

**TOWARDS the BUILDING of CIVIL SOCIETY in ETHIOPIA and the
URGE to TRANSCEND the CONFINES of EXCLUSIVIST ETHNO-
NATIONALISM**

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines past and present impediments that hampered the taking shape and development of civil society in Ethiopia. In doing so it tries to identify the political and socio-economic forces and factors that played the pivotal role for the prevalent state of affairs. The current situation is characterised by the diminished role of civil society in contributing towards democratic transformation. The author believes that the persistence of past bottlenecks and drawbacks is compounded by the fragmentation of society as a result of the ascendance of ethnic politics at present. One could thus justifiably argue that there is a need to withstand the challenges of the current politics of ethnic polarisation which could be detrimental to the well-being and prosperity of all the peoples of Ethiopia. The recognition of such a danger, therefore, makes it obligatory to transcend the mutual and reciprocal antagonisms and suspicions that pervaded several aspects of societal interactions. This could be achieved by working towards the construction of a formidable civil society based on democratic principles. This undertaking also calls for the prevalence of the rule of law anchored on equality of persons, cultures, and values of ethnic communities, the entrenchment of basic rights and freedoms that could nurture social, political and economic development of the peoples of Ethiopia, and the unhampered and equitable participation of all eligible citizens in determining their common destiny and deciding on issues of common concern, etc.

In order to attain such goals, it is incumbent upon all concerned to strive towards the prevalence of an overall political environment characterised by tolerance, reciprocal accommodation, and respect for human rights and the rule of law. The taking shape and development of good governance on the basis of the consent of citizens and well-considered principles, therefore, becomes indispensable to attain prescribed goals. Such an atmosphere is eventually bound to bring about a formidable social healing which undermines the taking effect of biases, prejudices, and reciprocal hatreds. It is to be noted that these are allowed to take effect on the grounds of such traits as ethnicity, religion and other primordial conceptions.

With this in mind, this paper makes a brief appraisal of the current situation. Furthermore, it attempts to point at the possible solutions presumed to lead to the resolution of the fundamental contradictions impeding the coming into being of a civil society that could play an active role in effecting democratic transformation.

2. BACKGROUND

Ethiopia is a land of diversities posing as a mosaic of ethnic and language groups, cultures, contrasting ecological zones and physical configurations. It is strategically located in the region commonly known as the Horn of Africa with a population of over 50 million inhabiting a territory of about 1.1 million sq. km. The marked ethnic heterogeneity characterising the polity is an outcome of protracted migration and continuous settlements resulting from conquests, displacements and resettlements. The ethnographic profile of the country depicts the existence of numerous groups speaking about eighty languages and over a hundred dialects.

The history of the land, which evolved as a result of struggles for hegemony and easy access to the amenities of life, is alleged to have impacted on some of the major events that are being witnessed at present.

It is claimed (Gebru 1991) that state formation in Ethiopia took place in a setting of cultural heterogeneity the process of which was required to go through protracted struggles and perpetual conflict. Available historical records show that the initiation of the state took shape in the northern part marking the genesis of the Axumite Kingdom as early as few centuries before Christ. During subsequent periods, this Kingdom transformed itself into a kind of quasi empire by annexing and incorporating territories and localities around and beyond the Red Sea coastal areas and to the frontiers in the South away from the center (Tadesse 1972, Thomson 1975, Africa Watch 1991).

Christianity was introduced into, and adopted in Axum around the first decades of the fourth century. This played a vital role in shaping the behaviors and responses of the state and creating an atmosphere of mutual convenience and complementarity on the one hand, and rivalries and competitions on the other. During the final decades of the last millennium, the centre of the state began to shift towards the south of the ancient heartland. This is alleged to have been caused by such factors as demographic pressures calling for new and more conducive hospitable spots, insurgencies by subject peoples threatening the security of the state, and the progressive intrusion of Islam that was hostile to the establishment. Hence the decline and fall of Axum as the centre of influence.

In the process of such a retreat , the interplay between old and new elements in the form of encountering different peoples with distinct attributes was experienced. The new posture of the polity thus assumed a myriad of diverse national and religious groups with differing economies, polities, ideologies and kinship systems. Subsequent periods were marked by series of instabilities prompted by regional and dynastic rivalries, internal centrifugalism and external invasions. Significant among these were, the convulsions entailed as a result of the drive to maintain the "Solomonic" line at the helm of state power as opposed to the aspirations of other pretenders (13th century) , the rise and expansion of Ottoman power triggering the assertive stance of Ethiopian Muslims (16th century) and the weakening of central authority caused by the proliferation of warlordism and fragmented regionalism as expressed in what is known as the "Era of Princes" (the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries). Chaos and anarchy was terminated following the rise of Theodros II (1855 - 1869) who reasserted both the image and authority of the state. Theodros' successors, Yohannes IV and Menelik II, followed the former's path in their attempts to consolidate the state.

Apart from striving to retain whatever was at its disposal , the state was simultaneously engaged in the exercise of territorial expansion by way of annexations and incorporation of principalities alleged to have led independent existence before. Brandishing historical claims as justifications for his actions and employing an admixture of diplomacy and military prowess, Menelik II prevailed on a formidable empire which he helped to take shape. The advent of the empire state under Menelik is widely held responsible for ushering the phenomenon of "modernity " on the one hand and effecting the subjugation of peoples of the annexed territories. Mekuria (1988) and Markakis (1994) argue that the coercive incorporation of the people of the conquered lands stored the potential for conflict in the nature of relationships formed between those who controlled the state and those who became its subjects.

3. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS UNDER HAILE SELASSIE

Both during his regency and after assuming supreme power in 1930, Haile Selassie I was preoccupied with carrying out of tasks for consolidating the accomplishments initiated by Menelik II. Until he was ousted by the revolutionary upsurge of 1974, Haile Selassie strived to infuse changes that were in line with new developments, both at home and abroad. However, utmost attention was lent to factors that were deemed to facilitate the

entrenchment of his omnipotence and personalised rule. The relatively increased integration of the country into the wider framework of the global political economy, the progressive retreat of some aspects of traditional values resulting from increased exposure to modern life, etc. contributed to the changes experienced the time. Greater awareness relating to developments in other parts of the world on the one hand, and better understanding of the situation in the country by many Ethiopians on the other, triggered demands and claims for fair and equitable distribution of societal values. It is worth noting, however, that the nature of the system was neither willing nor capable of providing avenues and leeway for betterment of state of affairs despite the introduction of series of reforms in many fields. At a later stage the reforms and other modest accomplishments of the period under discussion were viewed as measures intended to provide efficiency to the centralised and autocratic rule headed by the person of Emperor Haile Selassie.

Failing to transcend the confines of limited goals and purposes for which they were designed, the haphazard reforms introduced by Haile Selassie did not succeed in containing the effects of claims and demands which developed into formidable challenges over time. These challenges were expressed in varying forms like calling for further reforms and adjustments within the framework of existing structures on the one hand, and calling for the need to dismantling the entire establishment and replace it with a completely different arrangements on the other.

The reluctance of the system to respond to the democratic aspirations of society revolving around political, economic and socio-cultural issues rendered state-society relations to assume a crisis-ridden facade. Demands for equity, social justice, democratic governance and fair distribution of societal values basically remained unanswered and eventually led to the popular upheaval and mass protests which culminated in the events of the 1974 revolutionary upsurge. The system lost legitimacy because it was widely viewed as plodding, evasive, basically conservative and mainly interested in perpetuating itself than bringing about change for the betterment of society (Keller 1988).

4. The 1974 Revolution : An Attempt to Effect Democratic Transformation of Society

In addition to the structural drawbacks conditioned by the effects of the workings of the Ethiopian political economy, a brief summary of immediate causes that triggered the February 1974 popular upheaval would be worth while :

First, the progressive deterioration of quality of for many Ethiopians, particularly in the rural areas, resulting from increased failure in entitlement and aggravated by hosts of natural adversities :

Second, growing student activism, labour unrest, peasant uprising and marked dissidence on the part of the urban elite which militated against the establishment vocally calling for socio-economic and political reforms;

Third, the apparent opening up of an arena of struggle, rivalry and competition among splinter groups within the ranks of the ruling elite;

Fourth, the wavering loyalty of the members of the armed forces owing to discontents relating to administrative and logistical matters ;

Fifth, widespread disaffection caused by consumer price hikes due to international economic factors like the 1973 oil shock ;

Sixth, the taking shape of nationalist / regionalist and religious dissidence which resented the manner in which the regime had tackled issues affecting aspirants ;

Apart from concurrence on the general goal of dismantling the *status quo* it did not appear that all forces of change had given much thought to what was needed to be done following the fall of imperial rule . As Marcus (1974) affirms, there were no political parties that could generate competing agenda for action. Posing as the armed wing of the then unfolding popular protest and mass discontent, the provisional Military Administrative council, *alias* the *Dergue*, was formed by the armed forces . This body was composed of a group of non-commissioned and junior officers as elected representatives of the various units and contingents of the defense and security establishments. The *Dergue* was thus vested with responsibilities for carrying out the functions of the state, on an interim basis, "until such time that a popularly elected constitutional government takes over " .

Series of major ideological and policy shifts presumed to symbolise drive towards an overall betterment by effecting fundamental changes were made. Reform measures began to unfold around the first months of 1975 beginning with the nationalisation of rural and urban land and providing for the creation of new units of local government in the form of peasant Associations (PAS) and Urban Dwellers' Associations (UDAs) . "public" ownership of the commanding heights of the modern economic sector (Banks, insurance companies, manufacturing enterprises ...) was also declared simultaneously . Further, dismantling the edifice upon which the old order has rested in terms of functionaries, institutions, values and overall *modus operandi* became one of the major preoccupation of the early period. To this end, considerable measures of politicization and mobilisation, complemented by a host of legislation in tune with the new drives, were effected . These relate to legal sanctions designed to address a plethora of demands and claims surrounding such issues as ethnic and religious equality, civil liberties and democratic rights, etc. as enshrined in the National Democratic Revolution Program (PMAC 1976) which clearly spelt out the socialist-orientation of the revolutionary drive .

In the wake of the eventful occurrences of the early years, groupings with varying political frames of mind also came into the scene. Most among these invoked the Marxist-Leninist solution as regards the important issues of concern at the time. The tactics and strategies of the political groups, however, displayed significant discrepancies culminating in mutual animosities. Such hostile relations were not merely confined to verbal exchanges and inter-party polemics, but assumed a stance of physical violence and reciprocal destruction .

In a similar fashion, the PMAC was also strife-ridden as manifested in series of bloody purges that took place in its ranks repeatedly. Eventually, a faction within the PMAC led by Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as winner. After physically eliminating its remaining rivals within the ruling council in January 1977, the Mengistu clique placed itself in a position that enabled it to shape the destiny of the country in the years to come. Civilian opposition was contained following the effective and violent destruction of almost all the important political groups between 1977 and 1980. After firmly entrenching itself in power through ruthless employment of the repressive machinery of the state, the Mengistu regime had to reckon with few remaining challenge. These included the then outspoken Somali irredentism and the intensified insurgent activities in Eritrea and Tigray .

5. State - Society Relations : 1974 - 1991

Whether the allegiance that the revolution has managed to command in the early days was to persist, or the erosion of this support base was to follow in the coming years depended on the accomplishments or drawbacks of its exponents. Following the decimation of the nascent civilian opposition groups, the Mengistu dictatorship manifested authoritarian tendencies expressed in gross abuses aimed at curbing all forms of dissent and criticism. Massive purges and ruthless repression against the leadership and rank and file members of the various components of civil society suspected of harbouring discontent of one kind or other became the order of the day. Such state of affairs did not spare even the ranks of the armed forces and other pockets of power which were once viewed as the strong allies of the regime. The whole country, with the exception of the insurgents in the North, was engulfed in chaos, anarchy and terror.

The TPLF and EPLF were considerably strengthened owing to the ever growing support of their local populations which were antagonised to the regime. The disillusioned elite from other nationalities opted for initiating nationalist movements with such leading slogans as the right to self-determination. These believed that the lofty ideals of the 1974 Revolution have been supplanted by the then emerging naked despotism .

Under the *Dergue*, ideology-driven projects alleged to address political, socio-cultural and economic maladies were launched without taking note of objectively existing concrete situations. These were far from being congruent with the desires and wishes of the people and devoid of legitimate rationale and justification for their taking effect. Besides, a mix of both man made and natural factors led to the taking shape of a severe famine situation as of the early 1980s which culminated in a formidable catastrophe in 1984/85. The alienation of the masses of the people due to faulty and defective policies and praxis entailed a progressively widening antagonism against the regime and laid a favourable ground for the proliferation of armed opposition movements. These were spearheaded by nationalist fronts mainly based in Eritrea and Tigray . The response to such developments on the part of the Mengistu regime was to make intensive use of brute force without recourse to look for other solutions that could end the crisis. Hence the escalation of a full-fledged civil war. In spite of the regime's attempt to resort to political gimmicks by way of inaugurating a bogus "Republic" aimed at lending a democratic semblance to its autocratic rule, the armed opposition staged a considerable challenge culminating in the demise of the Dergue around mid 1991 .

6. Appraisal of the Current Situation : Politicised Ethnicity in the Post-1991 period

After dismantling the political and war machinery of the *Dergue*, the incumbent EPRDF formed a Transitional Government in collusion with other groups most of which claimed to represent ethnic groups inhabiting the different parts of the country. The Transitional Government was formed on the basis of a Charter designed to serve as an interim constitution. The Charter endorsed respect for human rights in accordance with the UN Declaration of December 1948; freedoms of conscience, expression, association and unrestricted peaceful political activities; the right of nations / nationalities and peoples to self determination ; the establishment of national / regional councils for self-rule. etc.

Alongside the initial optimism prompted by the ousting of the Mengistu dictatorship, a constituency of discontent opposed to some policy directions and measures of the EPRDF surfaced immediately after the overthrow of the *Dergue*. These relate to the prohibition of some multi-ethnic political groups from participating in the newly initiated political process, the official endorsement of ethnic politics, the secession of Eritrea, and the wholesale disbanding of the defense and security forces. The controlling of all the reins of power by the TPLF-led Transitional Government enabled the EPRDF to steer the country in accordance with the tenets enshrined in its political programme. In order to lend its sacrosanct catchword - the right of nations / nationalities to self-determination - the TPLF / EPRDF introduced policy measures for instituting national /regional state - governments (TGE 1992). These were established on the basis of ethno-linguistic considerations and were designed to pose as the constituent parts of the then envisaged Federal State of Ethiopia. Subsequently, national/regional and lower level units and nuclei of local government on which the EPRDF candidates presided overwhelmingly were set up. The approach employed to effect the decentralisation drive was also dubbed as a breakthrough that could nurture a sense of belonging vital to the "building of the new Ethiopia" based on the free will of the different ethnic groups.

Thus ethnicity became the epicentre of political life and nation-building. Article 39 of the FDRE constitution categorically pronounced "the right of nations/nationalities and peoples to self-determination including and upto secession". The passing of Article 39 was unparalleled in the history of constitution making in Ethiopia. In the past, such

exercises regarded territorial integrity as sacrosanct. Crafting an ethnicity-based federated Ethiopian entity could inherently pose practical problems owing to the overlapping of several crucial variables and attributes. These include socio-cultural and demographic factors, claims and counter-claims on localities of human settlement and natural endowments, and potential competition on factors pertaining to economic resources. One could thus justifiably argue that given the EPRDF's formula of decentralisation, it is extremely difficult to draw a clear line based on ethno-linguistic homogeneity.

Territorial contiguity also endangers the proposed project of ethnic federalism. More specifically, pockets of the areas inhabited by the larger ethnic groups can be found in more than one regional entity. This was historically determined by settlements and population movements of the past in various forms. Following the taking effect of this project, claims and counter-claims pointing at certain areas as the source for competition and rivalry are already on the rise. Thus the ethnic federalism formula has already precipitated the pitting of people against people (RAGPEHA 1995).

Another problem that can be expected to arise from the ill-conceived decentralisation approach of the EPRDF relates to the uneven resources endowments of the different regions. Whereas some regions enjoy advantages in terms of land size and fertility, skilled manpower, minerals, and structural features of production, others are found at a low level in these respects. This is likely to result in regional imbalances which could lead to fierce competitions culminating in the prevalence of an overall atmosphere of conflict. In this regard, there are already ample signs of discontent among some ethnically organised groups whose members feel that they could be better-off in disengaging from the federal partnership anchored on the new arrangement. These groups feel that others who are disadvantaged in terms of endowment continue to benefit at their expense. The politicisation of ethnicity that gathered momentum and gained currency in post-1991 Ethiopia is thus bound to lead to another vicious cycle of antagonism unless remedial rectification measures are introduced in good time. As Bahru (1992) cautioned:

To deny the principal of national self-determination is both unprincipled and impolitic. But to elevate that principle . . . to the level of creed and not to relate it to the country's pressing economic needs and the international context can only bring trouble.

My contention against the present arrangement of things with regard to the nationality question in Ethiopia is that it will entrench a sense of parochialism and centrifugal

the ethno-regional divide could flourish. Moreover, the current trend impedes the articulation of interests of Ethiopian society on the basis of unity and equality. However, it should be noted that this assertion does not imply that there are no issues of ethnicity which still need to be addressed. The redressing of historical wrongs pertaining to inequalities of all kinds that surfaced over the centuries and nurtured a sense of alienation and marginalisation is indispensable. This calls for concerted legal/constitutional and practical actions on the part of both society and government in a manner that aims at resolving the underlying antagonisms and pertinent problems.

7. What is to be Done ?

The pretensions of the successive Ethiopian political regimes that vowed to effect positive societal transformation have failed to pass the litmus test of time and legitimate aspirations of the people. The discrepancy between rhetoric and practice which has been the hallmark of mainstream Ethiopian politics entailed far-reaching implications negatively impinging on the sense of belonging to the polity and the legitimacy of governments. This negatively affected the entrenchment of mutual trust and respect among the various ethnic groups and sections of Ethiopian society.

The pseudo constitutional stances of the imperial government imbued with the divine right mythology miserably failed to provide the expected "public good". The self-styled "socialist" military regime, that supplanted the monarchy, intensified social and political polarisation in society thereby laying the ground for an overall conflict that engulfed the entire country at one point in time. The EPRDF-led regime of the post-1991 years, which brandished its untested democratic credentials on its way to power, is preoccupied with series of measures that cannot address the basic problems of democracy and all-rounded positive transformation. The misgivings of the three regimes differ only in terms of their extent with regard to specific aspects of life pertinent to state-society relations. The drawbacks that negatively affected the basic concerns of the peoples of Ethiopia as witnessed in the working of the different governments remained the same in essence.

The current state of affairs, which is the cumulative effect of persistent undoings over the years, warrants the consideration of a host of remedial measures aimed at curing the formidable maladies characterising prevalent problems. It is rightly believed that the unabated continuation of negative policies, perceptions and practice could culminate in

devastating consequences if kept unchecked. It is, therefore, incumbent to propose the following and work towards their realisation :

- a) The prevalence of the rule of law formulated on the basis of the free consent and participation of eligible citizens;
- b) Establish a system and mechanism for exercising rights and effect accountability of citizens and officials alike;
- c) Encourage channels and media for the populace to express their views on issues and important matters of individual, group, and societal concern and facilitate conditions for the right of ethnic groups/nationalities to advance their cultures, languages, values and other positive traits;
- d) Recognise the rights of Ethiopian nationalities to run their own affairs and administer themselves on the basis of agreed-upon democratic rules and procedures;
- e) Create a conducive socio-economic and political environment for the proliferation of civil society organisations, professional associations, self-help groups, unions, etc.
- f) Promote the notion and sense of pan-Ethiopian nationalism on a par with democratic ethnic nationalism.
- g) Sensitise on the compatibility of ethnic belonging with that of the Ethiopian identity and encourage the need to nurture a sense of common destiny by emphasising the congruence of the interests of the brotherly peoples of Ethiopia.

Conclusion

The termination of the civil war, the lifting of press censorship and the flourishing of the private print media, the relative freedom relating to unrestricted movement of goods and people, and the introduction of a relatively liberal economic policy replacing the centrally planned economic model are some of the achievements witnessed since the fall of the *Dergue*. Besides, attempts to institute democratically elected constitutional governments at various levels have been made. A federal form of government with relatively expanded political space signifying local autonomy has been witnessed. Official statistics depict that there are encouraging signs of recovery concerning most sectors of the economy. These and other similar accomplishments constitute the credit column of the balance sheet.

on the other hand, many people are suffering from the impacts and harsh effects of the “Structural Adjustment Programme” embraced by the new regime. The ethnicisation of politics is also viewed as having undermined the prospects for unity and cohesion among members of society. Ample instances of human rights abuses undermining of the rule of law, manipulating elections, etc. are reported as sins committed by the new incumbents. As Abbink (1995) argues, though much has changed as compared to the former government, the foundations of new power structures and of what is defined as democracy and accountability presently underway deserves close scrutiny. Given that events of the last few years have been marked by serious defaults and drawbacks, it is high time to undertake the proposed rectification measures to avert the inevitable convulsions of the future.

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