



The Emperor's New Clothes

*An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick,
unless Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress.*
- W.B. Yeats

The creeping military takeover of Ethiopia last week left Emperor Haile Selassie virtually stripped of his absolute power. For the first time since Selassie, 82, came to power 44 years ago, government-controlled newspapers published letters and articles critical of the monarchy. One particularly vitriolic magazine accused the Emperor of "defecating on his people." As additional insult, the military forcibly entered Selassie's palace in Addis Ababa and arrested the commander of the Imperial Bodyguard. Most important, the Armed Forces Coordinating Committee, which dictates policy to Prime Minister Michael Imru's five-week-old civilian government abolishing four offices through which Selassie had ruled the country since 1930: the Crown Council, which issued the Emperor's decrees; the Imperial Appointments Office, which implemented his selection of all important government officials; the Military Advisory Council, by which he ran the armed forces; and the Court Justice, which interpreted the law according to his wish.

The military is pressuring Imru's government to adopt a new constitution that would make official Selassie's loss of power. Drafted by a reform-minded committee of 30 military-approved civilians, the constitution provides for a bicameral Parliament that will be vested with most of the Emperor's powers. The Prime Minister will be chosen by the Parliament, as will judges and Cabinet members. The Emperor's Imperial Court will be replaced by an independent judiciary and Supreme Court whose Chief Justice will be elected for life by the Parliament. The Emperor will also lose his position as head of the Coptic Christian Church, an institution whose political influence has been second only to the monarchy itself, and there will be a complete separation church and state.

Just a Figurehead. In its present draft form, the document allows Selassie to retain the title of Emperor, but he will serve only as "a symbol of Ethiopian unity and history." Although some of the more radical leaders of the military coup object to even a figurehead monarch they have been persuaded, at least temporarily, that the success of their reform movement depends upon continued support among the peasant majority (95% of the country's people are illiterate), who still revere the Emperor.

The fate of the new constitution rests largely on how this issue is resolved. The aristocratic upper house of Parliament seems to favor the draft as it is now written, but the lower house is agitating for an entirely new document that would be much tougher on the monarchy, the church and the aristocracy. If debate drags on in Parliament, it is likely that the Armed Forces Committee will impose either a "temporary" new

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constitution or declare martial law. According TIME Correspondent Lee Griggs, "It is beyond doubt that the military does not want to take even temporary official control and certainly does not want to take the permanent job of running the country. But the coordinating committee has reluctantly set up a contingency plan to take over if the civilians shilly-shally over the new constitution."

Widespread arrests of Selassie's former aides have left the Emperor friendless as well as powerless. His official function reduced to ritual approval of the military's reforms, Ethiopia's "King of Kings" has little to do but attend daily services of the Coptic Church, visit his aging pride of lions in cages on the palace grounds, and walk his pet Chihuahua.

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