

**Observation no: 164**

**Country-year: Ethiopia 1976**

**1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?**

Yes

Emperor Haile Selassie had been overthrown by his military council, the Derg, in 1974. The Ethiopian coup is often referred to as a “creeping coup.”<sup>1</sup> Dissatisfied with the pace of economic and political reform to deal with corruption, famine, and growing discontent, an army mutiny kickstarted the coup at Nagele in the southern awraja of Borena. The Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army (the Derg) was announced on June 28<sup>th</sup> under the leadership of Major Atnafu Abate. The Derg began arresting numerous aristocrats, high officials, and generals accused of seeking the perpetuation of the emperor. Initially, the Derg denied a coup had effectively occurred and on July 2<sup>nd</sup> proclaimed its intention to hasten reform without seizing power from the emperor. On August 10<sup>th</sup>, General Aman Michael Andom a new constitution was drafted and on September 12<sup>th</sup> the Derg formally deposed the emperor. On September 15<sup>th</sup>, the Derg established the Provisional Military Council chaired by General Aman.<sup>2</sup>

**2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?**

Yes

In addition to the coup described in question 1, the commander of the Imperial Bodyguard, a few security officials, and some radical intellectuals led a coup against emperor Haile Selassie on December 13, 1960.<sup>3</sup>

**3. Is the country’s top leader a former military officer?**

Yes

In addition to the leadership of General Aman (question 1), Brigadier General Teferi Bant was elected chairman of the Derg and head of state on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1974. Nevertheless, most of the country’s power was concentrated in the ever secretive Major Negistu, who remained PMAC’s first vice chairman, and Lieutenant Colonel

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<sup>1</sup> Yohannis Abate, “Civil-Military Relations In Ethiopia,” *Armed Forces & Society* 10, no. 3 (April 1, 1984): 380–400, doi:10.1177/0095327X8401000303.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Nelson and Irving Kaplan, eds., *Ethiopia: A Country Study*, 3rd edition, Area Handbook Series (Washington, D.C.: Washington, D.C. : Federal Research Division, Library of Congress : For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O., 1988), 49–50.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

Atnafu Abate, PMAC's second vice chairman. Mengistu acted as a prime minister while stripping power from the civilian cabinet.<sup>4</sup>

**4. Is the military officer corps largely closed to those who do not share the leader's ethnic or sectarian background?**

Yes

Mengistu heavily promoted an overzealous Ethiopian nationalism undivided by and all encompassing of other regions.<sup>5</sup>

Mengistu was half Amhara (which is the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia) and half Welayta. In the early 1970s, 65 percent of officers at the rank of lt. colonel and above were Amhara and 20% were Oromo. Those below the rank of lt. colonel were 60 percent Amhara and 30 percent. According to estimates published in the late 1970s, half of the officer corps was Amhara, 20 percent was Tigray, and 30 percent was Oromo and Eritrean.<sup>6</sup>

**5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?**

Yes

Formal political indoctrination occurred in all commissioned officer training. Senior officers were obliged to attend a two-month course in command and leader techniques based on Marxist-Leninist principles.<sup>7</sup>

**6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?**

No

Technically a legally established political party never existed in Ethiopia and requests for a mass-based political party that would unite all the revolutionary forces of the country overwhelmed PMAC upon coming to power. The lack of a political party in 1974 facilitated the Derg to control all aspects of the government, since civilians lacked strong political loyalties in consequence. A group of cadres unofficially formed the Flame of the Revolution (SEDED) as an unofficial political party in 1977 but it was hardly a mass-based party.<sup>8</sup> The Commission of the Progressive Workers of Ethiopia was not formed until 1979.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 212, 218.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 218–219

**7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?**

Yes

Formal political indoctrination occurred in all commissioned officer training. Senior officers were obliged to attend a two-month course in command and leader techniques based on Marxist-Leninist principles. These courses stressed the development of a “political consciousness” in the ranks. Soviet instructors, hoping to construct a technically and “ideologically equipped” military personnel, also led basic training. Every army unit consisted of uniformed commissars responsible for the political education of enlisted personnel.<sup>10</sup>

**8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?**

Yes

Eritrean liberation groups made a forceful attempt to declare independence and control over the region. In response, the Derg dispatched regular troops as well as peasant militias to thwart the insurgents.<sup>11</sup> By 1974, a major civil war between regional secessionists, and Derg and peasant militias was started due to unrest in peripheral regions, 10 of the 14 regions were in open rebellion, under calls for regional autonomy.<sup>12</sup>

Ethiopia became engaged in a political struggle with the Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions (CELU), who called for greater civilian participation in the government. By 1975, the Derg forcefully dissolved the CELU but the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party emerged in its ashes. The struggle accelerated into a violent civil war in 1976. It prompted an assassination campaign by the EPRP in 1977 and the use of violent militias by the Derg. The “Red Terror” as these militias were called claimed 5,000 lives in 1977.<sup>13</sup>

By 1975, mass arrests of the civilian left were common.

**9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?**

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<sup>10</sup> Nelson and Irving Kaplan, *Ethiopia: A Country Study*, 253.

<sup>11</sup> John Harbeson, *The Military in African Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 177.

<sup>12</sup> Nelson and Irving Kaplan, *Ethiopia: A Country Study*, 263.

<sup>13</sup> Crawford Young, *Ideology and Development in Africa* (Yale University Press, 1982), 78.

Yes

Ethiopia was under rule by a military junta starting in 1974. (See question 1)

**10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?**

Yes

Proclamation No. 71 in 1975 declared the formation of a “People’s militia” to safeguard the revolutionary spirit. Urban dweller and worker associations elected constituents for service in the militia. The militia would occupy regional police duties and enforce decisions in peasant association tribunals. By 1977, the People’s Militia numbered 80,000 conscripts and were renamed the “Red Army”.<sup>14</sup>

**11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?**

No

An intelligence department existed at the time but it did not grow to such a significant extent as to monitor the military until after 1977.<sup>15</sup> The Department of intelligence did not begin to overtly spy on and encourage spying within the regular military until the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>16</sup> Given the uncertainty of the transition, it is safe to assume that a strong internal intelligence apparatus did not truly exist until after 1977 and that the intelligence apparatus that existed from 1974 to 1977 was primarily concerned with gathering intelligence on insurgents in Ethiopia’s peripheral regions.

**12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?**

Yes

The most infamous purge, referred to as the “Saturday Night Massacre”, occurred on the night of November 23, 1974. The Derg executed General Aman in his home for “boycotting his own office” and sixty other high-ranking figures of the old regime were arrested and executed.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nelson and Irving Kaplan, *Ethiopia: A Country Study*, 251.

<sup>15</sup> Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 210.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>17</sup> John W. Harbeson, *The Ethiopian Transformation: The Quest For The Post-imperial State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 124–125.

One purge occurred in 1975 where numerous officers were indicted for lack of discipline and military judgment resulting in the death of soldiers in battle. They were soon executed thereafter. Afterwards purges and defections of Eritrean origins occurred frequently.<sup>18</sup>

**13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?**

Yes

In April, 1971 the Derg promulgated the National Democratic Revolutionary Program that allowed overt political participation by those unconnected to the “old order”.<sup>19</sup> To promote this program, the military established the Provisional Office for Mass Organizational Affairs to establish cadres and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement, a political party in 1976 encompassing civilians.<sup>20</sup> This grew rapidly at the district level, and gained a significant base in labor, urban, youth, and peasant associations.<sup>21</sup>

A council of ministers, comprised of civil technocrats, remained but lacked sufficient power to initiate policies or make decisions throughout the military rule during this time. The ministries prepared and implemented national development plans for the military government but Derg representatives acted as watchdogs over the daily activities of the bureaucracy.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the PMAC created urban dweller associations under PMAC Proclamation No. 47 in 1975 for registration, rent collection, and the maintenance of law and order in cooperation with government agencies. These associations exhibited a three-tier system. The lowest level consisted of at least fifteen-elected member. The collection of smaller associations within a defined area constituted a higher urban dwellers’ association governed by an executive council of at least 26 members. These executive councils composed the congress of the *atekalaye* which would delegates from various central government ministries. In effect, the associations act as an arm of the PMAC, even in its military operations.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Nelson and Irving Kaplan, *Ethiopia: A Country Study*, 255.

<sup>19</sup> Harbeson, *The Military in African Politics*, 178.

<sup>20</sup> Abate, “Civil-Military Relations In Ethiopia,” 392.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>22</sup> Nelson and Irving Kaplan, *Ethiopia: A Country Study*, 197–198.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 201–202.