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Peasants, land reform and property right in Ethiopia: The experience of Gojjam Province, 1974 to 1997

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In late 1960s and early 1970s, progressive Ethiopians and international agencies urged Haile-Selassie's Imperial government to introduced land reform and rural change and in 1974 the emperor was deposed and the *Derg* took power. Soon, the new régime, the *Derg*, promulgated a revolutionary land reform program. The land reform proclamation abolished all private ownership making all land common property of the Ethiopian people. Despite the wide spread of the resistance, the law was implemented in most part of the province. In 1980's the *Derg* regime introduced villagisation and collectivization program in most parts of the country and that were unpopular and hence contributed for the fall of the regime. In 1996 to 1997, the second land reform in the province was made under the current government. Like the *Derg*, land property rights have remained vested in the state. In November 1996, the Regional Council of the Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) issued a proclamation of new land reform programme that has been hotly debated. However, despite the politico-economic and symbolic significance of arable land in the area under study, we have no scholarly work in the agrarian reform of Gojjam. The intriguing question arises as to why land right in Gojjam, despite its importance in the political economy of the region and the country, remained an infertile area for historical investigation. The available sources lack structural analysis and focus. It is only through a thorough and independent research that we can have detail and genuine knowledge on the topic under investigation. The aim of this discussion is to analyze the contexts and dynamics of land rights in Ethiopia in general and Gojjam in particular. The study, based on oral testimonies, published and unpublished sources, is intended to provide readers with objective issues on land politics and history. An attempt has made to collect both oral information and archival materials from local offices. In addition, I have consulted different archives of the Governorate General so as to compare and contrast the tenure reforms of the *Derg* and the EPRDF with the imperial period. The study will hopefully make a valuable contribution to the knowledge of the features and natures of Ethiopian agrarian reform and tenure system. Students of policy development will also find this work quite useful.

Key words: Peasants, land reform, property right, Gojjam, Ethiopia.

INTRODUCTION

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING AND GENERAL BACKGROUND

Gojjam, situated in northwestern Ethiopia, is nearly a river island as the Nile River surrounds it. Historically, it comprises three administrative units. These were Gojjam proper (Mota, Bichena and Debre Marqos), Damot and

Agew Meder (Gizachew, 1971). There is no significant dividing line among these units. The division was made only for administrative purposes by Emperor Menilek II in 1901, following the death of *Negus* Tekle-Haymanot. It was part of Menilek's attempt to make the province an integral part of the central government (Nega, 1972; Gebru, 1991). The area includes wide ranges of

geographic features such as depressions, lakes, lowlands, mountains and the upland plateau. It is the source of many rivers and streams that drain into the Blue Nile River. Rivers of this region with their annual sediments are the main contributors to the volume of the Nile River that gave rise to the ancient world civilization in Egypt. The Blue Nile is the main river in the region and is, among the local subsistence population, attributed with special power, various cultural meanings and peasant relations (Temesgen, 2001).

The study area borders to the Sudan and is close to the Nile Valley world (which was the main route of ancient contact). It has a mild climate and a favourable environment that might have attracted nomadic and agricultural people from Sudan or the Sahara. This might have brought agriculture to the Ethiopian highlands (Clark, 1988; Phillipson, 1993; Bahru, 1991). Moreover, the region is populated by different ancient groups of people such as the Cushitic and Omotic, and the relatively late comer Semitic and Nilo-Saharan speaking people with their own distinct economic practices (Ehret, 1979). Such contrasting physiographic, land and peasant contexts offer good opportunities to conduct this study.

The term land reform has several meanings. The definition of land reform is not easy. This is due to differences in land types, farming methods, the history of land acquisition, general social and economic conditions and political aims. Still, however, definition is important because some supposed land reform policies are not in fact intended to change the distribution of land ownership and rural power. It may involve the restoration of land rights to previous owners, a process known as land restitution. Land reform may involve the redistribution of land rights from one sector to another. Land reform may also involve land consolidation in which all land owners within an area surrender their land and are allocated new parcels of comparable value but in a pattern which encourages the more efficient and productive use of the land. Land reform may also involve changes in the tenure of the land.

The type of land reform that took place in Ethiopia in 1975 is redistribution of land rights, by taking land from individual owners of large estates and giving it to landless, tenants and farm labourers (Warriner, 1969). This type of land reform is often used interchangeably with agrarian reform. This is due to the fact that Ethiopian land reform goes beyond land redistribution. It includes changes in both land tenure and agricultural organization. It also support other rural development measures such as: changes in the technology of agriculture facilitate farm credit, cooperatives for farm-input supply and marketing, and extension services to facilitate the productive use of the land reallocated'. The danger with these wider prescriptions is that they may discourage governments from doing anything until they can do everything (Adams, 1995). Land reform may involve remodeling of tenure rights and the redistribution of land, in directions consistent with the political imperatives underlying the reform.

The Ethiopian experience, for example, was revolutionary as opposed to evolutionary policies. The reform aimed at improving access and security of tenure for small farmers under alternative forms of individual and communal tenure, which do not involve expropriation and compensation.

Land reform program normally affect land tenure. So understanding the concept of land tenure is important to see what a land reform can do. Land tenure refers a whole set of activities and structures. Land tenure is an institution, that is, rules invented by societies to regulate behaviour. Rules of tenure define how property rights in land are to be allocated within societies. They define how access is granted to rights to use, control, and transfer land and other natural resources, as well as associated responsibilities and restraints. In simple terms, land tenure systems determine who can use what resources for how long, and under what conditions. It is the relationship, whether legally or customarily defined, among people, as individuals or groups, with respect to land and associated natural resources (for example, water, trees, minerals, wildlife). Land tenure is an important part of social, political and economic structures. It is multi-dimensional, bringing into play social, technical, economic, institutional, legal and political aspects that are often ignored but must be taken into account. In Ethiopia, land tenure systems have varied in space and time. It is better to trace the history of Ethiopian land tenure system with its problem and implication, because it has far – reaching implication in providing a brief guide about how the land tenure system of the country has been changed and improved through time.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Land tenure has institutions that comprise the legal and contractual or customary arrangements through which people engage in the activity of agriculture and productive processes on the land. Without such system, there is chaos and disorder. The land tenure system of a country is not only the land that is regulated but also it is the means by which social stability is maintained as it establishes standard of social patterns and relationships (Adams, 1995). It also tells the background, the suffering and life of the society. In Ethiopia, for example, land tenure system has been molded to its present form by a number of socio-political factors and processes over the long span of the country's history, the monarchy had played an important role in the land holding system (Tesfu, 1973).

In other countries too, land reform and right have been considered as important means to bring rural transformations. Accordingly, most African countries, after 1960s in particular, have included programmes for land reform in their development plans. In 1950, the UN had realized and adopted the necessity of land reform for

economic development in the under developed countries (United Nations, 1950).

There are different views regarding agrarian reform. The liberal school views land rights and reforms in relation to specific measures such as land to the tiller or land redistribution. It is proposed by the conservatives. It is also exemplified by the laws which the legislatures, mostly dominated by the landowners themselves, have found necessary to pass it. This was most observed in Latin American countries. The voluntary donation of land by landowners and the church should be also included in this category. This view excludes significant political change as it is proposed and controlled by the conservatives. The main beneficiaries are the landowners themselves as they found favourable market for their extra land. Under this reform, there is no distributive justice and economic development as land owners have not lost their original power and right. The power has given them access to the control of legislation so that they effectively protect the status quo (Dessalegn, 2008; Economic commission for Africa, 2004; Schickele, 1952). According to this view, the landowners have to protect the status quo because if the agrarian reform undertaken is accompanied with the loose or passing of power, they lose their privileges.

The other view is the attempt to include all or part of the peasantry into the existing national political economy. This can be done through a process that mobilizes the progressive forces against the landowners. This view proposes redirecting rural credit and technical assistance so that the peasants, not the medium and land owners, would be beneficiaries. This theory is supported by many critics of the first school of thought as on its face it seems to be radical. The peasantry is incorporated into social and political life of the country (Ibid; Tesfu).

The third view demands revolutionary approach that aims for the transformation of the social, political and economic conditions all at the same time. Here the reforms are more radical and includes restructuring access and control on land and the distribution of land ownership rights. It begins with a far reaching change in the society. This includes the acquisition of land from the state or land owners for redistribution to other groups of people who have historically been dispossessed or disadvantaged (Ibid). In this school, land has been used as a strategy in social revolution. The structure of the society should be changed in parallel with agrarian reform as in China and Cuba. To effect this change, peasants should be mobilized and the source of power of the conservatives should be minimized so that they would be disabled from opposing the reform.

Coming to Ethiopia, in the post-liberation period, 1941 to 1974 the issue of land became very sensitive and complicated. The government was forced to pass several abortive legislations. The emperor made a speech on 2 November, 1961 addressing the parliament about the need for land reform. While fully respecting the principle of private ownership, he had also pointed out that

landless Ethiopians must have the opportunity to own their land. Then 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) whose major task was Land Reform (Ministry of Land Reformation and Authority Draft Policy, 1972).

In the early 1970s various groups of people having different conceptions of the fundamental shortcomings of Ethiopian land system were emerged. The liberals supported reforms through rationalization processes without affecting the basic structure of the then existing political economy, while the radicals favoured a revolution that demands the complete destruction of the existing order and its replacement by a new one. Then the term agrarian and land reform had been subjected to different interpretations in the country. 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, irrigation works, mechanization, resettlement and so forth while others conceived it broadly as a comprehensive programme for the transformation of the entire agricultural economy (Dessalegn, 1974).

Despite the sensitivity and complexity of the tenure, however, it is only a few that have produced scholarly work in the agrarian reform of Ethiopia in general and Gojjam in particular. This is particularly true for Gojjam where the existing works lack structural analysis and focus. This is because, among other things, the study of rural Ethiopia did not inspire much interest and promised little reward among the students of Ethiopian history. This paper tries to fill the gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In any research to investigate new field of study, one must make series of decisions. One of these is the decision of choice between qualitative and quantitative methodologies.¹ The choice between the two research methods is important because they reflect entirely different research philosophies. Accordingly, given the overall objective of this study, which is to deepen the understanding of access to land and agrarian reforms, I employed qualitative method, supplemented by basic quantitative method, as the main research methodology. This is because qualitative research techniques are essential in exploring peoples' values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. It is also particularly important when dealing with sensitive issues and people's life through interview and archives as well.

In addition, qualitative method is a naturalistic approach that helps to understand historic processes and human experiences in specific historical settings where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest. Further, the strength of qualitative research method to my research is its emphasis on words rather than numbers. This is important to reflect and interpret the understandings and meanings of people's past life, social worlds and realities.

¹ M. Hammersley, *The Dilemma of Qualitative Method* (London: Routledge, 1990)

Accordingly, the reason why I employed qualitative method as the main research method is the nature of the research problem and research questions, which in the case of this study, was an attempt to understand human past and experience in terms of land right in Gojjam. Therefore, in considering this reason, qualitative methodology is more appropriate.

Within this frame work, the study involved several ways and techniques of data collection. Gathering information from both published and unpublished sources and consulting archives of imperial offices are among the methods to be employed. True, Ethiopia does not have a well developed national archive, which has been one of the most important sources for scholars who work on land in contemporary Africa. Further, to the dismay of students of history, in many areas of the country, the 1974 and 1991 upheavals and the continuous civil wars that the country witnessed for over thirty years in the twentieth century has resulted in the total destruction of archival materials in many areas of the country. In supporting this, almost all the BA and MA theses produced by students at Addis Ababa University, in their introductions, talk about the destruction of documents which were either burnt or sold to shop keepers.

Fortunately, however, most of the archival materials of the Provincial capital, including Bichena Awrajja, have still existed in good conditions. The archives of police, Justice, Ministry of Interior in Debre Markos have been consulted. A great deal of information has been gathered. In addition, Wolde-Meskel Research Centre in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of Addis Ababa University is rich on materials on land and related issues. Records of major courts in the governorate general were also helpful in gaining insight in the nature of land right and land litigation issues.

In addition, oral traditions and information were important sources in writing the history of land right in Gojjam. Oral information was important as the majority of the rural population is illiterate. Former officials government, churchmen, peasants (Muslims and Christians; males and women) and members of nobility class were interviewed. The proverbs, poems and songs that were composed to express the grievances and feelings of the people against land reforms, land litigations, maladministration and others were collected, analyzed and synthesized. Finally, the data collected through different methods have been carefully examined, cross-checked, analysed and interpreted in order to reconstruct the history of land right in Gojjam.

Summarizing, the methodology for this study was diverse. The study depended mainly on oral testimonies and other primary sources including secondary sources. The research began with the extensive reading of relevant written literature.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research has the following significance:

1. Due to the variation and dynamics of the land tenure systems of the study area, the study have scholarly significance for the understanding of complex land ownership, social arrangements and inequality.
2. Regional study gives wider understanding of land right than the study of Ethiopia in totality.
3. The study contributes to our understanding of reactions and oppositions against land reforms in the country -despite the fact that I deal only within Gojjam.
4. The study builds deeper knowledge on social structure and land right in Gojjam not only from the perspective of the past but the present and the future too.

5. The research can be used as reference material for students and scholars of Ethiopian history in general and Gojjam in particular. In such a way, it will have significance for academic research activities, policy makers, general readers and to advance the frontier of our knowledge and perspective on land right and land tenure reforms of Gojjam.

LAND TENURE SYSTEM PRIOR TO 1974

Before 1974, Ethiopia had one of the most complex and diverse land tenure system in developing world. The forms of tenure are so variable throughout the country that it is almost impossible to impose any taxonomical order on them, unless it is understood that the description is operating at only the highest levels of generality. In this regard, the most ancient system of land holding is the communal land tenure system. It has survived to this day in many parts of the country (Temesgen, 2005:13; Molla, 1984:1-5). The system is characterized by all members of society having communal right to land in accordance with the ancient organization of society based on the family, the clan and other larger lineage groups. People had communal right to the land and freely exploited the resources of the land. This has typically been a persistent feature of the nomads of eastern Ethiopia where pastoral economy has characterized the region since early times.

With the emergence of agriculture and formation of classes and states in the northern part of the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia), the ancient form of land holding gradually changed. Accordingly, new forms of land tenure emerged and additional claims on the ownership of land came into being. This is called the *rist* system. *Rist* is the term given to the form of land tenure which developed in the highlands of northern Ethiopia. *Rist* was a group right. Though ultimate ownership resided in the extended family of an extremely remote and legendary ancestor, cultivation and distribution were individualistic. *Rist* land tenure system is unusual in pre-colonial Africa and it helped to explain the individualistic and conservative nature of the people in the region. It divided and re-divided among the ancestors of the founder of the land through time. It inherited within the family for generation. Thus, the *rist* system is the right to land use which members of families and clans had in the area where their ancestors had settled and lived for over long periods of time. It is a kind of birth right to the land. It is inherited from generation to generation in accordance with the provisions of local customary law (Molla, 1984).

It should be noted that the ancestors of the founding father of a certain area owned the land as a community. But, individually they possessed the land. The *rist* land is, therefore, the weakest form of private property as it had community rights and obligations. Individuals are not the owners of the land. They had only possession and use

right. No right of sell. Under this system, the *rist* owner had the right to distribute his land to his sons and pass it to his grandsons (Ottaway, 1978).

The other land tenure system was the 'Gult' system. The *gult*, flourished in southern Ethiopia, is quite different from the above two types of land ownership: communal and *rist*. It is not a right to hold land. It is the right to collect tribute from land owners. It is a different kind of institution which emerged with the earliest processes of state formation in northern Ethiopia (Dessalegn, 1984). Thus, *gult*, unlike *rist*, was not hereditary. His right was restricted to collect tribute from peasants living on his *gult* (Shiferaw, 1995).

In time, in some cases, there was transformation in the nature of *gult*. Some well-placed officials of the state began to be succeeded by their offspring in their official positions. As a result, *gult* became hereditary. These *gult* rights, which became hereditary, were called *riste-gult*. But the essential nature of *gult* right remained unchanged. It was still not a land right. Rather, it is only a right to impose tribute. The owners of *riste-gult* were hereditary officials of the state at various levels of its hierarchy. They exercised administrative, military, religious or judicial functions in their *riste-gult* land and over the inhabitants of that land. Institutions like churches and monasteries also came to acquire hereditary *gult* rights.

In the post liberation period, after 1941, end of the Italian rule, the issue of land became very sensitive and complicated. The imperial government founded Ministry of Land Reform and Administration in 1955 whose major task was land reform. According to Article 4 of the 1955 revised constitution of Ethiopia, the Emperor:

By virtue of his imperial Blood, as well as by anointing which he has received, the person of the Emperor is sacred. His dignity is inviolable and his power is indisputable.

The land reform during imperial period, which sets the base line for a large transformation of the agrarian structure, was followed by many restrictive laws about the use of land. The land reform did not bring any change regarding land ownership.

All land reforms attempts of the imperial period were opposed. This was reflected by the 1942, 1951 and 1969 revolts. In 1951, for example, a revolt broke out in Mota and Bahir Dar Awrajjas. The revolt in the western half of the province, led by Dejjach Aberre Yemmam, was a threat to the regime. Aberre, a former patriot, had also personal grievances. The power of the imperial government started to weaken. In the early 1970s, the erosion of royal power continued. The regime failed to provide political opportunities for the urban intelligentsia or to address problems in the countryside. The power of the state was declining with the advancing age of the Emperor. The imperial system became incapable of accommodating change. Oppositions continued in all corners of the country. The revolts in Gojjam, like other

peasant rebellions, contributed to the weakening and eventual downfall of the imperial regime. The authorities lost touch with political reality and had outlived their time.

Many studies were made to analyze the impact of this tenure system and found the major problems of the pre-1974 land tenure in Ethiopia which were exploitative tenancy, land concentration and underutilization, tenure insecurity, and diminution and fragmentation of holdings. Tenure insecurity was cited as one of the limitations of the pre-revolution/reform land tenure system. It had been manifested in various forms; ranging from endless litigation over land rights to complete eviction from holdings. Finally, on 12 September 1974, the Derge regime (1974-1991) took power and transferred ownership of all rural land to the state, established peasant associations at the village level, and embarked on massive collectivization.

LAND REFORM DURING THE DERG PERIOD (1974 – 1991)

Land redistribution has been utilized in many developing countries. Often, this happened in the wake of social and political revolution. In some cases, however, land reform is made a means to increase the efficiency of the family land and reduce poverty. The 1974 Ethiopian experience shared many similarities to the land to the tiller programmes implemented in other countries such as restricting land sales and other transfers in rural areas to ensure that the farmers remained beneficiaries of the land. The main difference between Ethiopia's case and the others, particularly the Latin America countries, was that redistribution was undertaken every year in the case of the former.

There was a set of historical circumstances and conjunctures which put the land question at the top of the political agendas of the day. Firstly, the two opposition democratic left groups (Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) alternatively called *Derg* and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, EPRP) saw the necessity for a radical land reform for the future development of the country. Secondly, the reform was believed to be essential for resolving the nationality question. It is remembered that in 1973 University students demonstrated in the streets of Addis Ababa under the slogan 'Land to the Tiller'. Opposition democratic left groups and students exerted great pressure on the junta to come up with a radical land reform (Bahru, 2002). Thirdly, the junta realized the need for a radical policy measure regarding land in order to uproot the landed aristocracy from the rural areas, to appease the left opposition, and to win over the support of peasants, thereby consolidating its power. Fourthly, within the Derg, there were some forward-looking elements, which then had significant influence. To this end, the Derg laid out a plan to immediately solve the

problem of land ownership.

The 1975 land reform of the 'Derg' was a radical measure in abolishing the economic, social and political administrations of the older land tenure system. It abolished the tenant-landlord relations and benefited social groups that did not traditionally own land (Kebede, 2002:128). The basic provisions of Proclamation No 31/1975 were public ownership of all rural lands; distribution of land to the tillers; prohibitions on transfer of use rights by sale, exchange, succession, mortgage or lease; setting a limit of ten hectares for a family; and prohibition for an able adult person against using hired labour to cultivate his holdings (Beyene, 2004:59; Yigremew, 2002:10). The power of administering land was vested on the Ministry of Land Reform and Administration through Peasant Associations at the grass root level (Haile, 2004:84; Yigremew, 2002:11).

Prior to the reform, the nature of land ownership became the source of unity among the peasants of the province. Based on the ideology, which envisaged to "socialize the overall economy", the Derg regime nationalized urban land for the benefit of the Ethiopian community in the belief that public control and allocation of land will be both more efficient and more equitable than leaving it to market forces or to traditional authorities. However, the 1974 land reform was not welcome, at least initially, by the peasants of Gojjam. The local gentry in particular attempted to persuade ordinary peasants that the new regime was threatening their *rist* rights. There was a perception that the *Derg* was anti-Christian. This view was confirmed when church lands not tilled directly by the priests were expropriated. When the land reform appeared in the *Negarit Gazéta* (the official gazette) at the end of April, 1975 the rightist opposition led by the aristocracy was begun in July 1974.

Indigenous Gojjam, did not take active part in the 1974 upheavals. It was some months later peasants of Gojjam started an armed opposition against the *Derg*. Empirical studies regarding the impact of land reform on livelihood of Gojjam yield inconclusive result. For instance, Kiflu (1983) argue that because of the nature of land ownership, the land reform proclamation did not have significant effect upon the day to day life of the majority of the peasantry. Instead, the main factor that led to peasants' discontent and rebellion was the attempt of the regime to mobilize the peasantry for the war in Eritrea. This was the *Raza* Campaign. Gebru (1994), Dessalegn (1997) and others argue that hat land was the most important issue among the peasants of Gojjam in particular and those in the north in general. According to them, in the past, land had been used by local landlords for mobilizing the poor peasantry for the struggle against the process of centralization. Accordingly, given the previous legal and political maneuvers, the 1975 proclamation is regarded by many peasants of Gojjam as an attempt to take their land by government located in Addis Ababa. The popular grievance caused by the land

reform received additional support from some urban dwellers following the proclamation on the nationalization of urban land and extra houses on 26 July, 1975. This proclamation, like the rural land proclamation, provided for the confiscation of all private extra urban lands and houses without compensation. In this regard, both reforms dispossessed the landlords whose dominant position had rested upon land ownership.²

The land reform was followed by the formation of new and complex social and political organizations. For the purpose of implementation of the reforms, on 29 December, 1974, *Derg* proclaimed "Development through the Operation Campaign" (Zemecha). The active participants in the development through cooperation campaign were university and high school students and teachers. Members of the campaign went to Gojjam. In most areas of the province, students and teachers were not successful in their mission. The students were hated not for their practical accomplishments but mostly for what they taught and inspired among peasant farmers. For instance, the formation of peasant associations and peasant economic co-operatives were a practical challenge to the former landowners. Such association deprived them of the power to exploit local people and instilling in the peasants relative self-reliance and independence. Peasant associations that were formed in 1975 to 1976 in inaccessible villages of Gojjam were less active than in the areas near to sub-provincial and provincial towns. Perhaps, in less accessible and politically volatile areas, the reform was not implemented for some time.

The land reform under the *Derg* was a continuous process. In most areas of the province, in addition to the initial allocation following the proclamation, repeated redistributions were implemented until 1991 when the Mengistu's regime shifted towards a mixed-economic policy (Ottaway, 1978).

The reform eliminated many of the basic problems inherent in the pre-revolutionary agricultural system. The reform liberated peasants of Gojjam from feudalistic bonds and contributed towards a more equal distribution of wealth and land. It also destroyed the basis of the feudal regime and it introduced new institutions into the countryside such as peasant associations and producer and service cooperatives; and it reorganized different agricultural forms of production. The vast majority of households and farms became individual run peasant farm.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the *Derg* intensified the collectivization program with the promotion of Agricultural Producer Cooperatives (APC) in the province. APC were to be formed by members of a Peasant Association by pooling their land, draught animals, and farm implements. The head of the cooperative automatically became the head of the Peasant Association and thereby could exert

² Informant: Tarekegn Alemu, Yibeyen Damte, interview, 10.5.2011

substantial political control and power over all association members (Alemneh, 1987; Bereket, 2002; Kirschet, 1989).

Officially, peasants should enter APCs at their free will, but some authors report more forceful implementation of cooperatives. Still, in 1984, only small percent of Peasant Association members were engaged in APCs in the province, and the productivity of cooperatives remained significantly lower than that of small-scale producers (Bereket, 2002; Clapham, 1988; Pausewang, 1991). Regardless of the weak economic performance of collectivization, “the single most important feature of the revolution” was the mass organization in the rural areas and the capture of the peasantry into a system of state control (Clapham, 2002).

Though peasant farms dominated agriculture in the province, it was producer cooperatives that have received priority. These biases against peasant agriculture mean that the 1975 land reform did not lead to greater support in material inputs. As one might expect the net result was that there was little improvement in agricultural production. This is not to suggest that the land reform was not positive but rather its impact on productivity improvement was limited by other measures carried out by the government.

The pace of implementation of the land reform of 1975 was not uniform in the different areas of the province (Kebret, 1998). In sparsely populated areas such as Metekel awrajja land reform activities were rarely applied and remained communal for some time. In populated areas such as in most of eastern Gojjam, it was applied strictly. Landless people who received land seem to have been benefited most. In this regard, the Muslims were the main beneficiaries of the land reform. It is remembered that in pre-revolutionary Ethiopia, Muslims were considered as subjects of the empire-state.³ They were regarded as a minority and described as “Muslims residing in Ethiopia”. The Muslims were not allowed to own land in the northern part of the country, including Gojjam. Now, the reforms and subsequent measures of the *Derg* put them on moral high ground. All in all, the Ethiopian revolution brought important and far-reaching changes in the socio-political and religious status of the Muslims of Gojjam.⁴

THE REDISTRIBUTION PRINCIPLE

Household size was used as a criterion for allocation by Pas (Amare, 1994). In other words, the ‘allocation rule’ can be stated as an attempt to equalize land among

³ For details on the portion of Islam and Muslims in socialist Ethiopia, see Hussein Ahmed, “Islam and Islamic Discourse in Ethiopia (1973-1993).” In Harold G. Marcus (ed.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies. Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*. Vol.1. (East Lansing :The Red Sea Press, Inc., 1994), pp.776-785.

⁴Informants: Haregewoyn Mannaheloh and Abebaye Nurellegn, interview, 24.02.2001).

households in a PA given family size. Guaranteeing households’ access to land to cover their needs (the number of ‘mouths to be fed’) is the principle behind this distribution rule. This principle tallied with the socialist ideology of the regime. The process of application was different from areas to areas. In most areas of the province, this allocation rule had been implemented strictly; in other areas was not. Location, population pressure and the existing arable dictated the process (Deassalegn, 1984).

Land in rural Ethiopia, including Gojjam, had been more equitably distributed than, say, other African countries. But whether the distribution of rural land was highly equitable as perceived has not been systematically examined in most areas of the country. There was active and direct intervention of the state in the allocation of land. The socialist ideology espoused by the government also gave a rationale for it. The government consequently implemented major policy initiatives attempting to centralize and control the activities of farm households. These in turn affected landholdings of households in the province of Gojjam.⁵

Another feature of the agrarian reform of the Derg in Gojjam was the introduction of villagisation in the second half of the 1980s. According to the central government, objective of the program was to create nucleated settlements to facilitate the provision of infrastructure. Yet, programme had come under severe criticism from both western governments and NGO’s. Some informants also opposed the operation in principle, seeing it as a forced collectivization strategy. The scale of villagisation was enormous.⁶ By 1988, except the natives of Metekel awrajja, who had nomadic and simple material culture, most of rural population of the province was living in new villages. Apart from other major impacts, at least temporarily, villagisation had significantly affected land holdings.⁷

In some cases the new villages were constructed on fertile agricultural land. Some of the villages became completely impassable during the rainy season. Trees grown near homesteads were destroyed. The changes in settlement in most cases were also accompanied by changes in land holdings of some households (for a detailed discussion of the impacts of villagisation see Lirensen, 1990). In Gojjam, villagisation brought about further movement and disruption of individuals’ land rights and caused many other problems, including environmental degradation, the loss of livestock through disease and reduced access to pasture, poor sanitation and tree crops planted near the homestead (Hoben, 1995). Starting in 1990, with a change in policy towards the promotion of a mixed economy, households in the new villages started to go back to their previous neighborhoods. Villagisation and peasant cooperatives

⁵ Informant Muluat Melese, interview, 08.6.2001).

⁶ Informant: Jenberu Bekele, Mune Fenta

⁷ Report of Motta Awrajja to the Provincial administrator, 10 May 1988

failed because they were issued in an authoritarian manner by a military regime without consulting any group in the country.⁸

THE 1996 TO 1997 LAND REFORM

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991 and introduced ethnic federalism. True, the Ethiopian ethnic federalism has generated intense scholarly debate by both its admirers and critics. Its admirers have even taken it as a model for other multi-ethnic African societies. According to its critics, the federal political arrangement failed to mediate competing political interests and conflicts among ethnic groups. Accordingly, areas that were part and parcel of Gojjam were incorporated into other administrative zones and regional governments; namely, Agew Meder Awraja and Metekel awraja. These are areas inhabited by the Agews, Gumuz and other minorities. Hereafter, Gojjam administrative zone refers areas inhabited by the Amhara tribe only.

After the fall of the *Derg* (military socialist) regime of Mengistu in 1991, privatization of farm collectives took place rapidly, and many international observers expected that in this process of "post-socialist transition," a transformation of land institutions towards a privatization and registration of land titles would follow. The World Bank recognizes that 'property rights are social conventions backed up by the power of the state or the community' (World Bank, 2004). The bank further recommends that individualistic rights of ownership bring land security.

The Transitional Government of Ethiopia, in its declaration on economic policy in November 1991 announced the continuation of the land policy of the *Derg* regime and the new constitution of 1995 approved and confirmed the state ownership of land in Ethiopia. Article 40 of the 1995 Ethiopian constitution states that:

The right to ownership of rural land and urban land, as well as of all natural resources is exclusively vested in the state and the peoples of Ethiopia. Land is a common property of the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale or to other means of exchange (FDRE, 1995, Art 40(3), pp.13).

Under Article 40, the Federal Constitution further describe about peasants and pastoralists right to access to land and protection against displacement. Ethiopian peasants have right to obtain land without payment and the protection against eviction from their possession. Ethiopian pastoralists have the right to free land for grazing and cultivation as well as the right not to be displaced from their own.

In this regard, many scholars have tried to compare and contrast the 1995 constitution to the land reform proclamation of 1975 (Berhanu et al., 2003; Dessalegn, 2004; Ege, 1997; Kassa and Manig, 2004). According to them, there are some notable differences between the rules of 1975 and 1995. The 1975 proclamation prohibits the lease of land and the hiring of labor and concealed the maximum land size per individual to 10 ha; such provisions are absent in the 1995 document (Yigremew, 2001). Furthermore, Article 40, sub section 7 specifies the rights to the compensation payments against expropriation. It stated:

"Every Ethiopian shall have the full right to the immovable property he builds and to the permanent improvements he brings about on the land by his labor or capital. This shall include the right to alienate, to bequeath, and where the right of use expires, to remove his property, transfer his title, or claim compensation for it" (FDRE, 1995, Art. 40(7)).

Ethiopia is one of the few countries in Africa that have not made significant changes in their basic land policy since the radical land reform of 1975. Exceptions to this have been occasional land redistributions to accommodate the growing population and, in some instances (such as the Amhara region's redistribution of 1996-1997), to redistribute the land that the government feels was unjustly acquired by former government officers and cadres (Nega et al., 2003).

The 1996 federal proclamation (law) devolved responsibility for land policy to the regions. Guided by the provisions made in the constitution, the regional government passed a land policy document that determined the administration and use of rural land since 1996. Amhara region was one of the regions which started to exercise its mandate. Amhara Regional government has passed three major land laws since 1996; Proclamation on the Re-allotment of the Possession of Rural Land No. 16, 1996, which was implemented in some areas of the region, law on Rural Land Administration and Use provided in 2000 and the revised rural land administration and use proclamation in 2006. Most of the provisions are directly adopted from the Federal constitution.

The rationality for the first land law, Proclamation on the Re-allotment of the Possession of Rural Land 1996 was readjusting the unbalanced possession of rural land that had been created as a result of grabbing land by officials of the *Derg* in the rural areas. It was also noted in the law that it aimed to make the peasants beneficiaries of the region's rapid economic change. The application of the policy was limited to those areas of the Amhara region which were not under the control of Ethiopia people's revolutionary and democratic front (EPRD) before the fall of the *Derg*, before 1991. The proclamation also prohibited land possession by peasants outside their residential village. One of the rural areas that were

⁸ Minute of the agriculture Department of Gojjam Province 5 June 1990

affected by redistribution of land rights undertaken in the year 1996 to 1997 is Gojjam.

The 1996 to 1997 rural land redistribution in Gojjam, in many ways, it was similar to that of the 1975 land reform policy undertaken by the former military regime. Some of my informants argue that the 1996 to 1997 land reforms were more rational and complete than the 1974 reform. They argued that the latter was discriminatory for women, although this was not primarily due to the legislation, since men and women enjoyed equal rights to land. But women's rights depended on marriage and were not registered separately. They therefore lacked control of agricultural land. But this view may not work to all areas of the country.⁹

Yared (2002), for example, note that the specific position of women differed across various ethnic groups. In Gojjam, even though land rights were granted to households, in practice, they were given to the registered member of the Peasant Association, usually the male head of the household. So married women held only indirect rights to land except the widows who were landholders as primary heads of households. In this regard, the 1996 to 1997 land reforms were more progressive at least for the following three reasons. First, it was more strict and accompanied with a number of rules and guides; second, it gave emphasis on gender relations; and third it granted access to land to rural Muslims, descendants of ex-slaves and other minorities.¹⁰

As endorsed in the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), "the right to ownership of rural and urban land as well as all natural resources is exclusively vested in the state and in the peoples of Ethiopia." This official document also states that "Land is a common property of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale, or other means of exchange."

Additionally, article 40, sub-article 4, declares that "Ethiopian peasants have the right to obtain land without payment and the protection against eviction from their possession."

Although redistribution has been undertaken to accommodate newly formed and landless households and also to equalize land quality, it is argued that redistribution erodes tenure security and that farmers will not undertake land-improving investments. In addition, it is argued that the prime motive of the 1996 to 1997 land redistribution policy was political. The new land redistribution policy was intended to categorize the peasantry into different classes, such as remnant feudal and bureaucrats, names that are not familiar to the local people. In this regard, Svein (1997:124) wrote:

The current [land] redistribution must be seen in a political context. It is not easy to see any economic

motive for the reform, and not even concern with inequality can explain the design of the reform. The apparent motive, the only one that can explain the facts presented in this report, seems to be a political project of establishing a class basis for the current regime, and to enter a new period in Ethiopian history. There is no indication that those identified as bureaucrats were particularly hostile to the government, or that those identified as non-bureaucrats were particularly strong supporters of the government before the reform.

In the process of implementing this policy, various committees from political organizations, including those from the ruling party, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), and from governmental institutions were set up at the regional, zonal, district and *kebele* administration levels. The guidelines and important decisions were made by the regional state's political cadres and party members. In each *kebele* of the province, four committees were set up to implement the redistribution policy fairly and justly. These were land possession verifying committee, family size verifying committee, land allotment committee and grievance hearing committee (Getie, 1997).

Before implementing the actual land redistribution process, peasants were requested to register the size of their landholdings, the size of their household, their family background and their participation of leadership in the former *Derg* regime. This request has generated suspicion, fear, tension, and uncertainty among the local population. This request was already addressed while the 1975 popular agrarian reform was implemented throughout the countryside. The regional authorities and state-owned media reported that the issue of land redistribution was, from its inception to its accomplishment, "demanded and decided by the people through their active participation." It is upon the wish and resolution of peasants' farmers, semi pastoralists and pastoralists where land distribution becomes the only alternative. However, empirical study undertaken by Bereket (2002) and Yigremew (2001) revealed that the policy of land redistribution was imposed upon wish of politicians who deal with and made decision on the matter, didn't take in to account the interests or the opinion of all participants.¹¹

REACTION TO THE 1996 TO 1997 LAND REDISTRIBUTION

It is known that one year earlier than its fall, 1990, the *Derg* officially announced the failure of Socialism and introduced the so-called "Mixed Economic" policy. This move was appreciated by the peasants of Gojjam, who enjoyed even greater relief from government. Despite ownership of land was settled in favour of public

⁹ Informants: Alemyehu Asege, getnet Damte

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Informants: Alemyehu Bishaw, Haregewoyen Manhhello, interview, 8.7.2011

ownership of land, control of land administration did not taken away from Gojjam people until the Amhara Regional state enacted Re-allotment of the Possession of Rural Land proclamation in 1996. In the period between 1990 and 1996 the Gojjam peasants made all their own decisions about the land use and land holding system, and there was a wide range of options, agreements and inheritance rights. With the proclamation of the 1996 rural land redistribution policy, however, the peasants of Gojjam experienced the interference of the government with regard to private ownership of land. The peasants had been told about the benefits of land redistribution, such as the promise to give land to all persons above the age of 20. Among all realities of the policy, the programme had basically political objectives rather than social and economic ones since most of the implementations of the policy were secrete and the whole process was highly politicized (Teke, 2000).¹²

Implementation was begun after several committees were set up. These were composed of some drop-out students, local development agents, and young (poor) farmers. Before serving on committees, they were given two days of theoretical and half-a-day of practical training by district officials throughout the province. These land re-distributors were not permitted to meet their families when measuring, registering, and verifying holding sizes of the *kebele* residents. The re-distributors and land study committee were busy with registering land claimants. Initially, it was announced that land would be allocated through a lottery system, primarily for eligible land-needy farmers (Getie, 1997).

When the land study committee was working in each *kebele*, great fear and suspicion spread among the local people. This was particularly true among those who were suspected of possessing land illegally. Prior to the proclamation of land redistribution policy, some peasants were accused of possessing handguns illegally and were forced to surrender their arms to the government. The "bureaucrats" and "remnant feudals" were the main victims of the policy, as they were allowed only one hectare of land while other peasants were entitled to have more than three hectare.¹³

Land re-distribution that took place in Amhara region, Gojjam, in 1997 was challenging. Owing to the land redistribution policy and its subsequent negative effects, the peasants of Gojjam began to voice their protest against local officials. Often there were conflicts between peasants and local officials. Traditionally, the people of Gojjam are commonly identified with hard work, faithfulness, patriotism, national pride, warrior hood and the desire to possess fire-arms. For the peasants of Gojjam wife, land, oxen, country and hand gun were always the symbols of identity, manhood and heroism. Historically, peasants of Gojjam were associated

themselves with these symbols and related practices. From the interview I made with Director Bureau of Environmental Protection, Land Administration and Use Authority, I realized that to minimize potential conflicts between peasants and local officials, district officials has mobilized and provided hand guns for their supporters.

This has exacerbated tenure insecurity, land degradation, holding diminution, and had negative results on production and land utilization (Ege, 1997). Some of the peasants decided to leave their homeland and became migrants elsewhere. The peasants preferred to migrate to neighboring regions in search of seasonal labor rather than idly watch the intrigues of local officials. Saddening phenomenon among the rural peasants of Gojjam is that they frequently migrate to the southern regions of Ethiopia for seasonal labor, leaving their families behind.¹⁴

In March 1997, Gojjam households that lost land during the 1997 land redistribution felt more insecure went to Addis Ababa; Capital City of Ethiopia to present their complaints to federal government. The central government offered the peasants no relief because in the federal system issues regarding land should be made under the regional level. The peasants returned to their province and began to compose poems to express their feelings against the new land reform policy to their province men by saying:

*Be our witness, the people of Machakel and listen the people of Gozamen,
Be our witness, the people of Berenta and listen the people of Tilatgen,
Appeal to God, the people of Enesse, Goncha and Sar meder, a
Appeal to God, the people of Awabel and Aneded,
How can our farmland be taken away by force? (Gete, 1997).*

Finally, state ownership and power to redistribute land plots made peasants vulnerable to arbitrary actions of local officials who decided about which individual was granted access to land as well as to political punishments for alleged political oppositions.

CONCLUSION

The land reform of 1975 was an important landmark in the socio-economic evolution of rural Ethiopia, not only as an economic but also as a political administrative measure. It came as a culmination of a popular movement against the legacy of a political-economic system that ended with the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie.

¹² Informant: Menga Wondachew, Mulatu Melese, interview, 10.4.2001).

¹³ Informants: Tilahun Darge, Azezhew Multatu, Gebeyehu Baye, interview, 10.4.2011

¹⁴ Informant: Col. Alebachew Tesfaye, Chekol Yigzaw, interview, 20.4.2011

The political administrative shape of rural areas was radically changed by the reform with the establishment of PAs. Unfortunately the state used the PAs as instruments of control rather than allowing them to develop into genuine local governments. This caused rural grievances. The 1975 to 1976 rural revolt in Gojjam, which was widespread, was essentially caused by the radical changes and measures taken by the *Derg*. Of these, the February 1975 land reform had paramount importance. The land reforms of the *Derg* dispossessed and disempowered the gentry and landed nobility. Therefore in Gojjam the land reform decree of 4 March 1975 had both short-and long-term consequence for *Derg* rule. The short term consequence was that the land owning classes were highly displeased from start by the *Derg*'s harsh steps because the pillar of their pride and joy, the main source of their wealth and political power, was taken away by stroke of the pen. The final consequence of land reform was to force many of the able bodied members of Gojjam land owning families to flee to remote and inaccessible areas in early 1975 from which they began an organized resistance against the government.

After the fall of the *Derg*, the current government also introduced a new land redistribution policy. The policy was endorsed and applied without the consult of the peasants of Gojjam. The reform has resulted in suspicion, conflict and insecurity among the peasants of Gojjam. The peasants became helpless against the abuse. There was no one to hear their problems and grievances .discrimination, corruption, and favoring relatives and friends were the order of the day. The oppositions were observed in the form of poems, songs, and arms of actions. Yet, the government was able to manage the possible oppositions to the land redistribution process using divide and rule, and force of action. Sum, the discussion above raises some of the issues in relation to arguments surrounding security of tenure in Ethiopia in general and Gojjam province in particular.

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