

Academic Freedom and the Development of Higher Education in Ethiopia: The Case of Addis Ababa University 1950-2005

Synopsis of a PhD Dissertation*

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This study explores the fate of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in higher education of Ethiopia by taking the case of the Addis Ababa University and seeks to understand how these were influenced by different political process (feudalism, socialism and democracy), which the country experienced over a period of half a century (1950-2005). To explore the degree of expression or erosion of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, the focus is on three critical points: (i) the exploration of state-university relationships and how the state viewed the university vis-à-vis the university's claim for academic freedom and institutional autonomy; (ii) how political regimes affected the erosion or expression of academic freedom in the university (iii) the examination of the impact of political militancy and engagement of university staff and students on the relationship between the university and the state.

The study is grounded in my understanding (from philosophical and theoretical analysis) that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are necessary conditions for the proper functioning of the university's teaching, learning, research and public service. I have used a multi-method research approach, which draws on philosophical analysis, historical and ethnographic methods. The entire historical period (1950-2005) is divided into three distinct cases of political regimes, i.e., feudalism (1950-1974), socialism (1974-1991) and democratic federalism (1991-2005). The method of analysis combines both historical narratives (for showing the continuities of the historical process) and inter-case comparisons--to compare and contrast the different cases (discontinuities of the historical process).

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The research suggests that:

(1) The relationship between the university and the state has been tangled with conflicting views of the state and the university regarding academic freedom and the idea of a university. Whereas the state viewed the university as part and parcel of its bureaucracy, fully accountable to national goals and ideology, what Ronald Barnett (1997b) called a university *of* society, the academic community viewed the university as an independent academic institution with a duty that includes a critical role of the state, albeit with accountability not only for knowledge but also for service to society. The latter includes standing for the poor and national development notwithstanding the position of the state. In this way, the academic community believed in the idea of a university *for* society—as distinct from the state's belief, which stressed the accountability role of the university. These divergent views led to hostile state-university relationships.

(2) The tangled nature of state-university relationship was more or less true across all regimes—feudalism, socialism and democratic federalism—albeit with some differences in intensity and type of threat to academic freedom. The embryonic cooperative relationship that appeared in the early life history of the university (when expatriate faculty dominated teaching and administration) fractured towards the crisis years of the feudal system when the academic community, especially students, violently turned against the state. The vestiges of academic freedom and institutional autonomy vanished under the Marxist regime that placed the university under complete silence and mere ideological compliance after 1974, the year of the Ethiopian Socialist Revolution. Red terror was used as an instrument for controlling freethinking and dissent. Professors were forced to teach prescribed courses, use Marxist research methods and serve as laborers in seasonal crop harvesting periods and in construction work of resettlement areas. In 1991, civil liberties (academic freedom in the sense of the 'general theory') were guaranteed by the federal democratic state that replaced the socialist regime. Yet, state university relationship remained the same due to ideological differences (the state ideology of ethnic autonomy versus faculty ideology of nation state), mistrust and lack of tolerance. Class disruptions, closure of the university, dismissal of professors, students and administrators characterized the state-university relationship during this

period. This new relationship generated a very unstable and weak university administration, which was often sandwiched between the state's requirement to account to it and the faculty's expectation of self-accountability. Not even elected presidents were able to play mediatory roles in this conflict. Following the higher education reform of 2002, professors and lecturers claimed they had lost many of their freedoms, mainly: (i) the freedom to select their future colleagues; (ii) the freedom to select their students; (iii) the freedom to participate in university legislative process; (iv) the freedom to decide the norms of student evaluation; (v) the freedom to decide the contents of their curricula.

(3) Political militancy of the faculty and students weakened the possibility of a cooperative state-university relationship in all political histories of the university. The militant actions of students and faculty against the state during the feudal regime facilitated state intervention in the affairs of the university, which, in turn, brought about collegial disintegration and self-inflicted threat to the academic freedom of the students, faculty and administration. The Marxist ideology had the effect of dividing the academic community into classes of revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries, which, in turn, generated an environment where everybody became a threat to the academic freedom of every other. During the reign of the federal democratic state that came to power after 1991, the ideological position of the academic community extended to rejecting the new constitution--which was premised on ethnic autonomy. The dominant faculty (including a section of the students) subscribed to the idea of a nation-state with a centrist unitary government. The latter seriously believed that ethnic autonomy leads to national disintegration contrary to the state's belief of the idea of 'unity in diversity'. This ideological difference divided the academic community itself (which was diverse in ethnic composition) into different camps and generated a campus environment where every person qualified to be a threat to the academic freedom of every other.

This research has implications about the critical need for cooperative and deliberative state-university relations by adopting a stance of mutual accommodation and tolerance if the university is to contribute to national development by maintaining its cardinal values, academic freedom and its precondition, institutional autonomy. I have noted that during the early periods of Haile Selassie I University (the old name of Addis Ababa

University), the idea of a university *for* society operated productively due to the context of mutual trust and understanding between the state and the university. One learns from the Ethiopian case study that a critical stance of the university could not be tolerated by the state if its criticisms affect the legitimacy of state-power. It is not, however, clear to what extent a university could be critical of the state and still maintain trust and support for it. But, a moral stance of moderation in one's criticisms could be tolerated more than an extremist position of critique, which might deter negotiations and deliberations. In this connection, Mazrui said, "What a university owes to government is neither defiance nor subservience. It is intelligent cooperation, respecting the academic's right to be skeptical without being subversive; sympathetic without being subservient" (Mazrui, 1978:275). A kind of partial autonomy or what Enslin and Kissak (2005) called conditional autonomy in the context of deliberative democracy would help Ethiopia to address the different needs and requirements of change and social transformation. The faculty has the added responsibility of promoting a deliberative culture and abandoning its old culture of engagement in violent political actions. It can contribute immensely if its main commitment is switched to promoting intellectual culture by sustaining a community of philosophers who engage in teaching students; and disseminating knowledge to serve the broader society. This demands a commitment to believe in the values of professional collegiality and self-criticality in addition to its traditional values of critiquing knowledge and society (mainly the state).

(References cited in text)

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- Enslin, P. and Kissak, M. 2005 *Conditional University Autonomy in a Deliberative Democracy*. Unpublished (Draft Copy).