

# ADDIS DIGEST

N°4

JULY 1995

## FOCUS OF THE MONTH: THE ETHNIC PROBLEM IN ETHIOPIA

It is generally admitted that for centuries the peoples of Ethiopia coexisted in relative harmony although periods of peace among the different ethnic groups were frequently interrupted as rival feudal warlords tried to use ethnicity in their struggle for power. Even then, although the history of this country is one of permanent violence and armed conflicts, there is no record of wholesale massacre involving ethnic groups as such.

Now many observers (both Ethiopians and foreigners) agree that the people of this country have grown «ethnic sensitive» as they had never been before. Ethnic hatred which remained an extremely marginal phenomenon has now suddenly turned into a «time bomb». Why?

Since the mid-sixties when the progressive Ethiopian Student Movement raised the issue of ethnic and religious oppression and decided to integrate the question of equality and unity of the peoples of Ethiopia in the overall struggle against the feudal order and for democracy, almost everyone agreed on the nature of the ethnic problem in the country. Marxist ideology which overwhelmingly prevailed at that time led to a «class struggle» approach to the problem. This in turn led to a few sensible conclusions which were to serve as guidelines to the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist liberation struggle: if we leave aside the two extremist wings of the student movement i.e. those

### THE MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS IN ETHIOPIA (+1% OF THE POPULATION) Population 1984: 42,616,876 (1)      Population 1992: 55,000,000 (2)

Ethnic group	Number 1994	%	Estimate 1992
1. OROMO	12,387,664	29.068	15,950,000
2. AMARA	12,055,250	28.288	15,400,000
3. TIGRAWI	4,149,697	9.737	5,400,000
4. GURAGE	1,855,905	4.355	2,300,000
5. SOMALIE	1,613,394	3.789	2,300,000
6. SIDAMA	1,261,724	2.961	1,690,000
7. WOLAYITA	1,092,085	2.565	1,430,000
8. HADIYA	643,085	1.510	825,000
9. AFAR	583,120	1.368	715,000
10. AGEW	489,834	1.149	605,000
11. GUJI	481,442	1.130	600,000
12. GAMO	463,933	1.089	594,000
13. GEDEO	455,408	1.069	588,000
14. KEFFA	443,000	1.040	572,000
15. KEMBATTA	432,819	1.016	555,000

(1) 1984 population and housing census of Ethiopia.

Transitional government of Ethiopia. Addi Abeba, Ethiopia - December 1991

(2) World Bank estimates for 1992

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marginal elements who were dismissed as «narrow nationalists» or «chauvinists», the general tendency was to consider the question of nationalities as a «secondary contradiction» which was only one aspect of the contradiction between the feudal establishment on the one hand and the peoples of Ethiopia on the other.

First, it was admitted that the masses of the Amara people, who were themselves victims of the prevailing feudal order were in no way responsible for ethnic and religious oppression. Second, even the Amara ruling classes did not take the blame alone. The feudal establishment, although under the hegemony of the Amara ruling circles, was considered as a vast «anti-people front» comprising the ruling classes of all the major ethnic groups in the country. It followed from this, that the «multi-ethnic» feudal establishment was the enemy of all of the peoples of Ethiopia, whatever their ethnic origin. It was argued that the solution to the ethnic problem would come with the triumph of a democratic system to be established with the demise of the feudal order. In this struggle against the «multi-ethnic» feudal establishment, the necessity of creating multi-ethnic progressive organizations was evident to almost everyone. These organizations, in fact, are the ones which initiated and led the struggle against the old order.

The abolition of feudalism which paved the way for a democratic solution to the ethnic problem was the result of the tremendous sacrifices paid by Ethiopia's democrats of all ethnic origins regrouped in multi-ethnic organizations. It is worth recalling that no ethnic based organization played any meaningful role in this tremendous historical achievement.

However, after abolishing the feudal order, the revolution lost track and turned into a diabolic tyranny. Thousands of Amara, Oromo, Gurage, Tigrean, etc. intellectuals and young democrats lost their lives in the civil war in rural areas that followed the land reform proclamation of March 1975. The «white terror» campaign unleashed against them in the country's urban centres in 1976 and the «Red Terror» campaign of late 1977 and early 1978 perpetrated by Mengistu claimed thousands more. This loss of a generation of multi-ethnic democrats led to the development of ethnic based organizations which were - to say the least - marginal during the years of the anti-feudal struggle.

Unlike the multi-ethnic progressive organizations who raised the ethnic problem in order to solve it as part and parcel of the overall struggle for democracy, groups like the ethnic based TPLF, tried to use the ethnic problem first in their struggle to secure power and now to maintain their hold on the country. This world of difference between the democratic and the

«ethnocentrist» approaches to the problem is behind the rise of «ethnic sensitivity» which is responsible for the ethnic hatred that is now perverting the minds of many Ethiopians.

In fact, TPLF's attitude toward the ethnic problem negates the essence of past and present attempts to foster brotherhood among the peoples of Ethiopia and find a democratic solution to the problem. TPLF's leaders thrived in their home province by mobilizing the Tigrean people «against the Amaras» and deliberately avoided any alliance with other forces of the democratic opposition until they were in a position to create and control other ethnic based organizations. In pre-revolutionary Ethiopia, the Amara ruling circles based their rule not on ethnicity but on the alliance they forged with the ruling classes of the major ethnic groups in the country. This alliance was directed against all the peoples of Ethiopia including the masses of the Amara people. Now TPLF's leaders try to «associate» the Tigrean people in a manner so provocative that Ethiopians are being led to believe that TPLF's rule is «By Tigreans and for Tigreans». The country's democratic forces still consider the ethnic problem as a «secondary «issue compared to the formidable task of fostering a democratic order without which no lasting solution to the ethnic problem could even be envisaged. TPLF's leaders try to divert attention from this task by pretending to «solve» the ethnic problem in isolation from the democratization process and indeed in a manner that is detrimental to human rights and democracy. «Ethnic sensitivity» is now so encouraged that TPLF's leaders have introduced their version of apartheid South Africa's «population registration act» and decreed that all voters' identity cards should indicate clearly the ethnic origin of the holder!

These are some of the policies that have turned the ethnic problem in Ethiopia into a time bomb. ALL the peoples of this country (including the people of Tigray) have been denied and continue to be denied their fundamental human and democratic rights. Ethnic tension and hatred would be done away with only with the triumph of a pluralist order which should be the ultimate aim of all those democrats in Ethiopia who stand for brotherhood, equality and unity of all its ethnic groups.

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