

The March 1975 “Land to the Tiller” Proclamation: Dream or Reality?

Mengistu Abebe

Wollo University, Department of History and Heritage Management, Dessie, Ethiopia
abebemeng@yahoo.com

Abstract: The complex and diverse feudal land holding and administration system was regarded as the major factor for rural poverty and the backwardness of the country in general. Students and progressive intelligentsia intensified the popular movement in favour of the “land to the tiller” slogan. The March 4, 1975 land reform was expected to promote rural prosperity and social justice (equity). The proclamation abolished the feudal institutions and the land tenure systems. But the overthrow of the feudal regime and the subsequent land reform only brought about the abolition of landlordism and landlessness. The reform did not lead to any significant agricultural development. As a result, the peasantry could not cope with the severe famine of 1984/85. The post-reform agrarian policies were unpopular and failed to stimulate productivity and improvement in living standard of the peasantry. Many socio-economic problems remained unsolved.

Keywords: Dergue; Ethiopia; land Tenure; 1975 Proclamation

Land in Ethiopia, as in other developing countries, has been very essential for, and central to, life. During the feudal regime, it was a major source of wealth, power and social status. Agriculture is the foundation of the national economy, providing about 45 percent of the Gross Domestic Product, 90 percent of the exports and 85 percent of the total employment and livelihood.¹ Consequently, the issue of land has shaped the history of the country from earlier times to the present.

It has been widely stated that Ethiopia has a rich agricultural potential. Unfortunately, however, this potential is far from being fully utilized. Ethiopia’s agriculture remains backward and barely sustains the farming population even at a minimum level of subsistence. It has become vulnerable to recurring famines and external food aid.

Thus, agrarian transformation, without which the country’s development is almost impossible, poses the concern of the citizens at large. Sustained agricultural development depends on the proper management of the land and the people, and their relationships-i.e. the system of land tenure. It was believed that the oppressive and backward feudal system of land tenure and administration coupled with poor technology left the peasantry with very little for their subsistence and for coping with any risk. The feudal system suited the concentration of land ownership in a small group (mostly absentee landlords) who underutilized their holdings, while the mass of the peasantry were suffering from land hunger. The system did not encourage the peasantry to invest and improve their farming methods. This was due to lack of security, uncontrolled rents, unwritten and uncertain leasing arrangements, unconditional eviction and uncompensated improvements. The logical corollary of this situation was low productivity, income, consumption and savings.² Then, students and the progressive intelligentsia served as the vanguard of the popular movement for land reform.

The failure of the imperial government to deal effectively with the fundamental socio-economic problems and the devastating famine of 1973/74 finally brought the collapse of the autocracy of Haile-Sillase who was ousted on September 2, 1974.³ Then, the government came under the control of the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) commonly called Derg. On December 19 the PMAC declared Ethiopian socialism and its commitment to major socio-economic change that were particularly significant for the rural sector.⁴

On March 4, 1975 the PMAC announced a land reform proclamation which dismantled the foundation of the old feudal regime and proved to be the major achievement of the revolutionary movement. The reform was destined

to alter the structure of the agrarian relations on the basis of equality and fraternity and to promote economic development, so that landlord tenant relations were entirely abolished and the peasantry were liberated from feudal oppressions and injustice. The legislation declared all rural land to be public property; confirmed only possessory or usufructuary right of self-labouring households up to a maximum of ten hectares of land; rents, feudal obligations and past debts were completely abolished.⁵

The proclamation also provided for the organization of small farmers into Peasant Associations (PAs) as the basic social and administrative units within a minimum area of 800 hectares (20 gashas). The Ministry of Land Reform and Administration (MLRA) assigned at least one officer at the district level to facilitate the formation of PAs and explain the purpose of the proclamation. The workers of the Ministry of National Community Development and Social Affairs, Extension and Project Implementation Department (EPID) workers under the Ministry of Agriculture, and above all the students already deployed for the national Campaign for Development Through Cooperation (Zemecha) played a major role in the establishment of PAs and the implementation of the land reform proclamation.⁶ PAs were primarily established to implement the “land to the tiller” proclamation and redistribute land to their members. They also replaced the defunct lower levels of the feudal administrative structure as a social and political foundation of the local communities. They are in charge of development planning, land tenure adjustment, community security and judicial administration.⁷

The radical groups had been surprised to the sweeping nature of the reform and the success of the campaign of “land to the tiller” launched a decade before.⁸ The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), The All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) and other progressive groups supported the land legislation and promised to implement its provisions.⁹ But as it fostered the government’s popularity among the masses, the proclamation affected the radical’s struggle against the Derg and created some differences in their attitude towards the military government.

The question why the Derg sponsored such a radical land reform is a controversial issue. However, some of the ascribed reasons included: the presence of radical agrarian specialists in the MLRA; the growing pressure of the students who had gone to mobilize in the countryside and of the peasantry; and the support of some Derg members like Mengistu and others who graduated from colleges and sympathized with the student movement for radical reforms.¹⁰ It is also believed that the land reform aimed at political stabilization. For the conservation of its power the military government wanted to win the support of the peasantry, to gain the control of the workers movement and to neutralize the opposition of the radical intelligentsia.¹¹ Still some claim that the establishment of ceilings and allotment of lands for private ownership sought much time and expense which needed a nationwide cadastral survey and professional experts. Then, the PMAC tended to use the simple but sweeping measure for the nationalization of land and its allotment to the tiller.¹²

But, the land legislation was not wholly supported. Some progressive organizations like Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA) strongly opposed the state control over the land as long as full political liberty and sovereignty of the people did not exist, whilst there is no democratic republic. According to them nationalization of land in the absence of peoples government means transference of the right of ownership from landlords to the state providing the people only with usufructuary rights.¹³

Nevertheless, it was the belief of many people including radical revolutionists that the 1975 land reform would bring a rapid change in the living conditions of the rural population in particular and the economic development of the country in general. But all predictions had been blown up by the wrong headed socialist agrarian policies of the military government.¹⁴ Initially the land reform had a land to the tiller character, but after the Provisional Office for People’s Organization was opened in May 1976, the Derg concentrated on political centralization and consolidation, and used the PAs and other rural institutions as a network of security. The elected members received directives from above instead of serving the interest of the local people. They enforced the law and order and implemented the collection of taxes and other obligations such as contribution, and recruitment of

youngsters for national service.¹⁵ Then, the peasantry lost the power that was originally delegated to them to make fundamental decisions concerning economic policy in promoting rural development.

Besides, peasants reported that the size of administrative bodies in the PAs, Revolutionary Ethiopia Youth Association (REYA), Revolutionary Ethiopia Women Association (REWA) and the recruitment of the several peasant militias drained considerable agricultural labour and affected production. The ordinary peasantry were said to have been obliged to cultivate the land of the PA officials and of militias engaged in national service,¹⁶ as they were doing for the former feudal officials. The elected members of the Producer's Cooperative (PC) and Service Cooperative (SC) also said to have hardly participated in production activities, which added to the burden of the ordinary members.¹⁷

In the second half of 1970s the government stressed the agricultural socialization and introduced forced collectivization, villagization and state marketing quotas. These policies were unpopular and failed to stimulate productivity and improvement in the living standard of the peasantry. Like that of the Chinese collectivization programme, the establishment of PCs was to be gradual, step by step and voluntary.¹⁸ But the government was a catalyst in their formation through input supply of improved agricultural implements, fertilizers, selected seeds and pesticides.¹⁹ Large tracts of lands favourably suited for agriculture were also given to cooperatives, while the majority individual peasants were pushed to less fertile marginal lands.²⁰ Through these preferential treatments, peasants were agitated to join cooperatives without understanding their advantages. Consequently, the cooperatives could not reap the advantages of the incentives and subsidies to show substantial increase of production over the individual peasant agriculture. The cooperatives worked less efficiently than the surrounding individual peasants who were not supported in any way. Paradoxically enough the problem of some of the cooperatives included excess of arable land that their members could not cultivate. This resulted in the inefficient use of land which was partly left fallow. Under such circumstances the local PAs ordered individual peasants to work on the land of the cooperatives during peak agricultural seasons without remuneration.²¹

The government also embarked upon an ambitious villagization programme to collectivize the scattered rural villages so that the peasantry had access to public services such as health, education, transportation, marketing, grain mill, pure water and electricity. However, the programme was unpopular that it resulted in reallocation and redistribution of peasant holdings to accommodate the displaced ones due to the demarcation of the areas for the establishment of villages. It worsened the problem of shortage of land as villages were constructed on farm plots as opposed to the traditional village pattern on hilltops and sides leaving plain areas for agricultural purposes. Besides it increased the distance between farm plots and peasant residence and made crop supervision difficult. It also affected livestock rising as peasants in the new villages had little access to the traditional grazing lands located in the previous villages. Due to this problem, the peasant were obliged to reduce their livestock to small herds.²² In the absence of the promised infrastructural facilities, villagization only brought overcrowding for both the peasants and their domestic animals, which results in environmental and social problems.

Such top-down rural development policies of the military government were not well thought-out and lacked knowledge of the local socio-economic conditions; they did not meet the needs of the people. Sustained agricultural development needs an active participation of the local communities in identifying problems and implementing development projects that are acceptable and suitable for local needs.

Besides the unprecedented state intervention, the declining agricultural productivity also explained in terms of demography and erratic rainfall. In the absence of modern technology to increase productivity per unit of land, the highland peasant's strategy to counteract population pressure was the expansion of arable land at the expense of forestry and grazing lands. Cultivation was extended to the marginal lands with a slope of more than 30°. In the scarcity of arable land most peasants left the traditional fallowing system and intensively use

their land to maintain their subsistence. This extensive and intensive use of land brought soil degradation and disappearance of many indigenous plant species. This in turn resulted in ecological imbalance and threatened both human and animal population.

The 1975 land reform resulted in a more equitable land distribution by eliminating landlordism and landlessness, thereby avoided rural social stratification. It also introduced a uniform rural administration and land tenure system. The Ethiopian revolution was, therefore, successful in eradicating the feudal order, but not the drought and the famine which is fundamentally linked to the subsistence nature of the agricultural economy. The objective of increasing agricultural productivity was never achieved. Rural poverty continued to exist with declining productivity. The limited area of arable land relative to the size and growth rate of the farming population, degradation and the still severe fragmentation of farmland remained as the major obstacles for rural development, as was lack of capital for improved implements and techniques of production. The highland peasants continued to plough the exhausted land following the traditional production system which led to further degradation. As a result, inadequate rainfall and crop pests caused the peasantry to be under permanent assistance following the revolution.

Land reform by itself can not lead to agricultural modernization and increased productivity, unless it is followed by improved rural services: extension services, input supply, credit facilities and marketing incentives. But, these services were mainly available for PCs while the majority of individual peasants had almost no access to them. The fact that the peasantry was deprived of the rights of land ownership led to the absence of responsibility for preserving the natural resources which in turn led to their degradation. This was coupled with continuous fragmentation through the division and redivision of farmlands by the PAs to balance inequalities and accommodate new members. This periodic redistribution brought insecurity of tenure and threatened agricultural productivity. Moreover, as family size determined the land that a household could acquire, marriage was encouraged so as to have as many children as possible. This aggravated population pressure on the land and hence led to poverty.

Under these constraints, the Ethiopian agrarian transformation failed to fulfil its basic objectives of peasant prosperity and ensuring abundant supply of food for the fast-growing population. The sowing of seeds for only subsistence grain production soon followed the reform, and consequently it was equity of poverty that was achieved in the rural areas. Thus, the problem of soil degradation, ecological crisis and the question of sustenance of the inversely growing population remained major rural problems that needed immediate solution. The peasantry should be helped to introduce modern technology and to switch from grain production towards high-yielding and drought-resistant root and tuber crops like cassava, sweet potato and insat (false banana) to sustain a larger population and maintain land conservation. The development of animal and fish resources can also help diversify the means of subsistence

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