CHAPTER 14

'LAND TO THE TILLER': HUNGER AND THE END OF MONARCHY IN ETHIOPIA

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A decade before the historic Ethiopian famine of 1984–1985, university student activists in Addis Ababa rallied around the crisis of peasant hunger. The plight of the peasantry was, for the students and their colleagues attending universities in North America and Europe, evidence of Emperor Haile Selassie's callous disregard for the welfare of his subjects and exposed him as unfit to rule. Hunger in and of itself was not the student activists' primary concern in 1972 and 1973. Yet, among their many differences the leaders of the various organisations and factions that comprised the Ethiopian student movement agreed that widespread hunger had no place in modern Ethiopian society. They embraced hunger as a stand-in for political issues on which they had neither consensus nor control: political corruption, economic stagnation, the Amhara's political and economic dominance, an antiquated land tenure system and the national language policy (Zewde 2010). The government's treatment of the peasantry, close to ninety percent of Ethiopians at the time, exemplified the Emperor's detachment from the realities of life in Ethiopia and provided the students with common ground and, for many, justified revolution. In this way, the student movement showed the efficacy of hunger as a political tool for those who sought to cultivate a sense of common cause toward social and political change.

In 1973, at the height of the food crisis, students, primarily from Haile Selassie I University in Addis Ababa, with help from their colleagues abroad, launched food relief programmes, while they held street demonstrations to compel the Emperor either to enact agricultural and educational reforms or to abdicate. Their activism created the political breach into which military officers launched the coup that ended Ethiopia's almost two thousand years of monarchy (Zewde 2001). Gradually, methodically throughout 1974, junior military officers took over the students' movement and either co-opted or

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marginalised its leaders. The soldiers' activities began as non-political defiance by rank-and-file soldiers and junior officers discontented with their living conditions and pay, rather than with the country's social and political condition. Yet, many of the mutiny's leaders sympathised with and gained inspiration from student activists. What is significant, particularly for the purposes of this essay, is that the more radicalised members among the junior officers broadened the mutiny's rather narrow focus to include national, populist concerns, peasant hunger in particular, as a platform for a coup against the Emperor and his government. By adopting the student movements' stand against hunger, the Derg ('the committee' in Amarinya), as the military leaders called themselves, initially gained popular support.

From this foundation, during the middle months of 1974, the leaders of the broadened revolution – students, military officers, labour leaders, and leftist activists – engaged hunger as a social, political and moral problem. Activists within this movement sought to delegitimise politically those it cast as complicit in creating or allowing widespread hunger or famine. In the context of Ethiopia's revolution, holding aloft the banner of hunger cloaked political actors with authenticity and a connection with masses of people that the monarchy considered at the time to be beyond the realm of political relevance. The activists moved beyond the Emperor's political authority by responding to the critical needs of the Ethiopian people, while he ignored them. Therefore, from 1972 to September 1974, for the first time in Ethiopia's modern history, commoners subverted state power with political rhetoric and protests that featured a food crisis among rural peasants as a principal grievance. University student activists, as would military leaders, ascribed a political significance to both hunger and the peasantry that departed from previous generations and provided a viable justification for revolution.

The students' humanitarian and political responses to hunger are all the more noteworthy in light of the predominant discourse on famine in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa over the past thirty years, which has largely rendered Africans agentless observers in their own tragedy. If one places students' activities at the centre of this history, the diverse and dynamic response to hunger among Ethiopians becomes evident. Moreover, one sees the ways in which the students' politically charged engagement with hunger was critical in reshaping Ethiopia's political history.

Grassroots Humanitarianism and the Ethiopian Student Movement

1972 and 1973 were the most severe years of the prolonged crisis in the Horn of Africa and across much of the Sahel. Nature combined with public policy to hobble a large swath of the peasant population. An extended drought struck key agricultural areas of the north and around Hararghe in the east which

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accelerated rising food prices. The government compounded the peasant's problems maintaining access to food by tightly controlling its distribution throughout the country. It directed the preponderance of produce to urban centres, which inflated food prices in rural areas. Moreover, Emperor Selassie did not approach agricultural and land tenure reforms as a priority. For 1972–1973, the monarchy allocated US$191,797,669 for defence, internal law and order, and information, compared to US$14,983,789 available to support agricultural production (Ethiopian Student Union of North America 1974). The hardest hit communities were the Afar camel herders in the lowlands and Oromo tenant farmers on the escarpment, although farmers of the highlands suffered the highest death rates. In Wello and Tigray provinces alone 40,000 and 80,000 people respectively died.

Until the rise of the student movement, Ethiopians did not valorise the peasantry. Whether urban or rural, a majority of Ethiopians defined themselves, first and foremost, through an Ethiopian hierarchy wholly based on class and ethnicity (Donham 1992). The country's unique power dynamic, in which the monarchy, nobility and the church owned much of the land, entrenched deep social and political inequality. Exorbitant tax practices which targeted the peasantry ensured that they rarely had a surplus from agricultural production, remained in debt and were denied the luxury of political participation. The resulting tensions periodically bubbled to the surface in peasant protests and uprisings (Rahmato 2008).

Despite palpable links between government policies and peasant hunger, many Ethiopians accepted episodes of extreme hunger as part of a natural order (Pankhurst 1985). Just as many Ethiopians spoke of social stratification – another target of the Ethiopian student movement – as God's will; they also seldom questioned the origins of drought, famine and poverty (Molver 2008). After the revolution, journalist Ryszard Kapuściński conducted extensive interviews with members of the Emperor's staff. In one, a palace official described famine to Kapuściński as an expected occurrence. It was natural, he suggested, that droughts arrived, the earth dried up, the cattle dropped dead and the peasants starved. Then, as he described it, the rains would finally arrive and the cycle would begin anew (Kapuściński 1978). Another palace official blamed Westerners for blowing hunger in the north out of proportion and interfering in Ethiopia's domestic affairs. Hunger and suffering were 'in accordance with the laws of nature and the eternal order of things', the official contended. 'Since this was eternal and normal, none of the dignitaries would dare to bother His Most Exalted Highness with the news that in such and such a province a given person had died of hunger' (Kapuściński 1978: 111).

Students in the early 1970s had only recently taken a social and political interest in hunger and the peasantry. Indeed, they remained relatively quiet politically until the mid-1960s. Some of the early activists were inspired by the failed 1960 coup against the Emperor led by Germame Neway and his brother, Brigadier General Mengistu Neway. But most students remained

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politically ambivalent. A critical force for change came from abroad. Emperor Selassie welcomed students from newly independent African nations to Haile Selassie I University, beginning in 1960 and established a scholarship programme to attract them. Many of the foreign African students who arrived at Haile Selassie I University over the course of the decade imported a strident nationalism, pan-Africanism and anti-imperialism that had a profound effect on their Ethiopian counterparts. Similarly, the sizeable population of Ethiopians who went to study in the United States took in the American civil rights and anti-Vietnam War protests that swept across American universities and cities during the period. These movements – African and American – shaped what many Ethiopian activists believed was politically acceptable for a government and possible for citizens (Zewde 2010). Yet the students' politics remained complex and fluid. Within and outside of the country, their activism reflected Ethiopia's complex ethnic and class dynamics. Student organisations at Haile Selassie I University pushed their own agendas, some of which placed these organisations in opposition to each other. Shared frustration with the Emperor alone was not an effective enough glue to bind these factions into one movement.

Emperor Selassie, furthermore, seems to have regarded widespread hunger as beneath Ethiopia's dignity. His responses to the problem suggest that he feared that highlighting the peasants' plight would threaten Ethiopia's international standing and internal stability. Ethiopia was the only African nation to stand as a political equal to the powers of Europe in the signing of the Geneva Conventions in 1949 and as a founding member of the United Nations. In the period of decolonisation, when the promise and hope of African independence was threatened by a proliferation of coups d'état, ethnic and regional violence, political corruption and neo-colonialism, hunger was poised to expose the Ethiopian government's soft underbelly of class exploitation, cronyism and imperialism. The students and the government recognised hunger's potential to subvert Ethiopia's place in the world, but in fundamentally conflicting ways.

Students in North America and leftist intellectuals were aware of Ethiopia's economic and political deficiencies relative to many of their African neighbours. For them, Ethiopia's economic and political stagnation undermined its prestige from never having experienced formal European colonial rule. Student activists and intellectuals argued that famine did not emerge from the absence of food, but, rather, from the peasants' lack of access to it. The Emperor had clearly defined duties and responsibilities to his subjects, but evidently did not foresee the political costs of his negligence. News of the famine, spread to students through their colleagues who either hailed from or had worked in the northern provinces and Hararghe. It became the Ethiopian government's ultimate shame and failing. A shift emerged in the perceptions of the urban-common elite with regard to the relationship between government policy and famine, government action and the persistence of hunger.

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The peasants' hardships in the midst of drought were compounded by exploitative taxes and rents that increased continuously. These factors rendered living conditions for peasants in northern and eastern Ethiopia unsustainable. Activists described northerners in 1972 and 1973 as living, 'in the grinding teeth of starvation' (Ethiopian Student Union of North America 1974: 38). They railed against exorbitant tax practices that targeted the peasantry and ensured that they rarely had surplus agricultural production, remained in debt and were denied the luxury of political participation and organised protest. 'The fundamental causes of the present famine in Ethiopia,' The Ethiopian Student Union of North American (ESUNA) leaders argued in December 1973, 'are feudal stagnation and imperialist exploitation . . . We thus strongly and angrily denounce the criminal government of Haile Selassie and his cohorts for playing jokes until death of the Ethiopian people whom we regard more precious than anything in the world' (Ethiopian Student Union of North America 1973: 39).

In Addis Ababa during the first years of the 1970s, students often staged their demonstrations beyond the university's gates, along King George Street. On occasion, they took their protests a mile down the road to hold protests near Emperor Selassie's Menelik II Palace. They chanted popular slogans that reflected their politics and linked the persistence of hunger with the broader issue of ethnic and class-based social and economic inequality. 'Land to the tiller,' they shouted, and 'self-rule for all nations,' and 'democratic and human rights.' In *Combat*, mouthpiece of the World Federation of Ethiopian Students, activists stated that it had, 'since 1965 made the land question the heart of the national problem by agitating for "land to the tiller". The implementation of this crucial watchword,' the activists editorialised, 'will once and for all remain the spectre of famine from Ethiopia. The antagonistic existence of abject poverty on one side and luxury on the other, grain exports by some and famine for the multitude and potentially rich country and an actually poor one will be made to vanish never to return again' (Ethiopian Student Union of North America 1974: 44). The students' demands that the land be turned over to 'those who till it' reflected Marxism's influence within the students' evolving ideologies. This rallying cry, as Kifle Selassie describes, 'became steadily louder, year after year, up to the fall of Haile Selassie and the adoption of a radical agrarian reform in 1975 by the Derg' (Selassie 1987: 19).

With the increased anti-government agitation in Addis Ababa, the government tried to block news of the famine from urban residents and the international community. Still, Western journalists and humanitarian organisations took note of the famine, and compelled Selassie to acknowledge the crisis, which he did, but refused to admit that it had grown beyond his control. In June, he met privately with humanitarian relief organisations, but did not follow these up with a comprehensive relief programme. Jack Shepherd, a US State Department official who served in Ethiopia during this period, described the Emperor as seeking, 'to create the impression that they weren't

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just another Sahel country coming apart at the seams' (Shepherd 1975: ix). Selassie did not invite officials from humanitarian organisations to assess the food crisis. In addition, government officials blamed foreign journalists and aid workers for inciting students to protest and denounce the Emperor (Kapuściński 1978).

In the absence of an effective government response to the food crisis, a group of university students and their allies on the faculty at Haile Selassie I University organised a food relief regimen. They started with an ad hoc research group comprised of three professors to examine the food situation in the north and issue a report. 'The situation is extremely grave and urgent' they related (Ethiopian Student Union of North America 1974: 33). More than simply filling the humanitarian void, students acted out of a sense of national purpose. From abroad, leaders of the World Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students demanded that the government use a portion of the food set aside for university students' meals for food relief for the peasants in the north and that the Emperor organise the relief operation. Ethiopian students in Addis and those abroad were not always coordinated in message and action. Foreign-based activists were essential in voicing the grievances and advertising the efforts of their Ethiopia-based colleagues (Zewde 2010). Indeed, the Emperor's aggressive response to students' humanitarian initiatives illustrates the tremendous risk that the students took. It was dangerous to protest and organise hunger relief. These remained the preserve of students within Ethiopia, while those abroad risked their scholarships through their vocal opposition to the monarchy and their fundraising on behalf of Addis Ababa-based activists.

During the first week of March 1973, students from Haile Selassie I University organised trips to Wello to distribute to peasants food they had collected. On 17th March, police arrested students for no apparent reason except that their initiative embarrassed the Emperor. The following week, students held political marches in Wello to draw attention to the famine and protest about their fellow students' arrests. The police fired on the crowd of peaceful demonstrators and killed seventeen students. Despite the government's willingness to use deadly force to put down the student movement, the propaganda campaign against the Emperor and the students' relief programme continued throughout 1973. Police action stifled student humanitarianism but strengthened their resolve to push the government to enact education reforms, end police brutality and address famine. The more radical students sought the end of the monarchy itself. Government violence against the students speaks to Haile Selassie's concern for the message that protests sent to the rest of the population. Evidently, however, he did not perceive the student movement as an existential threat, nor that the junior military officers would use the student movement to bring down the monarchy and implement elements of reform that the university students and leftist intellectuals had demanded. This evolved rapidly over eight months, beginning in 1974.

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The Double Usurp: Military Takeover of the Student Movement and the State

In Addis Ababa, students coined a popular aphorism that proved to be prescient: 'the students prepared the meal, the taxi drivers are cooking it, but the army will eat it' (Darch 1976: 12). While activists unwittingly prepared for the fall of the Emperor's government, their movement reached a tipping point. In January 1974, students at Haile Selassie I University boycotted classes and held large street demonstrations to protest government repression and violence directed at students and journalists. In the midst of this civil unrest, the government enacted policies that infused the movement with energy and broadened support, including raising petrol costs. Taxi drivers in Addis Ababa might have settled for higher fuel costs had the Emperor allowed them to raise taxi fares. He refused, and, in so doing, precipitated the taxi drivers joining the national protests. On 18th February 1974, the drivers and school teachers launched a city-wide strike, beginning four days of extensive protests, which encouraged the students. At the same time, however, student leaders within the broad administrative structure of the World Federation of Ethiopian Students struggled to keep their coalition of student organisations together. With the added pressure of coordinating with non-unionised striking workers and civil servants, and with the regime turning more liberal in its use of violence toward activists, the student movement floundered. The progression of the army's mutiny is not as clear as the student movement, but from January 1974 the revolution evolved with striking speed (Zewde 2001). Soldiers of the Fourth Division, in the southern frontier post of Nagelle Borana, were the first to mutiny.

In the early stages of what became a revolution, the government operated with a diminished capacity to discern the nature of the unfolding events and no palpable inclination to erect even a veneer of consideration for the concerns of protestors and mutineers. Both the military and civilian movements capitalised on the government's weakness and an unravelling of Ethiopia's social fabric, which had, for so many generations, successfully checked challenges to its social and political hierarchy. Apart from this context, the soldiers and the students aspired to distinct goals. The mutineers sent radio messages throughout the country in which they made their demands clear: increased pay and better living conditions. They did not make any political demands. As their message echoed throughout the country, other divisions joined the rebellion. When the army's Second Division, stationed in Asmara, joined its leaders and demanded not just reform but regime change, this was the beginning of the coup (Tareke 2009).

Rather than assess the forces that drove the movements for change, the Emperor and his government responded to the events taking place around them on the basis of centuries of tradition. As a result, junior officers freely formed an ad hoc branch of the central government that became the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police and Territorial Army.

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With the Emperor's tacit approval, the Committee, or Derg, investigated the soldiers' grievances. At its inception, therefore, the Derg was neither revolutionary nor populist. The issues that spawned it were specific to the military, and unlikely to be the basis for broad civilian support, but its agenda changed rapidly. Many activists welcomed the Derg, for its capacity to use force with the monarchy in ways that the coalition of activists and labourers could not. Derg leaders welcomed many leftist leaders and intellectuals into its fold. With its leadership and composition heavily in flux throughout the course of the revolution and its aftermath, they adopted much of the left's social and political positions, particularly with regard to the monarch.

The Derg, initially under the leadership of Aman Andom, and then Mengistu Haile Mariam, had, by November 1974, embraced the peasant-centred themes that brought the student movement popular support. It set up a commission to examine the causes of famine in Hararghe and the northern provinces, which announced its findings in a fifteen-page report on 27th August 1974. The commission condemned the entire imperial government for neglecting 'the problem of drought' in the north and accused Prime Minister Habte Wold and his cabinet of suppressing news of the drought. The Derg ordered the Prime Minister and the thirty-four people who served under him to stand trial. By contrast, Derg leaders remained respectful toward the Emperor, while they culled members of his government and family. But as they solidified the Derg's political position, its leaders turned to undermine Haile Selassie's credibility directly. Just as university student activists had done, Derg officials used the existence of pervasive hunger in the north to indict him for wilful neglect. The commission's report quoted an August 1970 memo from Mamo Seyoum, Governor and Special Imperial Envoy in famine-stricken Wello, to Selassie that warned him of the likely effects of prolonged drought in the region. Seyoum explicitly requested that Emperor Selassie take immediate action to 'save the lives of thousands of starving peasants' (Shepherd 1975: ix–x).

On the evening of 11th September 1974, a radio announcer read the names of the sixty-five government officials and members of the royal family who had been executed, and instructed listeners to turn on their televisions and await a special programme to be aired that evening. Derg officials also directed the Emperor to watch the scheduled television programme, British journalist, Jonathan Dimbleby's documentary, *Ethiopia: The Unknown Famine*. He reportedly did so, alone in his palace, except for a single aide (Kapuściński 1978; Shepherd 1985; Tareke 2009).

When Dimbleby arrived in Ethiopia in 1972, he was an admirer of the Emperor and of Ethiopia. Haile Selassie permitted him to travel freely throughout the country. But while Dimbleby travelled through Wello and Tigray, he realised the famine's extent. Dimbleby edited images from the Tigrayan crisis with footage of the Emperor hosting a lavish feast and feeding mounds of food to his caged, pet lions in one of his gardens. When he returned to Britain, Dimbleby reported that Selassie was slow to respond to the emer-

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gency in the north and had actively worked to conceal its seriousness from the outside world. *The Unknown Famine* is historic for its place in the dramatic end to Ethiopia's monarchy and the Haile Selassie regime. However, journalist Peter Gill describes the film as unwatchable: 'There is film of the bodies of children who have died overnight which would almost certainly be banned by modern broadcasters on the grounds that it was too upsetting. The twenty-five minutes comprise relentless images of suffering, a sparse script, and a veiled appeal for assistance' (Gill 2010: 29). The morning after the film was shown on Ethiopian television, the Derg forced the Emperor to abdicate. Chief among the indictments that the military officers used to justify seizing power was that Selassie fomented and ignored famine among the peasants. Hunger, therefore, served as the cornerstone of Ethiopia's revolution, waged in the midst of and justified by famine.

In October, the Derg cemented its political hold on the country and hunger, again, was central to this process. Yet the continuously revolving door of leaders and the growing list of condemned political and social elites made it difficult to gauge the direction of the revolution. It took on a vague meaning. At the very moment that the military dethroned Selassie, the Derg issued the more ominous *Ithiopya tikdem* (Ethiopia First) as the new slogan for revolutionary Ethiopia. This was a deliberate move away from the students' populist slogans and a clear nod toward the nationalist approach that the new regime would take toward separatist movements in Eritrea and the large Somali-speaking Ogaden. Still, hunger remained a core political issue for the Derg. In addition to establishing the Commission of Inquiry to investigate the famine, it enacted extensive and dramatic land reforms geared toward empowering the peasantry (Rahmato 1991).

Conclusion

Ethiopia's relationship with hunger in the mid-1970s was not simply as victim. Hunger was deeply politicised as an issue, as I have argued, and students' responses to it were historic and transformative. It is essential to recognise student engagement with hunger during this period, considering the broader significance of the 1973–1974 famine in international affairs. As historian, Hussein Ahmed, wrote, 'the prevailing economic and social malaise, aggravated by the famine and the global energy crisis, and by the mutinies of army divisions stationed in sensitive regions in the south and in Eritrea in the north combined to provide the complex backdrop to the revolutionary upsurge that finally swept away the monarchy and its institutions' (Ahmed 2006: 298). In distinct and significant ways, chronic hunger and famine were not only the experiences of millions of Ethiopian peasants during the early 1970s. Student activists reshaped them as symbols of political corruption, underdevelopment and, for many, political illegitimacy. For the Derg's leadership as well,

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effectively responding to chronic hunger legitimised it in the eyes of many activists, and Ethiopians in general, and enabled it to cast its military coup as a populist revolution.

Ethiopian student activists of the 1960s and 1970s have been called 'the grave diggers of the old regime and the generators of the Ethiopian revolution' (Zewde 2001: 220), for precipitating events that ultimately ended the monarchy. It is likely that this revolution would not have happened if they had remained the sole political agitators. Indeed, one former student described the movement as ultimately powerless without the army. 'As radical as we students were voicing the misery of the peasantry,' he recalled, 'we would have been protesting for many more years without any result had the military kept its pledge to protect the throne. It did not, and that made the whole difference'.[1] In response to the crisis of chronic hunger and in stark contrast to the role of the international humanitarian regime in the decades to come, student and leftist activists spearheaded their own, independent, humanitarian relief initiatives among peasants. The 1972–1974 famine, therefore, marks a moment in Ethiopian history in which perceptions of the peasantry among urban elites was transformed along with their conceptions of the government's responsibility to its people. It marks the end of a period, moreover, after which the obligation to respond to hunger in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa was embraced by Western humanitarian relief organisations. Their well-funded and well-publicised humanitarian interventions did not exclude local voices and relief initiatives, yet their predominance in famine relief in Africa after 1975, palpably defined during the 1984–1985 famine in northern Ethiopia, politicised hunger in a profoundly new and enduring manner (de Waal 1997; Gill 2010; Polman 2010). As with the junior officers of the Ethiopian military, who in 1974 embraced the rallying cry of hunger relief to accomplish their political goals, hunger during the 1980s and 1990s, as Alex de Waal, among others, has demonstrated, would legitimise international interventions in African affairs elsewhere (de Waal 1997).

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Note

1 Personal correspondence with Professor Teshale Tibebu, 18th December 2012.

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