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# WHICH KIND OF LAND REFORM FOR ETHIOPIA: THE DEBATE PRECEDING THE 1975 LAND PROCLAMATION

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## ABSTRACT

Sustained agricultural development depends on the proper management of the land and the people, and their relationships-i.e. the system of land tenure. The feudal system of Ethiopia was, however, believed to be a bottleneck for the utilization of the country's agricultural potential. Then, the students and the progressive intelligentsia played the vanguard role in the political agitation for land reform for more than a decade. The imperial government was unable to meet the demands of the popular movement that ultimately brought the regime to its demise. On September 2, 1974 the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), commonly called Derg controlled the government. Then, the issue of land reform became the subject of much discussion and controversy within the PMAC, student groups and radical intelligentsia and the public at large. The debate was conducted on two different levels, formally in the government institutions and in the official newspapers, and informally in the underground publications and in public gatherings. It took about six months of discussion and elaboration for the PMAC until its radical wing finally proclaimed the March 1975 land reform. The foregoing debate revealed the degree of polarization between the reformists and the revolutionists. The major questions in the struggle between the two poles were centered around the objective of the land reform, the issue of land ownership and of ceilings, and the method of its implementation.

**Key words:** land reform, land tenure, peasantry, tenancy, debate, Agriculture and development

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Land in Ethiopia, as in other developing countries, is very essential for, and central to, life. It was valued for not only economic benefits but also a source of political power and social status. Consequently, the issue of land has shaped the history of the country from the earlier times to the present. As agriculture is the foundation of the national economy, its transformation, without which the country's development is almost impossible, poses the concern of the citizens at large.

The feudal landholding system in Ethiopian was very much complex and diverse. However, it could be generally divided into two broad categories: the northern "communal" ownership and the southern private ownership of land (Alemseged, 1973; Crummey, 2000). Although the communal *rist* (hereditary land ownership right) system of land tenure reduced the problem of tenancy, fragmentation and scarcity of land were the major problems in the north. Moreover, it encouraged unlimited claims and counter claims and prohibited introduction of mechanization, intensive development and investment (Teame, 1971; Haile, 1970). The increasing populations have been forced to till increasingly diminishing plots of declining productivity caused by continuous use over centuries. Because of dispersion of farm plots, agricultural operations require an unnecessary large amount of labour and capital resources (FAO, 1969).

In the south, the majority of the local people were dispossessed of their lands and reduced to tenancy and forced to pay much of their produce to the '*neftegnas*' (the feudal lords who came from the north) and some local nobility. The exploitive nature of the feudal economy, coupled with ethnic and religious differences, worsened the relation between the peasantry and the feudal lords of the south. This was aggravated by the introduction of commercial agriculture which resulted in the eviction of many tenants and the subsequent social unrest (Bailey, 1979).

Generally, the feudal system suited the concentration of landownership in a small group (mostly absentee landlords) who under-utilized their holdings, while the mass of the peasantry were suffering from land hunger (Challenge, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1966). The system did not encourage the peasantry to invest and improve their farming methods. This was due to lack of security, uncontrolled rents, unwritten and uncertain leasing arrangements, extra labour service, unconditional eviction and uncompensated improvements (Dessalegn, 1985; Kebede, 1970). The logical corollary of this situation was low productivity, income, consumption and savings, then the peasantry could not stand even a simple risk.

It was a common understanding for many people that the problem of agricultural stagnation could be solved only through the alteration of the traditional system of land tenure. However, various groups of people had different conception of the fundamental shortcomings of the feudal system and the changes that had to be introduced. The

liberals supported reformism through rationalization processes without affecting the basic structure of the then existing political economy, while the radicals favored a revolution – the complete destruction of the existing order and its replacement by a new one (informants: Yemaneh G/Mariyam, Mesfin G/Hiyot; Ethiopian Herald, April 4, 1974). Then, the term land reform had been subjected to different interpretations. Some people defined it narrowly as a means to provide land to the landless, and others merely limited it to technological and administrative improvements like taxation programmers, irrigation works, mechanization, resettlement, etc while others conceived it broadly as a comprehensive program for the transformation of the entire agricultural economy (Tai, 1974; Warriner, 1969). The objective of this paper is, therefore, to describe and analyze the formal and informal debates carried out on the formulation of a land reform bill preceding the March 1975 proclamation. The study is made mainly based on contemporary/primary sources of data including oral information.

## 2. THE STUDENT MOVEMENT AND QUESTION OF LAND

The publicity of the real nature of the feudal system as a root cause of the impoverishment of rural population came into the forum since the 1960 coup, when the rebels and their student supporters, decried tenancy and deprivation of the peasantry (Markakis and Nega, 1976). The peasantry, with the exception of isolated rebellions against new and excessive taxes and tribute, played little role in the political agitation for land reform (Hoben, 1976). But this task was played by the students and the progressive intelligentsia.

In March 1965 the students of Addis Ababa University marched through the streets of the city to the parliament demonstrating in favor of "land to the tiller" and singing the popular song "መሬት ላራሹ የምትሹ ተዋጎላት አትሸሹ" [literally, those who quest for land to the tiller, fight for it! Do not retreat] (Kiflu, 1993). This marked the real beginning of the student movement for radical reforms. In the following years, the students union (both abroad and at home) eventually understood that the anticipated economic reform could not be achieved under the autocratic government. Hence, they took up an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle (Informant: Girma Siyum; Getachew, 1980). The movement of university-college students of Addis Ababa spread throughout the country's high schools. Then the question of land to the tiller widely reached everybody's ear and got solid ground in the countryside (Informant: Girma Siyum; Fentahun, 1990).

Therefore, "the issue of land and tenancy reform became a cause célèbre among the students, workers and reformers of the educated youth" (Bailey, 1979). But the popular movements were mainly unorganized and characterized by spontaneity. Many of the student activists understood land reform only to mean transforming the land ownership from wealthy landlords to the tenants who actually till the soil. Nevertheless, it severed as one of the political weapons in fighting against the feudal regime (Informants: Mesfin G/Hiyot, Sisay G/Giorgis). Since land was a major source of wealth, power and social status, a meaningful land reform program would inevitably destroy or limit the power base of landlords. It is not surprising; therefore, that land reform was often a central issue in the political debates.

## 3. MINISTRY OF LAND REFORM AND ADMINISTRATION (MLRA) AND ITS REFORM ATTEMPTS

Since the early 1940's, in response to the changing economic and political needs of different times, the imperial government passed several legislations to consolidate its political power and partly improve the condition of the farmers and increase agricultural productivity (MLRA, 1972). However, it was the 1960 putsch and the subsequent student unrest that gave leeway to the possibility of reversing the system. Under such circumstances, the emperor made a speech on November 2, 1961 addressing parliament about the need for a land reform. He stated, "The fundamental obstacle to the realization of Ethiopia's agricultural potential has been lack of the security in the land." While fully respecting the principle of private ownership, he also pointed out that landless Ethiopians must have the opportunity to own their land, and that "the fruits of the farmer's labour must be enjoyed by him whose toil has produced the crop" (Ethiopian Herald, November 4, 1961). To this end, he appointed a land reform committee which was later transformed into a Land Reform and Development Authority and finally, in 1966, into Ministry of Land Reform and Administration (MLRA, 1972).

After its establishment, the MLRA undertook land tenure surveys in the various provinces, and prepared several reform legislations for the abolition of 'outdated' holdings, tenancy regulation, cadastral survey and progressive taxation (Hoben, 1976; Kiflu, 1993). The ministry also prepared long-term programmes for the creation of private land owners by converting leaseholders into full owners, the establishment of ownership ceilings, the study of settlement projects and the consolidation of fragmented holding (Land Reform, 1966; Kiflu, 1993). However, only the reform of tenancy regulation ever reached parliament and it, though mild enough, was rejected many times. All the ministers (Balata G/Tsadiq, Fitawrari Ababa Gabre, Mulatu Dababa and Balay Abay), who successively took the ministerial post from 1966 to 1974, were not successful in implementing any of the reform legislation (Informant: Admassie Zeleke; Combat, Vol.2, 1975).

During the period of Balay Abay, it is said that, the tenancy legislation was seriously considered and debated in the parliament, whose members were then divided into conservative (landowners) and reformist groups. The foreign development agencies such as Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and World Bank openly urged the government in favour of moderate reforms,

while the conservative group insisted on resisting change and won the debate due to their superiority in number (Informants: Zegeye Asfaw, Admassie Zeleke). Finally, the emperor was said to have been forced by the influential large landowners like Ras Mesfin Seleshi to pass order to the Minister of Land Reform to stop his work for reforms. So, all the draft legislations ended up in the passage of empty texts (Ibid). Though its draft legislations were futile, the Ministry served two very important functions. First, with the help of FAO, it greatly contributed to the available data on the subject of land tenure; second, it also produced well trained and dedicated officials (MLRA, 1968/69).

In the field of national economic development, the imperial government introduced three successive five-year development plans. During The Third Five Year Development Plan (1968-1973), the MLRA was to “overcome the apathy of the agricultural production, caused by traditional inequitable land tenure patterns, concentration of landownership in a small group, insecurity of tenure and exorbitant rent or share-cropping arrangements”(MLRA, 1969/70). With the help of foreign capital and managerial skills, the plan also provided for the promotion (MLRA, 1968/70) of commercial agriculture through comprehensive and minimum package programmes as a means of increasing food production and agricultural exports (Stahl, 1974; Ethiopia, 1968). But, these changes affected only a few areas of the south. Even there, the introduction of modern technology, in the absence of effective programme of land reform, benefited the rich landowners and worsened the existing income distribution in rural areas. The landlords recognized the advantage of the use of modern inputs and continuously evicted the tenant farmers (Bailey, 1979; Gilkes, 1975). This was contrary to the initial objective of the programme to help the small owner and tenant farmers to raise their production and standard of living (Goricke, 1979). As a result, in spite of all the pronouncements for the alleviation of poverty and backwardness, the plans failed to show any dynamism in peasant’s long-lived subsistence farming, which became true in the drought years of 1972-74.

In spite of the aggravation of the popular movement and the influence of the external donors, the political leaders were not interested in weakening their position. The emperor himself, since 1941, had been interested in modernization only to the extent that it helped to consolidate the centralization of power (Markakis, 1975). However, the administrative modernization had helped the creation of a western oriented urban middle class (the new elite), an antithesis to the old conservative nobility. The emperor followed the policy of balancing the competing interests of the two groups, though he satisfied neither of them (Bailey, 1979; Schwab, 1972). Constant land grants were made for the members of the new elite in integrating them with the traditional nobility. This was, indeed, contrary to the popular demand for granting lands to landless farmers. Meanwhile, the popular movement for radical reforms was eventually strengthened and, the students and the radical intelligentsia served the vanguard role of the popular revolution against the existing system.

#### **4. THE FEBRUARY 1974 REVOLUTION AND THE SUBSEQUENT DEBATE ON LAND REFORM PROGRAMME FORMULATION**

With the inception of the 1974 revolution, the subject of land reform had become increasingly popular as one of the major demands of all progressive groups. The issue received attention in nearly all clandestine as well as official publications of the time (Combat, Vol.2, No.2; Markakis and Nega, 1986). Thus, the future goals of Ethiopian agrarian reform was expected to narrow the gap between the haves and the have notes, and of all, was highly expected to show the prospect of modernity on its long lived primitiveness (Informant: Zegeye Asfaw). The fact that a reform bill was before the parliament and the emperor, would not have significantly affected the life of the peasantry and the agrarian structure as a whole. It was the belief of the progressives, therefore, that a sweeping change in the ‘outdated’ socio-economic and political structure had to precede a meaningful reform or go along with it (Ethiopian Herald, April 4, 1974).

In the meantime, peasant revolts were intensified in several administrative regions such as Arusi, Shawa, and Sidamo against the landlords destroying their property and allowing them no share of crops (Markakis and Nega, 1986; Batu, 1979). This, popular pressure forced the Endalkachew cabinet to issue a policy declaration on April 8, 1974 promising land reform legislations that would enable the tenant farmers, and those who might wish to derive their living by working on land to acquire their own land (Ethiopian Herald, April 9, 1974; Ethiopian Draft Constitution, 1974). Consequently, the government planned for the immediate actions as stated below.

Except for the land designated for collective and public use, government land grants will henceforth be made only to those who shall make their livelihood by working on the land, and holders in excess of what is considered to be reasonable limit of the owners capacity to develop will be taken over by the government and will be distributed to those who will make their living by working on the land. With due regard to relevant ecological conditions, maximum land holdings and the appropriate modalities for compensation will be determined by law (Ethiopian Draft Constitution, 1974).

The government recognized that the traditional land tenure system hampered agricultural productivity and the need for a land reform as one of the major instruments for the achievement of socio-economic development and self-reliance (Ethiopian Herald, April 9, 1974). Then, the former Minister of Land Reform and Administration, Balata



G/Tsadiq, who had been dismissed from his position in the late 1960s for his reformist views, was recalled from his ambassadorial service in Russia and reappointed to the same post to revise the previous proposal (Informant: Zegeye Asfaw). His conception of land reform had basically not changed and comprised tenancy regulation amending or replacing the existing legislations on landlord-tenant relationship and a ceiling on land-ownership of 1200 hectares (Markakis and Nega, 1986). Special measures of appropriate settlement schemes were also sought to be made to solve the problems of overpopulation and, fragmentation and degradation of land due to a history of long settlement in areas of communal landownership. On the nomadic lands, the interests of the pastoral population were to be given priority in encouraging them to modern agricultural activities and animal husbandry (Ethiopian Herald, April 9, 1974).

However, this proposal was 'outdated' to go with the changes of the political conditions of the time and did not satisfy the participants of the movement, who thought of the Ethiopian revolution as a total alteration of the relation between the people and the land. So the struggle for an alternative land reform bill was intensified (Democracia, Vol. 1, No. 12; Kiflu, 1993).

#### 5. THE SEIZURE OF POWER BY THE PMAC AND THE DEBATE FOR A LAND REFORM BILL

On September 12, 1974 the pillar of the old regime, Emperor Haile Sellassie was officially deposed and monarchical rule brought to an end (Batu, 1979). Once the PMAC took power, the issue of land reform became the subject of much discussion and controversy within the PMAC, student groups and radical intelligentsia and the public at large (Bailey, 1979). The debate was conducted on two different levels, formally in the government institutions (like MLRA, Chillalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU) and in the official newspapers (such as *Addis Zaman* and *Yezareyitu Ethiopia* in October, November and December 1974), and informally in the underground publications such as *Democracia*, *Yasefiw Hizb Dimtse*, *combat*, *Challenge*, etc., and in public gatherings.

After a prolonged discussion and elaboration the radical wing of the PMAC finally proclaimed the March 1975 land reform. The foregoing debate revealed the degree of polarization between the reformists and the revolutionists. The major questions in the struggle between the two poles were centered on the following issues:

- the objective of the land reform
- the issue of land ownership
- the issue of ceilings, and
- the method of its implementation.

#### 6. PRIMARY OBJECTIVE OF THE LAND REFORM: PRODUCTIVITY V. EQUITY

Once land reform was justified to promote rural prosperity and social justice, the division of opinion occurred among several groups as to which of these objectives should be emphasized in the reform. The liberals, supported by foreign donors, favoured a rational reform programme and selected the increasing agricultural productivity as primary objective of the reform, which included some moderate redistributive measures (Informant: Admassie Zeleke; Addis, 1966 E.C). In view of this group, equalization of land ownership would only reduce farm holdings to an uneconomical scale, hampering the prospect of the introduction of mechanization and other modern agricultural practices. Apparently, "a land reform which does not increase production merely equalizes poverty" (Informant: Admassie Zeleke; Tai, 1974). The proponents of this view believe that equalization could be achieved with less political disruption by such measures as tenancy regulations, settlement of new lands, and direction of new inputs to small farmers (Tai, 1974).

The feudal taxation system did not foster land development, as payment of tax was higher on developed lands than on unused lands. This helped the landlords to hold extensive lands. So, the liberals proposed for a progressive taxation on large holdings and payment of taxes according to the natural fertility of the land. This would induce the landowners either to develop their holdings or transfer some of it (in the form of lease or sale) to others (Yezareyitu Ethiopia., *Tiqimt 2*, 1967 E.C). This view is supported by economists and supposed to increase government revenue and reduce inequality (Lipton, 1974). But, this opinion was proved ineffectual in bringing about development and redistribution of large holdings due to the absence of detailed information on the potential and the degree of utilization of landholdings, (MLRA, 1972) and above all the obstruction of landlords for development.

It was also argued that large farms have a higher rate of savings than small farms, so that the organization of agricultural production in large units would generate more investment capital for growth. As to the problem of population pressure and the subsequent land scarcity, it was suggested that there was so much unused government land available, which should be settled by the landless with appropriate schemes (Admassie Zeleke "Diary"; *Yezareyitu Ethiopia*, *Tiqimt 2*, 1967). However, this suggestion is based on unrealistic assumption as constant land grants were made for the military and civil officers, and the establishment of commercial farms was encouraged. For instance, *Ras Mesfin Sileshi*, having several *gashas* of lands in Jimma and other regions, was granted (with his brother *Bezabih Sileshi*) around 400 *gashas* of land in Awash Valley (Metehara region) evicting the pastoral people of

the area. The land was said to be sold later with 1.5 million Birr for foreign concessionaire, sugar enterprise (Admassie Zeleke "Diary"; Goricke, 1975).

On the other hand, the revolutionary groups of students and progressive intelligentsia rendered strong arguments against this line of thinking, which favoured the landed class interests. They fought for the equalization of agricultural income distribution as a primary objective of the land reform. They believed that unequal distribution of land was one of the major problems, which caused economic stagnation, as the landlords underutilized their holdings and used their income for luxuries. Therefore, the power of the landlords, who were the chief obstacle of political change and development, should be first broken in giving land to the tiller (CADU, *Nahase* 1966; *EPRP*, 1967).

Actually, all groups were concerned with agricultural development. The proponents of equity argue that it is possible for greater savings by small farmers, if modern inputs are available to them. Given proper incentives and facilities, the peasant farmers would adopt modern technology and produce more on a plot of land (MLRA, 1972). Therefore, the land distribution should be accompanied by adequate supplies of extension services, credit, and any other necessary investment materials for technical improvements (Ya ... *Temariwoch Dimtse* Vol. 1, No. 2, 1967). It was also proposed that small farmers be encouraged to voluntarily consolidate their plots into cooperative farms in order to avoid the socio-economic disadvantages of fragmentation. Proponents of the cooperative scheme regarded land reform as incomplete and inadequate if it stopped at land distribution. They believed that only through cooperative farming can the two principal objectives of land reform, productivity and equity, be really accomplished (*Addis Zemen, Hidar* 28, 1967; *Democracia*, Vol. 1, No. 12). In fact, some believed that in developing countries like Ethiopia, where there was no modern urban sector to absorb the surplus rural labour, labour intensive technique is more useful than mechanization of agriculture which involved labour displacement by machines (Informant: Girma Siyum).

## 7. THE ISSUE OF CEILING

The task of determining the amount of land that an owner is permitted to retain requires the imposition of a ceiling on landownership. This question of ceiling raised a great deal of controversy in proposing a land reform bill. The basic problem was that if the area of land liable to expropriation were small, there would not be enough land to provide each of the nation's tenants with a farm of moderate size. On the other hand, if the minimum size for a farm were not established, then the problem of fragmentation would remain unresolved (*Democracia*, Vol. 1, No. 12).

In the debate over this issue, the reformists prescribed for a higher ceilings and generous compensation for the confiscated lands. There were two kinds of views within the same group. Some, affiliated to the landed class, gave more emphases for agricultural development organizing in large holdings and prescribed the establishment of ceilings only on unused lands; i.e. if any landholder failed to develop the land, it would be confiscated and given to another person (*Yezareyitu Ethiopia, Tiqimt* 2, 1967). Others suggested a maximum ceiling of 3 to 5 *gashas* (1gasha=40 hectares of land) for every *rist* holders, and the rest be given to the landless tenants. If the confiscated land were developed, the government would equitably compensate the owner. Then the new recipient would refund the government in a long term payment of the money given to the landlord (*Addis Zemen, Hidar* 28, 1967). The justification for the higher ceilings was that the size of landholding should be viable for the increase of productivity. They believed that land scarcity worried the peasantry more than landlessness, and therefore a *rist* holder should have enough land for plowing, grazing, gardening and constructing his house (*Addis Zemen, Hidar* 28, 1967).

Nevertheless, the reformists view was refuted by the revolutionists. In the first place, the reformists' view could not be effectual as it was tried with the imperial regime and did not go with the new philosophy of "*Ethiopia Tigdam*" (Literally, Ethiopia First). The establishment of ceilings on unutilized lands only warned the landlords to develop their holdings. The second view, though it seems better than the former, allowed any *rist* holder including urban dwellers and government employees to retain lands. Hence, the proposal could not solve landlessness, as landlords could register their lands in the name of their family members and relatives (*Yezareyitu Ethiopia, Tiqimt* 16, 1967).

The revolutionary groups proposed that land be distributed for those who wanted to live on farming (*Yezareyitu Ethiopia, Tiqimt* 9, 1967). They opposed the reformist view of resettlement of tenants on new lands mostly lying in the peripheral lowlands, which had several infrastructural problems and need much public fund for proper settlement schemes (*Yezareyitu Ethiopia, Tiqimt* 16, 1967). Hence, the radical groups comprising the students and the young officials in the MLRA and CADU considered the contribution of the extent of ceilings for the purpose of equalization of landownership, and prescribed low ceilings to make a large proportion of farm lands available for redistribution. Then, the maximum size of holdings was to be determined by a local committee of poor peasants according to the ratio of land to the farming population of the area. The redistribution should take into account the size of households (*Democracia*, Vol. 1, No. 12; *Abyot* No. 5, 1967).

Regarding compensation, this group argued that it would be too costly for the government to afford it (*Ethiopian Herald*, April 21, 1974). Secondly, since one of the objectives of the land reform programme was to reduce wealth disparity, lands should be expropriated without compensation (*Yezareyitu Ethiopia, Tiqimt* 9, 1967).

## 8. THE QUESTION OF OWNERSHIP

The revolutionary group agreed on the basic premise that land is the “collective property of the Ethiopian people” (*Yezareyitu Ethiopia*, *Tiqimt* 16, 1967; *Addis Zemen*, *Hidar* 10, 1967). It was also agreed that the lands of the crown, nobility, foreign concessionaires and the church should be confiscated and given only for those who wanted to live on farming. Government employees and institutions such as the church were to be devoid of land. If land is needed for the churches especially in the northern regions, where the majority of the population is Christian, it was to be determined by law (*Democracia*, Vol. 1, No. 12; Kiflu, 1993).

However, there has been a serious debate on the issue of land ownership: state v. private ownership. The proponents of state ownership of land had various views. Some of them suggested the state control of land and its equal distribution to the peasantry, who then would have only usufructuary right. Sale and rental of land was to be prohibited (*CADU*, *Nahase* 1966). The farmer could pass his usufructuary right to his children on condition that they continued to live on farming (*Yezareyitu Ethiopia*, *Tiqimt* 16, 1967). Others favoured the idea of state leasehold, land be rented by the government to an individual or group holders. Small peasants were to be provided with modern implements and extension services in organizing large cooperative farms. Then, they would pay money for the land rent and in return for the services provided (*Addis Zemen*, *Hidar* 11, 1967). There is still another view which combined state control and socialization of agriculture. It was proposed that land be divided and developed into three major categories: arable, pasture and forestry. Then, an appropriate villagization programme would be carried out to collectivize the scattered rural villages so that the peasantry easily gets public services such as education, health, transportation, pure water and light supply. Farming was also to be organized in large cooperatives (*Addis Zemen*, *Hidar* 10, 1967).

All the advocates of state control over land justified their views against private ownership that the former would enable for an easy administration and monitor of land use practices, and would solve the problem of land litigation (*Yezareyitu Ethiopia*, *Tiqimt* 16, 1967; *Addis Zemen*, *Hidar* 5, 1967). They argued that if privatization of land is maintained, the poor peasants will mortgage or sell their land for the upper peasantry and urban bourgeoisie, and finally end up landless. Besides, land-ownership disparity would occur in a long period of inheritance with varying number of heirs to the same size plots of land. Accordingly, privatization of land means allowing the return of the problem of tenancy and landlordism, which means solving the problem of today's farmer and leaving that of tomorrow's (*Addis Zemen*, *Hidar* 13, 1967; Dessalegn, 1994; *Tederaj*, No.2 *Tiqimt* – *Tahisas* 1979).

Proponents of private ownership of land, on the other hand, argued that economics and politics should not be separated. Without the control of the state power by the masses, nationalization of land means turning the people from the tenancy of the landlords to the tenancy of the government. Then, they opposed the state ownership of land basically as the view of government officials which did not consider the interest of the Ethiopian peasantry for ownership of land and its security (*Addis Zemen*, *Hidar* 28, 1967; *Abyot* No. 5, 1967). They also added that state control over land might involve displacement of the peasantry without their interests (*Abyot* No. 5, 1967). Thus, even if state ownership of land was selected, the establishment of people's government must precede the nationalization (Birhanu Abegaz, 1966). Otherwise, as Lenin stated “nationalization of land is, as it were, landlordism without landlord” (*Combat*, Vol. 3, No.1).

Hence, several revolutionary groups proposed the equal distribution of land to the tillers with the vested rights of ownership. Then, the peasantry would have an incentive to improve their productivity. The government was required to provide the farmers with necessary services such as credit, modern implements, fertilizers and technical assistance for the purpose of increasing agricultural productivity (*Ya ... Temariwoch Dimtse* Vol. 1, No. 2; *Abyot* No. 5). The land that remained after redistribution should be owned by the government for settlement, forestry and other similar purposes (*Addis Zemen*, *Hidar* 28, 1967).

## 9. METHODS OF IMPLEMENTATION

The struggle for a land reform also exhibited the question of which class is to implement it and in what method. The reformists obviously favoured the gradual evolution of the feudal landlord's economy into the capitalist economy, where both the landlord and the capitalist are one person (*Tiglachin Zena*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1975; *Combat*, Vol.2, 1975). Lenin called this type of land reform “the Prussian way”, which means the transformation of agrarian relations into capitalist relations without the revolutionary uprising of the peasantry to overthrow the reactionary political authority, via reform from above (*Combat*, Vol. 3, No.1; *Nigat*, No. 2, 1967).

The revolutionary groups (especially of students in abroad and at home), however, opposed any reform from above as the continued servitude of the peasantry – as it was proposed by the defenders of the old landed property relations. They stated that the land problem was not only economic but also political. Therefore, the peasantry in alliance with the working class must be aware of the need for their own state power. They should rise in violence against their enemies and establish a people's government to safeguard their economic interests (*Tiglachin Zena*, Vol. 2, No. 3). In connection with this view, the following is worth quoting.

The fundamental question is to link the politics and the economics of land reform and not separate the economics alone, in one category, and politics in another, there is no land reform for its own



sake. Land reform is not a gift. It is not a philanthropic handout to the peasants. It does not come by declaration, by good intentions, by pious wish, etc. It is the most furious class struggle (*Combat*, Vol. 3, and No.1).

Therefore, the radical groups believed that the peasantry from below must implement the land reform. The peasantry needs to be armed to overthrow their overlords and take the land for themselves (*Tiglachin Zena*, Vol. 2, No. 3; Andargachew, 1993).

#### 10. MAJOR PROPOSALS PRESENTED TO THE DARG

Such was the debate, but the question was which kind of land reform the PMAC would support. Students and radical intelligentsia demanded a national economy independent of both feudalism and capitalism, yet no specific programme was forthcoming from any public sector. However, the two government institutions, MLRA and CADU, played an important role in drafting land reform programmes. Both institutions also carried out land tenure studies and contributed to the available data on the subject.

It is generally believed that the first land reform proposal was prepared by the CADU officials in August 1974 and addressed to the *Darg*. CADU was a Swedish assisted development project situated in Arusi province. Its employees largely constituted members of the left groupings such as Ethiopian Peoples Liberation Organization (EPLO) later Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the All Ethiopia Socialist movement (MEISON) and other independent radicals (Kiflu, 1993). The proposal that came out of this institution suggested that:

Land ownership be limited to ten hectares and extra land be nationalized without compensation and distributed to the landless; fragmentation would be avoided by limiting inheritance to one heir; sale and rental of land be prohibited; and large estates, agro-industrial complexes and farm machinery be nationalized. To execute the suggested reforms the participation of the beneficiaries, the peasants, was considered an important and decisive ingredient. The proposal stated that a central coordinating agency, peasant *warada* congresses and local committees--- had to be formed. The establishment of these local committees should also be regarded as the first step towards the establishment of local self government. In order to safeguard and to preserve the new local power, it was suggested that local militia be formed (Kiflu, 1993).

However, it is not known whether the *Derg* had considered this proposal or not. In the early stage, the *Derg* had no clear policy statements, and was gathering opinion from various groups of people (Informants: Zegeye Asfaw, Zagaya H/Mariyam). Then, the radicals doubted that the *Derg* would implement the slogan of land to the tiller, and they fought against its dictatorship in favour of the establishment of people's government. The activists of radical reforms responded with suppressive measures by the government. For example, about the beginning of October 1974, Henock Kifle, head of CADU and a prominent radical from the student movement, was forced to resign from his post (Kiflu, 1993; *Democracia*, Vol. 1, No. 10).

At the same time, there was a debate on land reform legislation within the MLRA. Then, the Ministry was divided into the "old" and "expert" groups. The old group was led by the Minister, Balata G/Tsadiq, and wanted to implement a moderate land reform without affecting the basic landholding system. While the expert group (composed of young officials), most of whom were university graduates and veterans of the student struggle against autocracy was in favour of radical reforms (Kiflu, 1993).

Shortly before the overthrow of the emperor, the Minister submitted his land reform bill to the cabinet meeting attended by the *Darg* members. The cabinet members supported the proposal, while the *Darg* representatives were not satisfied with it and opted for another reform bill (Markakis and Nega, 1986).

It is said that there were some college graduates in the PMAC such as Capitan Mogos G/Mikael, Major Damise Darasa, Major Sisay Habte, Fisiha Dasta, etc., who sympathized with the student movement. My informant Zagaya Asfaw says that in November Capitan Mogos (Economics graduate and appointed head of economic department) and Major Damise (a sociology graduate and appointed head of social department) had contacted him to discuss the issue of land reform, as he had served the Ministry of Land Reform for many years. Then, a drafting committee was formed in the Ministry comprising Zagaya himself and other radical young officials like Tamirat Kabada, Alam Anta and Teame Bayana (Informants: Zegeye Asfaw, Zagaya H/Mariyam). Though they belonged to different leftist groups like EPLO and MEISON, the young officials agreed on the basic premises of the land reform. They further sharpened the previous CADU's proposal and suggested a total public ownership (nationalization) of land and individual allotments up to a maximum of ten hectares, provided that there is enough land in the locality, rather than securing a minimum of ten hectares (Markakis and Nega, 1986). This proposal was opposed by almost the entire cabinet members, considering that it was extreme and designed to provoke rural unrest and catastrophic decline of production (Informants: Mesfin G/Hiyot, Zagaya H/Mariyam). But, the proposers defended that the overwhelming support of the masses for the reform would overcome the anticipated opposition from the landlords. They also argued that the expected fall of production might occur only in the commercial farms, which produced for the purpose of exportation rather than for domestic consumption. Still, this could be prevented since commercial farms were proposed to be intact under state farms ((Informant: Zegeye Asfaw; *Taderaj*, No.2, *Tiqimt-Tahisas* 1979).

Nevertheless, it was this proposal that was revised and discussed at subsequent meetings and eventually approved by the military government.

On the eve of the declaration of Socialism, December 19, 1974, the young lawyer Zagaya Asfaw was appointed Minister of Land Reform replacing Balata G/Tsadiq. Then, at the final stage of the debate the chief PMAC leaders, now embracing the new political philosophy of socialism, actively participated in the issue of land reform in favour of the radical programmes (Markakis and Nega, 1986). Subsequently, the government called for a two week seminar (from January 29 to February 13, 1975) on land reform and administration, which was held by 900 civilian and 400 military participants, who were carefully selected for their progressive thinking. The meeting was held at the national university and opened by the first vice chairman of the PMAC Mengistu Haile-Mariam, who characterized the meeting as "a great seminar for the construction of great Ethiopia" and as the second nation-wide campaign in Ethiopian socialism (*Ethiopian Herald*, January 30, 1975; The first campaign was – Development through Cooperative Campaign – introduced since December 1974 E.C.). The minister of land reform, Ato Zagaya noted that a draft land reform proclamation had been already prepared, and that socialist Ethiopia would give land to the tiller, and that collective farmers and communes would take care of the land and its utilization for the common good of the people. Thus, the seminar discussed the land problems and other related issues in finding ways and means for the implementation of the proposed land reform and administration proclamation (*Ethiopian Herald*, February 14, 1975).

Then, on the eve of the land reform proclamation, the *Derg* conducted an intensive propaganda against the feudal conspiracy that reduced the Ethiopian peasantry to poverty and kept the country backward (*Addis Zemen*, *Yekatit* 21 & 22, 1967). Meanwhile, a two day (February 27 and 28, 1975) seminar was held at the national university of Addis Ababa attended by university students, campaigners and agricultural institutes. The meeting was chaired by the office of Development through Cooperative Campaign, and discussed the implementation of the forthcoming land reform as well as the problems that might be encountered (*Combat*, Vol.2, No.2; *Addis Zemen*, *Yekatit* 21, 1967). Finally, on March 4, 1975 the PMAC announced a land reform proclamation, which dismantled the foundation of the old feudal regime and proved to be the major achievement of the revolutionary movement. The radical groups had been surprised to the sweeping nature of the reform and the success of the campaign of "land to the tiller" launched a decade before (Kiflu, 1993). Then, EPRP, MEISON and other progressive groups supported the land legislation and promised to implement its provisions (*Yesefiw Hizb Dimtse*, 1967; *Nigat*, No.3, 1967). But as it fostered the government's popularity among the masses, the proclamation affected the radical's struggle against the *Derg* and created some differences in their attitude towards the military government.

## 11. CONCLUSION

Though the land reform resulted in a relatively equitable land distribution by eliminating landlordism and landlessness, it failed to fulfill the objective of peasant prosperity and ensuring abundant supply of food for the fast-growing population. The reform was soon followed by the sowing of seeds for only subsistence grain production and consequently it was equity of poverty that was achieved in rural areas. The Ethiopian revolution was, therefore, successful in eradicating the feudal order but not the drought and the famine, which is fundamentally linked to the subsistence nature of the agricultural economy.

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**List of Informants**

No	Name	Age	Remarks
1	Admassie Zalaqa Kassa ( <u>Shalega</u> )	71	He was member of parliament, and provides great deal of information on the parliamentary debate on the issue land reform.
2	Girma Siyum ( <u>Ato</u> )	48	The founder member of student movement in AAU. He was working as CPA commissioner.
3	Mesfin G/Hiyot ( <u>Ato</u> )	47	A law graduate in 1964(E.C), then employed in MLRA. He actively participated in drafting the land reform bill of the 1975.
4	Sisay G/giorgis ( <u>Ato</u> )	48	He was among the young officials in the MLRA, and has been working in FAO.
5	Yamanah G/Mariyam ( <u>Ato</u> )	45	He graduated from AAU in 1964 (E.C) and employed in MLRA. He attended several parliamentary sessions discussing about land reform. Now he is working in the Ministry of Agriculture.
6	Zagaya Asfaw ( <u>Ato</u> )	52	A law graduate in 1959 (E.C), then employed in the MLRA and participated in land tenure surveying. Later in December 1974 he was appointed Minister of Land Reform and was one of the activists who proposed the March 1975 Land Reform Legislation.
7	Zagaya H/Mariyam ( <u>Ato</u> )	43	A university student campaigner for the Development Through Cooperative Campaign. After graduation he was employed in CADU.