The Horn Breaks African State Norms

Teshale Tibebu

The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay

by Christopher Clapham

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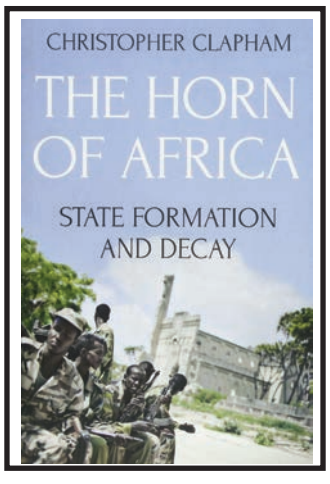
Christopher Clapham is a doyen of scholarship on twentieth and twenty-first century Ethiopian politics. He has published extensively not only on Ethiopia, but also on the Horn of Africa and the African continent at large. His two previous monographs on Ethiopia, *Haile Selasssie's Government* (Praeger 1969), and *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge 1990) have been standard references on the topics addressed in the two books. His various articles and conference papers on Ethiopia have been additional sources of information and insights for students of modern Ethiopian politics.

The book under review, *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay*, follows in the tradition of Clapham's excellent scholarly works on the region. The book deals with three states he included in the region of the Horn of Africa: Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Somali states of former British, Italian, and French Somaliland.

The book contains six chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the 'power of landscape', a discussion of the Horn's geography and its impact on societies and histories. Chapter 2 addresses histories of state creation and collapse. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somali states, respectively. Chapter 6 summarizes the entire work and reflects on the whole region, including its global importance.

The author states that the book addresses the 'dynamics of state formation and decay' (p. 2) in the Horn of Africa, its 'primary concern'being 'with developments since 1991' (p. 5). He writes:'It is the central argument of the book that the dynamics of the Horn are essentially home grown' (p. 2). The external powers that intervened in the Horn were 'absorbed into the existing structures of the region'.



The author states that the Horn is distinct from the rest of Africa in three fundamental ways. First, despite secessionist movements that emerged in many parts of Africa, it was only in the Horn that they succeeded. In 1991, Eritrea and Somaliland *de facto* seceded from Ethiopia and Somalia, respectively. Two decades later, in 2011, South Sudan became the third region to join the list of successful secessions.

The second uniqueness of the Horn lies in its geography, highland and lowland rubbing shoulders in ways unique in Africa. Clapham took John Markakis's classification of Ethiopia into highland core, lowland periphery, and highland periphery and applies it to the whole region of the Horn (p. 9). Clapham sees the history of the Horn as having been conditioned by its geomorphological features whereby the highland core dominated the peripheries, and to which the latter reacted (p. 9). As such, Clapham gave geography a prominent role in defining the history of the Horn. This is an old thesis, one where even the 'survival of Ethiopian independence' (Rubenson) was explained by Ethiopia's difficult and 'impregnable' geography. This approach is historically inaccurate, as no invader who attempted to take over Ethiopia ever found her geography an insurmountable barrier.

The third uniqueness of the Horn lies in its 'non-colonial' status. Although Eritrea and the Somali entities were European colonies, Clapham categorizes them under the term of 'non-colonial'. What does Clapham mean when he calls the Horn 'non-colonial'? He attributes non-coloniality in the Horn to the presence in the region of the 'only indigenous sub-Saharan African state, the Ethiopian empire' (p. 3). As such, given the weight and centrality of Ethiopia in the Horn, and given that it was never colonized, the other states of the Horn that were colonized 'were subordinated to non-colonial dynamics to a degree that did not occur elsewhere' (p. 3). In other words, what made the Horn's dynamics'non-colonial'is the hegemony of a non-colonial state, Ethiopia, over those who were colonized by Europeans - Eritrea and the Somali states.

This is a major thesis, one that was not advanced before in studies of the Horn. The thesis has a major flaw, however. Although Ethiopia was not colonized, the other states and peoples in the Horn region, and inside some parts of Ethiopia itself, saw it as a colonial power that ruled over them as colonial subjects. Accordingly, from their perspective, what made the Horn unique was not its being 'non-colonial', but rather of being subjected to a different kind of colonial domination. What made it different is that the perceived colonial power was not European, but African. All nationalist movements in the Horn of Africa, from Eritrea to Somalia, including the

Oromo, Sidama, Ogaden, etc., have made the same claim regarding Ethiopia as being a colonial power, and their struggles against the Ethiopian state as being an anti-colonial struggle. This is the key to understanding the uniqueness of the Horn. No other state in Africa has been confronted with multiple armed resistance groups fighting for independence under the banner of anti-colonialism. The abortive secessions of Katanga or Biafra did not articulate a theory of fighting against Congolese or Nigerian colonialism. The struggles that led to successful secessions in Eritrea and state collapse in Somalia were results of the military confrontation against the Ethiopian state which they saw as a colonial power.They would thus not accept the thesis that Ethiopia is non-colonial.

The break-up of Somalia in 1991 was tied to the defeat of the Somali military during the 1977 war with Ethiopia. The defeat led to insurgencies against Siad Barre, supported by Ethiopia, culminating in the collapse of the Somali state in January 1991. The 1977 war was fought by Somalia and Somali insurgents in the Ethiopian Somali region against what they called Ethiopian colonialism.

Clapham knows this well. He has written extensively about it, including in the book under review. It is a weakness of his book not to take this aspect into account when discussing the uniqueness of the Horn. Indeed, he himself lapses into describing Ethiopia as a case of 'internal colonialism'(p. 33),where Emperor Menilek carried out successful campaigns of territorial expansion during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, 'more than quintupling the area under Ethiopian control, and perhaps tripling or quadrupling its population' (p. 32). He went on to explain how internal colonialism was 'in some ways more problematic than an external one', and gave the example of how the Amhara, the internal colonizers, were privileged vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, while in external colonialism, which he meant European colonialism in Africa, all the colonial subjects were treated the same way. He described Ethiopia as an 'empire not merely in name but in behaviour', one that 'assumed a sense of manifest destiny towards its region that was most visible in its expansion under Menilek' (p. 180). All these flashy points about 'internal colonialism','manifest destiny', etc., belie the thesis of the 'non-colonial' nature of the Horn predicated on Ethiopian non-coloniality. The conquered subjects of Menilek's empire, at any rate their elite spokespersons, saw Ethiopia as a colonial power, not as a non-colonial entity. That is the key for understanding the dynamics of state formation and collapse in the Horn, the subject of the book under review.

We also need to be reminded that when Eritrea and Somaliland formed their own state in 1991, they did so along the lines of the European colonial cartography. The Italian colony of Eritrea and the British colony of Somaliland Protectorate became the new states of the Horn, born out of the fracture of Ethiopia and Somalia. Here, the Horn proves to be in line with, not different from, the rest of Africa.

Clapham sees Ethiopia as the key to the Horn of Africa, as the dominant powerhouse of the region, the 'prism through which outside powers have viewed the region' (p. 188). He discusses Ethiopia in great detail, delving deep into its history, state structure, power relations, and regional hegemony. The other regions of the Horn, Eritrea and the Somali entities, are discussed to a large degree in relation to Ethiopia. The chapter on Eritrea is mostly focused on Eritrea's failure to live up to its promised potential. He called Eritrea 'one of the greatest tragedies in the modern history of the Horn of Africa', even as he appreciates the 'quite extraordinary experience through which Eritrea came to independence' (p. 112).In the Horn, he sees Eritrea as 'ever the spoiler in regional politics' (p. 146). In short, for Clapham, the remarkable Eritrean struggle for independence ended up in a failed state unable to fulfill its dream of prosperous Eritrea.

Clapham's discussion of Somalia is not different. Here too, failure is the key. The pan-Somali nationalist movement inspired by the idea of 'Greater Somalia' ended up not with the enlargement of Somalia, but with its fragmentation and collapse. Somalia is the failed state *par excellence* in the Horn.

Clapham barely discusses Djibouti, devoting only five pages to it. In what he calls the 'Djibouti anomaly', he refers to its 'quite exceptional level of stability' (p. 171). Given how critical Djibouti is for the region, especially Ethiopia, and given its global importance, Clapham should have discussed Djibouti in more detail. Instead, he calls it a 'thoroughly neo-patrimonial little state under the control of a family oligarchy' (pp. 172-3). The irony is that this 'little state' was the most stable in the Horn, while fire was raging all around.

As compared with Eritrea and Somalia, Clapham has more positive things to say about Ethiopia, including its leader Meles Zenawi, whom he called 'a man of quite extraordinary intelligence' (pp. 69-70). He saw Meles as 'articulate and personally charming, ideally equipped to build relations with the outside world' (p. 70). Clapham wrote that Meles rose through the ranks of the TPLF due to 'his intellectual ability, combined with an open-ended pragmatism in responding to events, though always within Marxist frame of reference' (p. 70). The idea of 'Marxist pragmatism' may be Clapham's contribution to political theory. Clapham also wrote about Meles's'ever-enquiring mind' (p. 94). No leader in the Horn of Africa was subjected to such praise by Clapham as Meles, a leader reviled by the people of Ethiopia. By contrast, Clapham has a different take on the President of Eritrea, Isayas Aferwerki:

> Isayas, despite (or because of) his evident skills as an insurgent leader, simply lacked the capacity to make the transition from fighter to ruler of an independent state that was demonstrated to such a striking degree by Meles in Ethiopia. He remained a street fighter, preoccupied with power and survival, and prepared to lash out whenever these were threatened, but lacking any wider vision of the kind that Eritrea desperately needed (pp. 129-30).

Claham's insulting remark that Isayas was unable to make the transition from insurgent to leader of state ignores the fact that the EPLF had been a government in its 'liberated areas' for many years, and that, when it captured Asmara in 1991, it already had a state in place, and Isayas was its head.

One wonders why Clapham does not have the same harsh words against Meles and his regime for the massacre in the aftermath of the post-2005 elections, or the innumerable reports of human rights violations under his rule. Indeed, in the pages where he discusses the 2005 elections (pp. 86-92), Clapham does not even mention the massacre of 193 people (by the government's own admission), the declaration of emergency, the incarceration of opposition leaders, and the imprisonment of thousands of people. All he says is the government was able to impose control (p. 91). The question is, 'How did the government "impose control"?'

Clapham has a high regard for EPRDF and its leadership. In one quite remarkable statement, he wrote about the peaceful succession of power when Haile Mariam Desalegn became the new Prime Minister after the death of Meles. He wrote, 'From the decline of the Gondarine monarchy in Ethiopia in the later eighteenth century, through to the present day, it is difficult to find any unequivocal case of peaceful succession to the highest position in the state' (p. 102). Clapham ignores the simple fact that Haile Mariam was, and still is, a member of the same ruling party EPRDF, and that it was Meles himself who hand-picked and groomed him to be the vice-premier. Haile Mariam replacing Meles is not a change of regime or party. Clapham also praised the fact that succession struggles in post-insurgent regimes require 'struggle credentials', which Haile Mariam did not have. But, again, it was Meles who hand-picked Haile Mariam. No one in EPRDF would challenge Meles's choice. Moreover, there is the EPRDF tradition of 'democratic centralism' which rules out 'succession struggles'.

Clapham closes his book with this last paragraph:

> At a much more basic level, Islam threatens to empower the peripheries of the Horn against the centre, by providing a source of ideological inspiration allied to other and notably financial resources, and in the process reactivating a very ancient characterisation of the region in which the 'highland core' (not only in Ethiopia, but also in Eritrea), viewed throughout this book the relatively stable centre from which power ultimately emanates, may instead be threatened by its peripheries. This is a part of the world constantly in flux, in which patterns of state creation and decay form and reform, in response to the ever changing relations between highland and lowland, Christianity and Islam, zones of settled governance and zones of statelessness. *It would be foolish to assume that these tensions are being, or will ever be, resolved* (pp. 192-3; emphasis added).

In other words, the Horn will be the Horn, and nothing else. It is a region that comes back to what it left before, in never-ending cycles. The protagonists, who are antagonists, repeat the same pattern of conflict and confrontation because they are irredeemably divided into highland and lowland, Christianity and Islam, statehood and 'statelessness', etc. That such a view is put forward by Clapham is quite troubling. It freezes history; it assumes things never change in this region. So, perhaps, per Clapham, we may need to get ready for the second coming of Ahmad Ibrahim al-Ghazi anytime in the future.

One year after the publication of Clapham's book, the Horn began to witness a remarkable phenomenon. Dr. Abiy Ahmad was elected Prime Minister of Ethiopia in April 2018. Soon, he carried out sweeping reforms. Top on the list was a call for peace with Eritrea. He visited Eritrea, and Isayas came to Ethiopia. The man Clapham called a 'street fighter', one incapable of making the transition to a statesman, was warmly welcomed by hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians. Perhaps, against Clapham's gloomy prediction, the Horn could change for the better, and not repeat the cycles of the past. One, of course, cannot review a book based on events that took place after it was published. Yet, if scholars tend to 'see' the future, then Clapham may have been too eager to dismiss the hopes of the Horn as being tied to its dismal past. The people of the Horn have the capacity to change their future for the better. The bright light on the horizon of the Horn may be just the beginning.

Overall, in *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay*, Clapham provides a synopsis of one of the most complex regions in the world. His insights are informed by more than half-a-century of research and writing on the region, especially Ethiopia. Written in beautiful prose and smooth flow, *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay* provides overall knowledge of the region's politics of the last three decades.