent, the greatest fall since the 1984-85 drought. Preliminary figures indicated a further decline in GDP in 1991/92, although some gains were registered for agriculture.

To resolve these problems, the TGE abandoned the failed policies of the Mengistu regime. It began dismantling the country's command economic system and shifted toward a market-oriented economy with emphasis upon private initiative. In December 1992, it adopted a new economic policy whereby the government would maintain control over essential economic sectors such as banking, insurance, petroleum, mining, and chemical industries. However, retail trade, road transport, and a portion of foreign trade was placed in private hands; and farmers could sell their produce at free-market prices, although land remained under government control. While smaller businesses were to be privatized, agriculture was to receive the most attention and investment. By 1993 the state farms of the Mengistu era were being dismantled and turned over to private farmers; similarly, the agricultural cooperatives of prior years had almost all disappeared. A major effort was also being made to steer large numbers of ex-soldiers into farming as a way of increasing production and of providing much-needed employment.

Meanwhile, on October 1, 1992, the TGE devalued Ethiopia's currency to encourage exports and to aid in correcting a chronic balance of payments deficit. The country had in addition begun to receive economic aid from several sources, including the European Community, the World Bank (see Glossary), Japan, Canada, and the United States.

Developments such as these provided a solid foundation for future economic improvement—gains that in mid-1993 were still very much in the realm of anticipation. It seemed clear that Ethiopia would remain one of the world's poorest nations for the foreseeable future.

Since the downfall of the Mengistu regime, Ethiopia's human rights record has improved. At the same time, the TGE has failed to end human rights abuses. In

the absence of a police force, the TGE delegated policing functions to the EPRDF and to so-called Peace and Stability Committees. On occasion, personnel belonging to these organizations were alleged to have killed, wounded, or tortured criminal suspects. There were also allegations of extrajudicial killings in many areas of the country.

Several incidents in early 1993 raised further questions about human rights in Ethiopia. On January 4, security forces opened fire on university students protesting UN and EPRDF policies toward Eritrea and the upcoming independence referendum. At least one person, and possibly several others, died during the fracas. In early April, the Council of Representatives suspended five southern political parties from council membership for having attended a conference in Paris at which the parties criticized the security situation in the country and the entire transitional process. A few days later, on April 9, more than forty instructors at Addis Ababa University were summarily dismissed. The TGE alleged lack of attention to teaching duties as the reason for its action, but the instructors asserted that they were being punished for having spoken out against TGE policies. These developments came on top of United States Department of State allegations that more than 2,000 officials of the Mengistu regime remained in detention without having been charged after almost twenty months.

One of the most serious dilemmas confronting the TGE concerned its inability to restore security throughout Ethiopia. After the EPRDF assumed power, it dismantled the 440,000-man Ethiopian armed forces. As a result, several hundred thousand ex-military personnel had to fend for themselves. The government's inability to find jobs for these soldiers forced many of them to resort to crime as a way of life. Many of these ex-soldiers contributed to the instability in Addis Ababa and parts of southern, eastern, and western Ethiopia.

To help resolve these problems, the TGE created the Commission for the Rehabilitation of Ex-Soldiers and War Veterans. By mid-1993 this organization claimed that it had assisted in the rehabilitation of more than 159,000 ex-soldiers in various rural areas. Additionally, commission officials maintained that they were continuing to provide aid to 157,000 ex-soldiers who lived in various urban centers.

Apart from the difficulties caused by former soldiers and criminal elements, several insurgent groups hampered the TGE's ability to maintain stability in

eastern and western Ethiopia. The situation was particularly troublesome with the OLF. For example, in mid-1991 government forces clashed with OLF units southwest of Dire Dawa over the rights to collect qat revenues. Qat is a plant that produces a mild narcotic intoxication when chewed and that is consumed throughout the eastern Horn of Africa and in Yemen. Although the two groups signed a peace agreement in August, tensions still existed, and fighting continued around Dire Dawa and Harer at year's end. In early 1992, EPRDF-OLF relations continued to deteriorate, with armed clashes occurring at several locations throughout eastern and western Ethiopia. After the OLF withdrew from the elections and the government in late June, full-scale fighting broke out in the south and southwest, but OLF forces were too weak to sustain the effort for more than a few weeks. Even so, in April 1993 the OLF announced that it was once again expanding its operations, but many observers doubted this claim and the OLF's ability to launch effective military campaigns against government forces.

The TGE also experienced problems with the Afar pastoralists who inhabit the lowlands along Ethiopia's Red Sea coast, particularly during its first year in power. In early September 1991, some Afar attacked a food relief truck column near the town of Mile on the Addis Ababa—Aseb road and killed at least seven drivers. The EPRDF restored security in this region by shooting armed Afar on sight. Since then, EPRDF-Afar relations have remained tense. Some Afar have associated themselves with the OLF, but many others joined the Afar Liberation Movement, which by early 1993 claimed to have 2,500 members under arms.

Elsewhere in eastern Ethiopia, the TGE experienced problems with the Isa and Gurgura Liberation Front (IGLF). On October 4, 1991, clashes between government forces and IGLF rebels resulted in the temporary closure of the Addis Ababa- Djibouti railroad near Dire Dawa and the disruption of trade between the two countries. The fighting also disrupted famine relief distribution to nearly 1 million refugees in eastern Ethiopia. By early 1992, the IGLF still had refused to recognize the EPRDF's right to maintain security in the Isa-populated area around Dire Dawa. By 1993, nonetheless, improved conditions allowed the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railroad to operate on a fairly regular basis.

In western Ethiopia, during the July-September 1991 period, the EPRDF engaged in several battles in Gojam and Gonder with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the only major political group excluded from

power. Additionally, in Gambela, the EPRDF battled the Gambela People's Liberation Front, which claimed the right to administer Gambela without EPRDF interference. The downfall of the Mengistu regime also created a crisis for approximately 500,000 southern Sudanese who lived in refugee camps in and around Gambela. Although the new government claimed they could remain in Ethiopia, nearly all of the refugees, fearing reprisals for belonging to or supporting southern Sudanese insurgents that the EPRDF opposed, fled toward southern Sudan. As a result, by early 1992 fewer than 15,000 Sudanese refugees remained in western Ethiopia.

In southern Ethiopia, crime was the main security problem. In late March 1992, EPRDF troops reportedly arrested 1,705 armed bandits and captured thousands of weapons, including machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. Despite this and similar sweeps, many Western observers believed that security problems would continue to plague the EPRDF regime for the foreseeable future because of the large number of available arms and unemployed ex-fighters in the south.

In contrast with the political divisiveness in Ethiopia, nearly all Eritreans appeared to support the EPLF and its goals. As a result, in the first two years after military victory, the PGE was able to move swiftly on a number of fronts. As one of its first acts, the new government expelled thousands of soldiers and personnel of the former Ethiopian army and government in Eritrea, together with their dependents, forcing them across the border into Tigray. The PGE maintained that **the expulsions were necessary to free up living quarters and jobs for returning Eritreans and to help reduce budgetary outlays**. In October 1992, the government opened schools across Eritrea. A few weeks later, the PGE announced new criminal and civil codes and appointed dozens of judges to run the court system. A National Service Decree made it mandatory for all Eritreans between the ages of eighteen and forty to perform twelve to eighteen months of unpaid service in the armed forces, police, government, or in fields such as education or health.

Perhaps most important, the PGE honored the agreement it had reached with the EPRDF and the OLF in 1991 to postpone a referendum on the question of Eritrean independence for two years. By early 1993, given the general popularity of the PGE and the desire among Eritreans to be free of control from Addis Ababa, the outcome of the referendum was a foregone conclusion. On

April 23-25, 1993, the PGE carried out the poll. In a turnout of 98.5 percent of the approximately 1.1 million registered voters, 99.8 percent voted for independence. A 121-member UN observer mission certified that the referendum was free and fair. Within hours, the United States, Egypt, Italy, and Sudan extended diplomatic recognition to the new country. Thereafter, Eritrea joined the UN, the Organization of Africa Unity, and the Lom, Convention (see Glossary).

A month after the referendum, the EPLF transformed the PGE into the Government of Eritrea, composed of executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Supreme power resided with a new National Assembly, comprised of the EPLF's former central committee augmented by sixty additional representatives from the ten provinces into which Eritrea was divided. Aside from formulating internal and external policies and budgetary matters, the assembly was charged with electing a president, who would be head of state and commander in chief of the armed forces. The executive branch consisted of a twenty-four-member State Council, chaired by the president. The judiciary, already in place, continued as before. At its initial meeting on May 21, the assembly elected Issaias Afwerki president. This new political configuration was to last not longer than four years, during which time a democratic constitution was to be drafted and all members of the EPLF would continue to work for the state without salary.

In the months following independence, the Eritrean government enjoyed almost universal popular support. Even such former adversaries as the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), the Eritrean Liberation Front-United Organization, and the Eritrean Liberation Front-Revolutionary Council issued statements of support for the referendum and for the new regime. During his first press conference after the referendum, President Issaias stressed that his government would pursue pragmatic and flexible policies. He also discussed prospects for close economic cooperation with Ethiopia and **raised the prospects of a future confederation between the two countries**. Meanwhile, the president pledged that **Aseb would remain a free port for goods in transit to Ethiopia**. Additionally, he reaffirmed the EPLF's commitment to the eventual establishment of a multiparty political system, but there would be **no political parties based on ethnicity or religion**.

Its popularity notwithstanding, the Eritrean government faced many problems and an uncertain future. Economically, the country suffered from the devastation of thirty years of war. Eritrea's forty publicly owned factories operated at no more than one-third capacity, and many of its more than 600 private companies had ceased operations. War damage and drought had caused agricultural production to decline by as much as 40 percent in some areas; as a result, about 80 percent of the population required food aid in 1992. The fighting also had wrecked schools, hospitals, government offices, roads, and bridges throughout the country, while bombing had destroyed economically important towns like Mitsiwa and Nakfa.

To resolve these problems, Eritrea implemented a multifaceted strategy that concentrated on restarting basic economic activities and rehabilitating essential infrastructure; encouraging the return and reintegration of nearly 500,000 Eritrean refugees from neighboring Sudan; and establishing the Recovery and Rehabilitation Project for Eritrea. Additionally, the Eritrean government reaffirmed its commitment to a liberal investment code, the response to which by mid-1993 was encouraging. Even so, the Eritrean government estimated that it needed at least US\$2 billion to rehabilitate the economy and to finance development programs—aid that it sought largely from Western countries and financial institutions.

Another serious issue confronting the new government concerned the status of the country's armed forces. Since the country's liberation in 1991, the government had lacked the funds to pay salaries. Nevertheless, officials adopted a compulsory national service act that required all former fighters to labor without pay for two years on various public works projects. When the new Government of Eritrea extended unpaid compulsory national service for an additional four years on May 20, 1993, thousands of frustrated former fighters who wanted to be paid and to return at last to their families demonstrated in Asmera. The government responded by promising to begin paying the fighters and by instituting a military demobilization program that would allow volunteers who could fend for themselves to return to their homes.

Eritrea's long-term well-being also depended on President Issaias's ability to preserve the country's unity. Achieving this goal will be difficult. Eritrea's 3.5 million population is split equally between Christians and Muslims; it also is divided into nine ethnic groups, each of which speaks a different language. A

reemergence of the historical divisions between the Muslim-dominated ELF and the largely Christian EPLF is possible and could prove to be the young country's undoing. Also, at least some Eritreans doubted President Issaias's pledge to establish a multiparty democracy and viewed with skepticism his determination to prevent the establishment of political parties based on ethnic group or religion. However, as of mid-1993, Eritrea remained at peace, and the government enjoyed considerable support. As a result, most Western observers maintained that the country had a good chance of avoiding the turbulence that plagued much of the rest of the Horn of Africa.

The ultimate fates of Ethiopia and Eritrea are inevitably intertwined. For economic reasons, Ethiopia needs to preserve its access to Eritrean ports, and Eritrea needs food from Ethiopia as well as the revenue and jobs that will be generated by acting as a transshipment point for Ethiopian goods. Also, political and military cooperation will be necessary to prevent conflict between the two nations.

Despite this obvious interdependence, Ethiopia and Eritrea face a difficult future. Many Ethiopians, primarily those who are Amhara, and some Eritreans, largely from the Muslim community, remain opposed to Eritrean independence and the EPLF-dominated government. These malcontents could become a catalyst for antigovernment activities in both countries. Within Ethiopia, the TGE's concept of ethnicity as the basis for organizing political life has aroused controversy and has stymied many of the TGE's policies and programs, thereby reducing chances for the emergence of a democratic government. Additionally, if the EPRDF does not broaden its ethnic base of support and bring such groups as the Amhara and the Oromo into the political process, the likelihood of violence will increase. As of mid-1993, it was unclear whether the TGE's plans for a new constitution and national government would resolve these problems or would founder on the shoals of ethnic politics and economic despair.