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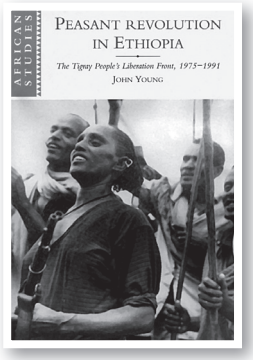
# BOOK REVIEWS




# Peasant revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975–1991*

John Young

As the challenges posed by Africa's various security problems increase, so too does the need for Westerners to better understand the histories and cultures of Africa's modern states. This is especially true of those countries on the frontlines of the fight against Islamic terrorism. The paperback reprint of John Young's *Peasant revolution in Ethiopia* (originally published in 1997) is, therefore, a necessary addition to the collections of scholars, analysts and policymakers alike.

Young's context is a relevant, contemporary time period in the formation of one of Africa's most strategically vital nation states, Ethiopia. In fact, in sub-Saharan Africa only Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa match Ethiopia in geopolitical importance.

The book centres on the rise and eventual victory of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). In a straightforward manner, Young posits several key research questions; the

* **New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-521-02606-2.**

most salient probe the background of the TPLF demand for self-determination and how the TPLF was able to defeat 'the most powerful army in Black Africa'.

Young's focus on the TPLF is significant on other accounts, too. The TPLF was one of numerous national liberation movements formed after the military junta known as the Derg overthrew the Haile Selassie regime in 1974. Today, the TPLF forms the central core of the Ethiopian government run by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Moreover, Meles Zenawi – Ethiopia's prime minister since 1995 and a former TPLF member – is the symbolic and substantive outcome of the TPLF victory.

Young's attention on the Tigray people also throws light on the history and culture of Ethiopia. The Tigray, along with other ethnic groups such as the Oromo, have long perceived the central Ethiopian government in the hands of the Amhara to be forceful 'foreign' rulers. Irreconcilable ethnic challenges, thus, have afflicted Ethiopia throughout its history as Africa's oldest independent state.

Young also discusses the socio-political significance of education and academic standing among the Tigray people; given that it is highly regarded, it is unsurprising that teachers and students comprise a crucial portion of the TPLF. Such useful facts on the TPLF and the Tigray are woven throughout the text.

Well written, researched and structured, the book's three chapters on the course and character of the TPLF revolution are especially insightful. The two chapters on Ethiopia's historical and social landscape as well as the social and political character of the Tigray contextualises them within the Ethiopian landscape. Young expands on the central motivating forces behind the TPLF, namely a sense of Tigray ethnonationalism, pragmatic self-reliant leadership and the consistently repressive policies of the Soviet-backed Derg.

Although individual opportunities and leaders were important (as Young's first-person interviews attest), the TPLF victory can in large measure be ascribed to its comprehension of Mao Tse-tung's theory of protracted warfare. Young rightly refers to the strategic importance of this aspect throughout the text. In contrast to its enemies, the TPLF took great care to gain the support and allegiance of those groups who were most important to its struggle, which included peasants as well as non-Amharic ethnic groups.

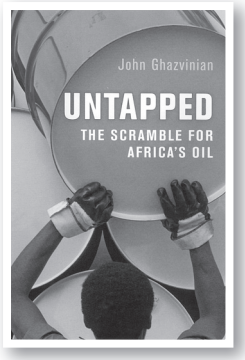
Strategically and tactically, the TPLF viewed the war as a long-term, full-scale revolution. For example, the TPLF alliance with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, though intermittent, was of overall strategic value. The TPLF recruitment methods and treatment of prisoners of war also demonstrated a nuanced understanding of Maoist theory. Success, as Young points out, was due to TPLF organisational skills (political and military) as well as their level of commitment – both hallmarks of Maoist principles.

Less valuable in *Peasant revolution* are two chapters on peasant revolution theories and TPLF–peasant relations. Perhaps because the book was a byproduct of Young's doctoral dissertation, these discussions serve at best as bookends to the central theme. The theoretical importance of Tigray peasants loses substantial weight when Young compares the TPLF to similar revolutionary struggles in Southeast Asia. The TPLF was successful because it took advantage of the strategic significance of peasants in Ethiopia while the Derg did not; one may appreciate this without Young's theoretical discussions. The context – always supremely relevant in strategy – dictated that the victor would have the support of an essential portion of the population, in this case the TPLF and the peasants. Different contexts would have required differing support bases.

Two additions to *Peasant revolution* would have been helpful. First, an appendix of the most important Tigrinya-to-English terms would have assisted in detailed parts of the text. Similarly, a timeline chronicling the salient events during the rise of the TPLF would have been of assistance as well.

These minor criticisms notwithstanding, Young's expert knowledge of Ethiopia and the complex Horn of Africa region shines through in *Peasant revolution*. From his experiences as a journalist and scholar to his governmental and nongovernmental positions, Young demonstrates that it is possible for outsiders – with dedication and hard work – to garner a truly commanding knowledge of foreign peoples and lands. Others would do well to follow in his footsteps.

*Reviewed by Donovan C Chau, assistant professor of political science at California State University, San Bernardino. This book review first appeared on the website of the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA), and is reprinted here with permission. Readers are encouraged to visit the ASMEA website (www.asmeascholars.org) and to consider applying for membership of the organisation. Membership during the 2007/08 academic year is free.*




# Untapped: The scramble for Africa's oil*

John J Ghazvinian

At a first reading I thought that the writing of Johan Ghazvinian was in the league of Michela Wrong (*In the footsteps of Mr Kurtz* and *I didn't do it for you*). However, despite the preparatory research and field trips, his narrative does not have the depth and context of that of Ms Wrong. To be sure, *Untapped* is extremely well written and researched. The author has the ability to present complex issues in an unusually compelling and vivid manner, but this is indeed a reference guide for the Afro-pessimist and Ghazvinian's narrative is the weaker for that. His writing reinforces the image of the worst stereotypes associated with corporate and African greed, oil and exploitation, and presents one-dimensional views of developments in Nigeria, Gabon, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, Angola (including Cabinda), Equatorial Guinea, São Tomé & Príncipe, Chad and Sudan. For Ghazvinian:

> Gabon is the golden child ruled by a self-interested French puppet who forgot to prepare his country for life after oil and has left it with a castrated economy.

* **Orlando: Harcourt Inc, 2007, 320 pages, ISBN 978-0-15-10138-4.**

> Cameroon and Congo are much the same story, but in the latter country, oil has fuelled a bloody civil war that has left the population traumatized and afraid to speak out against the country's high-level corruption. Angola is the sleeping giant where billions of dollars have disappeared and where the government maintains a deep distrust of and distance from the international community. And as for Nigeria, it is simply the doomsday scenario, an amalgamation of all the worst oil has to offer Africa: corruption, ethnic hatred, Dutch disease, and rentierism, organized crime, militant rebellion, hostage taking, and sabotage of industry activity … (p 167).

According to Ghazvinian, Gabon is a classic rentier state in which the state is no longer reliant on the economic productivity of its citizens for its revenue, but has itself become the main source of revenue in the domestic economy – its main function the allocation of handouts, with pet projects and corruption being the only way to get ahead. However, the most distressing is his account of the impact that oil has had on the volatile politics of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. As the federal government of Nigeria saw its annual revenue increase tenfold from 1965 to 1975, the bottom fell out of the country's agricultural base, with precipitous falls in the production of cocoa, rubber, cotton and groundnuts, and a concomitant increase in the percentage of Nigerians living in poverty. From a budding African powerhouse, he describes how Nigeria has become just another African basket case. 'How did a lush, swampy river delta home to quiet tribes of fishermen in wooden boats become the scene of a conflict so violent and unpredictable that neither multinational petroleum companies nor one of Africa's most powerful armies seem capable of contending with it?' (p 22).

Extractive industries (oil, gas and mining) already account for more than 50 per cent of African exports and 65 per cent of foreign direct investment. The corruption and greed of oil companies and the misrule by African governments has turned abundance into misery – no jobs, no wealth (save for a few in government) and massive environmental damage in certain areas. Overvalued African currencies (the effect is known as the Dutch disease) has undermined nascent manufacturing industries, destroyed subsidence agriculture and trapped key African countries with weak governance in a vicious cycle of violence, corruption and misery. The African oil boom produces far more jobs in the United States and Europe than it ever will in Africa – Ghazvinian notes that only about five per cent of the billions invested in African petroleum products every year is spent on this continent.

The book brings considerable perspective to the hype that has accompanied Africa as a major source of oil in an energy hungry world. Africa is believed to contain, at best, ten per cent of the world's proven oil reserves, yet it has become a source of much speculation regarding US, Chinese, Indian and other competition. Clearly, the fact that Africa is one of the world's least explored regions and the associated speed of growth of African oil production have contributed considerably to the exorbitant expectations.

Ghazvinian has five additional arguments in support of his contention. First, Africa's oil – most of which is found in the Gulf of Guinea – is viscous and low in sulphur. Known as 'light' and 'sweet' in industry parlance, it is easier and cheaper to refine than, say, Middle East crude. Second, transport-related costs and risks are low – particularly from the Gulf of Guinea that allows speedy transport to the major trading ports of Europe and North America. Africa also offers a very favourable contractual environment. Without the capacity to effectively manage and oversee oil exploration and production, or the ability to amass either the technical expertise or the billions in capital investment required to drill for oil themselves, most countries in sub-Saharan Africa operate on the basis of so-called production-sharing agreements that offer foreign oil companies tremendous downstream profits. This is particularly advantageous as few African countries are members of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), subject to limits on output. Most important of all, virtually all the big discoveries of oil in recent years have been made offshore, in deepwater reserves that are miles way from civil war, insurrection and strife. In fact, one third of the world's new oil discoveries since the year 2000 have been made in Africa, according to Ghazvinian.

## In summary

African oil is cheaper, safer, and more accessible than its competitors', and there seems to be more of it every day. And, though Africa may not be able to compete with the Persian Gulf at the level of proven reserves, it has just enough up its sleeve to make it a potential 'swing' region – an oil province that can kick in just enough production to keep markets calm when supplies elsewhere in the world are unpredictable (p 12).

What makes this such an important book is that a number of countries, including Mauritania, Mozambique, Madagascar, Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia, have joined or are about to join the ranks of the world's oil producers. Most recently oil exploration companies announced the discovery of an estimated three billion barrels of oil in Ghana. Although less than three days' worth of global consumption, production of 100 000 barrels per day is to start in 2010 and would double within five years. Having barely recovered from decades of misrule, bad governance and dictatorship, Ghana – recently Africa's poster child for development – will have to deal with many new challenges as a result of these discoveries.

In a brief epilogue Ghazvinian himself recognises the fact that caricature has replaced context and analysis in much of *Untapped*. While a great deal in this book is distressing to read, it remains a well-written and comprehensively researched – if perhaps one-sided – description of African oil and the challenges that it continues to engender.

*Jakkie Cilliers*