

# THE PROBLEMS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN MODERN ETHIOPIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

**Bahru Zewde**

*Department of History, Addis Ababa University*

## 1. HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

Institutionalization is not new to Ethiopia. Nor could this have been otherwise, given the highly organized nature of the state. The consolidation and transfer of political power required elaborate rules and institutions. This had both religious and political dimensions. Our concern here is mainly with the latter, however, as they are the ones that had more direct impact on political and economic activity. Many examples could be cited to illustrate this point. But suffice here to mention only the case of the *Fetha Nagast*, the code of law that regulated secular as well as ecclesiastical affairs until the twentieth century. A cursory glance at this venerable code of law and conduct (now conveniently made available as part of the giant volume entitled *Matshafa Hegegat Abayt*) shows that the issues it covered ranged from ecclesiastical appointments to commercial transactions and adultery (*Matshafa Hegegat 'Abayt*, 1962 EC: 5-451).

As Europe came into direct encounter with the West, the inadequacy of many of these traditional institutions became apparent. The call to introduce modern or Western institutions began to be heard from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. As if the country had no institutions before that time, the call was for rule by *ser'at*, which connotes orderly conduct or institutionalization. Thus the visionary emperor, Tewodros, reiterated the need for instilling *ser'at* in his people. He instituted a system of military ranks. He tried to set up a salaried army. In the end, all this brought him nothing but growing hostility. As he found himself isolated and forlorn on the inhospitable summit of Maqdala, he could only lament to the British general who had led the huge military expedition against him in the following poignant terms: "My people have rebelled against me because I tried to rule them according to *serat*. But you have defeated me because you deployed a force that has submitted to *serat*" (Rubenson 1994:354).

Some forty years later, the more pragmatic Menilek instituted a system of ministerial government, which had relatively better fortune. Intended as much to impress the *ferenji* as to introduce a change in the Ethiopian system of administration, the order

represented a clever amalgam of tradition and innovation. What happened in effect was giving the old functionaries a new cloak, or, to use another metaphor, serving the same old wine in a new bottle. Thus the *bajerond* became the minister of finance; the *fitawrari* became the minister of war; the *naggadras* became the minister of commerce; and the *ligaba* became the minister of the imperial court.

Perhaps because of this cautious injection of modernity, the ministerial system of government came to endure, unlike the ephemeral reforms of Tewodros. It marked the birth not only of a bureaucracy (in the positive rather than the negative sense of that term) but also of a nobility of service rather than of birth. It opened an avenue for skillful and diligent commoners to rise to positions of eminence in the government hierarchy. This development continued after the death of Menilek and well into the final years of Hayla-Sellase. Names like Hayla-Giyorgis Walda-Mika'el, Heruy Walda-Sellase, Walda-Giyorgis Walda-Yohannes and the Habta-Wald brothers readily come to mind in this connection.

Part of the explanation for the relative success of Menilek's innovation is the fact that conditions were ripe for it. At any rate, it had the support of a vigorous and articulate group of intellectuals. In some ways, it could be said to have been inspired by them. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go in depth into the careers and ideas of these intellectuals. But mention could be made of at least two of them who were most insistent on the setting up of institutionalized administration: *Naggadras* Gabra-Heywat Baykadañ and *Bajerond* Takla-Hawaryat.

*Serat* was a central pre-occupation of Gabra-Heywat. In his small but influential work on the reign of Menilek, he advocated the prime importance of *serat* in unequivocal fashion, arguing that the power of a state lies in it rather than in the size of its army. He went on to conclude that "a small town that is governed by law is to be preferred to a large nation that has no *serat*" (Gabra-Heywat, 1912: 341). The rationalization of administration, particularly of fiscal administration, was a central concern of Gabra-Heywat, as indeed it was of a number of his colleagues. And their pleas did not fall on deaf ears. To a ruler like Tafari/Hayla-Sellase who had come to appreciate the value of money for the consolidation of his political power, the arguments of Gabra-Heywat and his contemporary intellectuals were of great practical significance.

As for Takla-Hawaryat, no sooner had he returned from abroad before he prepared an administrative manual. His hope was that the scheme would be implemented first on an experimental basis and subsequently extended nation-wide. But he could not succeed in winning the sustained interest of the young ruler Iyyasu, on whom Takla-Hawaryat had pinned his hopes. He had to wait for the accession of the more systematic and single-minded Tafari to the throne to realize his objective in some measure. Not only did the latter adopt the intellectual's scheme of model provinces (Charchar, Guma, etc.), but he also authorized him to draft Ethiopia's first constitution.

Woefully inadequate as it was in many respects, the promulgation of that constitution in 1931 marked the pinnacle of Takla-Hawaryat's career as well as an important step in the institutionalization of government operations, more particularly in the setting up of a parliament. It is worthy of note in this context that Takla-Hawaryat was the first to express objection to the term *agara-gazh*, presumably because of the oppressive connotation of that term. He suggested instead the employment of the terms *meslane* or *endarasse*. The latter term was in fact adopted some decades later.

Measures of the above nature, which were taken in the period before the Italian occupation, were a sort of dress-rehearsal for the more systematic process of institution-building that took place after 1941. Indeed, we can divide the developments that took place thereafter into three categories: the period of institution-building (1941-1974), the period of stress (1974-1991), and the period of restructuring (1991 to the present). We shall look at each of these periods in turn.

## **2. THE PERIOD OF INSTITUTION-BUILDING (1941-1974)**

In retrospect, the period 1941-1974 strikes one by the number of solid achievements that were registered in the realm of institutionalization. Quite a number of the institutions that are still important components of our life today, albeit battered and tattered, trace their origin to this period. These institutions span the whole gamut of public administration, finance, education and infrastructure.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after he was returned to the throne in 1941, the emperor turned his attention to the consolidation of his power at both the central and provincial levels. The order re-establishing the ministries on a new and more clearly defined basis addressed the first concern. This eventually included the formal establishment of the post of prime minister, although the incumbent rarely exercised the prerogatives conventionally associated with that post. The setting up of a centralized provincial administrative system took care of the second concern. While the new system could be criticised for having been over-centralized, it nonetheless had the merit of drawing provincial boundaries that generally tended to take into account both regional identity and economic rationality.

This new and expanded administrative apparatus required personnel. And that is where the second major institution-building process came in, to wit the expansion of education with the primary aim of creating the necessary manpower to staff the ever-expanding bureaucracy. The setting up of formal educational institutions has pre-1935 antecedents. Some of the celebrated establishments, like Menilek II and Tafari Makonnen schools, belong to that period. But the post-1941 measures represented both a quantitative and a qualitative improvement on the earlier period. Not only did

the number of schools and students increase, but there was also the expansion of secondary and tertiary education, not to mention the sending of an increasingly higher number of Ethiopians abroad for second and third degrees. The establishment of Haile Sellassie I Secondary School (Kotebe) in 1943 and of the University College of Addis Ababa in 1950 heralded the new order of things.

All these measures required money. The augmentation of government revenue, which had been an abiding concern of the emperor since well before he came to the throne,<sup>2</sup> now became even more imperative. In a way, the centralization of provincial administration assisted this process of augmentation, as revenue that was formerly appropriated by local authorities was transferred to the central treasury under the new dispensation. The Ministry of Finance now became one of the most vital departments of the government. No wonder then that two of its incumbents—Makonnen Habta-Wald and Yelma Deressa—acquired legendary status in their own time. The setting up of rules and regulations intended to augment fiscal revenue was a primary pre-occupation of the Hayla-Sellase regime (Eshetu 1984:88-106).

Parallel with this process went the establishment of monetary institutions like banks. The old Bank of Abyssinia had already been nationalized, so to say, in 1931. The development of banking institutions picked up greater momentum after 1941. In 1942, the State Bank of Ethiopia was inaugurated in defiance of British obstruction. That bank eventually became parent to the Commercial Bank and the National Bank of Ethiopia, two banking institutions that continue to dominate financial operations to this day. This was followed by the setting up of the Development Bank of Ethiopia and the only private bank, Addis Ababa Bank (Befekadu 1995:232-276).

No less impressive were the developments in infrastructure. Three spheres merit special citation: telecommunications, road transport and aviation. The telecommunication network tied all major towns of the country to the capital, even if only rudimentary techniques were employed. Even more impressive than its spread, however, was its general reliability, which cannot be said of present-day services. Achievements in road construction surpassed the record for which the Italians had been given so much credit. But undoubtedly the most impressive achievement was registered in the field of aviation. Ethiopian Airlines, which took a faltering step into the world of international aviation in 1946 with less than half a dozen converted World War II planes, had become a jet-set continental carrier by the end of the period (Bahru 1988). A good deal of the success achieved in all three sectors can be attributed to the relative margin of independence enjoyed by their management. Over and above their intrinsic value, all three organizations became symbols or pace-setters of modernity in Ethiopian life.

Finally, the ancien regime took a major step forward in the direction of the institutionalized conduct of human relations when it formulated a series of legal

## **The Problems of Institutionalization in Modern Ethiopia: A Historical Perspective**

codes—civil, criminal, and commercial. These were all promulgated in the years 1957-60 with the help of foreign, mostly French, legal experts. Evidence of their remarkable thoroughness and resilience is that they are still in force today. The fairly protracted deliberations to revise them during the final years of the Darg passed without bearing fruit. Antedating the codification process was the promulgation of the *Negarit Gazette* in 1942. A permanent fixture of post-Liberation Ethiopia, this official gazette has continued up to the present time as the vehicle for the transmission of government notices, orders and proclamations as well as appointments and promotions.

Lest this survey sound somewhat too laudatory of the ancien regime, we would like to conclude with two cautionary notes. First, traditional forms of behaviour co-existed with the institutionalized norms; often the latter were subordinate to the former. The emperor's *chelot* remained the final legal recourse. Ministers were subject to the vigil of the emperor through the *aqabe sa'at*, the weekly and mandatory audience with the emperor.<sup>3</sup> The distinction between public and royal purse was not always clearly set. The imperial secretariat exercised a power incommensurate with its legal mandate, especially when the incumbent happened to be a person like *Tsahafe Te'ezaz Walda-Giyorgis Walda-Yohannes*, who effectively eclipsed the nominal prime minister for nearly a decade and a half. The epitaph on prime ministerial prerogative was uttered by its relatively most effective practitioner, *Aklilu Habta-Wald*, in 1974 when he lamented that the emperor's eldest daughter, *Tanañawarq*, had exercised much greater influence than him.

Secondly, and this is very much related to the above, the premium was placed on control rather than efficiency or development. This was particularly evident in the political sphere. Considerations of control as well as self-interest underlay the tight grip the central government exercised on the provinces. Little revenue percolated down for the development of the provinces themselves, just as little room was allowed for local initiative or autonomy. Parliament, even if it had its rare moments of courage, remained completely subservient to royal prerogative. The ultimate instrument of control remained the army, the one central institution whose modernization had engaged the attention of emperors from *Tewodros* to *Hayla-Sellase*.

### **3. THE PERIOD OF STRESS (1974-1991)**

That army finally put an end to the ancien regime by toppling its creator in September 1974. The transformation of society that became the new revolutionary agenda had a decisive impact on the institution-building process. Old institutions were scrapped or dented. New ones were born. And revolutionary struggle and war took its toll on human resources, the most vital component of any institution.

In the heat of the revolutionary moment, all former institutions were looked at critically at best or with downright hostility at worst. The monarchy, one of the oldest institutions in the country, was abolished. The church, its partner in the age-old power structure, was disestablished. And yet, it is worthy of note that, in the long run, the church has shown greater resilience in weathering the revolutionary assault than the monarchy. The latter seems to have vanished, never to return, the activities of the royalist "Mo'a Anbassa" political organization or the prominent public profile of some younger representatives of the dynasty notwithstanding. By contrast, although the rural land proclamation of 1975 has had the effect of cutting the economic base of the church, it has made a remarkable recovery since the 1980s. It was able to absorb the economic stress of the revolutionary period through various development programs and the setting up of parish councils. The recent restoration of its urban property has improved its financial situation even more dramatically. More importantly, its constituency, particularly among the youth, has expanded to unprecedented levels both in breadth and depth.

Even parliament, which had not had such a glorious existence in the old system, became the first victim of the Darg. The army, from whose bosom the protagonists of the new order had sprung, was not spared either. Members of its higher echelons constituted a significant proportion of the former government officials executed in November 1974. For quite some time, the Darg toyed with the idea of replacing the old "feudal" army with a new, revolutionary "red" army. The preponderant position that political commissars came to enjoy in the military hierarchy, coupled with the retirement or physical elimination of experienced career officers, undermined the military's fighting capacity and ultimately spelt doom for the Darg.

At the same time, new institutions were created to bolster the revolutionary regime. Control, which had always been a prime driving force in the institutionalization process, assumed cardinal importance under the Darg. Thus, two of the institutions that came to survive the Darg—the neighbourhood association (*qabale*) and peasant association - have emerged as vital agencies for controlling the urban and rural population, respectively, even if their birth was embellished with revolutionary rhetoric of liberation and self-administration. The peasant associations were set up with the objective of serving as the main vehicle for the implementation of the 1975 rural land reform proclamation. That proclamation, by abolishing landlordism, changed the rural Ethiopian landscape as few other events have done before or since. The village chief was now replaced by the peasant association chairman as the lowest and yet vital official in the government hierarchy. The proclamation also had the indirect effect of making the courts, which had thitherto thrived in processing land litigation, redundant. Land allocation, whether it be through fresh allocation or redistribution, became thenceforth the prerogative of the peasant association.

## **The Problems of Institutionalization in Modern Ethiopia: A Historical Perspective**

Institutions owe their vitality to their human element. Anything that affects human resources negatively is bound to have a corresponding effect on institutions. The terror that started in November 1974 claimed the lives of thousands of Ethiopians, some of whom took with them irreplaceable talent and skill. An even larger number languished in jails. While some of these managed to regain their vitality on their release, others remained maimed for life. The Diaspora that attended the killing and the intimidation compounded the drain on human resources. A generation that could have revitalized the country's institutions was thus rendered inoperative in one way or another.

A general observation that one can make regarding the Darg's relationship with old institutions is that it brooked no compromise with those that competed with it for power and influence but was prepared to tolerate or even promote to some degree those that it needed for financial or other purposes. The monarchy and the church belong to the former category. Ethiopian Airlines and to a lesser degree the University belong to the second.

Ethiopian Airlines experienced some of the most difficult times in its history during the first years of the Darg. Problems that had their roots in the pre-revolution period became even more compounded by developments after 1974. War and political control and indoctrination sapped its working capacity. Revenue declined precipitously, reaching its nadir in 1979. The credit-worthiness of the airline had reached an all-time low. It was in the face of those grim realities that the Darg appointed a new general manager with full powers to restructure the organization the way he thought fit. And that for all practical purposes saved it (Bahru 1988:140-153).

The Darg had a more ambivalent relationship with the University. In the early years of confrontation, it was viewed as enemy territory. Even after all the terrors of various hues and configurations had subsided, it was not allowed to stray too independently. The party committee stood in constant vigil on operations at various levels. The weekly indoctrination session for all staff continued almost right up to the end. The courses taught were formally made to conform to the dominant Marxist-Leninist ideology, although instructors had greater latitude in the actual process of teaching. Yet, the University was encouraged to launch a graduate programme which made significant contributions to staff development and faculty research. Some departments - notably Biology, Chemistry and History - could in fact be said to have had their heyday in both respects in the 1980s.

#### **4. THE PERIOD OF RESTRUCTURING (1991 to the present)**

Like the Darg before it, the post-1991 political dispensation has been trying to recast the country anew. Understandably, the army became the first target of this restructuring. An institution that had its roots in the 1940s was stigmatized as the instrument of the defunct regime. Its rank-and-file members were demobilized while a number of its officers were interned. For some time, the formal military hierarchy was eschewed in favour of the comradely relationship born in the armed struggle. But this could not last. An institution that had proven its efficacy in ensuring political control could not be ignored indefinitely. Gradually, the old norms have been reasserting themselves. The current Ethio-Eritrean war has underpinned the central role that the army as an institution is going to continue to play.

In other respects, three fundamental policy shifts have had a bearing on the fate of institutions and their human resources - economic restructuring, decentralization and privatization. These have entailed the re-deployment of the country's human capital as well as the scrapping of some old institutions and the creation of a few new ones. The purely economic aspects of restructuring induced by SAP do not concern us here. What is however germane to our discussion is the human cost of retrenchment. It is difficult to argue that some at least of the retrenchment was not dictated by considerations of removing politically undesirable elements from the bureaucracy. Where those elements happened to be endowed with special skills and expertise, as so often happened to be the case, institutions have been deprived of competent personnel as well as the vital element of administrative continuity. While some of these retrenched personnel joined the ever-expanding Ethiopian Diaspora, others sought alternative employment at home. The private sector and foreign agencies have invariably been the beneficiaries of this re-deployment. The question arises whether in a poor and still underdeveloped country like Ethiopia, the state can afford to lose such expert personnel that was produced at so much cost and sacrifice.

Had it not been attended with some complications, the decentralization policy would have been hailed as a welcome and salutary antidote to the over-centralization that had characterized the Ethiopian state in the preceding fifty years. Surely, after such stringent and stifling control, the country was crying for some relaxation. Yet, the ethnic basis of that decentralization, over and above the ominous shadow of strife and disintegration that it forebodes, has raised the fundamental problem of administrative competence and integrity. There has been perhaps no better demonstration of the perils of regional power than the way in which a national symbol and a continental metropolis like Addis Ababa has been allowed to rot and decay under grossly incompetent administrations.



Likewise, the privatization policy has had its merits. It too represents a policy initiative that was long overdue. It has had a liberating effect on private initiative and ingenuity that has been stifled for long, particularly during the Darg era. There is perhaps no more dramatic illustration of this salutary development than the proliferation of private banks and insurance companies, where previously the regime had been one of government monopoly. Yet, questions have been raised as to how far the ruling party has strove to steer the course to its advantage. More specifically, there are persistent complaints that the privatization process will not achieve its desired objective of liberating and promoting private enterprise unless the state guarantees free and fair competition.

In concluding this paper, it might be instructive to refocus our attention on the two institutions that we have chosen to highlight in the previous section—Ethiopian Airlines and the University. When we do that, we notice some interesting parallels as well as some divergence. In the case of the former, just as in the Darg period, the current regime first sought to tamper with an institution that had proven its viability and efficacy. It appears now that it has realized its mistake in good time and allowed the organization to function with the relative autonomy that it has always enjoyed. The University enjoyed a short honeymoon with the regime before the latter turned against it with what in retrospect appears to be unwarranted fury. It now appears safe to conclude that the University has been condemned to die a lingering death.

In general, what this short historical survey seems to underscore is the fact that, all too often, institutions have been overcast by political control. They had not been allowed to function with the freedom that is so essential to their vitality. All the three regimes discussed in this paper have followed, if in differing degrees, a top-down approach with regard to institutions. The result has been that institutions have tended to be smothered more often than they are fostered. There is thus a strong need to depoliticize institutions, be they military, educational or administrative. Related to this is the cavalier fashion—to put it very mildly—in which the country's human resources have been handled in the last twenty-five years. As we have tried to argue, institutions are dead wood without their personnel. It is their human component that makes them tick. A poor and backward country like Ethiopia can thus ill-afford to dissipate its skilled manpower, which is so scarce and precious.

#### **NOTES**

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of the institutions discussed in this context might perhaps be more appropriately described as organizations. But the distinction between organization and institutions is scarcely water-tight as the latter term also suggests the systematic and organized management of human affairs.

<sup>2</sup> The most dramatic illustration of this concern is his famous eulogy of money on the occasion of his visit to the Addis Ababa Customs Office in 1925: *Fere Kanafer*, I, 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> For the *aqabe sa'at*, which in a way was a form of institutionalizing the relations between the emperor, the effective head of the government, and his ministers, see Clapham, 1969: 108-110.

**REFERENCES**

- Bahru Zewde (1988). *Bringing Africa Together: The Story of Ethiopian Airlines*. Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Airlines.
- Befekadu Degefe (1995) 'The Development of Money, Monetary Institutions and Policy, 1941-1975', in Shiferaw Bekele, (ed.) *An Economic History of Ethiopia. Volume 2: The Imperial Era 1941-1974*. Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Clapham, Christopher (1969). *Haile-Selassie's Government*. New York: Praeger.
- Eshetu Chole (1984) 'Towards a History of the Fiscal Policy of the Pre-Revolutionary Ethiopian State: 1941-1974', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, V, XVII.
- Fere Kanafer ZaQadamawi Hayla-Sellase Negusa Nagast Zaltyopya. Addis Ababa, 1944 E.C.
- Gabra-Heywat Baykadañ (1912) 'Aste Menilek-na ltyopya', in *Berhan Yehun*. Asmara.
- Matshafa Hegegat Abayt (1962 E.C.). Addis Ababa.
- Rubenson, Sven (1994). *Acta Æthiopica Volume II. Tewodros and His Contemporaries 1855-1868*. Addis Ababa and Lund.