

The State, Ethnic Conflict and Democratization in Ethiopia

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Introduction

If a country is cursed to live under a shadow of its history, Ethiopia has got a very few parallels in the family of nations, and certainly occupies a unique position in Africa. A political culture informed by war and hero-worshipping, which had produced Ethiopian leaders for generations, lies at the centre of this Ethiopian predicament. In fact, it is fair to characterize the history of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian state as the history of conflict.

In a more recent history of the country, the wars of expansion and conquest that led to the creation of the Ethiopian Empire-state in the last quarter of the 19th century and the historical dynamics that defined its subsequent evolution, had resulted in a domination of one or two ethnic groups over the multitude of others. And as part of that process, the independence of various ethnic groups was forcefully taken away, a massive alienation of land from the indigenous peoples was carried out for a hundred of years; the cultures and languages of the indigenous peoples were suppressed while the culture and the language of the dominating ethnic group were imposed on the subjected ethnic groups. In a nutshell, in the process of the forceful expansion of the Empire-state, the vanquished ethnic groups were subjected to politico-economic domination, linguistic and cultural suppression in the name of a "nation-building" project by successive Ethiopian governments. Such a process continued up to the third quarter of the 20th century, until it became unbearable to the various hitherto subaltern ethnic groups in the country. Put, simply, such a political and socio-cultural domination and the forceful alienation of land from the indigenous peoples, especially across much of the south have provoked national resistance of one form or another by the subjected peoples. By the turn of 1960s this led to a low intensity conflict (1961-1974 in Bale and Eritrea): a destructive civil war (1975-1991 in Eritrea, Tigray, the Ogaden and some parts of Oromo and Afar) and back to a low-intensity conflict since the change of regime in 1991 (Oromo, the Ogaden, Afar and some parts of Amhara areas).

The revolutionary response which promised to end the class and national oppression in mid-1970s not only failed to make a major departure from the past but also led the country to a bloody military interlude that decimated the cream of one dynamic generation. In the same way, the much

publicized democratization of the country since 1991 is foundering; the hoped for a clean break with past has failed to materialize, and once again, the reality on the ground seems to frustrate the expectations of many students of Ethiopian politics and the dreams of many ordinary citizens of Ethiopia. Now, the most pertinent question is: what is the way out of such a political impasse whose root is the competition for power and the ethnic conflict thereof?

This paper seeks to trace the root causes of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia and attempts to suggest genuine democratization as a sine qua non for brotherly relations for the various peoples of Ethiopia and their peaceful development.

II. Background to the Root Causes of Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is a multiethnic and multi-religious society-created out of centuries of both peaceful integration and wars of conquest among the various peoples of Ethiopia. The wars between the Judias, Christian and the Muslim ruling houses for several centuries, the Oromo expansion in the 16th and subsequent centuries, the wars of 'Zamana Mesafint' (Era of the Princes) in the second half of the 18th and the first half of the 19th century, etc; form part of the earlier history of conflict in Ethiopia while the wars of conquest and expansion into the eastern, southern as well as western part of Ethiopia in the second of the 19th century form the more recent phenomena of the country's history of conflict. By the end of the 19th century, such a historical process had led to:

- 1) the hegemony of the Shewan Amhara elite for a century to come, as the result of their role in the creation of the modern empire-state of Ethiopia;
- 2) the creation of Eritrea as a colonial entity, largely out of historic Ethiopia's northern outpost;
- 3) the relegation of the Tigrean elite to a junior position in the expanded empire-state of Ethiopia, a position with which they were never been comfortable for a century to come, and

- 4) the subjugation of the southern Ethiopian peoples to dual oppression; national as well as class.

Needless to add, a centre-periphery relationship had been created both at the level of the elites and their respective communities in much of the country. And what evolved as the result of such a phenomena was a political, economic and socio-cultural domination of various ethnic groups constituting the Empire-state by one or two ethnic groups controlling the political center. This meant, a loss of power, wealth and privilege for the regional elites while it was a loss of land, cultural identity; etc.; for the masses of people. And contrary to the claims of the empire builders, by the first years of the twentieth century, a full-fledged national oppression was in the making, inflicting serious historical wounds in the minds of the subjected peoples and their respective elite.

These historical grievances were passed on to the succeeding generations who have turned the historic grievances to holier causes of 'liberatory' agendas. Hence, by the 1960s and 1970s both ideologically and organizationally, the struggle to redefine the Ethiopian empire-state was in the making. The challenges were both within-led by a radical student Movement and without by regional and/or nationalist movements. The cumulative effects of these have been a pertual crisis as the result of a stubborn resistance from the privileged elite who had occupied the primary position at the center on the one hand, and the various forms of rebellions, mostly from the marginalized regional elites who have begun to advance the "emancipatory" goal of their respective peoples on the other. The rise of Eritrean, Oromo, Tigrean, Ethiopian Somalie, Sidama, etc., movements in the 1960s and 1970s had been part of that historical process.

Although, the Ethiopian revolution of 1974 was partly caused by national/ethnic oppression and the various resistances provoked by it, the country's military regime, which was able to steal the revolution from the popular forces could not solve the deep rooted conflict by its top-down approach of regional "autonomy" formula. In fact, its bloody military intervention, had further aggravated the ethnic cleavages among the country's population.

After years of devastating civil wars the military regime was overthrown in May 1991, mainly by the combined onslaught of regional/ethnic based movements. Since then, the victorious ethnic-based movement which took over state-power in Ethiopia, has been carrying out a surgical operation of the Ethiopian body-politics under a rubric of political democratization and economic liberalization. And to this end, in the hope of transforming the country from what popularly known as "barrack socialism" to a participatory democracy and free enterprise, a four-year transition period was completed in August 1995 resulting in the formation of a permanent government and the inauguration of the country's second republic.

During the four-year transition period: the institutions of multiparty democracy were introduced and three major elections were held in June 1992, 1994 and May 1995 and correspondingly, a new economic policy which allowed the "free" operation of the market forces was initiated. All these initiatives were aimed at transforming the Ethiopian state and society from authoritarian rule to multiparty democracy. However, inspite of the official claims about the democratic nature of the new regime, it is certainly clear that there is no clean break with the country's authoritarian past. To be sure, the country's fundamental political question-which way power is to be transferred-through the barrel of the gun or the ballot box is not settled for good. In short, Ethiopia's transition to democratic governance has already been foundered both under the burden of the autocratic past and authoritarian present.

What lie at the heart of the failures of Ethiopia's successive regimes to transform the country are: the aspiration for ethnic hegemony and politics of exclusion. During the imperial period, the quasi-divine and omnipotent Emperor with the claim of the mandate of heaven had institutionalized the hegemony of the Amhara elite under the guise of a 'nation-building' project. Despite, its far-reaching land reform and other political measures, the military regime also failed to go beyond the politics of exclusion. In the same manner, the much publisized EPRDF-led transition is yet another "ethnocratic state" under the guise of multiparty democracy. Hence, the root causes of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia have remained the lust for domination and hegemony by the successive ruling

elite of the country and the resultant politics of exclusion.

The Contradictory Visions of the Competing elite for Power and the Ethiopian Democratization Problematique

Ethiopians moved into the "Era of Multi-Party Politics" in May 1991 with the legacy of the autocratic and/or authoritarian past, but with a hope to create a new political system of governance. However, as we shall see below, the victorious guerrilla force was busy transforming the Ethiopian state and society according its own image. The TPLF/EPRDF has started to move at its own pace as well as at its own terms to implement its own hidden political agenda. In fact, the TPLF circumvented all the acid test for democratic transitions by going back over its publicly stated promises of "free and fair" elections and decentralized state power. It was with ease and comfort, it got approved the Charter it itself had authored at the July Conference, instituted the magical 87-seat council in which its dominance was ensured and initiated a number of far-reaching policy measures. All these were anchored in the Transitional Government controlled by itself.

The new policy measures have had the resultant effects of alienating and marginalizing the non-EPRDF-political parties; further ethnicizing the country's body-politic and thus laying down the basis for the inauguration of new authoritarianism in the country. The sad part of this Ethiopian predicament is the further polarization of the country's inter-ethnic relations.

Besides the politics of exclusion being practiced by the successive dominant elites of the country, the heart of the ethnic problem in Ethiopia lies in the contradictory visions and/or demands of the competing ethnic nationalisms of various ethnic groups constituting the country, Chief of which are: Oromo, Amhara, Tigray, Afar, Ethiopian Somalies, etc.

More specifically, the Tigrean nationalist cast the present problem of Ethiopia as a revanchist aspiration of the Amhara elite, hitherto the dominant elite of the country as well as the narrow nationalists conspiracy of the hitherto marginalized ethnic groups-Oromo, Ethiopian Somalie, etc.

On the other hand, the Amhara elite accuse the Tigrean elite as a narrow nationalist force with a hidden agenda of disintegrating Ethiopia while the Oromo elite accuse the Tigrean elite for its failure to democratize the country and fulfil the Oromo's quest for self-determination. Hence, the visions of the various elites are both contradictory and the negation of each other's dreams.

To be sure, each of the above visions carries in itself the political and ideological objectives of rationalizing and promoting the interest of the various forces locked in serious political struggle. To put more precisely, the Tigrean nationalists vision is to ensure the permanency of the hegemony of the Tigrean elite; the Amhara elite's vision is to re-establish the status quo ante of the imperial days while the Oromo elite's vision is to go beyond the present status quo by creating the 'Oromiya' republic. As a result of such a vision, all the competing elites of Ethiopia are pitted against each other.

What should be clear at this stage of our discussion is that, although history is invoked to justify the position of the competing nationalists in the Ethiopian political landscape, the central issue is the present "struggle for power, resource control and status". In fact, it is about access to political power and the privileges thereof by the elites of the competing ethnic groups in the country and it involves self-administration and political representation, language and the employment opportunities it creates, control of resources and work mobility, the cultural ethos and symbols of each group, etc. This means, the issue is who controls the Ethiopian state and the national cake under its control; who decides over the shares "who gets what and how much", whose culture and language should occupy the dominant position and whose is to be relegated to a secondary status? In practical terms, these conflicting demands of ethnic groups have led to a very complex and interwoven multidimensional conflicts in Ethiopia.

And at the centre of these struggles are the elites which are the main stake-holders more than any other section of the Ethiopian society and as such the prime mover of ethnic politics in the country.

The central question around us is how the country could be fully democratized under a political environment of a highly politicized ethnic nationalism?

To answer this key question, it is necessary to understand the following real issues in the Ethiopian democratization i.e. the pitfalls of past attempts at resolving ethnically motivated conflicts in Ethiopia; the nature of the demands of competing nationalism of the various ethnic groups; the specifics of the collective rights and individual rights to be guaranteed to enhance the democratization process; the contradictory aspects of the two groups of rights; the possible meeting points, if any, of the two groups of rights and whether there can be a trade-off between the two groups of rights; to what extent democratization can equally satisfy both the individual and collective demands of ethnic groups or whether it can ever resolve the riddle between individual and collective empowerment of citizens? the possible location of such universal and basic issues as social justice in the continuum and/or hierarchy of rights; to what extent ethnic-based political parties with their own political economic and cultural programmes coexist and work harmoniously with the multi-ethnic parties with their all-inclusive political agendas and the possible modalities of mediating their rivalry and competition or at times contradictory perspectives and programmes; to what extent an ethnic-based federal state structure can resolve the dilemma of democratizing multiethnic polities grappling with and caught between balancing group rights and individual freedoms; the role of civil society organizations that usually cross-cut the ethnic divides, and finally the consequences of failing to democratize the Ethiopian state and society.

What makes the above identified problems more complex is the differing goals of ethnic nationalism. That is, ethnic nationalism can be resistance against domination and social injustice with the aspiration of the right to self-determination, to improve one's relative position in the competition for "political power, resource control and status"; to defend the group's existing privileges or to regain its lost status. If we have to translate these goals into the Ethiopian situation, the goal of resistance against domination with the aspiration to the right of self-determination corresponds to the case of the Oromo; the question of improving one's relative position can correspond to the southern Ethiopian groupings; the struggle to defend existing privileges goes with Tigrean nationalism, while the aspiration to regain lost status can be identified with Amhara nationalism. And understanding these competing goals of ethnic nationalism in Ethiopia is very

important both to comprehend the complexity of ethnic nationalism in the country and suggest appropriate solutions for the resultant crisis. The democratization enterprise under such political environment can be improved if:

- a) the ruling elite begins to think in terms of the sense of history and develop a political will so as to prepare the ground genuinely for democratic transformation;
- b) the opposition is unified around a democratic platform and seriously challenge the existing status quo by mobilizing the ordinary folks for a democratic cause;
- c) the emerging civil society could intervene positively in the workings of the political society.

These factors can positively reinforce each other and help the democratization process in the country. Especially, understanding the disastrous effects of Zero-sum-game politics by the governing elite is very critical in lessening the agony of transition in Ethiopia.

Concluding Remarks

As we can easily grasp from our preceding discussion, the chronic problem of ethnic conflict in Ethiopia and the resultant crisis thereof is organically linked with the country's war culture and its elites consistent adherence to Zero-sum-game politics. In such a political environment, the political will on the part of the elites leading the various nationalism is central in creating accommodative political structures around the principles of democracy and democratic governance. To be sure, it is only then that a 'New Social Contract' can be reached between and among the various ethnic groups of the country, and ethnic harmony is created for a common good. And finally civil society movements such as the Brotherly Peoples can make an important contribution towards the goal of creating harmonious relations across ethnic divides in a democratized 'New Ethiopia'.

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