The Transition in Ethiopia

by Terrence Lyons

The May 1991 collapse of President Mengistu Haile Mariam's regime was hailed both in Ethiopia and abroad as the end of a brutal era. Mengistu's flight to exile in Zimbabwe marked the end of 14 years of bloody military campaigns against regional rebels, agricultural and resettlement policies that left much of the population destitute, and repression of nearly all forms of political expression. This issue of CSIS Africa Notes assesses recent developments and alternative prospects for the country's future.

The Historical Backdrop
Ethiopia traces its origins as an independent entity to the ancient kingdom of Aksum that emerged in the highland plateaus of Tigre around 500 BC. After 330 AD, when the royalty converted to Christianity, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church provided an element of continuity and unity. In the ensuing centuries, Ethiopia's territory shifted as its rulers' authority waxed and waned. In the late 1800s, under Emperors Tewodros and Menelik II, the empire expanded as new ethnic groups joined the original Amhara and Tigrean inhabitants of the northern highlands. Meanwhile, in 1885 Italy took over the Red Sea port of Massawa and in 1890 created the coastal colony of Eritrea. An attempt by Rome to conquer the rest of Ethiopia was defeated by Emperor Menelik in the 1896 battle of Adowa.

Haile Selassie was crowned emperor in 1930. The Italians invaded again in late 1935, this time successfully occupying all of Ethiopia, despite an emotional appeal by the emperor at the League of Nations for collective security. In 1941, a British-led Commonwealth force that included South African troops liberated the country from Italian rule. In 1952, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia under the Ethiopian crown in accordance with a United Nations General Assembly resolution. In a controversial 1962 vote marked by accusations of bribery, the Eritrean assembly opted for full union with Ethiopia. Eritrean secessionists then launched what was to be a three-decade armed struggle for independence. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, other opposition movements, some (e.g., the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party) organized on the basis of ideology and others (e.g., the Tigre People's Liberation Front) on ethnic grounds, set in motion their own guerrilla wars.

The various stages of the transition to military rule were described by veteran Ethiopia-watcher Jerry Funk in an earlier issue of CSIS Africa Notes: "The first step toward military rule came in January 1974 with the
outbreak of a mutiny by soldiers and noncoms of the Fourth Brigade in the south. This unrest soon spread to other parts of the army, and sometime in May or June a National Coordinating Committee (Dergue) was created. The Dergue (which consisted of junior officers, noncoms, and privates) disclaimed any desire for immediate military rule, and it was not until September 1974 that its members got up the courage and the organization to place the progressively more confused monarch under detention. Two and a half more years of contradictory signals passed before a ... 39-year-old lieutenant colonel, Mengistu Haile Mariam, emerged from a bloody February 1977 confrontation at the Palace as the undisputed head of the Dergue. ... The reasons for the arrival en masse of Soviet advisers and Cuban troops were primarily related to the new government's acute material needs rather than ideology. In very early 1977, the Dergue abandoned its initial efforts to get the Emperor's patron, the United States, to provide the arms to forestall the growing threat of a military takeover by Somalia of Ethiopia's Somali-inhabited Ogaden region, and turned to a ready and willing Soviet Union for an eventual $2 billion in military aid. ... By 1979, the Soviets were pressuring Mengistu to create a revolutionary vanguard party to lead the nation to communism. ... Finally, in September 1984, the Workers' Party of Ethiopia was formally launched." (See "Can Ethiopia Survive Both Communism and the Drought?" by Gerald A. Funk, CSIS Africa Notes no. 40, March 1985.)

The Mengistu Era

Mengistu's efforts to impose rigid centralized control drove increasing numbers of alienated citizens into the ranks of ethnically based opposition movements and plunged the nation into economic collapse. An estimated 300,000 people died in the 1984-1985 famine. The Mengistu regime's attempt to force the dispersed peasantry into government-controlled villages and to move people southward from the rebellious north gravely disrupted rural life. Over 70 percent of Ethiopia's national budget went to the armed forces, leaving little for the rest of the economy. Across much of the land, decades of war have destroyed roads and bridges and emptied schools. Even before the recent upsurge of instability, more than 780,000 Ethiopians were refugees.

In a desperate attempt to hold off the many forces opposed to his rule, Mengistu announced in March 1990 that he had abandoned Marxism-Leninism and would pursue policies designed to encourage a mixed economy and multiparty politics. These measures and an April 1991 cabinet reshuffle proved to be far too little too late. In what may go down in history as his most decent act, Mengistu ruled out a bloody battle with advancing rebel forces for control of the capital and instead chose to fly into exile in Zimbabwe on May 21, 1991.

The Ethiopia that must now sort itself out includes some 80 ethnic groups who speak over 70 distinct languages. Although census numbers should be regarded with skepticism, an estimated 40 percent of the population is Oromo, 20-30 percent Amhara, and 12 to 15 percent Tigrean. Approximately equal numbers of Ethiopians are Orthodox Christians and Muslims, with a lesser number of Protestants and followers of traditional religions.


The United States developed a patron-client relationship with Ethiopia in the early 1950s on the basis of an exchange of political, economic, and military assets. Washington supported Haile Selassie's post-World War II efforts in the United Nations to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, and supplied military weapons and training as well as economic development funding, in exchange for access to the Kagnnew communications facility in Eritrea and cooperation on international issues such as the Korean war and the Congo (Zaire) crisis.

The 1974 revolution caused both sides to reexamine the relationship. The United States continued to supply military assistance for a time, but became increasingly concerned about the Dergue's record on human rights. The Dergue ended the military connection in 1977, when it turned to Moscow for support. Relations with Washington deteriorated further when Ethiopia accused the United States of supporting and encouraging Somalia's 1977-1978 military attempt to incorporate the Ogaden region, inhabited by ethnic Somalis.

Government-to-government relations between the United States and Ethiopia remained frosty for about a decade, even though Washington provided over $1 billion in famine relief during this period. Meanwhile, the Soviets funneled an estimated $10 billion or more in military aid into the country between 1977 and 1989.

As new thinking began to take hold in Moscow in the late 1980s and preoccupation with internal reform led its leaders to reduce military commitments to clients throughout Africa, there were signs that the extent of
support for Mengistu’s policies was being reconsidered. In the spirit of perestroika, Ethiopia was urged to implement economic reforms, seek a nonmilitary “just solution” in Eritrea, and improve relations with the West. This change in Soviet policy provided the opening for improved U.S.-Ethiopian relations. Worried about the long-term reliability of Soviet support, Mengistu began a “charm offensive” designed to improve relations with the West in general and the United States in particular. On several occasions, he suggested that the problems between his government and Washington were the result of misunderstandings, and proposed that diplomatic relations be upgraded from the chargé d’affaires level that has existed since the U.S. ambassador was expelled in 1980.

The U.S. response to these overtures was guardedly positive. When Herman Cohen, the new U.S. assistant secretary of state for African affairs, met with Mengistu in August 1989, the American suggested that improved relations might be possible. The atmosphere was further improved when former President Jimmy Carter undertook to orchestrate a negotiated solution to the protracted war between the central government and the secessionist Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). A September 1989 meeting in Atlanta and another two months later in Nairobi appeared to go well. The two sides seemed genuinely interested in talking and were able to agree on an agenda. In the end, however, the talks foundered on procedural disagreements (after the Eritreans demanded that the United Nations serve as an observer) beneath which lay an unwillingness to compromise on more fundamental issues. Subsequent meetings in Washington chaired by Assistant Secretary Cohen (in October 1990 and February 1991) failed to close the gap.

The United States had several reasons for renewed involvement with Ethiopia during this period. Although the decline of Cold War competition in the region lessened the priority given by Washington to the level of access to port and other transit facilities for implementation of Africa policy, the Horn still retained some geostrategic importance in relation to the Middle East. At the same time, the reduced Soviet role ended the rationale for isolating Ethiopia.

Within Ethiopia, the continuing human tragedy, as famine in one part of the country was followed by famine in another, led to an increased sense among both Ethiopians and foreign observers that “someone” must do “something.” The 1984-1985 famine demonstrated that nightly U.S. television coverage of starving children is too compelling to permit inaction on the part of Washington. White House officials became convinced that no permanent solution to the famine threat was possible without progress in resolving Ethiopia’s various internal conflicts and that the United States was perhaps the actor with the best chance of facilitating a negotiated solution.

U.S. domestic politics also played a part. Israel’s efforts in the 1980s and early 1990s to help Ethiopia’s Jews (known as Falashas) emigrate to the Jewish state mobilized an important congressional constituency and thus increased Ethiopia’s salience in Washington. Mengistu used the Jews as leverage to win support from the United States and Israel, permitting small numbers to leave from time to time, reportedly in exchange for Israeli weapons and money, and cynically halting their release when cooperation was not forthcoming.

Finally, the descent of Liberia and Somalia into anarchy provided reminders of what can happen when the United States turns its back on regional crises of governance. Rather than stand on the sidelines and watch Ethiopia disintegrate into chaos, Washington chose to expend a modest level of diplomatic resources and dangle a few carrots of future cooperation in an effort to facilitate a “soft landing” by acting as midwife to the transition that clearly lay ahead. Cohen’s October 1990 and February 1991 talks with the Mengistu government and the EPLF provided indications that the United States might be able to broker an end to the Eritrean conflict. Moscow signaled that it would not oppose such an initiative, and indeed would sit in on meetings when its presence would be helpful. The United States agreed to organize talks in London to be held in May 1991.

The Post-Mengistu Interregnum
When Mengistu secretly departed from Ethiopia on May 21 (apparently without notifying his closest associates), he left behind Tesfaye Gebre-Kidan, the former defense minister who had been appointed vice president in April, and Tesfaye Dinka, the ex-foreign minister now acting as prime minister. Both were regarded by Western diplomats as pragmatic technocrats, part of the reformist circle that had pressed Mengistu to soften his regime but had failed to persuade him until it was too late. This caretaker government released a number of political
Major Ethiopian Political Movements, 1991
(In alphabetical order)


All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON). Formed by student radicals. Cooperated with the military government until mid-1977. Supports Ethiopia's territorial integrity, opposes the EPRDF, and did not attend the national conference.

Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF). Includes the EPRP and MEISON. Favors unity and opposed the EPRDF accession to power. Some components such as the EDU left the coalition and participated in the national conference.

Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Founded in 1958 to seek Eritrean self-determination. Since suffering defeat at the hands of the EPLF and breaking up into small factions, this group has been largely an exile movement. It has some potential support, particularly among lowland Muslims in Eritrea.

Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Founded in 1970 as the result of a split in the ELF. Seized control of Eritrea in May 1991. Led by Isayas Afwerki. Attended the London talks and observed, but did not participate in, the national conference. Currently referring to itself as the provisional government of Eritrea, it seems to be distancing itself from its earlier Marxist rhetoric.

Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU). Originally organized in 1975 by leading figures of Haile Selassie's regime. Left COEDF and participated in the national conference.


Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Base of support is among the Oromo people, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. Has in the past demanded an independent "Oromia." Attended the London talks and the national conference.

Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Leading component of the EPRDF. Developed in the Tigré region in the 1970s. Became militarily more successful in cooperation with the EPLF.

Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF). In the past sought transfer of the Somali-inhabited Ogaden region to Somalia. Participated in the national conference.

Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE). Set up by Mengistu in 1984 as a Marxist vanguard party to institutionalize his authority. After Mengistu's departure, the EPRDF banned the WPE and prohibited its members from participating in the new government.

prisoners and tore down a key symbol of the old regime's ideology, a huge statue of Lenin in downtown Addis Ababa. Tesfaye Gebre-Kidan requested an immediate cease-fire and pledged to attend the previously scheduled London meetings. Meanwhile, however, the capital was being threatened by the approaching forces of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), an umbrella organization encompassing six diverse guerrilla groups, with the Tigre People's Liberation Front (TPLF) playing the leading role. The United States urged the EPRDF to refrain from entering Addis Ababa in the days immediately before the meeting, a request the insurgents honored.

In Eritrea, the EPLF used the opportunity provided by the confusion following Mengistu's departure to seize the few remaining towns in the region still in government hands. EPLF leader Isayas Afwerki announced the establishment of a separate provisional government in Eritrea but pledged that Ethiopia's access to Eritrea's ports would be guaranteed and that the new provisional government would cooperate with the transition in Addis Ababa. By unilaterally setting up a separate administration in Eritrea, Isayas arrived in London with a fait accompli that neither Addis Ababa nor any external actor had the force or the will to change.

After a payment of $35 million by Israel, the interim government in Addis Ababa authorized a dramatic airlift ("Operation Solomon") that flew out 14,000 Jews in little more than a day beginning on May 24. Some analysts viewed this extraordinary operation as necessary to protect the Falashas from becoming caught in the violence of the transition. Others argued that the United States and Israel had put the well-being of a few thousand Jews ahead of the fate of 50 million Ethiopians, and that the departure of most of the Falashas deprived Ethiopia of a rich and distinctive ethnic subculture.

The May 1991 London Talks
After some delay, Meles Zenawi on behalf of the EPRDF, Isayas Afwerki on behalf of the EPLF, Yahannes Leta Wagayo on behalf of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the remnants of the Mengistu regime in the person of Prime Minister Tesfaye Dinka, and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Cohen began their meetings in London on May 27, 1991. The interim government in Addis Ababa pressed the United States to include other groups in the talks, most notably the pro-unity Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF). Cohen did not object in principle to including the COEDF, but time was short and thus it was finally decided to limit the London session to those groups with a significant military presence within the country.

Some sources sympathetic to the caretaker government in Addis Ababa have suggested that the United States delayed the London meeting at the request of Israel until the Falasha airlift was completed. Others disagree and say that the EPRDF and EPLF asked for the delay, presumably so that they could complete their military campaigns and thereby arrive with strengthened
bargaining positions. Mengistu’s exit added new urgency to the London gathering and also improved its chances of success. If Mengistu had still been in power, the discussions would have revolved around him. Now that his role was history, the parties could focus on future political arrangements.

By the time the talks commenced, the military facts on the ground relegated Tesfaye Dinkha and his delegation to the role of marginal players with little choice but to sue for peace. In their negotiations toward this end, the outgoing government and the opposition groups never met together. Cohen instead shuttled between rooms at the Berkshire Hotel, talking to each group in turn. During the first day, Cohen received a call from Robert Houdek, the U.S. charge d’affaires in Addis Ababa, reportedly in reaction to the effect that Tesfaye Geber-Kidan now acknowledged that he had lost control of government troops and advised that the EPRDF should move into the capital to prevent anarchy and destruction. Cohen, hoping to prevent the sort of chaos that had devastated the Liberian capital of Monrovia and Somalia’s Mogadishu within the preceding year under similar circumstances, thereupon publicly “recommended” that the EPRDF enter Addis Ababa “in order to reduce uncertainties and eliminate tensions.” Tesfaye Dinka objected but, as the EPRDF’s Meles bluntly (but accurately) put it, “he is in no position to accept or reject anything.” EPRDF troops moved into Addis Ababa during the night of May 27-28 and assumed “state responsibility”; the change of government had effectively taken place.

On May 28, Cohen held a joint meeting with the leaders of the EPRDF, EPLF, and OLF. With the EPRDF now in control of Addis Ababa, the United States, as Cohen phrased it, was no longer mediating but was now serving in a “de facto advisory role for the three opposition groups.” Instead of undertaking to form a transitional government on the spot in London, the insurgent leaders called for a meeting to be held at the beginning of July 1991 that would include a wider range of political parties and interests. After the three groups issued a joint statement on the projected conference, the London talks adjourned.

Cohen’s Reasoning
Cohen justified sanctioning the rebel move into Addis Ababa on the grounds that the EPRDF was the only group “capable of going in and maintaining law and order.” The EPRDF was put on notice, however, that Washington’s continued blessing would be dependent on implementation of promised reforms. More specifically, Cohen said: “You must go democratic if you want the full cooperation to help Ethiopia realize its potential. . . . No democracy, no cooperation.” In further noting that the United States was acting as the “conscience of the international community,” Cohen may have intended to suggest that more was at stake than just U.S. assistance.

In addition to providing an important boost to the EPRDF by agreeing to its seizure of Addis Ababa, Cohen also bolstered the EPLF’s political position. The United States, as he put it, “favor[s] an act of self-determination by the people of Eritrea who have never been consulted on their desires.” This statement, which stood in stark contrast to decades of U.S. pledges categorically supporting Ethiopia’s territorial integrity, was part of Cohen’s strategy to guarantee the broadest possible governing coalition for the transitional period.

Most observers were surprised by the outcome of the London talks. Anti-American demonstrations broke out in Addis Ababa after the Voice of America’s Amharic service broadcast statements by Ethiopian exiles in Washington charging that the United States had double-crossed them and replaced Mengistu with a government that would be just as oppressive and narrowly based. Cohen’s comments on Eritrea provoked particularly sharp negative reactions. Some critics labeled the change of government “Cohen’s Coup.” Others conceded that the assistant secretary’s options were limited by two important realities—the EPRDF and the EPLF controlled their respective parts of the country. Some policy analysts expressed concern that placing U.S. prestige so decisively behind the EPRDF with only verbal promises of democracy in return risked losing the goodwill recently gained in Ethiopia if the new leaders should renege on their commitments.

Cohen’s acceptance in London of the EPRDF and EPLF takeover as a fait accompli reflected his belief that U.S. interests in democratization and famine relief for Ethiopia would best be served by working with the forces in control. He realized that he could do nothing to change the military facts on the ground: Mengistu’s army was shattered, the EPRDF completely surrounded Addis Ababa, and the EPLF occupied all of Eritrea. Rather than oppose what he could not change, he decided to make a virtue of realpolitik. The EPRDF occupation of the capital was the result of the collapse of the Ethiopian military and the insurgents’ military victory, not a prize bestowed upon them by the United States. Cohen believed that he served humanitarian interests by taking the EPRDF leaders’ declared commitment to democracy at face value. If outside powers treated the rebels as a responsible governing power, it would become more likely that the EPRDF would act as such.

The EPRDF in Power
Few, if any, Ethiopia-watchers would have ventured to predict in the late 1980s that a military takeover of Addis Ababa by the EPRDF would result in a government committed to democracy and reconciliation. Only a few years earlier this guerrilla movement was advocating a particularly orthodox form of Marxism that looked to Albania and Stalin for models. Its Tigrean social base would have suggested a governing elite as narrow as that of Mengistu’s primarily Amhara regime. The fact that the EPRDF had cooperated with the EPLF in the campaign to oust Mengistu and had declared its support for Eritrea’s right to self-determination and independence was
anathema to nationalist Ethiopians committed to the belief that Eritrea is an integral part of Ethiopia.

There are several reasons for the progress that Meles and the EPRDF have made in allaying these doubts and fears since the unseating of the Mengistu regime. As a guerrilla movement, the EPRDF won the support of the people in many areas it occupied by dismantling Mengistu’s hated villagization schemes and lifting restrictions on peasants. Moreover, EPRDF forces showed remarkable discipline and caused only limited damage when they entered Addis Ababa in May 1991. Rather than establish a transitional government under monolithic EPRDF control, Meles followed through on his commitment to organize a broad-based coalition government that he pledged would lay the groundwork for democratic elections. Although some members of the Mengistu regime were arrested, they were not executed, and many mid-level government employees kept their jobs. And to reduce the perception that the EPRDF is a militant organization acting primarily in the interest of the Tigrean people, Meles made a point of appearing in civilian clothes, spoke Amharic, and named an Amhara as acting prime minister.

The new leaders realize that the international community, and particularly the United States, is watching and that failure to deliver on their promises of elections, reconciliation, and law-based rule would mean the loss of assistance. The country is broke, in ruins, watching and that failure to deliver on their promises of jobs. And to reduce the perception that the EPRDF is a militant organization acting primarily in the interest of the Tigrean people, Meles made a point of appearing in civilian clothes, spoke Amharic, and named an Amhara as acting prime minister.

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July 1991: The National Conference

The national conference that Meles promised to convene at the London talks took place in Addis Ababa from July 1 to 5, 1991. If implemented successfully, the agreements reached at the conference may form a new basis for organizing Ethiopia’s politics.

The 87 delegates included 32 representatives from the EPRDF and 12 from the OLF, which therefore constituted a majority. The remainder of the seats were filled by representatives of some 20 different political movements, almost all of them ethnically based. Mengistu’s Workers’ Party of Ethiopia was excluded, as were the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON), on the grounds that they had declared war on the new regime. No Amhara group as such was included, although several notable Amharas participated as part of the nonethnic contingents. Representatives of the United States, the Organization of African Unity, the Soviet Union, and other interested international entities monitored the conference.

The EPRDF clearly controlled the proceedings. The assembly elected Meles as chairman and transitional head of state and adopted the EPRDF agenda. A new charter was adopted setting up an 87-member Council of Representatives charged with selecting a new president, drafting a new constitution, and managing the two-year transition to national elections. The charter restates the leaders’ commitment to democratic rights (including the right to self-determination up to and including independence), a foreign policy based on noninterference in the internal affairs of other states (a pledge was made to cease destabilization in neighboring countries), and delivery of relief to areas ravaged by war and drought.

The conference procedures were not ideal. Selection of delegates was hasty and managed by the EPRDF. Policy positions adopted remain vague and inadequately discussed. Yet it is a tribute to Meles that the conference even took place, coming as it did just weeks after the EPRDF had marched into Addis Ababa. A broad array of Ethiopians at least had a voice in the proceedings. Several exiles who did not dare set foot in Addis Ababa while Mengistu was in power attended and were allowed to express dissenting opinions and organize political associations. Open dialogue and cooperation among so many diverse political actors after decades of internecine conflict encouraged optimism.

Toward Socioeconomic Reconstruction

In addition to their successful management of the national conference, the new leaders have taken the first declaratory policy steps toward rebuilding Ethiopia’s economy and society. One of the first actions of the new transitional government was to abolish the corrupt state security apparatus. Freeing the population from the extortion of this organization gave the new leaders some quick and relatively easy support. Conscription has been ended. Travel restrictions have been lifted and passports are being issued freely, except to members of the old regime.

In the economic area, Meles and his colleagues have freed peasants from the stifling Mengistu-era controls in an effort to set in motion an upsurge of agricultural production, and are seeking to encourage investment of exile Ethiopian capital and foreign capital in the country’s future.

Although the new leadership faces enormous challenges in undertaking to get the devastated economy back on its feet, Ethiopia is a country of considerable potential. In addition to substantial agricultural resources, some of the infrastructure is better developed than that of many other African countries. Because the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity and the UN Economic Commission for Africa are located in Addis Ababa, communications links with the outside world are extensive and reliable. Ethiopian Airlines, which continued to be operated largely as if it were a private company during the Mengistu regime, remains one of the continent’s most efficient. The complex operations of the government’s Relief and Rehabilitation Commission are well organized. In addition, Ethiopians have developed sophisticated nongovernmental organizations for famine relief, most notably the Joint Relief Partnership of several...
Ethiopian churches. Most of the international relief organizations are largely staffed by Ethiopians and have only a few expatriate managers. The TPLF and the EPLF managed their own effective relief operations for years in the regions they controlled.

Eritrea’s Future
EPLF Secretary-General Isaias Afwerki attended the national conference in Addis Ababa in July as an observer, not a participant. He pledged that his organization would do nothing to disrupt the new transitional government but firmly rejected participation in the regime. The national conference agreed in principle to a UN-supervised referendum in Eritrea after a two-year transitional period in exchange for the EPLF’s undertaking to make Assab a free port and to guarantee Ethiopian access to the Red Sea. Although the EPLF has not yet declared formal independence, it now refers to itself as the provisional government of Eritrea and Isaias has stated that formal sovereignty is merely a technical issue that will be resolved once the referendum takes place.

Unlike the EPRDF, the EPLF has not organized a “national conference” to broaden the ruling group in Eritrea. EPLF leaders seem intent on transforming their guerrilla movement into the new government in Asmara, and toward that end the provisional administration has reduced links between the region and the outside world. International phone lines and regularly scheduled airline flights to Asmara have been cut and some Ethiopians working for relief organizations in Eritrea have been expelled. The International Committee of the Red Cross has also departed. It remains to be seen if this muscle-flexing is the result of confusion and lack of resources or whether it is part of an organized strategy to ensure that all activities in the region are organized through EPLF channels.

Former Ethiopian army personnel, most of them young draftees from the south, have been forced to the border and left to walk home. Ethiopian civilians perceived by the EPLF as superfluous to the Eritrean economy and occupying jobs and homes sought by returning Eritreans also have been expelled or at least strongly pressured to leave. From the EPLF’s perspective, these Ethiopians represent the remnants of an occupying force. Faced with the task of rebuilding a devastated region where 80 percent of the population now depends on food relief, the EPLF provisional government argues that it simply lacks the resources to support former opposition officials, soldiers, and their families. While some of the EPLF actions have been disquieting, they come in the wake of three decades of conflict and are not exceptional compared to the aftermath of rebel takeovers in other parts of the world.

The new phase of the Eritrean struggle for self-determination now under way will be complicated by the fact that Eritrea is a multiethnic region. The EPLF recognizes nine nationalities within Eritrea’s borders but rejects the idea that these groups have a right to self-determination. The Afars straddle the borders of Eritrea, Tigre, Welo, and the neighboring nation of Djibouti. The Afar Liberation Front (ALF) and its leader, Sultan Ali Mirah, support a traditionalist Islamic agenda and have long been leery of the EPLF. Ali Mirah participated in the national conference and seems intent on throwing his lot in with Addis Ababa, not Asmara. The EPRDF has favored some form of Afar autonomy, which raises an important difference with the EPLF that may come to a head sooner rather than later. Other ethnic groups in Eritrea such as the Beni Amer have opposed the EPLF in the past and there is the potential that a growing Islamic fundamentalist movement will resist the authority of the Christian-dominated and ideologically secular EPLF.

These divisions, and the close ties between some ethnic groups in Eritrea and their brethren in Ethiopia, may provide Addis Ababa with important leverage in its relations with the EPLF in the transition period. Unless Asmara and Addis Ababa construct mutually acceptable mechanisms for cooperation, both sides have the ability to make difficulties for the other and conflict may erupt again. Yet it remains conceivable that Eritrea may in the end join a reformed and extremely loose Ethiopian confederation.

Immediate Priorities
The newly formed government in Ethiopia faces enormous challenges in the months ahead. Famine (the result of drought and the aftermath of the brutal civil wars) currently affects between 4.6 and 6.4 million people. Hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled the 1990-1991 upheaval in neighboring Somalia place additional burdens on famine relief resources. Mengistu left the treasury virtually empty, reportedly with only $3.6 million in foreign exchange to pay for vital imports. The damage in terms of young people whose educations were disrupted, health care systems that no longer function, and destroyed physical infrastructure will take years to rectify. The new leaders are enjoying support now because they brought deliverance from an oppressive dictatorship, but opposition will begin to mount if visible economic change does not get under way soon.

The new constitution that Meles and his colleagues are committed to construct must be more than a written charter leading to elections. Their challenge is to devise a new set of organizing principles. The first step in this process, the recent national conference, provides some preliminary indications of how the new leaders see this challenge.

As indicated by the composition of the national conference and the transitional government, ethnicity will be a predominant factor in future politics. This focus on ethnic groups largely derives from the fact that few other political associations existed, nonethnic leaders had little time to organize, and it was the ethnic issue that toppled the regime. Although some nonethnic groups participated, most in this category were led by recently
returned exiles and lacked the built-in constituencies of the ethnic movements.

The inclusive character of the transitional government decreases the likelihood of alienation and conflict, at least in the short run. On the other hand, such a ruling structure will be more a conglomeration of ethnic groups than a government of national unity, a distinction that may strengthen the centrifugal forces always strong in Ethiopia. The new leaders are deliberately working to raise ethnic consciousness across the country, a policy that risks creating a sense of vested entitlement based on ethnicity.

Although the national conference included over 20 different political movements that favored a variety of political programs, this did not necessarily institutionalize multiparty politics in a practical sense. In most cases each ethnic group was represented by a single movement, so that what one had was largely an assembly of single-party constituencies. This process has continued since the conference; five different Oromo organizations have signed a unity agreement and two movements representing the people of the Ogaden have merged. In several cases, putative ethnic movements were created on the eve of the national conference with little input from their supposed constituencies. Not all of the intellectuals who now speak on behalf of the various ethnic groups are locally recognized leaders, a fact that risks creating further divisions between the local peoples and their appointed representatives.

The Longer-Term Challenge

The victories of the EPRDF and EPLF demonstrate that rural, ethnically based insurgency is a way to power, a lesson that future opponents are unlikely to miss. If a group were to conclude at some point in the future that its interests were not being served by continued cooperation with the central government, renewed conflict could occur. More specifically, the Oromos, who by numbers have the largest claim to central power, could someday decide to follow the same path as the much less numerous Tigreans unless they are given a role they believe they deserve. Or various ethnic groups in the south might have second thoughts about accepting the transfer of resources from their relatively wealthy region to those of different ethnic groups in the impoverished north.

Recent events in Ethiopia and Eritrea clearly were a victory for self-determination. This principle, however, has always begged the question of how the “self” is determined. In Eritrea, the EPLF insists that the unit must be defined by the colonially demarcated borders. In Ethiopia, the EPRDF is suggesting that the ethnic or nationality group is the pertinent division. Many Ethiopian nationalists claim that the historically based Greater Ethiopia (which in their view most certainly includes Eritrea) is the legitimate framework. These three possible definitions of the basis of the state clearly are in conflict. Although the nationalist perspective is now in retreat and largely silenced by the EPRDF and EPLF military victories, it could reassert itself.

Although much work remains to be done to institutionalize the new political structures, progress to date has been remarkably encouraging. For the first time in three decades there is no major armed opposition to the government in Ethiopia. The EPRDF has shown considerable skill in organizing the national conference, winning consensus, and reassuring an anxious populace. The key challenge will be to construct a political system that provides a measure of security and that keeps the now mobilized and armed social movements involved. If such a system can bring peace, it will allow Ethiopians to get on with the vitally important business of growing food and rebuilding their country. External actors can support this process by engaging with the new leaders in both Addis Ababa and Asmara, continuing to press them to fulfill their promises of democracy, and providing assistance when they do. It is just possible that the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea, who have suffered from war and famine for so many years, now recognize that the costs of any state of affairs other than peace are unacceptable.