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## Book Review

***Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*. Edited by Éloi Ficquet and Gérard Prunier. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015. 416 pp. \$29.72 paperback.**

Ethiopia—nestled among Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan in the Horn of Africa—is a study in duality. First, its geography: the towering 15,000-foot-tall Ras Dashen punctuates the Simien Mountain range in Ethiopia’s northwest, in contrast with the Danakil Depression, which sits nearly 400 feet below sea level. Then, its climate: despite being home to both arid highlands and fertile lowlands, it is not rare for Ethiopia to experience severe droughts and massive flooding in short succession. At night in the country’s mile-high capital Addis Ababa, the temperature drops below forty degrees Fahrenheit. At Ethiopia’s Danakil Depression, considered one of the hottest places on earth, temperatures easily exceed 125 degrees Fahrenheit.

Duality also extends to Ethiopia’s political and economic landscape. The country known as the cradle of humanity for being home to our earliest human ancestor, “Lucy,” traces its modern cultural roots to ancient empires. At the same time, its modernity is on display in the capital and throughout the countryside. High-rises across Addis Ababa multiply practically overnight, and the city appears constantly under construction; billboards advertise the country’s massive infrastructure investments, including the \$5 billion Ethiopian-financed Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The government boasts double-digit, if controversial, annual economic growth rates, and it is a prime destination for foreign direct investment.<sup>1</sup>

Ethiopia is also home to nearly ten million people who need emergency food aid this year after a drought spread across the country, and despite commendable progress on the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals, Ethiopia continues to experience low rates of development.<sup>2</sup> It ranks 174 of 188 on the UN’s Human Development Index, has a gross domestic product of just \$1,800 per capita, and ranks poorly on measures of transparency and political rights.<sup>3</sup>

Growing malaise with economic and social stagnation is now manifesting itself in a brewing crisis. More

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Cohen, William Davison, and Renee Bonorchis, “Ethiopia’s Hot, Nigeria’s Not, for Investors Eyeing Africa,” Bloomberg Technology, June 5, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-06-05/ethiopia-s-hot-nigeria-s-not-for-investors-targeting-africa> (accessed August 31, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> UN News Centre, “Ethiopia Will Need Urgent Global Support in Race to Prepare for Main Planting Season – UN,” August 15, 2016, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54681#.V8cQNPkrKUK> (accessed August 30, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Development Programme, “Ethiopia,” <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/ETH> (accessed August 31, 2016); CIA World Factbook, “Ethiopia,” <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html> (accessed August 30, 2016).

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than ever before, Ethiopians are challenging the status quo.

Sparked by a complex cocktail of political grievances that encompass the desire for ethnic autonomy, land rights, economic opportunities, and political freedoms, a wave of grassroots demonstrations against the government has spread across the country since November 2015. The predominately peaceful shows of discontent with the governing Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition, which has ruled since it overthrew the murderous Derg dictatorship in 1991, is unprecedented.

The demonstrations have pitted protesters—often young students—against security forces in sometimes-brutal fashion. An unknown number of protesters and security officers have been injured and killed in the resulting clashes and a substantial amount of damage—often to government property or foreign-run farms—has been reported.<sup>4</sup> At various points since the unrest began, cell phone and internet service has been completely shut off in the affected regions.<sup>5</sup>

Of particular note is the convergence of two unlikely allies: the highland-dwelling Amharas who reside in central Ethiopia and the Oromo, whose regional boundaries touch on six of the seven other ethno-linguistic regional states in the country. Traditionally, both groups have vied for power, rivalling, undermining, and in some cases, fighting each other to get it. But together the former foes make up the largest ethnic block in the country—nearly 60 million Ethiopians—and have come together in the most recent protests to demand greater autonomy and improved political and civil rights.

The recent protests have touched on some of the most sensitive facets of politics: religious freedom, media freedom, land rights, representative governance, and equitable resource distribution. The demonstrations are not monolithic and the protesters' demands are not unified. But they have coalesced around disenchantment with the current governing coalition and are growing more emboldened with each peaceful demonstration and subsequent violent crackdown.

Ethiopia is often on the periphery of American and international policy. But one of East Africa's most traditionally stable countries—and rising economic stars—is on the precipice. And given the political turmoil and violence afflicting its neighbors in Somalia and South Sudan, not to mention Ethiopia's contribution to US and international security goals in Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan, this could have

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<sup>4</sup> As of June 2016, activist group Human Rights Watch reported that at least four hundred people had been killed in the crackdown. Between August 6 and 7, Amnesty International reported that another ninety-seven protesters died in the weekend's violence. See Human Rights Watch, "Ethiopia: Protest Crackdown Killed Hundreds," June 15, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/15/ethiopia-protest-crackdown-killed-hundreds> (accessed August 30, 2016); Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: Dozens Killed as Police Use Excessive Force against Peaceful Protesters," August 8, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/08/ethiopia-dozens-killed-as-police-use-excessive-force-against-peaceful-protesters/>; William Davison, "Dutch, Israeli Farms in Ethiopia Attacked by Protesters," *Bloomberg*, September 1, 2016, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-09-01/ethiopian-protesters-burn-dutch-owned-flower-farm-in-north> (Accessed September 1, 2016); the Ethiopian government acknowledges that demonstrators have "legitimate concerns," but that "anti-peace forces" have infiltrated the demonstrations, including from Eritrea, to foment violence. As a result, an unknown number of lives have been lost. See Fana Broadcasting Company, "Middle East, Asian Ambassadors Briefed on Current Situations in Ethiopia," August 22, 2016, <http://www.fanabc.com/english/index.php/news/item/6683-middle-east-asian-ambassadors-briefed-on-current-situations-in-ethiopia> (accessed August 31, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> US Department of State, "Ethiopia Travel Alert," August 19, 2016, <https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/alertswarnings/ethiopia-travel-alert.html> (accessed August 31, 2016).

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grave consequences for the region as a whole.

Consequently, *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia*, edited by Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet, offers an incisive and timely look into the factors driving modern-day Ethiopia. It is a helpful backgrounder for casual and serious analysts alike on the complex, and sometimes contradictory, forces currently at work in the country.

The book is a collection of sixteen essays by some of the world's most renowned scholars on Ethiopia. Taken together, the contributors' experiences span the days of Haile Selassie, the rise and fall of the Derg, and the life and legacy of longtime Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. The editors themselves are preeminent Ethiopia experts: in addition to writing widely on Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, both served as directors of the French Center for Ethiopian Studies, housed in Addis Ababa.

The book builds on a previous work in French by Prunier, *L'Éthiopie contemporaine*, published in 2007. The expanded and revised English-version attempts to tackle the complexities of modern-day Ethiopia in a comprehensive fashion, and the authors note the existence of numerous, detailed studies Ethiopian culture and politics but few "wide angle snapshot[s]" (3). *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia* provides a "toolbox" to the myriad readers that the authors envision will peruse this study—with a focus on relevant political, economic, and religious trends that underlie the today's Ethiopia. As the authors rightly note, the inclusion of extensive bibliographies in the majority of the study's chapters provide readers with substantial follow-up opportunities.

The first section of the book focuses on the ethnic and religious makeup of present-day Ethiopia, starting with a broad overview co-authored by Ficquet and Ethiopian scholar Dereje Feyissa. It then moves to detailed chapters on the country's primary religious traditions: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Evangelical Christianity. Ficquet offers a useful backgrounder on Islam in Ethiopia, paying particular attention to the short-lived "Arab Spring-like protest," known simply as the Muslim Protests, that occurred between 2011 and 2013 (110). While Ficquet considers the Muslim Protests a success insofar as they "opened a new chapter" in the integration of many Ethiopian Muslims into the "Ethiopian nation," he leaves the reader without a clear resolution of their fate or impact. But resentment over perceived government meddling in Ethiopia's Muslim community continues today, and is exacerbated by the continued imprisonment of the protest's leaders, who were sentenced to jail terms of up to twenty-two years on terrorism charges just days after U.S. President Barack Obama visited the country in July 2015. Indeed, some of the undercurrents that spurred the Muslim protests have reemerged in the current demonstrations.

The book's middle chapters focus on Ethiopia's political history. Christopher Clapham tackles the best-known Ethiopian Emperor—Haile Selassie—who is credited with introducing a national currency, undertaking an ambitious road-building project, training an army, and opening the country's economy to international traders (189). But Haile Selassie's national unification project was no match for Fascist Italy's superior weaponry and air power, and the Emperor fled into exile in 1936 as the Italians—seeking to expand their empire—invaded and occupied Addis Ababa, where residents still joke that "macchiato" is an Amharic word, not an Italian one.

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Prunier takes the reader to what are arguably Ethiopia's darkest days in "The Ethiopian Revolution and the Derg Regime." The Marxist revolutionaries (*Derg* means "committee" in Amharic) deposed Haile Selassie in a 1974 *coup d'état*. He died in military custody under questionable circumstances the next year. Emerging from bloody purges of the Derg's internal and opaque machinations was Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who led the country into nearly two decades of "Red Terror," now the name of a famous Addis Ababa museum where viewers can tour exhibits about the Derg's (mis)rule. Under Mengistu, tens of thousands of Ethiopians were killed, tortured, or forcibly disappeared, thousands were pressed into military service, more than half a million were forcibly resettled to far-away lands where government services were sparse or non-existent. At least 50,000 resettled Ethiopians died in the process of establishing a "bizarre and contrary form of 'Ethiopian socialism' that not even its Soviet godparents approved of" (223). As Prunier notes of the Derg's disastrous economic policies:

In terms of agricultural policy, many of the errors committed in the [Soviet Union] in the 1930s were replicated in Ethiopia, particularly in terms of collectivization. Between 1980 and 1985, the collective farms, which represented only 5 per cent of cultivated areas, received 43 per cent of the investment in the agricultural sector and their returns represented less money than what had been invested in their development. There again, ideology had replaced common sense. (225)

The book's last section takes Ethiopia into the twenty-first century by detailing the EPRDF's defeat of the Derg, Ethiopia's separation from Eritrea and its role in the broader region, and its struggle to implement federalism. But it is René Lefort who tackles Ethiopia's most talked-about sector: its economy. Lefort writes, "For any observer assessing Ethiopia from the angle of infrastructure and physical development, everything in sight confirms the government's repeated claim of double-digit growth" (357). However, in economic growth lies another facet of Ethiopia's dualism: "[This approach] is blind to the realities of four-fifths of Ethiopians—those who still struggle to eke out a living from tiny undersize land holdings or 'informal' activities" (358). In his chapter, Lefort explores the concept of Ethiopia as a "developmental state," an ideology which transformed a country devastated by the Derg's policies into a dynamic economy with an ambitious and unique focus on poverty reduction.

While the volume is forthcoming in that cannot possibly cover all aspects of contemporary Ethiopia's culture or politics, an exploration of each major ethnic group's history vis-à-vis the central government would be greatly valuable. A cursory attempt to do so is offered as the book's first chapter, but an in-depth study would shed light on often-competing interests. Particularly in light of the ongoing demonstrations led by the Oromo (who comprise 34.4 percent of the population) and joined by the Amhara (27 percent) against a government largely made up of—and perceived to primarily benefit—Tigrayans (6 percent), readers would benefit from this additional detail.

Prunier's last chapter on Meles Zenawi's life and legacy offers a more personal look at the longtime Prime Minister's life than the preceding academic chapters. As he accurately notes, "For his detractors, Meles Zenawi was a dictator and a disaster for Ethiopia. For his supporters and devoted followers he was a genius, a visionary and a world class leader. One thing is sure: he did not leave anybody indifferent" (415).

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Prunier is generally complimentary of the controversial leader, and suggests that over his two decades of rule as Prime Minister, Meles “steered Ethiopia roughly in the right direction but a lot of such fine tuning...remains to be done” (434).

In ushering Ethiopia into the future, Prunier posits on the next chapter of Ethiopian history without Meles at the helm. He recalls the many billboards paying tribute to Meles that sprung up following his August 2012 death and the fear that a cult of personality would paralyze any new government. What the author does not address is Ethiopia’s trajectory under new Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, who was appointed to the office following Meles’s death. The former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hailemariam is a Protestant Christian from Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People’s Region, an unusual suspect for the country’s highest office. He is largely seen to have continued governing as Meles would have, including in launching the government’s second Growth and Transformation Plan, which will run through 2020. Time—and perhaps also the government’s response to ongoing unrest as well as to broader, long-term challenges—will tell whether the country heeded Prunier’s warning about the danger of Meles “governing from the grave” (426).

It is Prunier’s final sentence in the volume that is perhaps the most ominous: “The elections of 2015—and their aftermath—will be a key moment in the country’s history” (436). Indeed, the May 2015 contests were monumental in that they were the first since the death of Meles, who had served as prime minister since 1995; while generally peaceful and orderly, they also appear to have sparked a serious rift in the country after the ruling party won every single one of the parliament’s 546 seats. The election was criticized by human rights groups and Ethiopia’s fractured opposition groups.<sup>6</sup>

*Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia* touches on vital, related issues—religion, regionalism, land, demographic change, and economic potential—that will shape Ethiopia’s trajectory in the wake of the 2015 elections. Successfully achieving both democracy and prosperity will require a fragile balance between the dueling forces that are shaping the political and socioeconomic trajectory of this critical East African nation.

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<sup>6</sup> BBC News, “Ethiopia Election: EPRDF Wins Every Seat in Parliament,” June 22, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33228207> (accessed August 31, 2016).