

Part III

ESM Testimonials: Concluding Remarks

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Our direct involvement and observation of the tumultuous Ethiopian student movement during the 1960s culminated as we graduated from college in the late 1960s, yet the fervent struggle persisted through the unwavering commitment of our junior peers. By 1971, the agitation instigated by the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) had spread to secondary school students, who staged a strike in solidarity with the embattled university students, catalyzing further student-led boycotts. However, this burgeoning movement was met with vehement suppression by law enforcement authorities, culminating in the effective disbandment

[†] All three parts of this testimonial are an outcome of a division of labour between Prof. Tesfatsion Medhanie and Prof. Paulos Milkias. Prof. Tesfatsion prepared an outline and supplied his data for the draft of his section. Prof Paulos added his own data in a separate segment and then enriched and expanded the entire draft. He also reorganized and refined it to its final form. Both are jointly responsible for the contents of the document.

of the USUAA by the Board of Governors in 1972, thereby dismantling its central leadership.

Within this discourse, Paulos Milkias and Tesfatsion Medhanie discern the cumulative impact engendered by the conspicuous defiance of, and opposition to, imperial hegemony by the members of USUAA. This impetus provided a conduit for the political enlightenment of the populace at large, as well as the academic cohorts of Addis Ababa and provincial districts, who demonstrated fervent interest in and solidarity with the burgeoning assertiveness of the university students.

When student protests ebbed, ordinary citizens in Ethiopia began to ponder the fate of the university students. They questioned whether the students had succumbed to governmental inducements or relinquished their cause, reflecting their veneration of the students as natural sentinels against unjust treatment and the denial of liberties and entitlements. It is within this contextual framework that we posit the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) as the

conduit for articulating the grievances and aspirations of the masses, epitomizing the sole outlet for popular discontent in the absence of political parties. Nevertheless, we must admit that the activism of students at times hinged upon their academic progression within the university milieu.

The prevailing economic and societal despondency, the global energy crisis and overall deprivation, further exacerbated the national malaise. This discontent gradually spread and incited insurrections among military divisions stationed in sensitive locales such as Sidāmo Borena in the south and Eritrea in the north, amalgamating to furnish the intricate backdrop to the revolutionary surge that ultimately swept aside the monarchy and its institutional edifice.

Examining the sequence of events, by March of 1968, student demonstrations against a fashion exhibit showcasing miniskirts precipitated the denouncement of the attire as decadent and antithetical to Ethiopian mores. While forming picket

lines and staging protest rallies, USUAA members encountered vehement opposition, leading to a violent confrontation with law enforcement personnel and the subsequent apprehension and incarceration of student leaders, including prominent activists such as Tilahun Gizaw and Ammanuel Gebreyesus.

The detainees were entitled to appear before a court within 48 hours of their apprehension, yet days elapsed without judicial recourse, indicating a transgression of legal protocols by custodial authorities. In response, a cadre of law students organized to petition the High Court in Addis Ababa for a *Writ of Habeas Corpus*, mandating the presentation of detainees without delay. Despite initial success, subsequent developments thwarted the students' quest for justice, ultimately culminating in the tragic assassination of Tilahun and his compatriots.

By 1968, the radical ethos permeating the student milieu had begun to resonate in provincial enclaves,

precipitating widespread unrest. Criticizing the imposition of new educational fees and perceived inadequacies of educational materials, activists demanded fiscal austerity and challenged lavish embassy expenditures abroad. The reverberations of this mobilization, inclusive for the first time of secondary schools, precipitated the closure of numerous Ethiopian diplomatic missions overseas.

Following the violent demonstrations of 1969, which defied the feudal system's tightening grip on freedom of assembly, the Haile Selassie government ordered the closure of all schools, and the incarceration of approximately 5,000 secondary school pupils in three correction centers. The ensuing address by the emperor announced stringent measures to quell student activism, yet these actions failed to stem the tide, with students intensifying their opposition to the government by focusing particularly on opposing American influence which they believed supported the status quo.

Hijacking was another front in the ESM struggle against the Haile Selassie regime. Students took

control of Ethiopian Airlines planes to force-transport them to sympathetic countries not only to escape the intensifying crackdown but also to frustrate the feudal government. Between August 1969 and December 1972 there were three hijackings by student activists. The first two were successful. The third failed catastrophically.

The first hijacking was carried out in August 1969. The plane was on a local flight. It started in Bahr-Dar where the students boarded. According to the demand of the hijackers the pilots proceeded to Khartoum, Sudan. Among the hijackers were Berhane-Meskel Redda, Biniam Adane, Iyasu Alemayehu, Haile-Yesus Welde-Senbet, Addis Ayana, Gezahegn Indale, and Amanuel Gebreyesus. The group then passed on to Algeria where they had sympathetic socialist oriented leadership.

The third hijack was attempted in December 1972. The students boarded in Addis Ababa. Shortly after taking off, the hijack was announced. But in the plane were security agents, highly skilled snipers who, it seems, were already informed about the planned hijack and the identity of the hijackers. Shooting broke out. With the exception of one all the

students were killed. The students who attempted the hijack were the following: Walelign Mekonnen, Getachew Habte, Tesfaye Birega, Tadelech kidane-Mariam, Martha Mebrahtu, Yohannes Fekadu, and Amanuel Yohannes (the last one for the second time!). Tadelech – who passed away a few years ago – was the only survivor.

Despite governmental efforts to suppress student radicals, their resilience persisted, evidenced by their replacement of the University newspaper "*News and Views*" with the politically charged journal: "*Struggle*," and their opposition to the large military Communications Center in Asmara, perceived as a formidable payback to America for assuring the sustainability of Emperor Haile Selassie's grip on power.

In the latter periods of 1969, the student campaign had proliferated beyond the confines of the capital to encompass colleges and high schools across rural areas. At a pivotal juncture, the University Students Union of Addis Ababa formulated a systematic list of demands, disseminated widely in pamphlets. These demands

encompassed a spectrum of grievances, including the restructuring of new school fees, the expulsion of American Peace Corps Volunteers from Ethiopia, and the overhaul of governmental structures and the education system. Additionally, the students criticized the mismanagement of resources, the state of education in Ethiopia, and advocated for law enforcement accountability, specifically demanding trials and punishments for police officers implicated in the use of live ammunition against students during peaceful demonstrations.

The students persisted in their campaign for progressive demands, garnering mounting support from the populace. Enthusiasm among students nationwide burgeoned, culminating in widespread demonstrations, school boycotts, and riots. Consequently, numerous educational institutions were compelled to suspend activities due to the magnitude of the protests.

In a display of resolve, the students staged a series of sit-ins, resulting in 500 arrests and several fatalities at the hands of law enforcement officers. Subsequently, Emperor Haile Selassie, in a televised address, conceded to engage in discussions with the

students regarding their demands, albeit concurrently ordering the ban of the radical student paper, *Struggle*.

By the outset of 1970, the emperor had made partial concessions, including the dismissal of his deputy minister of education (the emperor himself was the minister) and the pardon of some individuals arrested earlier in the year. Despite these conciliatory gestures, attempts to conceal the extensive unrest from international media persisted through heavy censorship of government-owned newspapers and publications. Nonetheless, these subdued concessions failed to quell the agitation, prompting a shift in governmental tactics towards a harsh crackdown characterized by violent suppression of organized demonstrations resulting in incarcerations, tortures, and death.

Amidst the formidable momentum and solidarity characterizing the movement, organizational challenges surfaced within the USUAA. Despite concerted efforts, the students union could not find a viable alternative it would recommend to replace the existing establishment. Nevertheless, their actions

served as catalysts for the burgeoning military insurrections witnessed in Negele, Borena, and the Eritrean battlefronts, ultimately leading to the ascendance of the *Derg* regime. The Haile Selassie government, while contending with escalating student dissent, grappled with quelling an Eritrean revolt.

Internally, divisions emerged among USUAA members regarding the strategic utilization of the Eritrean Liberation movement to effect regime change. Notably, conflicting perspectives represented by figures such as Tilahun and Walelign delineated the movement into factions characterized by radical and moderate inclinations. Tilahun Gizaw, the president of USUAA, advocated reassessment of the movement's strategy and counsel direct violent confrontation, but his tenure was abruptly terminated by his assassination on December 28, 1969, precipitating a series of vicious reprisals. The ensuing crackdown, exemplified by the Imperial Guard's lethal intervention during a student assembly, heightened tensions and elicited international condemnation. Subsequent manifestations of solidarity emerged globally, with

student demonstrations in the United States, Canada, and the Soviet Union.

Indeed, in the socio-political landscape of Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, lacking political pluralism, the student movement emerged as the primary force challenging the status quo. Nevertheless, governmental responses to quell dissent resorted to draconian legislation, coercive tactics, and judicial restrictions on civil liberties, resulting in arbitrary detentions and punitive measures against dissenting voices. In the final analysis, the culmination of mass closures of educational institutions and the arbitrary detention of thousands of secondary school students underscored the regime's ruthless repression. But despite adversities, the student movement exhibited resilience, adapting its tactics to circumvent repression and garner public support.

Thus, during the struggle, ESM members modified their tactics. They demonstrated in support of Ethiopian veterans of the Congo war whose wages had allegedly been embezzled by officials of the ministry of defence, and in defence of oppressed vocational workers and traders throughout Ethiopia. They also made demands, none of them directly

related to student affairs - all deriving from serious problems affecting the daily lives of the public. They asked for (a) reduced bus fares, (as these had at that time, been increased by 20%); (b) price controls on basic items including staple grains such as Teff, butter, and potatoes.

The students effectively forced the closing down of numerous government schools in Addis Ababa and Adama. They organized street and market demonstrations which became popular. In fact, they were joined by the public who were severely hit by the excessive cost of living. Changing tactics again, the students started to avoid direct confrontations with riot police. Their attacks were concentrated on *Anbassa* buses (most of the shares of this company were owned by the estates of the emperor) and on the high-status Mercedes-Benz automobiles which served as a symbol of the aristocracy and the new bourgeoisie of the capital. In all, 76 buses and scores of Mercedes Benzes on the streets, in showrooms and private garages were smashed. Students also attacked the homes of big landowners in the country, as a symbolic target of the feudal aristocracy.

Students continued to modify their tactics. One guerrilla approach they came up with during this

period became particularly popular with the public - causing great concern for the regime. They made sorties into the marketplace and asked traders how much they charged for staples such as peas, lentils, butter or potatoes. Since the students always moved in large numbers and spoke in a threatening manner, the traders were forced to quote a figure that was significantly lower than the going price. The students then invited the public to buy at the quoted price. If merchants hiked up their prices after the students had departed, the activists returned back and poured liquid paraffin over the produce.

These shifts in tactics had a double purpose. The first was to depict the government's use of police to crack down on activists as fighting for its own survival, not for the good of the people. The second goal was to win the public over to the students' side. The scheme worked. Even law enforcement officials started to empathize with their drastic moves.

For the first time since student militancy began, the police force, themselves victims of spiraling inflation, refused to obey government orders to intervene. Almost everywhere the students carried out guerrilla sorties, police officers stood by passively, remarking: "this is not politics!" And soon, the price of some

essential foodstuffs went down by 50% and remained lower even long after the demonstrations had ended. Worried by these turns of events, especially by the support the students were winning among the police, the government called in the army, but it was again surprised by the sympathy of the soldiers for the actions of the students. In the city of Nazareth, some soldiers were seen collaborating with the students in their sorties and were subsequently arrested and goaled. But the soldiers' defiance continued. So, the government had no alternative but to enact price controls which it had refused to do previously.

At a later stage, student support for the revolutionary changes assured the new military junta earn sympathy of the vocal constituency and gave it the time to consolidate its power. However, no sooner had the students expressed their solidarity (for example wit the radical action they took about land reform,) the student activists began to challenge the *Derg* mainly on ideological grounds. There is no doubt that the land reform proclamation was implemented primarily through the efforts of the students, often at great cost to their lives. Members of ESM also demanded the return of the soldiers to their barracks and called for the establishment of a civilian

people's government. This led to strained and bitter relations between the two. It was then that inspired by the old student demands, and in response to the long-standing grievances of the Ethiopian peasantry, the military regime introduced two radical and far-reaching reforms: the dispossession of the landed gentry and distribution of confiscated lands among tenants, nationalizing large ranches mostly owned by aristocratic families and turning them into state farms like in socialist Eastern Europe, and the nationalization of urban real estate and private financial institutions.

When these measures were taken, the whole country was seized with revolutionary fervour, and the government and its allies launched a campaign of vicious and arbitrary attacks on individuals, especially intellectuals.. They hard hit the propertied classes to satisfy student demands, as well as former officials, who were branded as counterrevolutionaries or allies of opposition movements or agents of Western imperialism..

Patriotic Ethiopians that were members of the ESM struggle against the feudal regime and the military junta had died for the cause of justice and the alleviation of the condition of the downtrodden. But it

is important to keep in mind that when the courageous leaders of the ESM martyred themselves through hijackings, assassinations, and extra judicial killings, what they had done for themselves alone was ephemeral, but what they had done for the oppressed, the motherland and future generations will remain etched in the minds of patriotic Ethiopians.

As explained earlier, the actions of ESM members had borne fruits. For example, by employing guerrilla tactics, students leveraged public sympathy and precipitated a reduction in essential commodity prices, prompting a re-evaluation of government policies. This was a huge gain for the public.

In the student struggle, the nuanced interventions of *Lij Kasa Wolde-Mariam*, a figure often maligned in scholarly discourse, played a pivotal role in advocating for student rights and shielding them from undue persecution by government security apparatuses. An illustrative incident from circa 1968, during a ceremony commemorating book donations to the law library by the French Ambassador, underscores *Lij Kasa's* adept navigation of the

intricate student-government dynamic. By adopting a stance that acknowledged the legitimacy of student grievances while emphasizing adherence to legal frameworks in the exercise of rights, *Lij Kasa* positioned himself as a mediator, drawing criticism from both student activists and government authorities alike.

As intimated earlier, ESM members' struggle was not limited to the Haile Selassie regime. The Derg that came to power followed the demands of the ESM and implemented the programme of "land to the tiller of the soil." Then in 1974-1975 the *Derg* publicly announced the imminent implementation of the Development through Cooperation Campaign **ዘመቻ** (*Zemecha*), ostensibly designed to enable students to teach and politicize the peasants but justifiably seen by the ESM as a politically motivated ruse to get them out of the capital and the provincial towns, their principal centres of political agitation against the regime.

Indeed, the symbiotic relationship between the student movement and the nascent military regime eventually eroded due to ideological fissures, culminating in strained relations between them and causing numerous deaths when the ESM morphed into

MEISON that gave the Derg provisional support and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) that fought it tooth and nail to drive it back into its barracks. The bloody struggle dubbed '*White Terror and Red Terror*' then ensued and claimed the lives of over 150,000 young Ethiopians most of them EPRP members.

The trajectory of Ethiopian student activism, evolving from the political reticence of the 1950s to a more ideologically informed disposition within a decade, represents a transformative paradigm shift. Unlike their counterparts in other African nations, Ethiopian students demonstrated a growing inclination towards ideological engagement, driven by an expanding comprehension of scientific socialist theory. This ideological awakening delineated Ethiopian student activism and laid the groundwork for more assertive and politically charged movements in subsequent years.

The invocation of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony provides invaluable insights into comprehending the socio-political dynamics of pre-

Derg Ethiopia. The hegemonic order perpetuated by Emperor Haile Selassie's regime, reinforced by coercive state apparatuses and ideological dominance, marginalized the majority populace. However, resistance movements and counter-hegemonic struggles, exemplified by the student movement, catalyzed the eventual demise of the Ethiopian monarchy and the rise of the Derg regime.

Reflecting on the climate of the 1950s, collegiate cohorts within Addis Ababa demonstrated a proclivity towards reformism, evincing a reluctance to engage in political affairs. However, within a decade, particularly with the influx of African students under the Haile Selassie Scholarship, Ethiopian students exhibited a heightened level of advancement and outspokenness. This disparity can be attributed to the residual memory of anti-colonial sentiment prevalent in other African nations—a sentiment predominantly rooted in nationalist fervor rather than ideologically informed anti-imperialism, which subsequently waned. Conversely, Ethiopian students progressively gravitated towards left-wing ideological inclinations, marking significant strides therein.

In response to escalating student agitation, the government went on enacting newer and newer draconian restrictions on all forms of demonstrations, denying freedom of association and assembly except under stringent conditions. Subsequent violent demonstrations in 1969 prompted the closure of all schools, with thousands of secondary school pupils incarcerated under harsh conditions. No doubt despite the emperor's stringent measures, student activism not only persisted but was in fact tremendously radicalized until in the end it contributed to the downfall of the powers that be!