

Land, Nation and Citizenship in Ethiopia

Mekuria Bulcha¹

¹Mälardalen University, School of Sustainable Development of Society and Technology, Sweden

mekuria.bulcha@mdh.se

The paper treats the land question as a political issue concerning who owns and controls the country. It will examine the intricacies of ownership and distribution of land, a resource which is inextricably interconnected not only with subsistence but also ethno-national identity, in most African countries. Taking Ethiopia as a case, the paper provides an overview of the land question with the following three points in focus: (i) It discusses the nature of conquest, colonization and dispossession of peasants and pastoralists in the late nineteenth century in what is today southern Ethiopia creating a quasi-feudal system which prevailed until the mid-1970s. (ii) It explores the role of the land question in stirring struggle for the equality of citizenship as well as the claims made for distributive justice by peasants and intellectuals from various nationalities of southern Ethiopia in the pre-1974 period. (iii) Examining the causes for the failure of the radical Ethiopian land reform program of 1975 to meet the popular demands, the paper argues that land ownership has remained one of the major issues constraining the establishment of social justice and causing social conflict in the country. It discusses the socio-political consequences of the displacement of peasants being caused by the apparently market-oriented land policy of the present government comparing it with the post-1975 “socialist” policy of the former regime which was also a cause for mass displacement of rural populations in the 1970s and 1980s.