Political Violence in Ethiopia:
Some Reflections on the *Red Terror* and its Legacies

Tafesse Olika[1]

Abstract

This paper attempts to explain the political violence and the violation of human rights in Ethiopia in the post-Imperial period. The interest of the article is to understand the contexts of the red terror resulting in the wanton human rights abuses in Ethiopia during the Derg regime by examining the different but interrelated factors. The task of the paper is threefold. First, it tries to identify the institutional and political underpinnings of the transfer of state power from the ancien regime to the military in Ethiopia in 1974. Second, it identifies and discusses the multi-dimensional forces and factors that led to the escalation of political violence/terror and human rights violation in the country under the military regime. Finally, by evaluating the socio-political impacts of the red terror, the paper tries to bring the discussion to its current relevance.

Key words: revolution, class war, political culture, political violence, *red terror*, violation of human rights

Introduction

The overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie and the collapse of centuries old monarchy in 1974 did not usher in the system of democratic rule and justice in Ethiopia. State power was transferred to a group of the military that came to be called the Provisional Military Administrative Council/PMAC (or the Derg). Disorganized as they were the civilian forces that fought for the demise of the imperial regime could not provide leadership to the Revolution. Hence, the military with its concentration of the coercive machinery of the state eventually evolved into one-man dictatorship alienating and distancing the civilian political forces from the country's open political life. The subsequent power struggle that surfaced between the Derg regime and the civilian groups on one the hand and

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[1] Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Addis Ababa University

amongst the latter on the other resulted in waves of political violence that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Ethiopians in the second half of the 1970s.

"Revolution devours its children" is the aphorism in the Marxist theory of revolution. But does this mean that revolutions 'can't take place without violence and terror? There is a measure of agreement – but not unanimity – on inevitability of violence and terror in revolutions. Review of the Literature reveals that there is no revolution without violence and terror, as well as without connivance from foreign powers (Mayer 2000, O' Kane 1991). Clapham (1985:160-180) defines revolution as "a rapid, violent and irreversible change in the political organization of a society". For him "revolution involves the destruction of the existing political order, together with myths which sustain it and the men which it sustains…" Revolution, according to Gurr (1970:34), is "change accomplished through violence". In her seminal work entitled, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World,* Theda Skocpol (1994) has also made a conclusion that social revolution is "class-based revolts from below". The classical revolutions in France and Russia that pitted the forces of change against the forces of reaction experienced violence and terror. As Mayer (2000) summarizes,

> …there is no revolution without violence and terror, without civil and foreign war; without iconoclasm and religious conflicts; and without collision between city and country. The furies of revolution fueled primarily by the inevitable and unexceptional resistance of the forces and ides opposed to it, at home and abroad.

In fact, there are cases where the post-revolutionary violence and terror experienced were mild (the Cuban revolution) or non-existent at all (the Nicaraguan and Iranian revolutions) (O' Kane 1991:6, as cited in Bahru 2008:429). From this point of view, the *red terror* that the Derg unleashed in Ethiopia from 1977-78, in its intent and purpose, is similar to the one in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge regime. In Kampuchea, where the Khmer Rouge seized power through guerrilla warfare and faced little post-revolutionary threat, a "small group of intellectuals out of the fanatical determination unleashed a reign of terror of unparalleled proportions to force their ideas about a better world upon the masses" (Bahru 2008:429). In the Ethiopian case, the Derg regime unleashed the *red terror* under a situation in which it faced internal and external resistances. Among such resistances is the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP's) strategy of launching urban guerrilla tactics to terrorize the military regime that controlled the coercive machinery of the state. In February 1977, the EPRP initiated terrorist attacks – known as the *white terror* – against key members and supporters of the civilian political groupings, in which particularly All Ethiopia

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socialist Movement (Ma'ison) sustained the first causality losing Fikre Merid, one of its top members (Andaegachew1993). The EPRP also undertook an assassination attempt against Major Mengistu Haile Mariam, and this was at the time when the Mengistu regime was threatened by secessionist insurgency in Eritrea and other armed insurgent movements in other regions of the country. At the same time, the various political groupings – Ma'ison, Malerid, Echat, Woz League, and the EPRP itself – also posed political threats to the Derg by agitating for a broad-based democratic government run by civilians. Externally, the military regime was also threatened by invasion from the Siad Barre regime in Somalia (Dawit 1989). Frustrated by this political/military environment unfolding internally and externally the Derg regime sponsored the *red terror* that became instrumental for the military regime's rapid evolution and growth into an authoritarian mold.

The main concern of this paper is not the class wars between the revolutionaries and beleaguered *ancien regime*. The interest rather is about the violence and terror that surfaced between and among the political forces who claimed were/are in defense of change and revolution. More specifically, this article is on the violent conflict that erupted between the Ethiopian military regime (the Derg) and the political organizations of the left on the one hand and between/among the latter on the other; particularly between the EPRP and Ma'ison following the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia.

The aim of the paper is twofold. First, it tries to show that post-revolutionary violence/terror resulted almost everywhere in the failure of revolutions and the rise of leaders of the authoritarian (or dictatorial) mold, such as Josef Stalin in Russia and Mengistu Haile Marian in Ethiopia, for example. Second, it attempts to explain that the rise of authoritarian/dictatorial leadership in the post-revolutionary period is followed by the liquidation, detention, forced exile or "political emasculation" (Bahru 2008:428) of the forces of change.

The methodology employed for analyzing the study is qualitative. The data that informed the research have been obtained mainly from secondary sources. Interviews with key informants and focus groups discussions that the author undertook some years back were also used to support the secondary sources, where he believed there are some gaps in information. The evidences obtained are analyzed and interpreted using political economy, historical and critical methods of data analysis. Guided with these tools of analysis and based on qualitative tradition the researcher has summarized theories on revolutions and terror. The elements of a comparative method are also used in the study to understand whether there is a necessary and direct correlation between revolutions and terror in the post-revolutionary period.

Contexts for the Rise of the Derg Regime and the Red Terror

Institutional and Political Factors

The dethroning of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 through the mass-based revolution led to the seizure of power by a military group that came to be known as the Derg. This was because the struggle against the system of monarchy and the Emperor's unlimited personal rule lacked organized political leadership. When the revolution erupted, both the forces of change and reaction were caught by surprise. The continuing impact of the country's "closed," undemocratic political culture will be discussed in detail below. But what must be mentioned here is, because of the entrenched system of absolute monarchy in Ethiopia there was no a political culture of openly organized political dissent and the institutional underpinnings necessary for democracy and good governance. In other words, when the *ancien regime* collapsed political parties that provide the country with alternative political leadership or the civil society organizations that could bring about organized and informed influence on government policy and praxis were not in place. The varied political dissent and armed rebellions that the government of Emperor Haile Selassie witnessed during his long reign –1916-1930 (*de facto*) and 1930-1974 (*de jure*) – could not crystallize into a political party or parties as they were suppressed by force (Bahru 2008: 432).

As part of his modernization efforts for which he has always been credited, Haile Selassie introduced the Constitution of 1931, and the Revised Constitution of 1955. Nevertheless, these measures did not bring about significant change / reform in the country's governance realm. The Revised Constitution stipulates a system of government with three branches: the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. These branches of government were to serve as a mechanism of checks-and-balances in the operations of the government. In practice, however, this remained symbolic and superficial. If anything, the Revised Constitution and the Parliament it established only gave the monarchy a semblance of modernity for domestic and international public consumption (Assefa 2002: 60-65). Put simply, these institutions as modern liberal means against arbitrary rule did not transform the political system of the country, at least to a constitutional monarchy. The Emperor's power remained unlimited and the system of absolute monarchy persisted. As Yacob (1992:10) has put, "the Constitution lubricated the system of absolute monarchy and helped it to continue to run." The parliament had no significant influence on policies as the Emperor retained the power of final say on all legislation. Although the Emperor tried to show the gesture of having made progressive reforms in the political sector, these did not facilitate for smooth and peaceful passage of political power from one generation to the next (Harbeson 1998:65).

After the second half of the 1960s, the Ethiopian student movement formed the only viable opposition to the regime. With their advantage of modern education (Araya 1999: 150-151), the students played a vanguard role in the battle against the decaying system of monarchy. The students raised several socio-economic and political demands to which the old regime failed to respond. Despite their abilities to point to the weaknesses of Haile Selassie's regime, when the regime disintegrated and finally collapsed in 1974, the students failed to provide political leadership to the revolution. Instead, the military stepped into the vacuum and paved the way for the rise of the authoritarian military rule under the leadership of the strongman, Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam. As Merera (2001:12) has succinctly stated,

> Ethiopians received the removal of the Emperor with mixed feelings. Despite most people being to the festive side, the passing of power to the soldiers with no revolutionary credentials did create uncertainty among the conscious part of the population, and anger as well as hopelessness among the beneficiaries of the old order.

Upon seizing state power, the soldiers started arresting, prosecuting, and executing leading members of the former government and others that they labeled as anti- revolutionaries. On the other hand, although the military regime paraded itself to the outside world as the champion of Marxism-Leninism in Africa from 1975 onwards, initially it had no clear vision or a well thought political program. As Chege (1979:369) reminds us, the Derg's "*coup d'état* was based on a solid nationalist platform epitomized by the slogan *Ethiopia Tikdem* (Ethiopia First)". The Derg was even toying with the idea of a constitutional monarchy when it invited the crown prince Asfa Wossen, son of the late Emperor to come and ascend the throne. As Chege (1979:369) further observed, "it was after the endeavors of two civilian prime ministers to institute a bourgeois government failed that the Derg took unto itself the task of destroying what it called the feudal-bourgeois order." According to Addis Hiwot (1987:54-55):

> The Derg exercised unpredictability as virtue, and never had anything remotely evincing programmatic guideline and yet their political conduct after seizure of power was not one of preservation but of destruction of social foundations of the old order.

Initially, the regime also distanced the intelligentsia from the political process. Later, however, having intuitively read that the requirement of the time was to move with the political waves of the day, it flirted with the civilian lefts' political agenda of a socialist revolution. To secure tactical alliance with at least a segment

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of the civilian left, the Derg accepted Marxism-Leninism as a state ideology. In order to capture popular ground and improve its revolutionary credentials, it also undertook some socialist-oriented socio-economic and political reforms between 1974 and 1976.

The 1975 rural land reform legislation is among the reform measures that earned the Derg regime considerable credit (POMOA 1977: 18-29). The 1975 rural land reform legislation confiscated all rural lands from landlords and freed millions of the Ethiopian peasantry from the age-old bondage of tenancy. It also provided for the organization of peasant associations entrusting with the power to implement the legislation and function as units of local self-administration thereby enabling the local people/the peasantry for the first time to decide on their local affairs. Moreover, the proclamation also addressed one of the main historical grievances of the different ethnic groups whose complete incorporation into the Ethiopian state in the last quarter of the 19th century subjected to economic exploitation and political marginalization.

In May 1976, the military regime proclaimed a Program of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) which recognized the rights of Ethiopia's nations and nationalities for the first time (POMOA 1977: 9-17). The NDR program also provided for social justice and respect for human and democratic rights of the people. In addition to its acceptance of the multiethnic character of the Ethiopian state, the Derg, to its credit, also officially recognized the equality of religions and the separation of State and Church in Ethiopia, a country where religious and ethnic inequalities were perpetuated as part of state policy (Andargachew 1993).

The emergence of several multi-national civilian political organizations having their own political programs in 1974 and 1975 was another indication of the regime's initial tendency to tolerate organized and open political dissent in the country that had been alien to such a political culture. However, as soon as the organizations started gaining strength and, in some cases, began raising the question of state power, the regime became uncertain/felt insecure and started reversing its early reform policies. In short, the Derg backpedaled from its reform and "revolutionary" zeal and started intimidating, jailing, and executing its opponents and the critics of its policies.

The point to note here is, despite the rhetoric, the regime failed in many respects to transform the country's politics along a democratic direction. Haile Selassie's ruling style included 'neutralizing, co-opting through political marriage ties, or appointing to ambassadorial posts or to governorships of frontier provinces those whom he suspected of harboring dangerous thoughts against his system (Bahru 2008: 432). Arguably, these were pushed to the excess by the Derg. With the collapse of the imperial regime, the Emperor's 'modes of tolerance and accommodation' (*sic*) of dissent gave way to the ascendancy of "total control of

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society and polity" in the post-imperial period in Ethiopia (Bahru 2008: 442). Its early promise of ensuring law and order and creating a political environment for smooth and orderly transfer of power to the civilian rule aside, the Ethiopian military regime even changed its uniform to civilian suits and embarked on the task of creating Ethiopia in its own image emasculating and paralyzing the civilian political forces. The end of the rule of Haile Selassie and the age-old system of the monarchy in Ethiopia ushered in the hope for open post-Imperial political space and democratic system of governance in the country on the basis of transfer of power through peaceful and competitive elections. Nevertheless, this hope was dashed as the Derg regime mobilized resources under its control to depoliticize and disenfranchise the opposition in a more brutal way than it was during the imperial regime. Those who aired views critical of the regime's policies, demanded for democratic rule and for the exercise of justice in the operation of government, or advocated respect for human rights were publicly condemned as anti-revolutionaries and imprisoned, forced to exile or summarily executed. This was to create an atmosphere of fear and anxiety among the society, to make people feel insecure and distance themselves completely from the affairs of politics and governance of the country.

In a nutshell, the purpose of the revolution in overthrowing Haile Selassie and abolishing the system of monarchy was to create social and political order based on justice and equality. The military's assumption of power, however, became the beginning of the end of this aspiration. The problem started in the second half of the 1970s, when the military government began pursuing the policy of seeking military solution to political conflicts that the country was facing. This immediately resulted in a complicated power struggle among the country's various political forces. The political organizations of the left civilian elite fought against the regime on the one hand, and against one another on the other (Lefort 1983, Markakis and Nega Ayele 1986, Andargachew 1993). The political violence and terror this caused ultimately led to wanton abuses of human rights in the country.

The Political Culture of Violence as a Factor

The phenomena of the *red terror* and human rights violation in Ethiopia in the 1970s could not be explained without taking the country's political tradition into account. Ethiopia has a long history of independent existence and is the oldest African country that successfully escaped European colonial rule. However, since the country's system was monarchical, the Ethiopian people were not free in relation to the government of the country. This writer's contention is that a country could only be called sovereign and free if its people are able to freely express/air their opinion and exercise their legal rights in relation to their government, when

there isn't any obstruction from the latter. In view of this, the Ethiopian people have never been free. As Yohannes in his book titled *Atifto Metifat* (in Amharic), has correctly put:

> The rights to speak and write are natural rights as to eat, drink, breath, walk, and to dress oneself. [Freedom of] thinking [and expression] is actually one of the characteristics that differentiate human beings from other animals (*the author's translation*).

The Ethiopian people did not know these critical political rights and freedoms. In Ethiopia rulers have always been authoritarian in character. Irrespective of their differences in time and ideology, Ethiopia's leaders denied their people the rights to express their ideas orally and in writing, and to exercise independent thinking. As Babile (1989: 4-5) has noted, in Ethiopia:

> [T]he relation between the rulers and the ruled was one based on force. ...Dialogue, persuasion, peaceful dissent and tolerance were all unknown. None use of force as an instrument of rule was considered as a sign of weakness that would lead to downfall ultimately.

Babile further (1997:3) asserts that, "Violence has almost always been the medium of government- people relations in Ethiopia". Force has almost always been the language the Ethiopian rulers have used in their interactions with their political opponents, as well as the people at large. This, no doubt, tempts one to add that in the utter absence of freedom of opinion and free system of election for orderly transfer of power, violence has been the only way to capture and maintain state power in the country. Rulers from Emperor Tewodros II, to whom the beginning of modern Ethiopia is attributed, to the present seized power with military force and believed, in varying degrees of course, in the use of force as an instrument of rule.

As mentioned above, although modern institutions like the Constitution and the Parliament introduced by Haile Selassie in principle guaranteed democratic rights, the Emperor's power remained untouchable. The Emperor continued to rule the country arbitrarily, not through political dialogue and compromise. The tradition of writing the Constitution and establishing the Parliament continued under Mengistu and Meles, although with changed ideologies. President Mengistu adopted Marxism-Leninism; Prime Minister Meles has presided over democracy based on ethnic federalism and multiparty system. Such changes in the superstructure of ideas, however, have not brought about a significantly altered *modus operandi* of governance of the post-Imperial regimes. Despite the alleged

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changes, intimidation, torture, detention (in some cases for life), etc. of political opponents continued as the ruling strategy whether in the name of revolution or democracy.

Tolerance to critics of government policies and plurality of ideas are the *sine qua non* for the modern and civilized governance. During the Derg, critics to government policies and those who entertained ideas that differ from that of the regime and the leader were rewarded with either detention or death. Apart from armed struggle to capture state power and maintain it, Ethiopia during its long history of existence as State has not developed a culture where different political forces organize and compete for state power by peaceful means. Whenever there happened organized opposition, rulers encouraged and promoted cliques/factions and played off one against the other thereby leading towards the ultimate demise of all, the shadow of which has not yet been completely removed from the country's political life.

Such a political culture has important bearing on the peoples' attitude towards politics. The Ethiopian people have been passive in their relations to their government, save for fragmented and sporadic instances of peasant movements (Gebru Tareke 1996). Putting ones hands in politics has been considered as 'playing with fire', a dangerous exercise (Pausewang and Kjetil Tronvoll 2000: 153). People's passive attitude to politics and the feeling of helplessness in relation to their rulers have been entrenched in the Ethiopian society's psyche. As Machiavelli (1469-1527) advised rulers in his *The Prince*, '[r]ulers may not need to be always loved, but feared' (Bondanella 1984). In Ethiopia it seems that they have to be always feared; just as if politics may not work unless people are caught by fear of rulers.' There are several expressions in Ethiopian society that testify to the people's weakness in relation to leaders. For instance, there is a saying in Amharic, *Nugus ayikassasim samay ayitarasim* (literarily means to criticize the King is as impossible as to plough the sky). People also say *leman abet yibalal,* which literarily means there is no court of justice to appeal to in cases of offense or injury from persons in authority. This shows the absence of responsible/accountable government authority in the country to protect the rights and interests of citizens.

The upshot is, from such perception of helplessness in their relations to the government – an institution that fails to make difference to **best** of their lives – the majority of the Ethiopian peoples deny their respect for and allegiance to it. Owing to the fact that the people in no time had been granted constitutional rights to confront their rulers and hold them responsible for their misrule publicly and peacefully, the only way to punish the illegitimate and oppressive regimes have been through rebellions. Simply put, disobedience to authority has always been manifested by taking up arms and going to the bush. In Ethiopia, as Babile"

(1989: 4) puts, "violence has been inculcated into the system, into the national psyche and socio-cultural heritage.

In sum, in Ethiopia, rulers and the ruled have always perpetrated mutual fear and mistrust. Those who had differing views from the official line were accused of being dangerous to the security and wellbeing of the country and, thus, unfairly/irrationally treated. The art of governing in the country has been through the consistent use of force. Hence, Mengistu's draconian measures against his opposition were not unprecedented. They had their origin in the imperial period. How the past has continued to influence the present is important and this is discussed below in this paper. Here it suffices only to note the following observation.

> Especially now, after the members of the previous regime have been put on trial for human rights violations, this possibility hangs over the head of any person or group that has carried any inhuman activity. This is one negative repercussion of an incumbent trying those who he overthrew while himself engaging in similar wrong-doings (Leenco 2000:131).

What in short, these words relate to is that the EPRDF regime has put officials of the previous regime on trial for their human rights violations while it is also being accused of making similar mistakes.

Crisis in Civilian Politics

Another key to understanding the context of the subject under consideration is to examine the nature of conflicts and contradictions of the civilian elite in post - 1974 Ethiopia: the crisis in civilian politics. Somewhere above in the paper, we have attributed the rise of military dictatorship and the ensuing human rights crimes in the country in the 1970s to the absence of organized political opposition ready and capable of assuming state power and usher the post-Imperial Ethiopia on to the path of democracy and the rule of law. The unfortunately unanswered question of democratic leadership in Ethiopia also after Haile Selassie led to the crudest form of power struggle among the various political forces in the country.

The division in the civilian left precede the fall of the imperial regime (Bahru 1999, Addis Hiwot 1987, Gebru Mersha 1987). The rift had its roots in the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM). The ESM, particularly abroad, was divided on the interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, the solution of the question of nationalities, and the issue of armed conflict in Eritrea. The issue of getting rid of the *ancient regime*, however, was not controversial (Addis Hiwot 1987: 41-64, Bahru 1999:133).

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After the overthrow of the old regime, issues like the political role of the military and the strategies and tactics with regard to the regime's exercise of power during the transition period triggered rift within the civilian political groups. What must also be mentioned is that, among the political groupings that came to the fore none could develop to the disciplined and seasoned political party to articulate and coordinate the national agenda. These political groupings were the Ma'ison, the EPRP), *ECHAT* (the Oppressed Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Struggle), *MALERID* (the Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Organization), *Wez-League* (the Workers' League), and *Abyotawi-Seded* (the Revolutionary Fire/Flame). Many of these political organizations emerged after the fall of the old regime, and some were simply "clones of other organizations or to cater to the whims of some "prima donna" (Negussay 1990: 18-19). Moreover, "personalities, personal animosities, and lack of trust and respect counted more than ideological differences in the formation of these parties" (Ibid., footnote 14, p. 28). Be it what it may, it is also important to mention that these were the first 'modern' political parties in Ethiopia.

Among these the only prominent political organizations that posed the first challenge to the Derg regime were the EPRP and Ma'ison, which Henze (1998: 42) characterizes as "elitist, authoritarian, and multiethnic Marxist groups". Both Ma'ison and the EPRP originated in the ESM and most of their core leadership was composed of returnees from abroad. They also brought with them the division in the ESM. Popular attitude towards these two political organizations has been varied relating their political orientations and socio-economic bases. While Ma'ison was seen as a pro-Soviet group whose members were drawn from aristocratic families in exile, the EPRP was considered as a home grown and pro-China group whose members were drawn from urban intellectuals and workers (Chege 1979: 372). The validity of these perceptions aside, what divided the EPRP and Ma'ison into antagonistic and irreconcilable groups was less ideological than difference on strategies and tactics on how to capture state power.

As events unfolded, the rift between these two groups became so acute that they even started taking differing positions on issues…large and small. As Addis Hiwot (1987: 54) has observed, "all previously shared attitudes became issues of contention". They conducted all sorts of "verbal violence" against each other in the pages of *Addis Zemen*, the government owned daily, during the early months of 1976, and the center of their disagreement was the question of state power (Ottaway, Ethiopianist Notes). They initially displayed common position on the Derg and scorned its lack of political vision (Addis Hiwot 1987: 54). Later, however, they were divided on the regime's future political role. While the EPRP condemned the Derg as "fascist" and called for its immediate removal and formation of a "Provisional People's Government" (PPG), Ma'ison seemed to be

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moderate believing that the Derg had progressive stance that could be exploited during the transitional period and eventually offered it 'qualified support'. A point to be stressed here again is that it was neither "differing social bases", nor ideological dispositions that made the EPRP and Ma'ison to take contrary views towards the Derg. What must be clear is that, they were jockeying for state power: while Ma'ison wanted to seize power by using the state apparatus from within, the EPRP wanted to capture power by toppling the regime militarily, through urban insurrection (Negussay 1990:18-28).

In the final analysis, the continuing strife between the two increased confusion and frustration among the civilian left; and this was a "bonanza" for the regime (Bahru 1999:133). When Ma'ison joined forces with the Derg, the EPRP, which felt betrayed, labeled the former as *banda,* a traitor and an agent of the "fascist" Derg. Ma'ison on its part characterized the EPRP as "anarchist". Upon the proclamation of the NDR in 1976, the EPRP refused joining ranks with the other organizations of the civilian left to form EMLADH (Union of Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist Organizations). This was because the EPRP believed that the program of the NDR was authored by Ma'ison. The Party also withdrew its members from the Political Office for Mass Organizational Affairs (POMOA) alleging that it was dominated by Ma'ison. What followed was EPRP's isolation; it was singled out as an intransigent party (POMOA 1977).

To be sure, the political rift between the EPRP and Ma'ison, the two dominant multinational political groups of the civilian-left – because of the utter absence of the politics of tolerance and accommodation – culminated in desperation and frustration that ultimately led to acts of mutual/physical destruction of the civilian intellectuals and the demise of multinational politics on the one hand and the ascendancy of the military on the other (Addis Hiwot 1987, Bahru 2008, Bahru 1999). The political bickering which these political organizations of the civilian left engaged in bought the regime time to establish, expand, and strengthen its repressive apparatus that it used to liquidate members of these political groupings and terrorize and establish total control over the Ethiopian society.

To conclude this section, the Ethiopian opposition missed numerous opportunities to positively impact on the direction of the country's political development. They failed to pursue the politics of accommodation among themselves. For instance, the failure of the ESM to crystallize into an organized and disciplined political part(y)ies rendered the 1974 revolution to be 'spontaneous' upon which the military capitalized to establish and consolidate its rule (Dawit 1987:56-57). This denied the revolution the leadership of the civilian left. The crisis that mounted between the EPRP and Ma'ison after the eruption of the revolution also led to what Addis Hiwot (Ibid.) phrased as the "politics of

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gangsterism". While the former pursued an insurrectionist posture towards the Derg, the latter followed a collusion course. In short, having failed to narrow their differing strategies for capturing state power through discussion and dialogue, the organizations accused each other as 'anti-revolutionary' and took up arms against each other to the effect of mutual annihilation, and the consolidation of the Derg's authoritarian rule .

The *Red Terror*: What it is and who is Responsible for it

People have different views about the *red terror*. Some equated it with the crimes of Apartheid in South Africa; some to the carnage the fascist Italian soldiers committed in Addis Ababa during their five-year occupation (1936-1941) of Ethiopia; some others would like to remember it as a traumatic time than what happened during Ahmed Gragn's war in the sixteenth century.

The *red terror* was a state sanctioned execution of citizens. Indeed, it was an expression of the reign of the law of the jungle in Ethiopia. Arbitrariness in decisions and unmitigated use of violence by the military regime reached its extreme proportion during the period of the *red terror* (1976-1978). There was virtually no part of the country and no section of the population that had not been affected by the violence. In the countryside farmers were terrorized, imprisoned, or killed under a variety of allegations such as having committed economic sabotage, causing failure in agricultural productivity, promoting chauvinistic ideas, supporting anti-Derg forces, or objecting to the regime's villagization and resettlement programs. In urban areas schools, industrial sites, and marketplaces turned into battlefields. Students, teachers, workers, merchants, public servants, etc. became victims of State sponso*red terror*; major towns such as Addis Ababa (the Capital City) sustained the heaviest casualty.

In studying the Derg *red terror* it is important to distinguish it from what was then called the *white* terror. To put the issue of political violence and terror during the period under study in context, important to understand is that it was not only the regime's security forces (Revolutionary Defense Squads) that used force and wantonly abused human rights. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Army (EPRA), the military wing of the EPRP, also hunted down and killed individuals as part of its strategy of struggle for power. In the name of defending the revolution, EPRA also caused liquidation of the young and educated citizens of the country. Negussay (1990:22) remembers the carnage of EPRP's urban-armed struggle in its attempt to wrest power from the military as follows:

(K)illing whole families, hanging children in school yards, gunning down husbands waiting in cars for their wives and fathers dropping their kids off at

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school, assassinating young members of a family and dumping the bodies in front of the house, so as to shock and brutalize the rest of the family.

Under the name of *red vs. white* terror people were slaughtered and corpses, particularly in urban centers such as Addis Ababa, were left on the streets for days to be seen by passersby. Emperors Tewodros, Yohannes, Menelik, and Haile Selassie who ruled Ethiopia from the second half of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century are remembered not only for their state-building efforts, but also for mistreating those who resisted their authority. Notwithstanding the differences in time and the challenges faced, Ethiopia under the Derg witnessed gross human rights violation and bloodbath. People were murdered *en masse* for reasons in some cases they did not know and were buried in mass graves (Babile 1989, Kiflu 1998). Others who survived suffered in prisons under inhumane living conditions. In addition to physical and psychological torture, the horrible life in the crowded and suffocating prison cells, the conditions of food, lack of medication are still nightmarish memory for this writer, who is one of the survivors of the *red terror*. In the Derg prisons days were restless – interrogators could come to take anyone from prison cells for interrogation, torture, or execution at any time. In addition to the 'unpredictable arrival' of the regime's killing squads, fleas and bedbugs also kept prisoners sleepless. In Ethiopia, people in general express life in prisons as *kamutbälay, kaqumbatach*, which literary means, "Prisoners are above the dead and below the living". Many who could not withstand these horrible conditions of life in the prisons went mad and finally died.

As regards the question of responsibility for the *red terror* and human rights crimes committed in Ethiopia during those days, no independent/impartial research has been done. Even though there is a range of opinions, there is no consensus among the Ethiopian public on this point. One argument is that the *Red terror* was the regime's response to the EPRP's urban-guerrilla warfare started by its assassination attempt on Mengistu, the First Secretary of the Derg, in late September 1976. According to this line of argument, the Derg, in retaliation, declared the *Red terror* in February 1977 to counter EPRP's urban terrorism. According to this line of argument, the Derg's *red terror* declared in February 1977 was to counter EPRP's urban terrorism.

The second argument, which is pro- EPRP is that the Derg's extra-judicial killings predated the declaration of the *red terror* (Kiflu 1998, Babile 1989). The EPRP presents the summary execution of the former government officials in December 1974 as evidence saying that the Derg's terrorist actions and violation of human rights had been in process since early on. Hence, EPRP's resort to armed struggle in September 1976 was a counter-offensive (Kiflu 1998,

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Babile1989). Arguably, this line of argument must have influenced the EPRDF's Trial Process in which topDerg officials have exclusively been charged for committing "genocide" and human rights violation during the *red terror*.

The third, which is the argument of the partisans of the Derg, is that the waves of the political violence that engulfed the country started by the EPRP and Ma'ison against each other and the Derg later joined on the side of Ma'ison (Negussay 1990:21).

The forth argument holds Ma'ison responsible on grounds that its choice of collusion- course with the Derg furnished the latter with legitimacy and ideological support to consolidate power and counter the civilian opposition violently, including against Ma'ison itself. Ma'ison is also accused for having caused failure of the Coalition of Ethiopian Marxist-Leninist Organizations (EMALDH) while it was yearning for *primus inter pares*. Be that as it may, what must be mentioned here is, as EMALDH disintegrated, *ECHAT*, for example, opted for promoting ethnonationalism, while members of the *Wez League* and *MALERID* were co-opted into the Derg regime (Addis Hiwot 1987: 56, Negussay 1990:21-23).

The last argument relates to 'complicity of foreign powers', notably the Soviet Union. According to this argument the Soviet Union, in order to make itself an indispensable ally of a strategically significant Ethiopia, provided the Derg with massive military assistance and thereby bolstered the regime's destructive power. In fact, given the fact that the Horn of Africa region became one of the cold war battle grounds following the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution, one cannot argue that foreign connivance was absent from the scene. In short, foreign power influence in the form of commission or omission was inevitable. There were the Americans and the Soviets in the region in search for their respective regional allies for the furtherance of global interests. Ma'ison and EPRP also do not disagree on this. As a final note the Soviet intervention in post-revolutionary Ethiopia disrupted the internal balance of power in favor of the Derg ultimately resulting in the virtual annihilation of the country's revolutionary forces and failure of the Revolution (Babile 1989: 119-124, Abera 1987:93-97).

In the final analysis, this author argues that the Derg, the EPRP, and Ma'ison, albeit the difference in degrees, each made its contribution to the "dirty war" that destroyed one productive generation of Ethiopia (Yohannes *Atifto Metiifat*). In light of this, the argument to single out a particular actor for having committed gross crimes against humanity in Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s cannot be justified. It was chaos that reigned in the country. This is what Clapham, a close observer of the affairs of the country, has noted, "In the final phase of the *red terror* …it was often hard to tell who was killed by whom (Clapham 1988:57). In the final analysis, the contention of this writer, in a study of this nature is that one

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has to consistently apply the issue of human rights at the center of analysis, rather than asking the question "who fired the first bullet"?Or the scale of the damage a certain actor's involvement caused. These are more relevant for litigation at law court rather than an attempt to understand the issue. For instance, there is an assertion that the *red terror* was not a defensive measure on grounds that the EPRP's *white terror* could not be exaggerated to the level it puts the Derg in that (defensive) position. Similarly, the EPRP's "urban-guerrilla" warfare was criticized only on the basis that it served the regime as a pretext to unleash the war of annihilation. Without committing the risk of lessening the Derg's *red terror* crimes, one would say that each of the political actors of the period contributed to the crimes against humanity in pursuing its narrow political ends.

Forgiveness for Justice or Justice for Revenge? Popular Attitude on the *Red terror* and the Derg Trial Process

In July 2001, when fieldwork for this project was conducted in Addis Ababa, Hawassa, and Dire Dawa, this writer had discussions with people of different occupational, ethnic, educational backgrounds. The people had different experiences of the *red terror*. Some were survivors of the *red terror*; some had lost family members, and some others were too young to have experienced the carnage at all. In their political orientation, some were supporters of the EPRDF regime while others sympathized with the opposition parties; the majority were however politically apathetic. Owing to this fact, the people had mixed views about the *red terror* and the EPRDF's Derg Trial Process. Hence, the range of expressions and views obtained could be said to be fairly representative of the feelings of different groups of Ethiopian society.

The author's general observation from the discussions and personal interviews he had with those people is that they still are bitter about the *red terror*, and a significant number of the people were so traumatized that they even were not willing to express their opinion about it. For example, among the questions put to respondents less than half were responded to and a significant number of these were invalid responses. Understandably, people have valid reasons to choose not to respond to the questions put to them. In addition to being fearful of getting involved in politics, they did not want to recall the *red terror*, the issue they also believed was less relevant, particularly in light of the present regime's "repeating similar wrong doings".[2]

From the valid responses obtained what has been gathered is that the *red terror* negatively affected Ethiopia socially, economically, and politically. Socially, it eliminated a young and educated generation of the country: thousands were killed, imprisoned, and forced into exile. The crisis in human resource

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negatively impacted on the country's economy.[3]Politically, the trauma of the *red terror* has the effect of making the present generation to have a sense of ill feeling towards politics. A respondent with college education, 46, who remembers the *red terror* as "extremely ugly", said:

> I do not participate in politics because I have no interest. The political violence during the *red terror* negatively influenced the attitude of my generation towards politics. The political situation of that time was chaotic when even the illiterate individuals were given guns with authority to take "free measures", i.e. to kill people for their political beliefs. I was detained suspected of being a member of the EPRP. My friends were killed. But I survived death by mere chance. God saved me.[4]

The trauma of the *red terror*, ill feeling to the present government's ethnic politics, and lack of genuine democracy and free and fair elections were some of the reasons mentioned as reasons for people's apathy.

What seems appropriate to mention here, and on which the majority of the respondents also had consensus, is that, in Ethiopia people vote in elections not only because they believe in the benefits of political representation but out of fear of consequences of not voting. It is important to put this issue into historical context. By African standards, Ethiopia has a long history of elections. Elections have been conducted in Ethiopia since the 1950s, for more than half a century today. However, except giving regimes a semblance of legitimacy, elections have never changed the essence of rule in the country. During Emperor Haile Selassie's reign people elected oppressive officials, landlords for that matter, as their "representatives" to the Imperial Parliament just to get rid of them. During the Derg regime, in urban areas people went to electoral polls to "choose their representatives" to the National *Shengo*(the regime's unicameral parliament) not only as their "revolutionary duty", but also it qualified them for *Kebelle* services where government subsidized consumer goods such as bread, salt, soap, different types of food grains, etc. were sold for cheaper prices. In the countryside, too – apart from intimidation, harassment, and detention – the need to get land was the main reason why peasants had to vote. Land, among others, has also been used by the EPRDF as "carrot-and-stick" strategy for winning the peasants' vote in elections in rural Ethiopia (Tafesse 2006). To be fair, in addition to the regime's ethnic political formula and the notion that people administer themselves through their elected ethnic representatives, to get and sustain jobs and position in the government are some of the reasons why people have to vote in favor of the EPRDF. Such behavior of voting out of fear or "benefit calculation", usually makes people to vote in favor of those in power (Yacob 2007).

Our respondents' feelings on the Derg Trial Process were also mixed. From the positive side, [5] there were those who believed that the Derg regime was responsible for the *red terror* arguing that rather than guaranteeing security of citizens as government, it sponsored *terror* for the sake of sustaining power. Some of the respondents refuted the argument that the *red terror* was a response to the EPRP's white terror, and argued that the Derg started killing people as soon as it came to power. For such respondents the *red terror* is not forgettable. They argued that perpetrators of the crime have to be tried and sentenced according to the law: no question to forget and forgive. They also believe that the Derg Trial Process would have good results in restoring harmony and confidence-building measures among the people; it would have the effect of healing past "wounds" and bad memories. All political actors would also learn a lot from the Trial Process with regard to the value of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.

From the negative side, [5] many respondents were very skeptical about the Derg Trial Process. The feeling of such a category of respondents was that the Trial Process should have been a national agenda. A respondent who preferred anonymity said: "The Ethiopian people have not accused the Derg members, even they have not been consulted; the Trial Process is purely the EPRDF agenda."[6] The general consensus of the respondents in this category was the regime had three objectives when it first decided to put the Derg officials on trial for "genocide and crimes against humanity". Firstly, it sought revenge against officials of the Derg regime who fought it militarily during the period of its insurgency. Secondly, by charging Derg officials for genocide and human rights violations the EPRDF wanted to secure international support, particularly that of the West for its post-Derg economic and political agenda. Thirdly, by putting members of the Derg on trial and defaming all these who worked with the Derg regime it wanted to distance them from power politics in the country.

The upshot is, the Ethiopian public in general seem to be skeptical of the Derg Trial Process, and the source of the skepticism, in the first place, was owing to the fact that "justice delayed is justice denied": the process that started in 1994 was underway for over a decade until May 2008, when the Ethiopian Supreme Court passed sentences on the *red terror* convicts – Derg officials including the former dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam – sentencing them to lengthy prison terms and the death penalty. This was after the victims of the Mengistu regime's *red terror* were re-buried on 27 May 2007 in Addis Ababa, at the Revolution Square, now re-named the Meskel Square. Tens of thousands marched to re-bury the remains of the victims. According to the verdict the Ethiopian Federal Supreme Court, President Mengistu, who is in exile in Zimbabwe, along with other 19 Derg officials received the death penalty having been found guilty of

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"crimes of genocide" committed during the 17-year reign of the Derg (1974-1991). In actual fact, while it is unlikely that Harare would be willing to hand over Mengistu to the authorities in Addis Ababa to face the death penalty, the 19 members' death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment from which they have been released after serving twenty years.

In the second place, people were also not expecting much from the Derg Trial Process both in terms of justice for healing past socio-political wounds caused by the waves of the *red* vs. *white terror*, and in terms of instantaneous positive change it would bring in the realm of governance in the country. It is also the contention of this writer that both the incumbent government and its opposition do not seem to have learned from the mistakes of the previous regime and its opposition. While the incumbent is still being criticized for not being tolerant enough to the opposition, the opposition in its part is also badly divided to the extent it could not significantly positively impact on the political development of the country by bringing about civilized influence on government policies and praxis.

The Legacies of the *Red Terror:* Towards Bringing the Study to its Current Relevance

A country always in transition, Ethiopia experienced waves of transitions since the second half of the 1970s that failed to meet their stated goals. The popular uprising that overthrew Haile Selassie's regime brought to power the military regime, which essentially was dictatorial. Although the regime took certain economic reforms in its early years; and, though belatedly, it ratified the Constitution, institutionalized elections, and named the country a Democratic Republic, these measures proved to be simply window dressing. Having essentially rested on the military as support base, the Derg could not change the undemocratic political culture of the country. It not only destroyed the institutions of the monarchy but also crushed the civilian forces that fought against the *ancien regime*. It imposed a state of siege on the society and legalized state sponsored *terror* in which thousands of young and educated Ethiopians were decimated. This denied the country an opportunity for socio-economic and political development.

To reiterate what has been stated above, the political system the military regime introduced was hostile to civilian politics. The strains the system placed upon the unity of the civilian groups were that of divide-and-rule policy so that even the regime's authoritarian style of rule did not impress upon them the need for unity. Having capitalized on the division in the civilian camp, in spite of its early flirtations with the civilian left and its adoption of Marxist-Leninist ideology, which of course was to bolster its "revolutionary credentials", the

regime monopolized the country's political life. To make matters worse, the regime's launching of the state sponsored *terror* led not only to the physical liquidation of the multinational civilian political organizations, but also the death of multinational politics. This prompted the search for solutions for political problems in the country along ethnic-nationalism and the creation of ethnic-based movements. As Assefa (2002:39) has put,

> …when the plan for joining up radicals of all nationalities in a single (a pan-Ethiopian) organization was found to be ineffective the nationalists opted to work for their own separate agenda.

The removal of multinational political agenda resulted in the mush-rooming of ethnic-based liberation movements, thereby leading to the ascendancy of the pervasively ethnicized politics in post-1991 Ethiopia (see Bahru 2008: 442). 'In the post-Derg period, many Ethiopian intellectuals and politicians turned ethnonationalist more than ever in their discourses and their vision of how the national politics around them should be organized' (Assefa2002:39). As ethnic identity is seen as a natural basis for political organization in present-day Ethiopia, ethnonationalism has become the dominant tone of the country's politicians' in their explanation of multi-party democracy. In light of this, it is interesting to observe debates on policy issues in the Ethiopian Parliament taking more often than not the forms of ethnic struggle, as if the representatives in the national assembly were ambassadors of their own ethnic groups.

What also makes this study relevant today is the fact that the Derg's system of misrule and the tendency to rely on force for retaining power is still evident in the country. As Merera (1999: 121) has noted, "… the legacy [the Derg] has left behind is far more pervasive than the imperial regime it had replaced". The multinational party politics that declined as the result of the *red terror* has yet to resurface in the country. The mistrust and division the ethnicization policy of the post-Derg regime has created in the camp of its opposition is also disturbing. In short, in spite of the rhetoric, the existing regime still seems to be adamantly opposed to the entry of credible opposition into the political process of the country (Bahru 2008:442-3, 1999: 121).

The ruling coalition party itself is also not stable. There has been divisions and confusions within the EPRDF. Immediately following the end of the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war the TPLF, the core member of the ruling coalition, made public its split into two factions, the "majority" and "minority". This created mistrust and lack of confidence within the other coalition members. Although it was settled soon, subsequent to the split in the TPLF other coalition member parties purged many of their officials and cadres. For example, the then presidents

of the regional states of Tigray, Oromia, and the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regions had been sacked on accounts of "corruption and anti-democracy". With regard to the Amhara National Regional State, the then Secretary of the ANDM, in his 10-year performance report mentioned the 'lack of openness and anti-democratic tendencies' as major problems of the party. In short, no EPRDF member party was immune from the then *Gimgama* (an Amharic term to mean "performance evaluation") policy of the regime.

Another incident indicating the vulnerability of the Ethiopian political scene is the political violence that surfaced following the outcome of the 2005 elections. If it had not been quickly brought under control by the regime using all the benefits of its incumbency, the crisis was nearly a kind of Hobbesian "state of nature". The post-2005 elections crisis resembled the situation of Mengistu's crackdown on the different political groupings in the country in the 1970s in order to do away with the critics of his policies and establish his own style of political party, the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE). Whether the successors of the late Prime Minister Meles would opt for one strong party in the form of "renewed" EPRDF or continue with the *status quo* is remains to be seen. To note however is, in the post-2005 elections a host of parties of Ethiopia's ethnic minorities publicly announced political affiliation with the ruling coalition party, and are acting accordingly. The upshot is that there is no very clear vision about the future direction of the country. But one could say that the political and ideological illusions that both the regime and the opposition still face will undoubtedly have consequences on the democratization process and the governing party's future dispensation to the opposition.

Conclusion

The Derg's *red terror* had the objectives of 1) punishing the EPRP, 2) terrorizing or brutalizing the civilian intellectuals, 3) inspiring fear in the minds of the people at large so that they would distance themselves from anti-Derg politics.

The following assumptions also could be made with regard to the aims and objectives of the Derg Trial Process. From the result of our survey research conducted for this study and from personal observation we have been able to gather that people are still, quarter a century later, apprehensive about the *red terror* and have apathetic political behavior due to their memories of it. On the other hand, the Derg Trial Process does not seem to have been designed to remedy the political and psychological legacy of the *red terror*. The problem of regimes that gun their way to power everywhere is how to gain and sustain legitimacy. In putting the Derg officials on trial the needs and concerns of the EPRDF regime is to be political: to gain domestic and international legitimacy, and to distance

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members of the former government and its party (the WPE) from the country's politics.

Debates in the pages of the emergent private press in the country and the observation obtained from the summary of the survey research for this paper also testify to the fact that the Derg Trial Process has been partial from its onset for the reasons that the regime put on trial only members of the Derg government for the crimes of the *red terror* while failing to give concern for those who died and suffered from the consequences of the EPRP's '*white terror*'. Only in view of this, healing of the 'past injury', restoring harmony, and serving the purpose of confidence-building measures among the people do not seem to be the major intent and purpose of the Derg Trial Process. How much would political actors of the country have learned and would learn from the Trial Process with regard to respecting and promoting the value of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights also remain to be seen.

Finally, if Ethiopia should not be allowed to move once again towards another cycle of political violence and socio-economic crises the following few points of recommendation are in order. First, the political forces of the country, both the governing party and the opposition have to exercise in earnest the culture of political tolerance and accommodation. Second, the incumbent government should put more time and energy to policies of socio-economic development that deal with the pervasive poverty in the country. Third, avoiding the presently ethnicized political culture that is being taken out of proportion is essential for the well-being and united existence of the country. Ethnonationalism is not politically evil in itself. But if manipulated for specific purposes, it can lead to social destabilization and political turmoil. A democratized state is the best way of dealing objectively with questions of nationalities. A majority of the Ethiopian people can support a unitary form of the national state which is democratic in its operations, which does not alienate any group of people socially, culturally, economically, and politically. A democratic state also will create the people's unity, collective involvement and responsibility that are imperative for building and sustaining a strong and developed Ethiopian state. To conclude with the beautiful words of (Ttukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo 2000: 117), "ethnonationalism cannot replace a democratic state"; thus "the only way out is to de-mystify ethnicity in giving it a national responsibility in the hierarchy of both state and society".

Notes

1   This paper is a significantly revised version of the Paper Presented at the Workshop on Derg Trial Project organized by the Norwegian Institute of Human Rights (NIHR) held in Oslo, Norway, September 2001

2   Personal interview: an individual survivor of the *Red terror* in Addis Ababa, married and has three children, and who strongly preferred anonymity, 10 February 2001

3   Personal interview with different individuals with different occupational and educational backgrounds in Addis Ababa, 10 February 2001; in Hawasa City, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR), 15 February 2001; in Dire Dawa, 21 February 2001.

4   Personal interview: an ex-member of the EPRP who survived the *Red terror* and has now become a successful businessman in Dire Dawa, 21 February 2001.

5   Focus Group Discussion: people composed of men and women of different age groups in three selected sites: in Addis Ababa, 11 February 2001 before noon; in Hawasa 16 February 2001 before noon; in Dire Dawa, 23 February 2001.

6   Focus Group Discussion: people composed of men and women of different age groups in three selected sites: in Addis Ababa, 12 February 2001; in Hawasa 16 February 2001 afternoon; in Dire Dawa, 24 February 2001.

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