

ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN ETHIOPIA- POST 1991

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INTRODUCTION

The social structure of many third world countries is multi-ethnic and is a fundamental factor that must be an integral part of the process of planned change. Ethnic pluralism can not be ignored and must occupy a central role in the strategies of development that are designed, till it will in due course be assimilated or eliminated in the process of development. Ethnic diversity, which is denied acknowledgement, when exploded, diverts enormous amounts of scarce resources from development to security and stability. Fanatically adhered ethnicity, on the other hand, is equally dangerous and self-annihilating. Such fanatic ethnicity sentiments can easily ignite into uncontrollable violence, completely out of proportion of the meaningful goal they initially were striving for.

Ethnic conflict that emerge as a result of both extremes has got a devastating effect which have been depicted in Rwanda, Democratic Congo, Nigeria, Liberia, Yugoslavia, Lebanon, Bangladesh and so on.

Questions on the nature of ethnic problem are varied and hence, ready-made answers may not be available. But a policy of mutual assistance and respect can serve common interest than hostility and estrangement.

Concept of Ethnicity

One can view ethnicity from different perspective. According to Ralph R.Premdas Ethnicity refers to collective group consciousness, that is shared sense of identification with larger community, it pertains to the percapita that one shares a common identity with particular group and is inturn so perceived by others. Ethnicity, then is akin to nationalism and for this reason, ethnic consciousness may be referred to as ethno-nationalism so as to point to the fact that many states contain several sub-communities with a sense of consciousness distinct from other similar groups. The second component of ethnicity that was stated by premdas was that, "points to certain putative communalities such as common language, religion, tradition etc. or a multiple coincidence of several of

these cleavages which together contribute to deep divisions in a state. These factors such as religion, race, language, custom etc. may be regarded as objective features which underlie ethnic identity and facilitate collective consciousness" (premdas, 1993).

Rothschild on the other hand view ethnicity in a wider scope. According to this view ethnicity refers "to behavioural effects of this variant of group membership. Specifically, ethnic group membership, as politically self-aware entity, confers symbolic solidarity satisfactions as well as instrumental and material advantageous (Rothschild, 1981). The important point here is that ethnicity is politically charged phenomenon whose consciousness is stimulated into existence by certain triggers such as group contact, decolonisation, modernization and policy choices by the state which in turn precipitate defensive group quest as well as initiative for symbolic and material gains. Consequently, ethnic group formation is expressed behaviourally as rival claims to those of other groups.

Ethnic group identity can be relational or conflicting. It is relational if it is marked in pursuit of an objective by an intensity of emotion aiming at community building, achieving real equality and exercising one's own culture, language, religion etc. they act rationally as pressure groups in pursuit of programmatic interests of their members. Denial of these rights through legal or illegal procedures and purposeful national oppression on the one hand, and fanatically followed irrational behaviour of ethnic groups, on the other, could be conflicting. Ethnic politics defining the direction of political change from the promise of democracy to seizure of power by one ethnic community could also be followed by social, economic and political conflicts.

But it is generally absurd to conclude that the mere existence of ethnicity is a precondition to conflicts. Therefore it is not ethnicity that causes conflict, but rather the way ethnic problem is handled that could be a cause for conflict.

The other important issue to be raised here is the linkage between ethnic conflict and human right abuses in ethnic conflict situations. The strategies to abuse human right include:

- a) Forced assimilation: - Forced assimilation involves an attempt by a dominant ethnic group to destroy the culture of certain other ethnic groups and to force them to adopt the dominant culture. The use of distinctive language, religion and specific customs will be discouraged or even banned and penalties imposed for expression of the culture under threat. The dominant culture and this will then be reflected in schooling, media and public interaction.
- b) Expulsion: - It is opposite to forced assimilation, it tries to remove certain ethnic groups from a given area or state. The Serbs' trial to expel ethnic Albanians can be cited as a recent example.
- c) Genocide: - when forced assimilation or expulsions are impossible then the dominant group may attempt to eliminate certain ethnic groups through mass murder. The case of Jewish in Germany during the Second World War and latest Hutus murder by Tutsis in Burundi are examples of genocide.
- d) Other mechanisms: - This include physical or psychological injury, brutal killings by death squads, depriving from basic requirements of life, discrimination in employment, housing and access to education, making an identity under threat and so on.

BACKGROUND TO THE POST 1991 ETHNIC CONFLICTS

Ethiopia is not only a country with long history, and the original sites settled by human earliest ancestors but also a country with an extra ordinary ethnic diversity that broadly belong to three main groups, Semitic, Cushitic and Nilotic origins. This might be why a famous historian called Carlo-Conti Rossini, described the country as a museum of peoples. These different ethnic groups interacted with each other in the political, economic and social arena. Their relations were not always marked by smooth harmony but also by dominance and subordination or by conflict, similar to the history of many nations. But what is peculiar to Ethiopia is that the pull and push dynamics among the various ethnic groups didn't affect the unity and integrity of the country for many

years. Internal conflicts were always compromised whenever there were threats to the country's independence from external forces. Moreover the process of migration and settlement from north to south, south to east and North and at times from east to west and north facilitated the process of assimilation and integration rather than confrontation and enmity among the various ethnic groups.

This, however, does not mean that there never existed political, economic and cultural claims by some ethno-national groups. It was these ethnic problems that were manifested in different forms such as exclusion from political participation, injustice in resource distribution and fears that an identity is under threat, which led to the incorporation of ethnic issues into the student movements of 1960's. TPLF (Tigrean peoples' liberation front) whose grand strategy remained ethnicity was the product of those days' student movements. Contrary to most African states who have sought to suppress ethnicity in the interests of a wider national unity, the TPLF programme recognized the futility of this approach and proposed a system in which self governing regions would gain the identity and legitimacy conferred by their common ethnic basis while retaining the ability to cooperate over matters of common concern. Following the overthrow of the Derg a nation wide ethnic movements were introduced to the country. This led to the formation of ethnically based political parties, many of which were affiliated to the EPRDF (Ethiopian peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front). Prisoners of war from different nationalities who were captured by TPLF during the war with the Derg were the core founders for the many of these parties, who lack experience in public affairs. These parties mobilized the mutually distrustful segments against each other and against whom many of them considered the ethnic oppressor the "neftegna". People who view themselves simply as Ethiopian without affiliating themselves with any particular ethnicity were not only favoured but also discouraged through different mechanisms such as discrimination in employment, labeling with the overthrown Derg and disfranchisement. Considerable economic, ethnic and cultural differences were highly magnified, than the ethnic integration, which was largely the result of a long process of assimilation among the people of certain ethnic groups. Moreover,

questions such as representation in political power, budget allocation, border issues, uninterferred internal self-administration etc. usually arose under the programme of ethnic federalism. EPRDF's constitutionally recognized policy of self-determination up to secession could not sustain some of the parties who claim to represent different nations and nationalities in the system.

As a result of this, all forms of ethnic conflicts including open ethnic clashes, activities of death squads, state detentions, deliberate depriving of individuals or groups of basic human rights, suppression of certain ethnic groups etc. were apparent in post 1991 Ethiopia.

Cases of Ethnic Conflict since 1991

The coming to power of the EPRDF following the demise of the Dergue, brought about the introduction of ethnic politics eventually perpetuating conflict among the many Ethiopian ethnic groups. The engineers of this policy, most probably, did not have the necessary experience in public affairs, especially in matters related to the management of society in diversity and unity.

Ethiopia is a country of huge ethnic complexity. Its peoples use many dozens of languages and consider them selves to be part of many different ethnic groups. Though for the most part people live in relative harmony, one can not deny that these difference resulted in conflicts as well.

If this differences are not duly and properly managed there can arise regrettable human catastrophe as the world witnessed in Rwanda and Yugoslavia very recently. The events in Rwanda in 1994 showed that the very worst could and did happen. However less the damages were, in approximately the same time in Ethiopia ethnic conflicts sought many human lives. Yet the world gave deaf ear to the atrocities committed in Ethiopia as a result of erroneous government policy and its practices.

The practices of ethnic policy in Ethiopia demanded expulsion and emigration of people. People who settled hundreds of Kms away from birth places of their own or of their parents were forced to leave the places where they lived generation long and emigrate to places where they would feel and be

considered "aliens". Nevertheless, this expulsion and emigration process was not a peaceful one. It wasn't only forced but also violent; people were beaten, shot, severely tortured, their possessions burnt or confiscated by the perpetrators of the conflict.

The Ethiopian Human Rights congress (EHRCO) is so far the only body engaged in selecting data and information of this nature. Following information was obtained from documents of EHRCO.

The Incident in Arsi

In Arsi Administrative Region, Arba Gugu Awraja, in Jeju, Godana, and Gololcha weredas and the Merti Awraja in the localities of Arboye Wanjelo, Asenabo, Weshebo, Angodechu and Wedaymena some 154 Christians are reported to have been killed or burnt in their homes. About 20 Christians were reported wounded. A large number of houses, including two churches were burnt. As a result thousands of people have become homeless. Moreover surviving victims have reported that large numbers of their livestock and goods in stores have been forcefully taken away from them. Other reported property damages include the dismantling of flour mills and the burning of granaries.

More and more violence

In Western Hararghe Administrative Region, in Habro Awraja 46 Christians were reported to have been killed in four localities. The loss of life, destruction of property and displacement of persons due to rivalry between ethnic organizations that started in Arba Gugu extended to other places in Arsi Administrative Region. The suffer of the people resulting from rivalry and armed conflict generated by ethnic organizations has escalated.

According to a complaint lodged to the EHRCO by the Christian Welfare Association of Ticho, Sude, Ameya and Seru Woredas of Arsi the following cases of violations were filed.

- That the Christian population in these areas could not lead a peaceful life.
- That in Kulu, Derreba and Diksis towns the population has been prevented from engaging in trade with each other and from going to the market.
 - That bandits have taken away the flour mill of the people and that Christians are prevented from using the flour mill of the Muslims.
 - That 13 Christians have been massacred and that many are detained and their property looted.
 - Serious problems have been reported from Arsi Administrative Region, Arba Gugu, Merti Jegu, Gololcha weredas. On January 30, 1992 at Merti wereda at a place called Mofer Ghibi, five persons have been found killed by unknown persons:
 - On April 3, 1992, two young boys aged eighteen and twelve were killed while going to water their cattle at a river in Arba Gugugu Awragja, Merti wereda, Wereba peasant Association.

In addition on April 7, 1992, within the same Arba Gugu Awraja two other persons were killed.

➤ In Southern Shewa Administrative Region, Haiqotch Awraja, Arsi Neghelle wereda non Oromo peoples living in the areas were attacked by Arsi Oromos. The following disturbing results have allegedly occurred since December 19, 1991 as reported by representatives of the Amhara and the Kembata living in that area.

- 60 deaths,
- 60 other persons wounded,
- 6205 heads of cattle looted,
- 64 houses with corrugated iron roof destroyed,
- Over 7246 houses set on fire,
- 1200 barns set on fire,
- 14,520 quintals of cereals looted,
- Crops on farms with a total area of 247 hectares set on fire,
- 12,766 corrugated iron sheets looted,
- 48 rifles expropriated illegally and forcefully,

- Church property estimated at about 431,120 Birr looted.

The total loss of houses and other properties is estimated to be about 931,782 Birr.

✎ In Metekkil Awraja, Diba Tena, Mandura Gungua weredas the representatives of the displaced Amharic speaking Moslems have reported the following actions allegedly committed by the Beni Shangul.

- many persons were burnt alive,
- many men were castrated,
- about 270 persons were shot and killed,
- 6833 houses were burnt,
- 6833 houses of residents in nine peasant associations were burnt down and the people were forcefully displaced,
- crops on farms and grains in stores as well as livestock were either looted or burnt.
- 185 mosques and schools were burnt.

As a consequence of all this some 60,000 persons are displaced and were under temporary open camps at Menta Wuha and Chagni towns without any shelter, clothing and medical facilities.

Atrocities committed at Beddenno

The atrocities committed against peaceful residents in the town of Beddenno is a serious violation of human rights. It is the responsibility of any government to maintain law and order and to protect the lives of its citizens. However, it is frightening to note that there was no established government force to maintain law and order in the area. It is further strange that these atrocities have not been revealed to the public for a long time. Even now, it is essential that the government should give special attention to the atrocities committed and bring to justice the persons responsible for this horrible criminal act. It is also the right of the Ethiopian public to know accurately what is presently happening in Arba Gugu, Arsi.

The complaint Lodged by All Amhara People's Organization

- Zone 3 council

The organization has lodged a complaint to the transitional government with regard to violence allegedly inflicted on the Amhara by EPRDF's OPDO in Arba Gugu Awraja, Jeju, Aseko and Guna weredas. It is stated that the loss of many lives and of property has occurred in these areas since June of 1991. It is alleged that armed Oromo groups along with Oromo people's Democratic Organization (OPDO) forces, a part of EPRDF, have fired against residents of Wemeta Lensho peasant association, threatened the residents to surrender their weapons, forced the people to attend a meeting and looted the property of the church and the residents of the area. It is also alleged that they had beaten and tortured many people. Initially, the OPDO forcefully disarmed the residents in Arba Gugu Awraja, Aseko wereda Qebele peasant associations. Eventually they returned the weapons to the Oromo people and not to the Amharas. In Guna wereda, in the localities of Dima Achale, Dima Bedaso, Dima Arera, it is reported that Amharic speaking persons have been detained without cause.

The organization has requested that a committee of non partisan groups be dispatched to the area, investigate the situation, have detained persons released, cause looted properties to be returned to the owners and bring those responsible to trial.

Inhuman and Illegal acts committed against the Guraghe Ethnic group in kefa and Ilubabor administrative regions:

A fact finding mission sent by the Guraghe people's democratic Front (GPDF) has ascertained that about 3000 persons of Guraghe ethnic background had been displaced and that, in addition, children are dying and that nursing mothers are facing hardships due to lack of medical care, shortage of food and shelter. The displacement of the Guraghe population is mostly in the areas of Limu and Diddessa awrajas. Although the displacement of other ethnic groups is comparatively small, non-Oromo ethnic people have also been displaced. This illegal act is continuing and expanding to adjacent areas causing the loss of life and destruction of property of the people. Those

responsible have not been brought to trial, because, it is alleged, the instigators of such unlawful actions are cadres of political organizations. The fact finding team of GPDF alleges that the government has not fulfilled its duty of maintaining peace and security in the area.

Guji Oromo and Gedeo Clash

Beginning from Hamle 15,1990 (July 22,1998), a conflict that occurred between the Guji Oromo and the Gedeo tribes living in many qebeles (peasant association areas) in Borena Zone, Hageremariam wereda, has resulted in the death and displacement of many members of the two tribes and considerable destruction of property has occurred.

Even though conflicts among pastoral groups in the area do occur, it is believed that conflicts of this magnitude are not known to transpire. Moreover, the usual reasons for conflicts between pastoral groups are not believed to account fully for the recent conflict between these two tribes. In addition to having developed, as a result of having lived together for ages, strong cultural ties, the two tribe have different subsistence systems with the Gedeo being largely settled farmers, while the Guji Oromo are pastoral nomads.

According to informants from the area, this huge conflict between the two tribes emanated not from what government spokespersons say, but from problems inherent in the government's regionalization policy as well as from the particular mistakes of officials assigned to implement that policy in the area.

Even though at the moment it may not be possible to estimate accurately the lives lost and the property destroyed by the conflict, various governmental and non-governmental sources have given their own estimates as shown below. Different though these estimates may be, even the loss of a single life should not have been passed with as little concern. Nevertheless, the government failed not only to prevent the conflict and, once it occurred, to reduce the damage caused by the conflict, but also to inform citizens with the view of mobilising their assistance to those affected.

Moreover, even though the government claimed to have successfully resolved the problem in accordance with the tribes' traditions, that this is not so and, indeed, that a conflict as serious as the first can occur in the future is indicated by discernible signs. Among these is the fact that when the government security forces that had been sent belatedly to the region to control the earlier conflict was ordered to leave the area about a month ago, the people, in fear, wanted to leave with the security forces, but calmed down when they realised that the security forces were reordered to stay in the area.

Concluding Remarks

The diverse ethnic groups of Ethiopia have over a very long period of time lived together in harmony. They have always managed to neutralize misunderstandings that bred amongst them. Never in the modern history of the country has a person or group of persons been subject to harassment and suffering because of ethnicity as today.

The ethnic policies initiated by the EPRDF since its coming to power has caused untold suffering to thousands of persons in different parts of the country. Though there are ethnic problems in Ethiopia, a policy which instigates further division of the society is far from being a solution to the problem. What happened in Rwanda together with the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia and the sharpening nationalism and ethnic hostility spreading through the Balkans caused many people to draw the profoundly pessimistic conclusion that while ethnic conflict could be pushed underground, the divisions would remain fundamental and incapable of resolution.

The rulers in Ethiopia need to follow the example of the new South Africa who is trying to prove the apposite. the overwhelming view of those who fought to end apartheid- a system based on ethnic oppression-was that they wanted to create a society based on respect for people of different ethnic groups. Such a society depends on successful political and economic changes and on people knowing, understanding and respecting each other.

Likewise, the problem in Ethiopia can be alleviated and gradually be solved by putting an end to the divisionism pursued by the EPRDF and by letting independent multi-ethnic civic societies to operate freely. Multi-ethnic civic societies can work towards normalizing inter-ethnic relations and further foster brotherly cooperation and relations among the various ethnic groups in Ethiopia. It is strongly believed that such measures would play highly constructive role in the democratisation process in Ethiopia.