

Isn't Oromia a creation of OLF ? Reply to Lencho Letta [Naomi Begashaw]

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In its latest article entitled, “The origin of ethnic politics in Ethiopia”, Lencho Letta, a former OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) now ODF (Oromo Democratic Front), warned of any efforts to undo the current ethnic federalism, imposed on the people two decades ago by TPLF and OLF.

“Those aspiring to undo the extant multinational federation need to carefully re-examine their project for its success does not look likely without horrendous bloodshed. Despite its undeniable practical shortcomings, no national community would willingly give up the right to self-government enshrined in the present Constitution” Lencho wrote.

To those who argued that the current ethnic constitution is imposed by TPLF and the OLF, the message of Lencho is unrepentant and dismissive. “Political groups are merely wasting their time and energy by arguing to the contrary” he writes, arguing that the ethnic federation that is believed to be the root cause of many ethnic tensions in the country, as the natural outcome of the “circumstance existing already”, rather than the “noble or ignoble intentions of the incoming ruling group (TPLF and OLF).

Allow me to share few points that show some serious weaknesses of Lencho’s argument.

1. Is the current federalism a multi-national federalism?

Lencho is referring the federalism we have now in Ethiopia as a multinational federalism, a federalism of “nations”.

First we have to define what we mean by “Nation”. The words Nations Nationalities and peoples are mentioned numerous time in the Ethiopian constitution. The interpretation of these words though, depends often on who you ask.

Article 39 sub article 5 of the Ethiopian constitution gave a definition for “Nation Nationality and People”.

“The term “nation, nationality and people” shall mean a community having the following characteristics: People having a common culture reflecting considerable uniformity or similarity of custom, a common language, belief in a common bond and identity, and a common consciousness the majority of whom live within a common territory.”

The same definition is given for the words “nation”, “nationality” and “people”. A “multinational federation” can also be equated as a “multi-nationality” or a “multi-people federation”.

For Lencho Letta, Ethiopia is a country of many “Nations”. There is the Oromo Nation, Amhara Nation, Tigre Nation, Gurage Nation, Welayta Nation, Gumuz Nation, and Hamer Nation ...etc.

Therefore if we agree to Lencho's characterization of the federalism we have in Ethiopia as multinational federation, then we should have had more than 80 federal states for we have that much "nations" in Ethiopia. But we do not have that much states.

- In Amhara region there are the Agews, the Oromos(Kemisse) which by themselves are also "nations".
- "Gonderes" and "Weloyes" that may be considered by Lencho as "Amharas" are incorporated in Tigray.
- In the southern region, a huge number of "nations" were bundled together in one new state called "Dehub".
- Within Oromia, there are people who have a common culture reflecting considerable uniformity or similarity of custom, a common language, belief in a common bond and identity that may be different from those who consider themselves "oromos". For instance we can consider population hubs like Addis Ababa, Diredawa, Adama and Jimma as "Nations". Though Addis Ababa and Diredawa are chartered cities, still they are not recognized as states and officially lumped up within Oromia.

So in Ethiopia we do not have a "multinational" federation. What we have is a federation that is created to strengthen the grip of power of TPLF, appease the OLF and intentionally diminish the power base of what they called "Naftagnas". It is a federation imposed by the few, the victorious of a war, on the majority, purposefully aimed at creating wedges and division among different ethnic groups of Ethiopia.

2. Language politics

Lencho mentioned the 1933, "only Amharic" proposal of the then Minister of Education, Sahlu Tsedalu, to justify the ethnicization of the backward ethnic politics.

"Unity is the strength of a country, and the sources of unity are language, custom and religion It is thus necessary to legally preserve in the whole of Ethiopia only Amharic and Ge'ez" said Minister Sahlu back then.

That was 82 years ago. The problem with the current Oromo radicals like Lencho Letta is their "sahlu Tsedale" like attitude; this time it is the Afan Oromo only policy. That is why, when they call for Afan Oromo to be a working language of the federal government, they resist making Amharic a working language of Oromia. That is why they do not allow Ethiopians in Oromia to learn Amharic in their schools. (Per the opposition of the people, only in Adama area, Amharic is given as a subject, which is an exception). In Adama where 75% of residents are non-Oromos, residents have to file papers, forms and get services in the Adama municipality and the courts only in Afan Oromo. Unless you speak Afan Oromo, you can work in Oromia government offices and cannot run for election. Their politics is not really a pro-oromo politics but an anti-amhara politics.

Languages cannot be source of divisions, hate and war. Languages are communication tools. Instead of the 1933 "Amharic only" or the current "Afan Oromo only" policies, why not have a pro Afan-Oromo and pro-Amharic policies? Why not teach our children both languages? Why go back to the past and grow when we should look forward? Why not look for the common good of all?

3. Yes to Federalism

Lencho and others like the infamous Jawaar Mohamed, often confuse the public, equating those who oppose the current ethnic federalism as advocating a unitary, non-federal system. The truth the matter is almost all major opposition groups (UDJ, Semayawi, AEUP, EDP, Medrek) advocate for a federal system. Ethiopians must be a federal country. Power needs to be decentralized; and the best way to achieve that is to have a true federal arrangement.

However the federal system must be a system that reflect the will of “nations”, not only the Tigray and Oromo “nations”. It needs to be a system where the right of people to govern themselves is respected. It must be a federal arrangement that give priority to human rights, that can sustain itself independently economically and convenient to the people.

I believe it is time to be free from the past and focus on humanity and citizenship rather than ethnicity. What brings us together is more powerful that what divides us. Oromo elites like Lencho, instead of bringing up all wounds, instead of advocating the building of monuments of hate like Anole and Chelenko, ought to critically think about how they can achieve freedom, equality, and economic progress within the Oromo community as well as elsewhere in Ethiopia in an equitable and fair manner.

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