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ETHIOPIA: RADICALS STAVE OFF NEW CHALLENGES

The recent executions and purges in Ethiopia--and indications that there may be more to come--represent the most serious split in the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) since the killing of General Aman in November 1974. But the radicals--led by Vice-Chairman Mengistu Haile Mariam--seem to have quelled the immediate threats to their control of the council:

--On the right, the main opposition has come from moderates on the council (who question the radicals' insistence on a rapid pace of change) and from dissident military units. A leading PMAC moderate--Maj. Sisay Habte--and the commander of Ethiopian troops in Eritrea--Brig. Gen. Getachew Nadew--were among the 19 people executed on July 13. Subsequently, the PMAC put down mutinies of two military battalions.

--On the left, the major source of opposition has been the underground Marxist Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which, although ideologically indistinguishable from the PMAC radicals, is demanding a return to civilian rule.

There is no strong evidence at this juncture of any cooperation between the EPRP and the dissident military elements. The opposition of both groups, however, is beginning to coalesce around two major issues facing the PMAC--the Eritrean insurgency and the deteriorating economy:

--The EPRP, which is believed to be dominated by Eritreans and Tigreans, supports self-determination (in effect, independence) for Eritrea. Sisay and Getachew had ties to military units that are dissatisfied

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with the PMAC's handling of the Eritrean problem, and may have been pressing for political options that were unacceptable to the PMAC radicals.

--Both the EPRP and the military rank and file are essentially urban groups that have taken the brunt of the accelerating rate of inflation (33 percent overall from April 1975 to April 1976), with a 50-percent increase in food prices over the same period. Despite an above-average harvest last winter, marketing disruptions and political uncertainties have caused shortages of cereal staples in the urban areas.

The troops guarding the PMAC in Addis Ababa have always been outnumbered and outgunned by disgruntled field units, but the latter have so far lacked the leadership and organization to mount a successful challenge to the council. With the execution of such potential leaders as Sisay and Getachew, the chance of a strong challenge from within the army appears to have been further diminished. Within the council, the radicals continue to erode the position of remaining moderates, such as Vice-Chairman Atnafu Abate. Thus the trend of the past eight months of consolidation by the radicals of their power has been reinforced.

Radical Attempt To Consolidate Power

Although the details of PMAC internal maneuverings have always been unclear, it appears that in late 1975 the radical faction came to perceive a threat by an emerging coalition of moderates within and outside the council. Fearing that revolutionary momentum would be lost, the radicals moved to tighten their grip on power:

--In late 1975 a group of radical civilian ideologues-- variously known as the Secretariat, the Politburo, and now the People's Organizing Provisional Office-- was appointed to advise the PMAC.

--In February 1976, using the excuse of a purported coup attempt, the PMAC radicals arrested large numbers of royalists, aristocrats, and other rightists.

--In April the PMAC formally announced a "National Democratic Revolutionary Program" (in many respects similar to the 1949-54 Chinese political strategy of

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a coalition of "progressive" forces) aimed at the eventual establishment of a working class party and a "people's democratic republic." The program was a sop to the opposition on the left, especially the EPRP.

- In May the PMAC ordered a revamping of government economic planning to reflect the new ideological program and to reduce dependence on Western assistance.
- In June the PMAC decided that Ethiopian students would no longer be allowed to study in the West, except in scientific and technical fields. Instead, they will be sent to East European countries.

Radical Objectives and Pragmatic Tactics

Ever since the radicals seized control of the PMAC in November 1974, their objectives have remained constant--the dismantling of the old feudal society and its replacement with a new egalitarian order. But they have also tried to calculate how fast and far they can go at any particular juncture.

Land Tenure. The land reform decree of March 1975 was radical in that it sought to revolutionize the country's land tenure system. Nevertheless, it was successfully implemented in the south within a few months and, apparently with a minimum of bloodshed. In the north the PMAC has encountered serious resistance to its changes in land tenure, but this has been through little fault of its own. Aware of the difficulties of enforcing the decree in an area where peasants were reasonably content with the existing communal system of landholding, the PMAC specifically exempted the north from some of the provisions. Its conciliatory approach, however, was sabotaged by students (the Zemetcha) sent to the rural areas to explain the decree and to organize the peasantry. The students' advocacy of immediate collectivization helped produce the armed rebellions in the north that the PMAC is still trying to put down.

Agricultural Development. The PMAC is committed to cooperative and collective agricultural models. Yet it has made concessions to smallholders--low taxes and high food prices--to increase agricultural production during the first critical year of land reform. These concessions are also consistent with the council's desire to better the peasants' lot by reducing the roughly 4 to 1 urban-rural income differential.

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Despite the current agricultural crisis, the council seems determined to press ahead with collectivization. A key government proponent of smallholder incentives was dismissed this spring, and the US AID Mission in Addis Ababa is now receiving signals that the PMAC does not want foreign aid that favors "capitalistic" forms of agriculture.

Foundations for Civilian Rule. Ultimate PMAC goals include the formation of a workers' party, the establishment of a socialist society, and the military's return to the barracks. The council insists, however, on an unlimited period of military tutelage (reportedly as long as five years) before power is turned over to civilians. The device of the National Democratic Revolutionary Program makes it easier for the military to continue to rule, while giving the urban elite--whom the PMAC intensely distrusts--the illusion of political participation. This program promises political privileges to all "progressive" forces, but under the military's watchful eye. It clearly subordinates the civilian People's Organizing Provisional Office to the Supreme Committee for Organizing the People (apparently comprised of the PMAC's inner directing group). The government is planning to widen its control of the economy, but at the same time it promises temporary protection for the economic interests of the urban middle class (private business "beneficial to the country" will be encouraged).

Mengistu--A Possible Strongman?

An important factor in continuing radical control of the PMAC is Mengistu's own personality and capacity for leadership. He is a tough ex-NCO who is popular with the troops and who has so far retained the confidence of the enlisted men who comprise a majority on the council. His own political views have been difficult to pin down, other than his singleminded resolve, as the son of a serf, to restructure Ethiopian society. It is doubtful that he fully comprehends Marxist or Maoist ideology, but some Communist concepts--such as the class struggle, the national bourgeoisie, and imperialism--provide him with a much needed political formula for Ethiopia's current stage of development. The regime's ideology also has affinities with those of radical Arab countries (such as Baathist Syria and Iraq and Nasserite Egypt), as well as with traditional Ethiopian political concepts.

Mengistu is believed to be at least half Galla, and his present ascendancy has aroused fears--especially among the traditional Amhara ruling group--of a Galla takeover of

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power. There have been periodic reports of friction between Amharas and Gallas, the two largest ethnic groups in the military, but so far the educational, professional, and ideological ties of PMAC members have outweighed communal loyalties. The regime is essentially an Amhara-Galla coalition (as was Haile Selassie's government). Although a majority of PMAC members are Gallas, the inner core is largely Amhara. The politburo is reportedly a Galla-Amhara mixture. An ethnic split within the military cannot be ruled out, but the likeliest dissidents at present are Tigreans and Eritreans, who are a minority within the military. Mengistu's political tenure is by no means secure; but if he does survive, his mixed ancestry may prove to be a political asset in multi-ethnic Ethiopia.

Growing Centrifugal Pressures

The radicals and other factions within the PMAC disagree on how fast to proceed with reform, but they are more united on the need to maintain Ethiopia's territorial integrity. Threats to this integrity now exist all along the country's periphery--in Eritrea, the French Territory of Afars and Issas (FTAI), and the southeast (Harerge, Bale, and Sidamo provinces).

Eritrea. The now-abandoned Operation Raza (an anti-insurgent campaign by a force of 30,000-40,000 peasant militia) was the military prong of an attempted "final solution" to the Eritrean problem, precipitated in part by a near mutiny of battleweary and casualty-ridden troops in the province.

--On the one hand, the PMAC sought to intimidate the Eritreans with a military strategy that reportedly included the forcible movement of population, the removal of Eritrean industry to other parts of the country, and the establishment of concentration camps.

--Simultaneously, the council offered the Eritreans a political settlement consisting of local autonomy, political amnesty, and rehabilitation aid (basically the same offer that the insurgents have steadily rejected over the past 18 months).

The carrot-and-stick approach resulted in tentative insurgent feelers for talks, but this initial interest faded as soon as logistical problems and international pressure (especially from Arab states and the OAU) forced the PMAC to call off the peasant march.

The prospects for ending the insurgency continue to be bleak. Eritrean civilians--urban elite and peasants alike--are tired of the bloodshed and, in the judgment of many observers, willing to accept any reasonable political settlement; but they have little ability to press or influence the the insurgents into accepting a settlement that falls short of independence. The intransigence of the insurgent leaders on the issue of independence probably rests on the following calculations:

- The PMAC cannot be trusted. The regime's authoritarianism makes it doubtful that real local autonomy will be granted to Eritrea or any other province for the foreseeable future. Moreover, the regime's "leveling" predilections--aimed at reducing differences not only between classes but also between regions--are incompatible with Eritrean assumptions of social and economic superiority.
- The PMAC is vulnerable. The upcoming Ethiopian-Somali confrontation over the FTAI will give the Eritreans and other rebellious peripheral groups an opportunity to wrest their independence from an over-extended Ethiopian military establishment.

Despite the failure of Operation Raza, the PMAC radicals achieved some success in rallying thousands of northern peasants behind the central government by diverting their rancor against land reform to the age-old "Arab threat." Operation Raza was the harbinger of a broader PMAC plan to mobilize the population--through country-wide mass recruitment into a militia--for national defense and civic action programs. The formation and use of a peasant militia for political purposes--including the conquest and settlement of such dissident areas as Eritrea--is a traditional Amhara political practice. In recent history, such an army, under Emperor Menelik, incorporated the southern provinces into the old empire.

The FTAI. The PMAC radicals are already trying to turn both military and popular attention from the Raza fiasco to the growing Somali threat to the FTAI. Troops are being reinforced along the border, and Mengistu reportedly has said that an Ethiopian-Somali war over the territory is "100 percent certain." The PMAC may well be contemplating a preemptive invasion of the FTAI on the eve of independence (tentatively scheduled for the late spring of 1977) to prevent a Somali takeover. Initially, Addis Ababa had hoped that Paris could bolster an independent state with a continued French military

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presence. But the PMAC's current advocacy of an Ethiopian-Somali security guarantee (rather than a French one) and its hostility to greater Arab influence over an independent state (through Arab League membership or a League guarantee) suggest that the council has decided to go it alone.

Southeastern Ethiopia. The Somali-supported insurgencies in Harerge, Bale, and Sidamo provinces that began in late 1975 are an attempt by Somali President Siad to intensify the centrifugal forces in Ethiopia and to draw Ethiopian troops away from the FTAI border. Mogadiscio has been able to make common cause with some of the Muslim Galla and Somali clans living in the lowland areas of these provinces. The latter have waged periodic revolts against Addis Ababa, most recently in the 1960's. So far the Ethiopians have been able to contain the dissidence, even though the security forces in the southeast are understrength.

Foreign Policy Implications

Ethiopia today is a beleaguered country. The PMAC desperately needs arms and diplomatic support to counter what it regards as its main antagonists--Arabs who support the Eritrean insurgents and Somalis who have designs on the FTAI and on parts of Ethiopia's territory.

The radicals on the PMAC view Ethiopia's major arms supplier--the United States--as an untrustworthy ally. The US has been unable to live down its support of the Haile Selassie government; the radicals believe that it preferred in early 1974 (when the old regime began to collapse)--and still prefers--a more moderate successor regime. The US is suspected of consorting with "reactionary" and secessionist elements, and of favoring its ties with conservative Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, over those with Ethiopia. For the radicals, moreover, US and Western political and economic models are irrelevant. They believe that Ethiopia's current situation requires an authoritarian political system and structural transformation of the economy, not gradualist, capitalistic development.

Hence the PMAC is trying to diversify its arms suppliers, although the moderate Ethiopian Defense Minister told Embassy Addis recently that he hoped the US would remain "a main source for some time." The regime reportedly has purchased arms from Yugoslavia, India, Turkey, Italy, and France, and in addition, more than 40 Israeli military advisers are now in Ethiopia (despite the radicals' worries about Israeli ties with the US).

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So far, however, the radicals have been unsuccessful applicants for large-scale Communist arms aid:

--The PRC reportedly has agreed to provide training and small arms for the militia, as well as to renegotiate the economic aid agreement it signed with the Haile Selassie government. But, according to one report, the Chinese have refused to supply heavy ~~weapons and heavy armor to the~~ COMICar alignment of Ethiopia with the East and the Third World, continuing Arab hostility has forced the council back into traditional foreign policy patterns--reliance on the supporters of the Haile Selassie regime, especially the US and Israel.

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