

# THE POLITICS OF LAND TENURE IN ETHIOPIAN HISTORY: Experience From the South

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**Abstract:** This paper examines primarily the role of politics in rural land allocation and its effects on the peasants of the incorporated southern territories prior to the Land Reform of 1975. Heavy political intervention played crucial role in an unjust land allocation. The political system favoured handful of the predominantly northern landlords and political elites, while effectively marginalizing an overwhelming majority of the indigenous peoples. Particularly, the poor farmers were the net losers in the politics of asymmetrical land tenure policies. This situation, which exacerbated the contradictions that existed between the ruling classes and the masses of the peasants, in turn, contributed to the destabilization and eventual collapse of the Imperial government following the Revolution of 1974. The military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam (the *Derg*), which replaced Haile Sellassie's government, nationalized all rural lands, thereby, *inter alia*, changing the patterns of land ownership across the country. While the reform measures, radical as they were, initially provided the peasants with use rights and tenure security, the *Derg's* economic policies where the government controlled the rural economy and rural decision making processes, have gradually undermined some of the gains of the land reform. This contributed to the emergence of contradictions between the peasants and the political elites, which was culminated in the downfall of the Mengistu's government in 1991. While significantly changing the policies of the former regime in other areas, the current government has retained state/public ownership of the land. This has generated heated debate over tenure policy option(s) calling for profound empirical research.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The question of land tenure has been a pivotal and sensitive political issue in contemporary history of Ethiopia. Given the agrarian nature of the country, where agriculture is a principal source of the economy, this is not surprising. Agriculture is a main source of income and livelihood for between 85 percent and 90 percent of the country's population (Helland, 1999). It is a source of raw materials for industry and a major source of export earnings. Moreover, agriculture accounts for 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings and 50 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) (Tadesse, 1999). Politics has played crucial role in determining property rights to land in the country. This was true, particularly, in the southern provinces prior to the Land Reform Act of 1975, which was one of the fundamental measures of the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974. Contrary to the situation in the North,<sup>1</sup> where communal or *rist* system where no one was entitled to own land privately or sell the land was prevalent, in the South, there emerged state, private, and church forms of tenure, alongside land confiscation and land sales. Here, ownership of a large tract of fertile land was concentrated in the hands of the predominantly northern landlords and political elites. Consequently, the majority of the indigenous peoples were effectively marginalized and deprived of their traditional land rights. These systems of land tenure have had far-reaching adverse effects for the dignity and lives of the masses of the southern peasants.

The Provisional Military Administrative Council (popularly known as the *Derg*), which replaced the Imperial government of Haile Sellassie in 1974, proclaimed a radical land reform in March 1975. The reform act nationalized all rural lands; eliminated private landownership, together with a number of its adverse effects and liberated the majority of the peasants from the yoke of

landlordism. However, some of the gains of the reform were gradually undermined as a result of heavy political intervention.

Although it has embarked on a market-oriented economic policy and has considerably altered the policies of the previous government, the current government, which is led by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), has retained the *Derg's* policy of public ownership of the rural (and urban) land. This has engendered heated debate between defenders of the status quo and advocates of privatisation.

The main objective of this paper is to examine the role of politics in rural land allocation in southern Ethiopia and its effects on the majority of the peasants in historical perspectives, with the emphasis on the pre-1975 period. Specifically, the paper attempts to address the following research questions. How had political intervention distorted resource/land allocation in the incorporated southern provinces under the Imperial regimes of Menelik and Haile Sellassie? What were the effects of these policies on the majority of the peasants of the South? What are the achievements of the Land Reform of 1975? How had *Derg's* intervention in the peasant sector affected the gains of the land reform? What are the relationships between the *Derg's* and EPRDF government's tenure policies?

While these are crucial questions, there is not yet a synthesized and consolidated work on the politics of tenure in historical perspectives in the South, which covers three distinct political systems, namely, the Imperial, the *Derg*, and current governments. The present study is a modest attempt to fill the existing research gap by documenting the role of politics in determining land tenure systems and its effects in the South, which, for historical reasons, deserves special attention. By so doing, the study hopes to provide some historical background, which we assume is useful not only to grasp the past occurrences, but also to appreciate the current debate and predict the possible consequences of the suggested tenure policy option.

The paper is essentially based on a review of secondary sources of data including books, journals, and official documents. This is supplemented by the author's exposure to the rural areas and close contact with the peasants during the periods under discussion.

The balance of the paper is organized as follows. Touching up on the experience from the North, section two describes the politicisation of land allocation, and its effects on southern population during the pre-1975 period. Section three examines the significance of the Land Reform of 1975 and its challenges. It also glances the existing tenure policy and shows its relevance to the pre-1991 tenure system. The last section concludes the discussion and suggests the way forward.

## II. POLITICISED LAND ALLOCATION AND ITS EFFECTS

*It is important to recognize that changes in property rights generally involve winners and losers (Lee J. Alston, Thrainn Eggertsson, and Douglass C. North, 1996).*

The above quotation exactly suits the politics of tenure in southern Ethiopia, above all, during the pre-land reform period. Following brief description of the northern *rist* system, for comparison, this section will explore the motives, magnitudes and effects of asymmetrical land redistribution and its effects on peasants of southern provinces.

## Land Tenure in the North

In order to understand the extent to which political interference affected the change in property rights to land in the South, it would become necessary to first look into the nature of land tenure in the North. In the North, the *rist* or *risti* (Amharic and Tigrigna, respectively) or communal form of land ownership was the fundamental feature of tenure system. As per the prevailing customary law, in the northern societies, individuals have had land use rights and only the minority religious groups (the majority being Orthodox Christians) or people of low caste, who worked the land as tenants (Bezuwork, 1992). Under the *rist* system, individual's rights over *rist* land holding were decided essentially on the basis of his or her membership to a village community.

Individuals had the rights to the land by virtue of their blood ties to the founding fathers, for instance, *wana abbat* in Gojjam and *nay kidm aboy* or *akni abbat* in Tigray (Bruce, 1976; Hoben, 1973; Imperial Ethiopian Government, 1969; Markakis, 1974). These rights were inherent and hereditary, which could neither be abridged nor abrogated under different pretexts, such as absence of an individual from the locality (Markakis, 1974). The same social customs prohibited land sales (Bezuwork, 1992; Bruce, 1976; Imperial Ethiopian Government, 1970). This is because land was a common property of the village community and not a private property of an individual. And both Menlik's and Haile Sellassie's governments had "tacitly" acknowledged and respected these customary laws.

The significance of *rist* rights should not be seen solely in terms of economic benefits that a holder might have enjoyed from the land. *Rist* have also had social and psychological importance for the northern peasants. As well as vital economically, it had been a source of freedom, pride and self-esteem (Hoben, 1973). Consequently, in the northern communities, *rist* was perceived as "sacred hereditary property" (Donham, 2002 :10). Accordingly, whoever had the rights to the *rist* land was considered to be a *ristegna* (a person who exercised hereditary *rist* rights). A *ristegna* had almost absolute or an unchallenged control, use and inheritance rights over his or her possession. That is to say, as far as political authorities, including the Emperor, or landlord interventions were concerned, there was no tenure insecurity or fear of being evicted from the *rist land* (Clapham, 1988; Cohen and Weintraub, 1975; Imperial Ethiopian Government, 1970; Markakis, 1974; Pausewang, 1983; Weissleder, 1965). Although there had been periodic land redistribution in order to accommodate all claims, particularly by the generation of young peasants, this was done within the concerned community as an "in-house" matter. To be sure, it was not an externally or politically imposed practice (Hussein, 2001). Moreover, some researchers (for example, Bruce, 1976; Weissledre, 1965) contend that even in this context, tenure insecurity in the North must not be overstated. According to these authors, this is because the very concept of *rist* in the northern societies had implied tenure security. This is in contrast to the general suppositions.

## The Politics of Tenure in the South : Winners and Losers

The experience of the conquered southern territories was entirely different from the situation of the northern provinces. As noted earlier, in the South, there emerged state and private land ownership, alongside Church land (*simon*, which is beyond the scope of the present paper). (For extensive account of a variety and complex categories of tenure systems that had existed in the South see, Cohen and Weintraub, 1975). These forms of tenure were alien to most of these territories until they were conquered and incorporated into the Ethiopian Empire by Emperor Menelik of Shewa, who replaced Emperor Yohannes of Tigray, in 1889, towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century (Cohen and Weintraub,

1975 ; Mirgissa,1994 ; Shiferaw,1995).The newly imposed tenure systems had negatively impacted on the overwhelming majority of the population of the South.

The conquest and incorporation of the southern territories and the resultant land appropriation were motivated by the Imperial ambition for expanded territory , wealth acquisition , and consolidation of power. The expansion was dictated by two major factors, namely, political and economic desires of the Imperial government of Menelik.Politically, it was meant to effectively control the conquered territories (Pausewang,1983) by the newly coming northern landlords and political authorities , while economic interests were guided by the need to have access to and secure the flow of resources,such as gold, ivory, agricultural products, including coffee and even slaves (Markakis, 1974) and to secure collection of taxes (Pausewang,1983). The resource appropriation motives had both domestic and international character. As Clapham ( 2002 :15) puts it, “under the *gebbar* system...surplus production had been appropriated [ from the local peoples of the South ] in order to maintain the state and to link Ethiopia to the global economy”.

It is important to note that the incorporation coincided with and encouraged by the European scramble for Africa. It is well known that Menelik enlisted support from the European powers ,such as Great Britain , France , and Italy , that were in fierce rivalry to seize or consolidate their control of the surrounding territories in the Horn of Africa . In his famous letter sent to the European colonial powers ,in 1891, Menelik was unequivocal in his Imperial ambition to participate in the bid for the partition of Africa when he candidly stated that, “ ‘If [European ] Powers at a distance come forward to partition Africa between them, I do not intend to be an indifferent spectator””( quoted in Markakis, 1974:24). Indeed, European backing made possible for Menelik’s forces to eventually crush local resistances and establish the Imperial rule in the conquered southern territories.

Incorporation and the introduction of the politically-imposed tenure systems resulted in the emergence of dominant-subordinate relationships of actors between the privileged northern landowning and political elites,assisted by the co-opted local chiefs-*balabat*-and the marginalized peoples of the southern territories (Hussein,2001 ). This interaction generated a situation whereby political authorities alienated arable land of the indigenous peoples and provided the new coming elites with a vast amount of land, ranging from two-thirds to three-fourths (Cohen and Weintraub,1975;Pankhurst,1966, 1968). In the extreme case, this reached as high as four-fifths of the land as the experience of Melkedera of Jibat and Mecha *Awraja* (sub- province), Shewa Province has shown (Mirgissa,1994). This obviously meant that the majority of the local population were discriminated against and denied of their customary property rights to land.

Following Menelik’s conquest and incorporation state and private tenure systems were introduced as essentially new types of land ownership. Here, the government granted ,in the form of *gult*(fief?), fertile lands to key political authorities , soldiers, and supporters .Those grants were a kind of compensation for the services the individuals rendered to the state and were also necessary to effect control of the native peoples in the newly occupied areas.The newly introduced land holding arrangements led to social stratification in most of the cases and into the emergence of a new class of peasantry,the practice that reduced the status of most of the southern peasants into landless tenants or *gabbars* ( Donham, 2002; Pankhurst , 1966, 1968 ). In short, “In the process of conquest and centralization, peasants and nomads[ of the South]were made serfs on their fathers’ lands” (Pausewang,1983:16). In other words, “land confiscation led to the collapse of traditional land management strategies, and the actual land-owners[the indigenous peoples ] turned to be *gabbars*”( Asseffa Jalata, 1993, cited in Terefe, 2001:127). In this way, the majority of the southern societies lost their customary land ownership and resource management rights and dignity altogether.

The first and central point to make about the pre-1975 land tenure systems in southern Ethiopia is that the state acquired land ownership in the incorporated territories, where the Emperor reserved for himself ultimate power for land allocation (Markakis, 1974). This was the basis for the prevalence of lop-sided tenure policies and practices that favoured the insignificant minorities at the expense of a vast majority of the southern peasants. This discriminatory approach resulted in a number of adverse consequences for the local population. Such a situation where the majority of the southern peoples were discriminated against by the political system in land allocation and were placed at the mercy of the growing power of the northern elites could be thought of as the politics of land tenure. Indeed, experience from the Ethiopian South is a good example of what Platteau (1996:45) terms as “high level of politicisation of wealth allocation in Sub-Saharan Africa”. This practice reduced the status of the peasants into landless farmers or *gabbar*, as noted earlier, who were exposed to political and cultural subjugation coupled with economic exploitation by the alien landlords from the North. A good illumination of this reality comes from John Markakis (1974:112) who contends as follows:

The expropriation and distribution of a very large portion of land in the south among the victors had a dramatic effect on the native population. The relationship of persons to land was radically transformed practically over-night by *force majeure*. The southern peasantry, which found itself on land claimed by the state, lost whatever rights it had held traditionally over the land. The people were transformed into *gabbars* of the state and of the privileged group to whom the state granted rights over such land. As was the case with the term *balabat* the term *gabbar* changed in meaning when applied in the south, since the position of the peasant cultivator in this area was substantially different from that of the northern *gabbar*. In the north... the term refers to the tributary status of the peasant, regardless of his rights over land. Thus the northern *ristegna*, who has secure rights over his land, is also a tribute-paying *gabbar*. In the southern provinces, however, the peasantry cultivating land expropriated by the state lost whatever rights it had enjoyed over such lands and was reduced to the status of tenant ‘quartered on the land of another’.

It is, therefore, noteworthy to underline that the alteration in property rights to land generated fundamental changes in the status and dignity of the majority of the southern peasants who were reduced to the status of *gabbar*. In the South, contrary to the North where *gabbar* stood for a tribute-paying *ristegna* – who had an unchallenging *rist* rights (Donham, 2003; Markakis, 1974) the term was designated to describe a generation of landless peasants who had been devoid of any say on their own land and exposed to severe exploitation and domination by the northern landed classes and political authorities (Pausewang, 1990).

Elite-peasant relationships should also be understood beyond economic interactions. It is recorded (Donham, 2002; Pankhurst, 1966) that the circumstance in the southern areas was entirely different from that of the northern provinces, where *gultegna* (*gult*-holder) and *gabbar* shared ethnic identity, religion (Orthodox Christianity), language and cultural values, which enabled the latter to exert social pressure on the former to protect *rist* rights. In the South, by contrast, land alienation and exploitation of the *gabbar* were coupled with ethnic discrimination and domination. In short, the situation in the South is characterized as a “political and social structure that had created an enormous inequality in wealth and power along class and ethnic lines” (Alemneh, 1987:32). This obviously means that there existed a system of double oppression of the peasants of the southern provinces. They were subjected to economic exploitation, as a class, and political and cultural domination, as the political minority ethnic groups.

In short, transformation of land holding system from the principally communal (Bezuwork, 1992) to a substantially state and private<sup>2</sup> tenure led to negative changes in the status and dignity

of the majority of the southern peoples. It is maintained (Bahru,1991;Markakis ,1974) that such a drastic change of property rights to land and the reduced status of the southern masses was the outcome of excessive political intervention ,which was directed against the best interests of the majority of the local peoples.

### **Some Methods of Land Alienation**

The process of land alienation in the South was facilitated through multifaceted mechanisms, which, *inter alia*, included the following. First, conquest and blatant seizure of the southern territories(Bahru,1991; Markakis 1974).This is the situation whereby the minority, by virtue of their ethnic background and access to political power , gained at the expense of a great majority of the native population. Second, conversion of land holding rights from temporary to permanent forms(Bahru,1991;Markakis 1974; Pausewang,1983),thereby providing the *gulteгна* (*gult* owners) with private holding rights.The *gulteгна* were initially provided with the land as "*maderia*" (a means of livelihood, literally) and such a land was eventually transformed into *rist-gult* -a private holding of the *gulteгна*<sup>3</sup>. This process is analogous to the landholding system under feudal Europe where the fiefs, which were originally granted as a compensation for military services ,were gradually transformed into heritable and transferable private property of the fief-holders( Riker and Sened,1996). Third, combination of inaccurate land measurement (Markakis,1974) followed by the imposition of arbitrary land tax .Fourth, alienation of the land that was originally owned by individuals or the local communities failing to pay taxes. This kind of land was known as *gebre-tel meret* (or "tax-born land"). The identification of the existence of "excess " land was a golden opportunity for Haile Selassie's government to deny local communities land ownership and management rights .

Evidently, the southern peasants were helpless in face of well-designed and systematically imposed land grabbing strategies and practices.This is the issue of power relations between powerful elites and the weak and scattered peasants masses. It is typical to an authoritarian type of political system elsewhere in which case , "Power and privilege are...[used] as means to acquiring wealth , and the desire to acquire wealth motivates the actions of the ruling stratum"(Winiecki ,1996:64). In southern Ethiopia, such a practice was a reflection of an absence of the rule of law and accountability of the political authorities , which manifested itself in an extreme politicization of land allocation.

That courts were mainly influenced by the landlords and interfered by political authorities had also played an important role in facilitating land alienation. The local communities were discriminated against and denied of justice even in the courts, which were , in principle , supposed to give fair and prompt verdict. Certainly, there had been endless land litigations mostly between government authorities and the local peoples. Peasants had to travel back and forth between the deep rural areas and the urban centers, including Addis Ababa, the capital, in search of justice. It is not difficult to imagine the extent to which this state of affairs, coupled with other adverse effects of the imposed tenure systems , was backbreaking for the peasants in terms of resources and time that could otherwise be used for productive activities.

### **Major Effects of the Imposed Tenure Systems on the Peasants**

Excessive political intervention that facilitated land grabbing by favouring landlords and political authorities and the emergence, *inter alia*, of state and private ownership of land have had severe impacts on the southern peasants. These included tenancy, sharecropping, eviction and labour services. The following paragraphs explore these adverse effects.

### **Tenancy**

One of a number of negative effects of the politically-imposed tenure for the peasants of the South was the emergence of widespread tenancy. It is estimated that tenancy covered between 39 percent (Sidamo) and 75 percent (Illubabor) (Cohen and Weintraub, 1975:51). In the extreme case, as the experience of the Nekemet *Woreda* (district) in Wollegga Province has demonstrated, the rate of tenancy reached as high as over 80 percent (Clapham, 1988:163). The southern tenants had, thus, to live under the conditions of uncertainty and excessive dependence on the alien landlords and government officials.

It must be underlined that, by and large, tenancy (like many other concepts) means different things to the southern and northern peasants. As Hoben (1973) observed, in the North, in Daga Damot *Awraja* of Gojam Province, for instance, tenancy was a system of sharecropping between or among different households who pulled together their resources, including land, inputs, draught animals and labour power. It was generally based on equality and mutual benefits of the parties involved. Here, the tenant was locally called *tetemaj* (i.e., partner) and he or she was not, definitely, a *chisegna* (or tenant) in the real sense of the term. "It must be stressed that tenancy in Dega Damot does not involve the type of subordination, dependence, and one-sided control that it does in many other traditional agrarian societies. Tenants ...do not constitute a distinct class of landless people. Only few men (with the exception of artisans) are totally dependent on land they cultivate in tenancy" (Hoben, 1973:137). The circumstance in the South was basically different. In the South, we have a situation where a bulk of the peasants were reduced to the status of a class of landless army who were compelled to work as tenants for the predominantly northern landlords who succeeded in their conquest of southern territories (Bruce *et al*, 1993). Clearly, there had been significant differences between the southern and northern societies in terms of their land rights and the associated patterns of relationships between and among the actors concerned. Tenancy was prevalent in the South and it was minimal in the North.

Consequently, most of the economic burdens had to rest heavily on the shoulders of the tenants of southern provinces than on the smallholder-cultivators of the northern areas. This was so because although both were obliged to pay taxes and bribes and were placed under the control of political authorities, the landless farmers of the South had been extremely insecure than the smallholders of the North. The southern tenants had, thus, to live under the conditions of uncertainty and excessive dependence on the principally northern landlords and political authorities.

### **Share Cropping**

Another impact of the private land tenure was the emergence of the system of sharecropping. In the southern provinces, sharecropping was a heavy burden, "which [both] economically and politically exposed the tenants to the power of the landowners" (Hussein, 2001:40). This was the situation where the landlords received a lion's share of the produce of the tenants. Studies (Clapham, 1988; Cohen, 1974) reveal that the amount of the produce that the landlords grabbed from their tenants ranged from one-fourths (*irbo*) to two-thirds. According to another source (Dawit, 1989), this share was even as high as three-fourths of the tenant's produce. To be sure, this is higher even than the typical rent that the European tenant paid to his landlord, which was half of the total produce (Stevenson, 1991). In the Ethiopian South, "Using their distinct social position landlords and *melkegnas* (governors) squeezed as much as they could from their tenants" (Terefe, 2001:131). It is also important to note that a considerable majority of the pre-1975 landlords in the South were engaged in grabbing the tenants' produce rather than farm the land themselves (Clapham, 1988). They were absentee landlords.

It is true that in the North ,too, the *gultegna* received a good amount of produce from the peasants residing on their *gult* territories . Yet, the nobles used a great deal of those resources to the benefit of the concerned communities(for detail discussions, see, Pausewang, 1983), in contrast to the situation in the South where the landlords grabbed from the peasants whatever was available for them. Here, sharecropping was a manifestation of a classical type of tenancy and asymmetrical power relationships between the owners and non- owners of the land . This practice is in line with what Douglass North (1990:134) explains as “ a story of humans with unequal bargaining strength”. It was a vital source of exploitation and domination of the tenants by the politically- backed absentee landlords and government officials. Indeed, the experience of southern provinces under the Imperial regime confirms the theoretical argument ( Ellis, 1993) that sharecropping is not just an economic institution, which subjects tenants to exploitation by their landlords. It is also a political instrument that provides the landowners with the power to suppress the tenants and landless labourers.

### **Eviction**

Eviction of the landless southern peasants was another adverse effect of landlordism under Haile Selassie's government. Besides exacerbating the sufferings of the tenants through exploitation, the landlords could discontinue their relations with their tenants at discretion .Thus, the poor peasants had been subjected to displacement that created further insecurity of tenure.One of the important causes of eviction of the tenants concerns the introduction of mechanized farming<sup>4</sup> that emerged in the second half of the 1960s. In areas such as Chilalo *Awraja* of Arsi Province(known for a large-scale tenant eviction) , for instance, the newly introduced schemes led to mass displacement of tenants as well as smallholders ( For details ,see Bruce *et al*, 1993;Cohen and Weintraub,1975;Shiferaw,1995). The introduction of new technology in the field of agriculture, indeed, highly tempted the landlords and stimulated their appetite for more income and wealth, which were anticipated to be substantially higher than the rents to be received from tenants . Hence , the landlords started to displace the tenants in large-scale. They did this for two reasons.1) to rent their land out to those who were considered to be capable enough to employ new technology in the farms, or 2) to farm the land themselves using modern agricultural methods( Bezuwork ,1992). The introduction of such agricultural methods created a golden opportunity and incentive for the landlords to get rid of the poor peasants, who were helpless in face of the powerful landlords who were backed by the officials of the Haile Sellassie’s government.

Eviction was undertaken arbitrarily rather than in a planned way that might otherwise give the tenants time to look around for alternative plots. Furthermore, tenant displacement was effected where there existed no adequate alternative means of employment for the landless peasants.Clapham (1988) found that as a result of mechanized farming ,in southern provinces such as Arsi, Bale and Southern Shewa, a portion of the poor peasants were either turned into agricultural workforce or being displaced from their villages to come to the urban centres in search of jobs or migrated into “marginal” areas to seek plots of land to cultivate. These negative effects of private property of land on the poor peasants corresponds to Bromley’s (1989:198) theoretical contention which goes as follows :

One often finds an argument that thoroughgoing private property will fully guarantee individual liberties. Yet, if that privatisation results in the denial of the means of survival for a portion of the population one would think it easy to argue that their most basic liberty, survival, had been denied. When private ownership of land is concentrated in the hands of a fraction of the population, and others are reduced to daily wages at starvation levels –if they can gain employment at all- one would think that the contradictions would elicit some comment.



Definitely, the politicised land allocation in southern Ethiopia had created excessive tenure insecurity for the majority of the population - tenants and peasants alike. This situation, in turn, along with other effects of land privatisation, discussed previously, have furthered agrarian contradictions and the associated conflicts between the landlords/ government officials and peasants of the South.

### **Labour Services**

Labour service that the tenants rendered to their landlords was another form of exploitation and subjugation of the southern peasants by the northern elites. Studies (Bezuwork, 1992; Dawit, 1989; Shiferaw, 1995) demonstrate that a landlord had full power over his tenant to force him to render to the former all kinds of labour services without compensation. Surely, such a labour duty, which is an element of what Ellis (1993) terms as "non-market coercion", was an extension of landowner's authority over the landless cultivator by virtue of the political backing he secured and his ownership of the land to be rented to the tenant. The latter was compelled to perform the duty imposed on him because he was not sure about his future, for his landlord could displace him arbitrarily.

The tenant had no legally established guarantee on the plot that he cultivated. As Cohen (1974) contends, an insecure person can hardly be expected to turn down the imposition of another person on which he is heavily dependent for his subsistence. This is because there is little or no alternatives to such a dominant-subordinate pattern of relationships. The tenants of southern Ethiopia could not be exceptional.

To sum up, the pre-1975 politics of land tenure generated asymmetrical patterns of production relations, which subjected the masses of the southern peasants to excessive dependence on the northern landlords and political elites. In fact, as Cohen (1974) observed, the landless farmer of southern provinces, by and large, worked for others on whom he was excessively dependent to have access to the farmland, which was crucial for him and his families' livelihoods. The lopsided tenure policies had not only deepened the misery of the majority of the population of the South, but it had also aggravated the contradictions that existed between the peasants and the Imperial government. This situation, in turn, contributed to the destabilization and eventual collapse of the Emperor Haile Selassie's regime, in September 1974.

## **II. THE LAND REFORM OF 1975: Achievements and challenges**

The introduction of the Land Reform of 1975, which was a response to one of the basic questions of the 1974 Revolution, is a landmark in contemporary history of the country. In this section, we will describe the significance of the land reform and show some challenges to the gains of the reform. In passing, we will touch upon the current tenure policy and the associated debate.

### **The Reform Measures and Their Effects**

On March 4, 1975, the *Derg* introduced a fundamental land tenure system, the Proclamation to Provide for Public Ownership of Rural Lands No. 31, 1975. This measure changed the patterns of relationships between the owners and the cultivators of the land by "making land to the tiller for the first time a reality in Ethiopia" (Ellis, 1992:254). The Proclamation nationalized all rural lands throughout the country. It eradicated private land tenure system and replaced it with public ownership (article 3, sub-articles 1 and 2). Indeed, "the abolition of private land ownership" (Clahpam, 1988:1) is one of the basic factors that demonstrate the radicalism of the Ethiopian Revolution. The reform act has prohibited transfer of land by sale, lease, or mortgage (article

5). The legislation abolished tenancy(article 4,sub-article 5 ) and emancipated the poor peasants from all types of obligations to the landlords(article 6,sub-article 3). Evidently, this was a radical departure from the pre-land reform dominant-subordinate relations between the landlords and peasants, which prevailed in South . Nevertheless, the reform act provided the peasants only with use rights, and not private ownership rights. Moreover, only individuals who were willing to farm personally were entitled to possess land.Hired labour was generally prohibited.

The Land Reform of 1975 was indisputably radical by any standards, “ even in Soviet and Chinese terms” (Ottaway and Ottaway, 1978:67).It substantially transferred property rights to land , alongside political power, from one social class to another, thereby changing social status. In Marxian terms, it is an expropriation of the expropriators. Like before, the fundamental change in property rights generated a class of winners and losers,but in a reverse order. That is, losers became winners and vice versa. The winners were former tenants and poor peasants of the South as a class and the majority of the southerners as people . Together with land rights, they regained their lost dignity and power to manage their resources in their villages . The losers were the landed-classes and political elites whose economic and political basis in the countryside were uprooted . Up until that point, rural land was a “ major source of power in the countryside and of status and wealth in the cities”( Ottawa and Ottaway, 1978:66), for the predominantly northern landlords and political elites, while it was a major source of exploitation and domination for the southern peasants. Now,thanks to the revolutionary land reform,the elites lost their land rights and the associated political power .They received no compensation , for they paid none when they expropriated the lands of the indigenous peoples. One can argue that the Land Reform of 1975 was a measure that was required to heal the historical wound. It was a restoration of property rights to the legitimate owners.It was a rectification of past mistakes.

However, the achievements of the Ethiopian land reform should not be measured in terms of the amount of land that was redistributed , which was not remarkable (Clapham, 1988; Pausewang,1990), when compared ,for example, with land reforms in Latin America. In most cases, peasants and former tenants retained the lands that they were farming before the introduction of the reform. Redistribution was made of the lands obtained from the “medium-level” landowners who held in excess of 10 hectors. In some instances ,a small portion of commercial farms were redistributed, while the most parts were transformed into state farms. One may ask: why was then the land reform so important for the majority of the peasants? What the reform obtained, in most cases, to the peasants were measures such as abolition of tenancy, assurance of tenure security, the elimination of obligation of the tenants to the landlords , the very eradication of landlordism, and the termination of land-based litigations. Such a freedom was important both materially and psychologically.In fact, the peasants felt that they were free to consume the fruits of their labour and no one would evict them from their possessions. Moreover,in the early years of the land reform, that they were freed from all sorts of feudal obligations made it possible for the peasants to become owners of the fruits of their labour (Clapham ,2002 )and even enabled them to boost their produce and improve their lives ( Pausewang,1983,1990 ). Hence, no wonder that the reform measures were welcomed warmly in the South and were ,by and large, implemented effectively and with slight confrontation with the overthrown classes (see Alemneh,1987;Clapham, 1988). This initially led to the emergence of harmonious relationships between the government and the peasants.

The newly established ( within a minimum of 20 *gasha*-800 hectors) peasants associations (PAs) have played a crucial role in undertaking the reform measures in their respective *kebele* (villages).The associations were provided with administrative, judiciary and social functions and powers.These included land redistribution, administration of justice by establishing *fered shengo* (judicial tribunal), maintenance of law and order; and provisions of services to the

peasants by setting up services cooperatives. Initially, PAs operated almost autonomously as mass organizations although they were assigned with additional role of local governments. During the early years of the establishment of PAs, the peasants were, generally, free to elect and remove their leaders. Moreover, government authorities appeared to be supportive of the associations. Particularly, it was observed that the newly appointed young *woreda* (district) administrators and officials and experts of the Ministry of Land Administration had shown positive attitudes towards the peasant associations.

### **Government Intervention in the Peasant Sector :A Threat to the Gains of the Land Reform**

Government-peasant harmonious relationships did not last long as a result of the “austerity policy measures”(Hussein,2001:43) that the *Derg* introduced subsequently. Political domination of the peasant associations, the emergence of Agricultural Producers' Co-operatives(APC) and the introduction of grain marketing and pricing policy are cases in point.

### **Government versus Peasant Associations**

The party (the Worker's Party of Ethiopia) and government gradually subjected the associations to political control. Consequently, “what was established in order to promote local democracy, justice, and peasant rights, has in practice turned into a control for administrative efficiency and against popular participation”(Pausewang,1988:264). In other words, for the most part, the peasant associations were converted into “extensions of state power, rather than agencies of self-administration”(Clapham, 1988: 161). The implication is clear. The associations lost morale authority and legitimacy to mobilize their members for rural transformation, using the opportunities that the land reform had created.

The prevalence of political intervention in internal affairs of the peasant organizations suggests that the associations' leadership could not defend the interests of the peasants whom they theoretically represented. Such a heavy political intervention in local decisions and staunch control of the rural communities were the manifestations of the growing authoritarian character of the *Derg* (Hussein,1997) and absence of the rule of law. In short, politics undermined peasants' once dependable organizational mechanisms for defending land rights.

### **Agricultural Producers' Cooperatives**

The establishment of agricultural producers' co-operatives led to tenure insecurity for the non-members, i.e., the majority of the peasants who did not belong to the co-operative societies. In some cases, where fertile land that was held by the smaller-holders was needed for cooperative farming, private holders could be instructed by a *kebele* PA chairperson (usually male) to settle elsewhere in the peasant association. This was a system that was designed to exert “peer pressure” (Alamneh 1987:40) on the non-members to force them to join the cooperatives in fear of losing their plots.

The existence of the government-favoured APC in their surroundings and the associated possibility for peasant (internal) displacement led to a state of uncertainty and created tenure insecurity for the smallholders. In fact, there is evidence to show that in every village where the producers' cooperatives existed, “the best land available was allotted to them, evicting ordinary peasants, who might then be given greater inferior land in exchange”(Clapham, 1988:172). Also, the peasants perceived that under APC, all produces would be put into common pull granaries and member households would receive from there their assigned quota grains for consumption. This parallel to the motto, “food for work”. For all these

reasons, the majority of the peasants had shown hatred for agricultural producers' cooperatives.<sup>5</sup>

### **Agricultural Marketing and Pricing Policy**

The military government's marketing and pricing policy was another key factor that the peasants considered as a challenge to the gains of the land reform. The Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), which was established in 1976, was authorized to set prices, assign quotas and buy grain from different rural sectors and supply agricultural inputs to the farmers (Alemneh 1987; Clapham, 1988). The objective was to establish firm political control of the peasant economy and provide the urban consumers and the military with cheaper agricultural produce. To this effect, the small-holders were obligated to sell certain amount of their grain production, as per the quota imposed on them, to the surrounding service cooperatives at fixed lower price, i.e., "farm-gate price", determined by AMC (Alemneh, 1987; Cohen and Isakson, 1987; Eshetu, 1990). Interestingly, the quota was imposed so arbitrarily that, in some areas, peasants were compelled to sell their livestock to buy grain from elsewhere to meet their quota requirements.

It can be argued that the AMC quota was an over-taxation of the peasant agriculture, a system that was in sharp contradiction with the spirit of the land reform. In this way, the *Derg's* grain marketing and pricing policy has contributed to the erosion of the anticipation that peasants would be free to enjoy the fruits of their labour, as implied in the reform act.

In general, political intervention, that was dictated by the desire to control rural resources and rural decision making processes, strangled the country's smallholders from every direction. The *Derg's* agricultural policies were, in effect, a threat to the gains of the land reform for the great majority of the peasants. These interventionist policies have contributed to the surfacing of contradiction between the peasants and the *Derg*, the situation which the opposition groups exploited effectively to overthrow the government in May 1991.

### **The Current Situation**

In spite of remarkably changing economic and political policies, in other areas, the EPRDF-led government has retained rural (and urban) land tenure policy of the *Derg*. At present, public ownership of land is constitutionally acknowledged. As it was under the previous government, private tenure and land sales that it entails are prohibited. Article 40 of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), which entered into force in 1995, stipulates that being a common property of nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia, and not a private property of individuals or group of individuals, land would not be sold or exchanged [FDRE, 1995:98].

The preservation of public ownership of land has become a contentious issue (see Hussein, 2001 for extensive review of the post-1991 debate) between supporters of the status quo and advocates of tenure policy shift in favour of privatisation. As could be expected, while the arguments of the adherents of the existing policy is based on equity consideration, the proponents of privatisation defend their position on efficiency ground. The problem, however, is that none of these arguments has provided comprehensive empirical research findings that show the views and interests of the peasants, poor farmers in particular, who would be the most affected by drastic tenure policy change. That is to say, "It is seldom, if ever, that farmers are actually asked how they feel about these issues, controversies and the policy options, all of which are entrained and created by outsiders [i.e., the elites] who are usually out of touch with the farmers' realities" (Tekie, 2000:89). Therefore, it is of paramount importance to conduct adequate empirical studies that focus their attention on the feelings and interests of the majority of

the country's peasants, without excluding the interests of other actors or ignoring the efficiency argument. Thorough empirical studies are vital to narrow the existing research gap and to draw informed conclusions ..

### III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The foregoing discussion suggests that rural land allocation in Ethiopia has been surrounded by politics. This was apparent, especially, in the South during the pre-1975 Land Reform period. Following Emperor Menelik government's conquest and incorporation of the southern territories, there emerged a situation whereby large portion of arable lands were confiscated from the indigenous peoples and allotted to a handful northern landlords and political elites to the neglect of land rights of the majority of the local population. Emperor Haile Sellassie preserved Menelik's tenure policy. The fact that government policies favoured and encouraged landlordism exposed the peasants of the South to landlessness, exploitation, and oppression in several ways.

The Land Reform Act of March 1975 freed the peasants of southern provinces from tenancy and the associated feudal obligations, provided them with land use rights and guaranteed tenure security. Nevertheless, heavy political interference in the rural economy and rural decision-making processes, challenged tenure security and undermined peasant autonomy. It must be underlined, however, that despite such policy impediments and challenges, the essence of the land reform, that is, liberation of the great majority of southern peasants from the bondage of landlordism and provision of peasants with land use rights have, general, been intact.

The post-1991 government has retained status quo in land ownership. This led to heated contention over appropriate tenure policy option(s). The main questions remain: Should the existing tenure system be retained? Should land be privatized? Or, is there a third option(s)? This calls for comprehensive empirical research that would enable us to create better understandings about the subject under discussion and to also come up with appropriate suggestions for future policy considerations.

### NOTES

1. The designation north and south is based on convenience, and it does not imply precise geographical location. As it is used here, North concerns Amhara and Tigray provinces including Gojam, Gonder, Northern Wollo, Northern Shewa and Tigray, while South consisted of eastern, western, and southern parts of the country.

2. Although the process was started prior to 1935, when Italy invaded Ethiopia, 1941 witnessed widespread and swift privatisation in South, while communal tenure remained intact in North. This process continued up until the mid-1970s (For detailed discussions of the process of privatisation, see for instance, Bahru, 1991; Cohen and Weintraub, 1975; Markakis, 1974).

3. Contrary to the situation in the South, in the North, though the *gultegna* (*gult*-holders) had the right to collect tribute and receive a portion of the produce from the *ristegna* (small-holder) he or she, nevertheless, have not had property rights to the land. The land belonged to the village communities.

4. Admittedly, there is no agreement among researchers on the impact of large-scale agriculture in the pre-land reform Ethiopia. Its advocates consider mechanized farming to have playing a leading role in the "modernization" of agriculture and in setting example to small-scale farming.

They saw the role of commercial farming in terms of its contribution in opening up 'unutilized land' for cultivation, in the provision of seasonal employment to peasants, and in its contribution to the country's export earnings. If true, these were positive results of mechanization. On the other hand, mechanized farming is considered by some as carrying with it negative consequences for the poor of the Ethiopian South. It is, hence, discredited by the critics "for land grabbing, and for large-scale eviction of the peasants from the land" (Bruce, *et al*, 1993:28).

5. Interestingly, the already existing producers' cooperatives themselves were dissolved en masse by their members, following the policy shift and the ensuing statement of President Mengistu, in 1990, only a year before the downfall of his government, in view of the "mixed economy" policy.

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