

## **THE SORROWS OF ETHNIC FEDERALISM IN ETHIOPIA**

At the end of 2015 and going onto the first weeks of 2016, about 140 Oromo youth were murdered, and about 5,000 incarcerated by forces of the ruling Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF)/Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party. Their crime? They participated in a peaceful demonstration protesting the widespread dispossession of farmlands in the Oromia regional state bordering the capital Addis Abeba. A similar protest, although not claiming as many lives, had taken place nearly 2 years ago in some areas of the regional state. The federal government and the regional party OPDO have since halted the policy of the expansion of the planned development into Addis's suburban areas. Civil disobedience, as part of the peaceful struggle in Ethiopia, empowered the protesters and proved once again that Ethiopians can assert their natural rights by engaging in peaceful, defiant acts.

Normally, the planning and execution of a development plan in other places would involve local inputs, a series of consultations and environmental controls and mitigations. However, these have not been normal times in Ethiopia. Big and small things alike fall within the purview of an ethnic federal arrangement in effect since 1995 through the instrument of a constitution – a constitution from whose origination and adoption major stakeholders were deliberately excluded. Under this constitution, Addis Abeba is a chartered, federal city while Oromia is one of 9 regional states.

Federalism is in a major way an outgrowth of democracy and is a glue sticking the periphery to the center in a clearly defined shared power. In the absence of democratic rule as the Ethiopian case shows, federalism is a zero sum game where groups are in permanent competition with each other, trying to outdo each other and maximize their gains. TPLF, as the first among equals, usually makes the decisions on who gains and who loses, and one of the ways an ethnic group can maximize its gain is by closely allying itself with TPLF and doing its biddings.

Sadly, Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, initially drafted by TPLF/OLF and Shabiya as they started ruling what was once one country now split into two, has resulted in multi-dimensional problems too many to list them all here. TPLF has taken lands that were previously in Wollo and Gondar provinces and added them to the domain of the Tigray regional state; the port of Assab, despite the pleadings of the Afar people who live around there, and the pleas of other Ethiopians, has been ceded to the new Eritrean state; Amharic speakers and to a lesser extent other Ethiopians mostly engaged in commerce and trade and living outside of "their linguistic group's kilil (regional state)" have been forcefully evicted, frequently murdered and maimed

(in Wollega, Harer, Beni Shangul and the Southern regions. There were reports that families were thrown off cliffs in Harer). The economic power and high political status that accompanies a region has even triggered sub-ethnic elites within an ethnic group to successfully lobby to be recognized as distinct to make sure that they are not onlookers in the loot. The Silti elites, successfully orchestrated the split from their ethnic brethren the Gurages despite the latter's opposition, and formed a "People's Democratic Organization" (PDO) joining the network of corrupt, ethnic PDO parties clamoring for status and economic gain. Following the Siltis, the Kimants asserted their independence from Amaras in Gondar and secured some woredas as their distinct homes, and lives were lost in the inter-communal clashes regarding their claim. The regime is rumored to encouraging each group to go after the other, and then playing an arbitrator (shimagelle) to settle the disputes.

Who is next in line for separate identity lobby and clash? Those who claim affinity to long dead linguistic groups?

The Sidama elites were not as successful as these others, despite their census numbers proving they are the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> highest population group in the nation. Their attempt to get their own kilil is so far unsuccessful despite their convincing argument invoking the case of the Hararis who are much smaller than them in terms of numbers, and yet, because of the Hareri League party's close collaboration with TPLF, enjoy a unique position to administer the city of Harer. Then there is the sad fact of inter-ethnic clashes between ethnic groups that is either new, or that has gotten worse by EPRDF's ethnic federalism. Pastoralists and farmers competing for limited grazing land and farmland have repeatedly clashed in Borena and Guji. Agnuaks and Nuers have also clashed, with Agnuaks mostly at the receiving end of the clashes. As befits a country that is embroiled in backward, inward looking perspective, statues have gone up in some areas commemorating purported past injustices. The war memorial statue of a severed breast at Anole in Arsi is a case in point. It would be a source of laughter had it not been tragic to surmise the number of statues and war memorials that could spring up in the nation for a country with over 3,000 years of history! The Gojjameis would need a statue to memorialize Atse Yohannes's pillage of war in the 19<sup>th</sup> century during King Tekle Haymanot's reign there; Wolloyes would need to erect a statue of severed hands to memorialize the cruel punishment meted out by an angry King Tewodros. Central and northern Amaras could erect a statue of their victimhood under the hands of the Oromos and Gragne Mohammed during the 16<sup>th</sup> century Oromo northward expansion. We can go on and on to narrate the foolishness of this enterprise. Instead of focusing on our common shared history to help us look forward and claim our place in the world, we are on each other's throats and obsessed with finding more differences, thanks to ethnic federalism. Some Oromo nationalists have decided and implemented the Latin alphabet as the alphabet for Afan Oromo. That this was a political decision and not a linguistic one has been extensively

commented on by Ethiopian linguists, notable among whom is Professor Baye Yimam. Ethiopians of Oromo heritage have immensely contributed to the development and growth of Geez and Amharic literature: Laureate Tsegaye Gebremedhin Qewessa, Be'alu Girma; Solomon Deressa and Fikre Tollosa Jigssa are just a few examples.

Afan Oromo as the second Ethiopian language with nationwide speakers must be considered as a second Ethiopian official language. However, TPLF/EPRDF's ethnic federalism not only has prevented that, but it has also enabled Afan Oromo and other Ethiopian languages to run away from their heritage Geez, a heritage not only Ethiopians, but other Africans and the Black Diaspora are proud of, and took refuge in a European alphabet. Other sorrows include the constantly changing Somali regional state where stability and peace of mind are luxuries and unheard of in the last 20 years. The heavy-handed policy of EPRDF coupled with extremist actions by the Ogaden National Liberation Front have denied the populace a semblance of law and order for a long time. Also, universities, incubators of revolutionary and Ethiopian-themed radical ideas during past regimes, under ethnic federalism, are shells of their former glory where instead inter-ethnic clashes occasionally flare up among students.

There is also the case of neglected national historical sites and memorials. In the name of power devolution, national historical sites and buildings are either lying in ruins, or have been razed down for condominium type new development. There is no meaningful national registry and preservation of historical assets.

To say under EPRDF, Ethiopianity and Ethiopian nationalism have been maligned and brutalized is an understatement. Despite the regime's annual celebration of "Day of Nations/Nationalities" and its twin "Bandera Day" celebration, the regime has not been able to move the needle in either direction and the celebrations remain lip services.

Ethnic federalism is also a culprit in the fast diminishing Ethiopian forests; in the sad fact of ecological disaster, such as the foot print diminishing and pollution [from chemicals used in tanneries] of the Lakes in the Hawassa area, such as Lakes Abayta and Shala. That the system has created an ethnic entrepreneurial class that is greedily amassing property and wealth cannot be disputed. A prime example of this is none other than the victimization of the majority Tigreans by TPLF's elites related by politics and marriage.

Ethnic federalism also feeds the beast of obscene wealth inequality in Ethiopia. Land is taken from poor urban dwellers in urban areas, and farmlands in rural areas with nominal compensation, and sold off to wealthy developers and those with government connections. The loot and hefty profits are pocketed by middle men and corrupt officials.

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The political line that gave rise to ethnic federalism goes back at least 40 years. When TPLF argued at that time that the major issue in the then Ethiopian politics was the contradiction between nationalities, and that each nationality had to fight for its liberation in its own land, and thus multinational organizations such as EDU and EPRP had to leave Tigray. EPRP resolutely said no, and showed that the major problems of Ethiopians were poverty and the absence of democracy, and hence, and as the Yekatit 1974 revolution illustrated, Ethiopians could stand together to usher in a new era. EPRP at the same time held the right of nationalities to self-determination.

One might generously give the benefit of the doubt to the crafters of ethnic federalism as young revolutionaries who innocently saw it as a panacea to Ethiopia's long running oppression of languages and cultures. That is understandable. However, after all this evidence is in over the last 20 years, and the wreckage strewn all over the land, to persist in this destructive path has no other name but an act close to treasonous. Among the purported victims of oppressed culture, the Oromos, are now believed to be the largest incarcerated community in Ethiopian jails, and mostly for political reasons. Tigray has been turned into a grand jail where Arena supporters and others languish. What more can show the disastrous failure of ethnic federalism than this?

Now, one can anticipate an argument from the ethno-nationalists side that says the problem is not ethnic federalism per se, but the lack of rigorous implementation of the policy. It could be argued that had TPLF/EPRDF devolved power as its constitution says, allowed self-determination under Article 39, all would be good. These ethno-nationalists have to understand that the census results under EPRDF and the ethnic kilil maps themselves are still contested issues. Conferring power and sovereignty to nations/nationalities under Article 50, and claims by some ethno nationalists that they are first Tigre or Oromo before they are Ethiopians, has led only to a zero sum game. The competition we talked about above among ethnic groups, especially in one of the poorest nations in the world, would get worse and even lead to open wars. Ethnic federalism is a formula for the eventual breakup of the country, and for a permanent war, or "no, war, no peace" situation just like the condition between Ethiopia and Eritrea now. This is not the way we want to go. There is a better way, and that is democratic federalism and the rule of law under one, united, and democratic Ethiopia.

Just before the mass protest of the Oromo youth, TPLF/EPRDF officialdom admitted a fact known to Ethiopians long ago: that the public does not trust them, that the nation is a playing ground for middlemen and corrupt officials; that Ethiopians no longer expect justice from the courts. A common saying out in the street is, according to the study team that reported to the

Prime Minister, “kand mastrate, yibetal and yesebeta mereit” (one is better off with a slice of Sebeta land, than being awarded a master’s degree). Our heroes of conscience like Eskinder Nega, Wubshet Taye, Temesgen Desalegne and Abrha Desta are languishing in jail for precisely saying and writing about the same things the regime’s officials now are forced to admit. Our Moslem brothers and sisters have peacefully and patiently protested for the last few years and were asked by the regime to select their negotiators, only to see their chosen leaders (shimagelles) thrown in jail on the usual flimsy charges.

Ethnic federalism has generated atavistic sentiments that seeped from notions of kilil to awraja, woreda and even villages.

Amid such chaos, supporters of the ethnic federalist project must not harken back to the 1960’s radical language and besmirch their critics as “chauvinists”. Name calling only cements an already blocked mind and will not allow the revisit and rethinking of an issue.

From Athenian democracy through Jeffersonian democracy to Marxist thought, political philosophers have sought to enhance –not always with success – the spiritual and material well -being of man in a stable, peaceful community. Ethnic federalism, however, is an anathema that builds and encourages a closed, retrograde, inward- looking, enemy -seeking ethnic self that is in perpetual war with what it perceives as the Others.

The solution in Ethiopia is to empty the jails off political prisoners, and embark on crafting a democratic federalism through the mechanism of an all-inclusive engagement. The current path is leading to a dead end as mounting evidence amply demonstrates.

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