



Twilight of an Emperor

The upheaval in Ethiopia, which began with a strike by teachers and taxi drivers and culminated in a military mutiny, continued unchecked last week. Beleaguered Emperor Haile Selassie, 81, offered the protesters concession after concession, only to see them ask for even more reforms. By promising changes for his semifeudal country, Haile Selassie probably saved the monarchy as an institution, at the price of yielding much of his fabled, once absolute power.

In response to army demands for higher pay, the Emperor had earlier been forced to oust his old Cabinet and name a progressive-minded diplomat, Endalkachew Makonnen, 46, as Prime Minister. The military's success in getting what it wanted apparently served as a goad to other dissatisfied Ethiopians. In early March a general strike paralyzed Ethiopia's cities for four days and cut the country off from the outside world. The international airports in Addis Ababa and Asmara were shut down and the Red Sea ports were closed. Food and fuel shortages spread as truck drivers stopped working. So determined were the striking workers to win government acceptance of their demands that the negotiating committee refused to meet with the Emperor himself, an unprecedented snub.

Only after Endalkachew agreed to increase the 50¢ per day minimum wage to at least 75¢, make primary schooling free and give government employees the right to organize, did most workers return to their jobs. Teachers, however, remained out, demanding higher salaries. Toward week's end their protests were joined by several hundred black-robed priests of the Coptic Christian Church, who demonstrated outside Parliament. Claiming to speak for Ethiopia's 200,000 priests, they threatened to strike unless they received a boost in their current \$1.50 monthly minimum allowance. Also angry were the capital's estimated 50,000 prostitutes. In leaflets, addressed to the police and signed "the guardians of your happiness and well-being," they warned that they would stop selling their wares unless price controls would be eased to allow them to charge a minimum \$10 fee.

Except for the interruption of services caused by the strikes and the overtones of exhilaration and apprehension, there is little evidence in Addis Ababa that Ethiopia has undergone what amounts to a revolution. The military is back in the barracks, and the hordes of hideously deformed beggars are back in the streets—a sure sign of normalcy. Both the protesters and the government have so far shown remarkable restraint and have avoided violence. Only when restless students from the capital's Haile Selassie University ventured outside the campus last week, to ignite an effigy of Endalkachew and demand "free speech" and "free press," were they attacked by baton-wielding police. Even then, few were injured or arrested. Ethiopian students studying in the Soviet Union also demonstrated. They occupied the Ethiopian embassy in Moscow for three hours and demanded that the Emperor abdicate.

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Haile Selassie, however, has vowed that "the monarchy will remain." In a traditional gesture of good will, he drove to the Addis marketplace, rolled down the window of his limousine and handed out green Ethiopian dollar bills to the swarming beggars. The protesters were not impressed. "The time is past for puny Imperial charity," said one labor leader. Far more meaningful was the Emperor's decision to appoint a constitutional commission with a mandate to propose some reforms within six months. Last week he told a press conference that he "wishes to change the constitution [so that] the will of the people will now dictate our attitude. Even the rights of the sovereign will depend on the will of the people."

TIME Correspondent Lee Griggs, who was in Addis Ababa last week, reports that "veteran observers wonder whether Selassie's talk of reform is sincere. At other times he has spoken movingly of the need for change, but nothing ever came of it. One problem has been the ability of the Amhara tribe, to which the Emperor belongs, to thwart any alteration of the status quo. A land-owning feudal aristocracy that collects up to 90% of a tenant's harvest as rent, the Amharas have stalled land reform and can be expected to resist any attempt to undermine their power."

If the Emperor drags his feet on reform, the military-sparked by middle-echelon officers-will likely move again. While they seem ready to retain the monarchy as a symbol of national unity, the young officers can be expected to push for high taxes on the wealthy Amharas. Most likely they will aim to deprive the throne of its remaining power by insisting on a constitution that provides for competing political parties and a Cabinet responsive to a popularly elected Parliament.

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