

G rard Prunier and  loi Ficquet, eds. *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*. London: Hurst, 2015. Abbreviations. Maps. Index. xvii + 521 pp. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781849042611.

Ethiopia, both state and society, has experienced significant change in the past quarter-century under the reign of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and its late leader, Meles Zenawi. The EPRDF took power in 1991 after a long bloody struggle ending with the overthrow of a military dictatorship that had brought the country to the brink of collapse. The immediate problem it faced was to pacify a country torn by ethnic and regional conflict, and it succeeded by imposing a political system that nominally follows federalist principles, while in practice it involves a radical administrative decentralization of state functions, without reducing the power of the central government. Needless to say, it has not satisfied ethnic aspirations for a share of power at the center, which remains a potentially destabilizing factor in the country's political future.

The EPRDF also introduced an ostensibly plural political system with open competition for power among political parties through periodic elections. In practice, the ruling party has left precious little space for a meaningful opposition to develop, and it has swept every election since coming to power. In common with much of Africa, this is a de facto single-party regime operating behind a democratic fa ade. Behind the fa ade, the lion's share of state power has been held by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), an ethnoregional party that led the battle against the military regime and also founded the EPRDF as a national political organization.

Like many "liberation" movements in Africa, the TPLF initially professed a radical form of Marxism and passed it on to the EPRDF. And like the others, it underwent a conversion on its way to power in order to qualify for political and economic support from the United States and the West. Having resisted initially the embrace of the free market as required by its patrons, it finally succumbed to the force of globalization and opened Ethiopia's economy to foreign capital. Fueled by loans and investments from abroad, the economy has witnessed remarkable growth, led by huge public investment in the energy, transport, and communication sectors and also boosted by loans, private investment in banking, housing construction, and tourism. Its government has been rightfully praised for its energy and effectiveness in promoting development.

Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia offers a compendium of articles treating recent development in several areas, including those touched upon above. The joint editors' goal obviously is to provide an overview for the layperson who has an interest in the recent political and economic history of the country, rather than to delve deeply into the intricacies and controversies that delight Ethiopianists. One can argue that with sixteen contributions over more than five hundred pages, the work has overshot the mark as far as the layperson is concerned. Furthermore, in putting

together an eclectic collection of articles without connecting threads to stitch them together, the editors have violated a basic rule of collective works.

Half of the contributions are potted versions of work already done by stalwart Ethiopianists. Inoffensive for the most part, occasionally they lapse into opinionated statements, such as one editor's assurance that Ethiopia's "revolutionary and federal democracy has become a model which is quite unique" (3). In his summary of the Meles Zenawi era that closes the book, the same editor gratuitously blames the hapless opposition for lacking "long term political maturity" in challenging the regime (430). Another contributor describes in some detail the tortured history of elections under the EPRDF, and concludes that the move to an effective multiparty democracy is some years away, "if only because of the weaknesses of the opposition" (330). One is left to wonder what accounts for a crippled opposition.

The book also includes work by younger scholars based on recent research offering fresh data and perspectives, provided one can unearth them from the thick layer of conceptualization and pseudoscientific jargon they are buried under, following current social science fashion. Among other topics, this covers the reaction of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to the challenges of modernity represented by the phenomenal spread of Pentecostalism, the veiled posture of Islam in Ethiopia (a faith that represents some 34% of its population), as well as the revival of Rastafarianism.

Such shortcomings notwithstanding, *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia* does provide useful guidance to anyone with a recently acquired interest in the fortunes of that country.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2016.48

Chris Vaughan. *Darfur: Colonial Violence, Sultanic Legacies & Local Politics, 1916–1956*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, U.K.: James Currey, 2015. xiv + 231 pp. Map. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$80.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-84701-111-4.

This study contributes significantly to scholarship about the colonial state, using evidence derived from the historical experience of colonial Darfur (1916–56). The author wisely refrains from reifying any a priori concept of "the state," which, he proposes, should rather be understood in the ever-contingent shifting context of historical process and political struggle. He places special emphasis on the role of "chiefs," by which he means those, both black and white, who served along the interface between the colonial rulers and the ruled, where they implemented a "negotiated authoritarianism" (19). The author's introductory discussion of geography and ethnicity is a small masterpiece of synthesis that should hold scriptural authority over the perhaps well-intentioned but often ill-informed discussion of contemporary Darfur.