

HAS THE NEW ETHIOPIA BEGUN

Reflections of a Long-time Absentee (P. V.)⁺

To come back to Ethiopia at this time after a prolonged absence is exhilarating. Not because one sees that all the problems have been solved. Rather the excitement comes from the feeling that the enormity of the problems can now be squarely faced and openly discussed.

One sees four different forces pulling different ways. They are all up against the monumental inertia of the rural masses with an ancient culture who seem to distrust change of every kind.

What are these four forces?

First there is the privileged class of rich landlords and capitalists. Their wish and hope, of course, is to keep their economic power, to sustain their control and exploitation of the economy for their own advantage. Today they can operate mostly behind the scenes. The Crown can no longer be as easily their instrument as before. They have to bide their time until things have shaken down, and only then can they intensify their efforts to buy back their power from whatever government finally establishes itself. Though a few of its leading figures have now been imprisoned, this largely faceless force is one to be reckoned with in the future too. It will be dangerously foolish to assume that their eye-teeth has been pulled or that they have been rendered innocuous.

Second, and today clearly most vocal, there is the young university crowd. They are not all of the same point of view. But what is being heard above all the din is the voice of a sort of radical liberalism, so familiar to anyone in touch with student thinking all over the world. To be young is to be full of hope,

⁺ stands for Political Visionary

unspoiled by doubt, confident of achievement: to be young is to underestimate difficulties, to see everything in terms of black or white, to proffer simple solutions to enormous problems. To be young is to dare where the wise desist.

Such simple solutions are usually taken from textbooks and journals, based on generalizations that take little notice of historical and cultural particularities. For example many young people would today opt for a 'secular democratic' state - one which has no place for Crown or Church, one which is based on adult franchise and elected ministers, one which seeks to establish a socialistic pattern of society. Their visions are lofty and generous; but are they also realistic?

Despite all the changes that have taken place, the present Ethiopian State is still far from what the young are dreaming and demanding. Those now in power have not been elected by the people, and their claims to represent the 'people's' views can be legitimately questioned.

Neither Crown nor Church has gone away. No socialistic platform may have been clearly articulated or proclaimed.

Small wonder then, that the young still clamour for change.

Third, there is the Government. What sort of an animal is it? At the head of the government is a Prime Minister well known for his liberal views and stringent criticism of the previous regime. The Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister is also a known Oxford type liberal. So are many of the other ministers - young, energetic, progressive. At the top of the government one no longer finds the old feudal, foot-dragging, privilege-loving, vested-interest-oriented crowd. There is plenty of drive, energy and openness to new ways, at least at many spots on the top.

But the Government itself is hamstrung by two facts. First, there is the fact that the changes are mostly at the top. Further below there are, of course, changes

young, energetic junior officers may now receive more support for their creative ideas than before. Merit, rather than family connections, may soon become the criterion for advancement. Despite all this, the corpulence of the Government machinery still provides for more inertia than drive. The bureaucratic habit is never easy to shed. The ship of state still continues to hold more ballast than moving power. Secondly, even those at the top are plagued by a sense of instability. How long will the precarious balance last? Can any Prime Minister last for more than a year in the present circumstances? Does the Prime Minister have sufficient power or is he too much at the mercy of forces that are often faceless and therefore difficult to deal with? With such uncertainty, would any Government try to do anything radical and long-term, beyond making the necessary day-to-day decisions?

The fourth force to be reckoned with, and obviously no decisive in many ways is the 'Derg' - the joint committee of the armed forces, the police and the security forces. They are the spearhead of the bloodless revolution, and they deserve credit, not only for not shedding blood, but also for allowing criticism, including criticism of the Derg itself. They are under fire from students for moving so slow. They are under pressure to show that they mean business, which is not always easy if you really mean business. So far they have pulled off a few symbolic master-strokes like nationalising the imperial palaces, abolishing the Ministry of Pen and the Chilot - all comparatively harmless and all directed only at the Crown and not at other pockets of privilege.

The Derg has now worked out its own modus operandi for co-ordinating with the civilian Government, but the distribution of power inside the Derg is itself not very clear - even to its own members. It seems to have pinched a page each from the Paris Student Revolution of 1968 and from the People's Liberation Army of China. Not to

have a clear bureaucratic or hierarchical structure of power in the army and in the ruling group; it is an exciting experiment in spontaneity and freedom, but one that is difficult to sustain for a long period of time. Let us start with one of:

It is clear that the younger officers in the Derg are closer to Arat than to any other group in the country. Many of them are themselves university people and are basically in sympathy with student opinion. But are they less experienced enough not to make major mistakes? Experience comes very quickly in a revolutionary situation, but often in the wake of tragic mistakes.

The astonishing fact, however, is that all these four pulling forces together constitute less than one percent of the people of this country. Where are the rest? Are they pulling, resisting, or sitting still? How long will they stand on the side-lines and watch?

What is happening to the masses of people who lack the means of expressing their views? Have they understood what is involved in the new draft constitution? How can they take part in the discussion until they are 'conscientized' and 'politicized'? Will the next election be the occasion for such conscientization and politicisation? If this is to happen in an adequate way certain steps have to be taken before the next election. And this has to do bearing on the mighty question whether the present parliament should be disbanded as soon as the constitution is finally promulgated, so that the election by the people can take place, righteous; or whether it should serve out its present term, allowing enough time for the infra-structure necessary for a new Ethiopia to be built up. Then organize your life

What are these steps? This observation sees a two-pronged approach - one civilian and the other military.

Let us concede the unpleasant fact that we are adopting the western parliamentary system with some slight modifications of our own. In any case we need



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the young are dreaming and demanding. Those now in power have not been elected by the people, and their claims to represent the 'people's' views can be legitimately questioned. Neither Brown nor Blenkhorn has gone away. No socialist platform has been clearly articulated or proclaimed. Small wonder then, that the young still clamour for change.

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But the Government itself is hamstrung by two factors. First, there is the fact that the changes are mostly at the top. Further below there are ^{of course} changes brought about by the change at the top. For example, young, energetic junior officers may now receive more support for their creative ideas than before. Merit, rather than family connections, may soon become

The criterion for advancement. Despite all this, the copulence of the government machinery still provides for more inertia than drive. The bureaucratic habit is ~~never~~ easy to shed. The ^{ship of} state shall continue to hold more ballast than moving power.

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The astounding fact, however, is that all these four pulling forces together constitute less than one percent of the people of this country. Where are the rest? Are they pulling, resisting, or ~~sitting~~ sitting still? How long will they stand on the side-lines and watch?

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What are these steps? This observer sees a two-pronged approach - one civilian and the other military.

Let us concede the unpleasant fact that we are adopting the western parliamentary system with some slight modifications of our own.

In any case we need a civilian political party. At the moment, this writer is not sure of the wisdom of multiplying political parties, but it seems inevitable that there will be more than one, if freedom is given to the people. ~~So~~ However that be, let us start with one civilian political party with a clear socialistic platform. Such a party will have to recruit a large number of volunteer political workers whose job it will be to go down to each and every village in Ethiopia and make people aware of the issues before them. This cannot be done by conducting lectures in the villages. It will be a long-term process in which the party workers are catalysts for the village to organize itself, not only for political action, but also for socialist ~~form~~ organization of production and distribution in terms both of agriculture and small-scale crafts and industries.

Here is the challenge to 'Avat kils' to test whether their wills and their muscles are as strong as their vocal chords. Do they have the guts ^{and} the gumption, ~~and~~ the will and the will to undertake such a programme of Conscientization and politicization of the masses of Ethiopia. What is the use of mouthing the advanced ideas of Maoism, if you dread the rigors of Tientsin and the Long March? Mao Tse Tung did not

start at the pinnacle of power, nor did he begin the struggle from the comfort and security of the class-room. He dug himself along with his few followers into the mountain caves and there began organizing the masses in the neighbouring villages. Go back to your text-books and see how he fought his way up, not from class-room to Prime Minister's Office, but from mountain Cave to mass leadership.

Then organize yourself, give up your ambition for power, and go to the villages. Live there with the sharing their poverty and hardships, quickening their talents and their creativity, helping them educate themselves and organize themselves for common and equitable production and distribution, for culture, for leisure, for sports. That is the way to a new Ethiopia - not simply by Governmental change nor by you yourselves or your ~~backlog~~ Candidates

taking over power straight away at the Centre. Wollo maybe a good place to begin, right now, for young people who mean business. The present writer speaks thus to the young intelligentsia only because he is one of them, though not so young any more.

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And for the Derg, I would propose that they sincerely pluck a page from the People's Liberation Army in China. The PLA looks after the defence of China not merely by training in armed combat, but by becoming the major educational implement of the masses for building a strong China with character, culture

and creative self-reliance. When lobina, after the first flush of revolutionary enthusiasm had begun to fade, and the victors had begun to become softened by power and in danger of falling victims to greed, it was the PLA in league with the students that cleaned up the country, though the cleaning job was not as neat as could be desired. The armed forces in Ethiopia should learn how to build the mass-base of peace, by becoming a grand educational force. Could some of our Army (both officers and men) as well as younger men and women go and learn what Tanzania is trying to do - in terms of self-reliance, simplicity and hard work? Do we have the creativity not to fall a prey to the ^{charms of the} so-called democratic liberalism of the west, which still cloaks the most inhuman forms of exploitation, oppression and alienation?

We are only at the beginning of a new path. I suspect that it is neither the government nor the parliament that is going to initiate the true revolution. It could be attempted only by a new league between the armed forces and the younger educated people of the country - in terms of self-discipline, closeness to the masses, mass-based politics and revolutionary fervour channelled into socialist production and distribution.