

## **The State, National Identity And The Role Of Ethnic Federalism In Ethiopia**

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For the international community, Ethiopia is a country known for perpetual famine, poverty, and war. For Africa, Ethiopia is a vanguard for pan-Africanism, symbolizing strength and hope for many in Africa who sought independence from colonial powers. Ethiopia took on this position by virtually redefining chauvinist European perceptions towards Africa, and blacks in general. With the defeat of Italy in 1896, Ethiopia established herself as the only African country to successfully resist European colonization. 1896 did not mark the end of external aggression in Ethiopia. Fascist Italy, under the leadership of Benito Mussolini came to overturn his country's humiliation in 1935; however now, with modern weaponry Ethiopians were unable to match.

Patriotic Ethiopians of all ethnic groups picked up their swords and outdated rifles with sheer determination and spirit that they will triumph over fascist Italy. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Fascist Italy used mustard gas indiscriminately and nearly annihilated the Ethiopian population at the time. Ethiopia's modern national identity thus can be argued to have planted its seeds in these two historical experiences. In 1896, the Ethiopian patriots were led to the battlefield directly by the emperor at the time, Menelik II (Amhara). Others, notably Ras Gobena (Oromo), Ras Mengesha Yohannes (Tigray) amongst others were united, despite ethnic differences to defeat the Italian aggressors. The defeat of Italy in 1896 became known as the Battle of Adwa. Today, that history serves as the basis of Ethiopian national identity and history. Therefore, Jeffrey Herbst's conclusion that "external threats have such a powerful effect on nationalism" is valid in the case of Ethiopia. (122, 1990)

Today, Ethiopia is home to over 94 million people who have a shared history that dates back to over 2000 years. Since 1935, Ethiopia has seen three political systems, all of which contributing to this perpetual cycle of famine, violence, and dictatorships. Emperor Haile Selassie I led a feudal system until a military Junta, the Derg led by Col. Mengistu Hailemariam, overthrew him in 1974. The Derg, a nationalist/Marxist-Leninist party ruled Ethiopia with an iron fist and brute dictatorship for 17 years. In 1991, a separatist group turned "nationalist" and overthrew the Derg. Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has since been ruling Ethiopia under minority ethnic based dictatorship. Today, 25 years into its divide and rule method of staying onto power, TPLF is facing the height of Ethiopian resistance, both civil and armed struggles.

Because of their tendency to suppress dissent, dictatorships by their very nature cannot allow the free flow of information, especially that brought by this new digital era. The reason is, as scholars like Francis Fukuyama argue, changes in political systems emanate from social transformation; hence, dictators need to contain and hinder social evolution if they are to stay in power for long. Fukuyama writes, referring to the third wave of democratization of the late 1990's, that "the shift to democracy is a result of millions of formerly passive individuals around the world organizing themselves and participating in the political life of their societies." He adds, "social mobilization is driven by ... education, that made people more aware of the political world around them; information technology, that facilitated the rapid spread of ideas and knowledge.." and other factors.(17, 2011) Krasner further advances this argument as he concludes "technological changes has made it difficult, or perhaps impossible, for states to control movements across their borders." (22, 2011) The minority government in Ethiopia, therefore- spends millions of dollars to jam diaspora based media outlets such as ESAT and VOA precisely to contain the rapid spread of information from reaching those within Ethiopia to prevent social mobilization against its authority.

TPLF controls the monopoly of force in Ethiopia. Through the confidence of such monopoly, it rules with its own discretion without any regard to the rule of law. Its mere legitimacy to rule is based upon its control of the security and intelligence apparatus. Any dissent is crushed and journalists are imprisoned. A renowned scholar and one often regarded as the forefathers of modern Social Science Max Weber, proclaims that there are three forms of "legitimations" one needs to cease power of the state. "They are, traditional, charismatic, and

legal.”(Weber, 73, 1958) In a modern and democratic society, legal legitimation is one that is appropriate. In Ethiopia, like many countries of the global south, this is not the case. Although the Ethiopian government puts on a show as an electoral-based democracy by holding restricted elections every five years, it is but far from that. Fukuyama states “authoritarians pay a compliment to democracy by pretending to be democrats.”(14, 2011) In the recent 2015 elections, the ruling party, “Ethiopian peoples Revolutionary democratic Front” (“EPRDF”) claimed to have won 100% of the 547 parliamentary seats that were up for grabs.

Weber writes, “the modern state is a compulsory association which organizes domination.” (82, 1958) The nature of such domination in the present Ethiopia is what I will examine. TPLF, the core party of the “EPRDF” coalition that rules Ethiopia today has organized the domination of key institutions not by meritocracy or competency but solely on ethnicity and loyalty to the few ruling elite. Foreign diplomacy, military leadership, intelligence, economy, amongst many other key apparatus of the state are controlled by ethnic Tigrayan who make up roughly 6% of the overall Ethiopian population. Gudina writes, “the major institutions, which are supposed to act impartially and promote democratic governance such as the election board, the parliament, the judiciary, the police, the army, and the civil administration as a whole are not fulfilling and not able to fulfill their duties impartially as per the country’s constitution.” (183, 2011)

Many scholars would argue that such unjust minority ethnic based administration would incur visceral reactions from the disenfranchised majority. Ethiopia’s polity could certainly be characterized as patrimonial, especially before the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012. Rotberg argues, “Patrimonial rule depends on a patronage-based system of extraction from ordinary citizens.” (87, 2002) He adds, “The typical weak-state plunges toward failure when this kind of ruler-led oppression provokes a countervailing reaction on the parts of resentful groups or newly emerged rebels.”(Rotberg, 87, 2002) This “countervailing reaction” has been unraveling in Ethiopia for the past two months from the Oromo people, the largest ethnic group who make up about 33% of the Ethiopian population.

In Ethiopia, ethnic-federalism has served the purpose of keeping ethnic groups exclusively to themselves. This architecture of governance was methodically engineered to prevent any unification of the ethnic groups against the minority ethnic-based leaders and elites. State outlined ethnic boundaries coupled with weak institutions will soon test the fabric of Ethiopian unity. Herbst underscores, “federalism often is inappropriate in countries where national institutions are not strong.”(127, 1990) He argues that in federalism, “incentives for leaders to attempt to gain total control are much greater than the barriers posed by recently adopted institutional arrangements.”(Herbst, 127, 1990) I would then argue that if there are no competent parties to balance the effects of such ethnic politics, then Ethiopia’s future is a storm being weathered.

The Oromo protests that have been the foci of anyone following Ethiopian current events would have noticed that political capital between the Oromo people and the government is virtually non-existent. The Oromo protests that started off as an opposition to the “master plan” or a policy intended to expand the capital city; Addis Ababa into the Oromia region was met with popular discontent and visceral reactions from Oromo students and farmers alike. This plan, many argue will displace millions of Oromo farmers to the economic benefit of the ruling TPLF elite. Despite the government’s willingness to abandon the policy after the deaths of approximately 150 innocent protesters, the protests continue on until today. The Oromo have chosen to no longer accept maladministration, and along with other ethnic groups in Ethiopia, marginalization from genuine political representation.

Today’s Ethiopian political dynamic does not secure its future stability. Rotberg, as he defines state failure concludes “weak states have the potential for definitive failure if ethnic disparities and ambitions provoke civil strife.” (89, 2002), This is all too familiar in Ethiopian politics mainly due in part by ethnic based federalism itself. It seems that Ethiopia is already set-up for further ethnic civil strife. The question here now is, will Ethiopia’s unity outweigh the consequences of unjust ethnic federalism? Only time will tell.

In the meantime, Ethiopia continues to experience a tense and fragile social capital. The scholars I’ve mentioned above such as Fukuyama, Rotberg, Herbst and Krasner all believe that institutions are key elements of a state and hence, without strong institutions, there exists no strong central government. The notion that Ethiopia is stable because there is yet no tangible conflict, the state has monopoly of force, or it’s infrastructure is not failing, in my perception is not necessarily indicative of the population’s discontent towards the regime. The need to stay in power by force implies that the Ethiopian government suffers from a political decay- a government that cannot accommodate its society according to the progressiveness of the people. The

contributions of these scholars in the realm of understanding national identity, state failure, globalization/technological advancement, and democracy in relation to the state all have helped to broaden our knowledge about Ethiopia and the world in general.

Citation

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