An Incommensurate Burden

Gerry Salole

The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement c 1960-1974
by Bahru Zewde
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It must be unusual for a book review to dwell so much on what is not there. So it is perhaps worth stressing that Bahru’s credentials to write this book (and potentially its sequel too) are impeccable. Not only is he one of modern Ethiopia’s pre-eminent historians but, as the blurb on the back of the book feebly advertise, he was a protagonist in some of the momentous events narrated in the book. He describes himself as ‘participant observer’. There is no doubt that this book is thus a labour of love. Therefore, to complain that Bahru stops short of telling the story of what happened once the Revolution got hijacked and that he does not tell us about other aspects of Ethiopian society feels very churlish because this book delivers what its title promises: a detailed analysis of how the Ethiopian student movement developed. This notwithstanding, the book does leave one wanting more and there is so much hinted promise, especially in some rather irrelevant and tongue in cheek footnotes, that one years for the sequel. I can think of no one better to write it.

The first chapter begins with the global context and Bahru succinctly contextualises the Ethiopian student movement in a global framework. The book was compiled in 2011-12. Thus he applies weaves in the international context: beginning with the revolt that has become known as the ‘Arab Spring’, the revolution that was ignited so premonition of the trouble that he was set for. The second chapter of Quest is set firmly on familiar and beloved territory for Bahru, given his previous work on the reformist intelligentsia of the early twentieth century (Bahru 2002), and establishes the political backdrop in the post-liberation period immediately after the restoration of Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1941 following the end of the Fascist occupation of Ethiopia. Bahru depicts the deliberate cultivation of the personality cult around the Emperor, acknowledges the clear accomplishments of the imperial regime but focuses on the relentless and successful centralisation of the state infrastructure, as well as the increasing investment in education. He links the unmistakable ‘post-liberation tremors’, the rather tragic demise of critical and intellectual debate, and the inevitable increase of sycophancy and adulation of the Emperor, notably in the education system. The chapter also describes the gradual ascendency of the United States over the United Kingdom in exercising influence in Ethiopia, the imperial penchant for five-year plans, the creation of the University College of Addis Ababa and its rather painful morphing into the Haile Sellassie I University.

Bahru’s analysis of the 1960 coup, an event which shook the imperial regime profoundly, portrays a watershed, marking the end of plots and conspiracies and the beginning of open and militant student protests. The account of the attempted coup presented is not much different from the classic account given in so many earlier studies, but Bahru focuses on the way in which the coup leaders’ legacy has been woven into the narrative of the Ethiopian student movement, as well as the knee-jerk reaction of the state regime to the coup, and the sheer inability of the system to adjust to the challenges faced. In this context, too, the chapter addresses the rise of the ethno-nationalist Tigrean insurgency – the Waynean rebellion of 1943. Bahru also addresses the emergence of Oromo ethno-nationalism through the Mecha and Tulema self-help Association set up in 1963 and the Bale uprising of the same year. Pride of place, naturally, is given to the Eritrean armed struggle that began in 1961.

Beginning with Haile Sellassie’s premonition of the trouble that he was kindling with the opening of the first institution of higher learning, the third chapter takes the reader through the gradual escalation of discontent. It anchors the early grievances on relatively mundane issues and shows how the political horizons of students gradually changed. The gradual maturation from a patronised and controlled student council, mirroring into the ineffective National Union of Ethiopian Students, laid the groundwork for the inevitable development of more radical unions. He shows how the written and spoken word mattered, and how the adoption of anonymous tracts and pseudonyms permitted increasingly free expression. The hugely important extra-curricular activities, centred on sports, culture and debates, culminated in the poetry readings on the annual College Day, marking the authentic articulation by students of the grievances of the peasantry and the poor. From 1961, when Tamiru Feyissa’s poem ‘DehawYenagaral’ (‘The Poor Man Speaks Out’) won the poetry competition, departing from the philosophical and social content of earlier poems, a distinct change in tone of students speaking truth to power becomes evident. The inability of the system to absorb this lèse majesté meant a temporary resort to fake acquiescence and glittering and tame cultural extra-curricular activities covering simmering, but palpable resentment.

It is in this context that the students began to develop a consciousness about the plight of the peasantry and the urban poor and the spontaneous development of the idea of community service, with students building schools, teaching adult literacy classes and engaging in other community development projects. This spontaneous student concern led to the Ethiopian University Service (EUS), which was hijacked by the university administration and led, in turn, to friction between students and the authorities as this spontaneous initiative was appropriated. The EUS was morphed from a voluntary activity into a compulsory annual imposition. Bahru also tantalisingly suggests that:

One may even venture to push the story further and see in the EUS a precursor of one of the most ambitious and controversial programmes in rural transformation – the Development through Cooperation Campaign (known in short by its Amharic term, Zamacha) that the government introduced in December 1974, a few months after it deposed Emperor Haile Sellassie (p. 95).

Ethiopian student organisations in Europe began with the Association Mutualist des Etudiants Ethiopiens en France in 1920 (a self-help, mutual aid association) and the K-based Ethiopian Student Society in 1947, which reads like a who’s who in the imperial political establishment. The Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) was founded in 1958 and continued to hold annual congresses until 1964, when the resolutions took on a decidedly political turn, heralding its growing radicalization. Parallel to this, the Ethiopian Students Association in
North America ushered in powerful radicals who would guide the student association until dislodged by the home-grown radicals who challenged their leadership after 1969.

In chapter four, Bahru depicts the unrelenting radicalisation of the student movement against the backdrop of the anti-colonial wave that was sweeping across Africa and the role of African scholarship students in radicalising their Ethiopian fellow-students, as well as the overwhelming influence of the 1960s anti-colonial revolution and resonated in the discourse of students and in their increasingly overt publications. Bahru also chronicles the advent of the Crocodiles, which made their advent by confessing what Bahru feels is the need for secrecy with the sponsorship of an official student paper. The exact membership of the group has remained a closely guarded secret to this day and so their history and their deeds are shrouded in mystery. The society's aim was the propagation of Marxist ideas among the student population. The fact that the discourse becomes increasingly Marxist from this point on is an indication of their success. They also inculcate the students relentless contestation between initially sympathetic, then ambivalent, and finally hostile attitudes towards the United States, in conjunction with African-American radicalism and the protests against the American war in Vietnam. The Crocodiles rather tactlessly came out into the open when many of the alleged members of the secret group were elected to the leadership of the student union; the leaders were immediately suspended in May 1965.

The increasing awareness of the plight of the Ethiopian peasant leads inexorably to the dramatic entry of that most powerful slogan in Ethiopian politics: 'Land to the Tiller'. The feudal, stagnant, and bi-racial society was one that would dominate the Ethiopian polity since the ascendency of Menelik, and yet to be written. He returns to the central importance of the vying for hegemony of the two Fronts, and the traumas of the Red Terror, the severed relations between the ruling incumbent EPRDF and the Ethiopian Students Union in North America was tackling the question of 'self-determination up to and including the national question' in Ethiopia. Bahru skilfully shows how the dissatisfaction with the education system and a growing sense of the irrelevance of the syllabus dovetailed with increasing resentment of Indian and American Peace Corps teachers. This chapter in particular demonstrates the considerable work that has been done in reading, analysing and synthesising into a coherent whole, a myriad of contrasting political narratives and personal reminiscences, police reports, leaflets, etc., all woven into a complex narrative.

First, it introduced strong, aggressive and violent language into the political debate:

- In what is likely to be a polemic style – which formed a perfect contrast to the Incubation of political parties (EPRP) – that had been formed in clandestine fashion in the meantime (p. 230).

Citing Andargachew Assegid (2000) and Kiflu Tadesse (1993), who have written major accounts of Ma'adis and EPRP, respectively, Bahru essentially makes the point that whilst Ma'adis saw the revolution as a long-term process, EPRP had a more urgent perspective. However, in the context of the reality, therefore, the divergent stands of the two organisations probably reflected political positioning rather than ideological or political convictions. Nevertheless, the two organisations aligned themselves on opposite camps in the revolutionary struggle and were "girding themselves up for the duel that killed them both". He also tells us the story of the singularly more successful armed struggle against the Tigrayan ones. "TPLF launched the armed struggle against the Darge regime in February 1975... That armed struggle eventually culminated in 1991 in its seizure of state power, something that had eluded the acrimonious multi-ethnic left (p. 262)."

The concluding chapter, a recap of the multi-layered, complex story that Bahru has laid out so diligently, is in many ways an appetiser for the book that is yet to be written. He returns to the universality of youth protests, re-emphasises the historical system the student movement originally opposed and the gradual process of radicalisation, partly due to government overreaction and partly to the tireless efforts of a small group of students. He then returns to the central importance of the emergence of the national question and the subsequent credo of 'self-determination up to and including the national question'. On the larger scene, it is its promise and the hint of an analysis of the future of Ethiopia. In a few dense pages, he tantalises the reader with profound ironies (the fact, for instance, that the principle of self-determination has been championed (from the historical core of the Ethiopian polity), the severed relations between the ruling incumbent EPRDF and the Oromo and Ogaden (Somali) Liberation Fronts, and the traumas of the Red Terror. He concludes his students' penchant for dogmatic belief, rather than seasoned debate and a spirit of compromise, has had an enduring result both in the framing of the National
References


Question and in their organisational culture. The country has to come to grips with the legacy of the student movement ‘if it is to have any hope of redemption’.