

Demystifying: Ethnic Politics And Ethnic Federalism In Ethiopia

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It is troubling to see a pure unitary position, unwilling even to recognize the existence of Ethiopians whose demand for democracy includes a right to preserve and promote local languages and cultures. The group still feels strongly about the need to avoid any form of ethnic federal system. However, considering the ethnic sentiment built in the last quarter of a century and the situation that lead to the change in 1991, it would be unwise to be so disdainful of the demand for ethnic based administration, allowing the simultaneous enrichment of the diverse languages and cultures in Ethiopia. We don't seem to recognize the kind of chaos and instability that will ensue should a significant member of the population feels disenfranchised or when ethnic relationship in Ethiopia is not handled in a way that is fair and equitable to all. Why I am writing this article is not because I am in love with ethnic federalism, rather it is because I strongly believe in the need to find common ground as the answer may not lie in the extremes. This article attempts to show the possibility of implementing ethnic Federalism without the malice of ethnic politics. Interestingly, though, there is a tendency to use ethnic politics and ethnic federalism as if the two were one and the same. As a result we are obstructed from seeing the possibility that ethnic federalism can be implemented without ethnic politics, which as we all know is divisive and discriminatory. The lack of distinction between the two terms becomes a hindrance in creating a possible compromise among proponents of unitary system and ethnic federalism. Grasping the nuances of 'ethnic politics' and 'ethnic federalism', would help us recognize that as long as there are no ethnic political organizations or similar proxy identity politics which by definition are divisive and discriminatory, ethnic federal system could lead to a true Ethiopianism, recognizing unity in diversity.

However, the confusion gets worse when we jump to the concept of 'geographical based federalism', as an alternative to ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. What is geographical federalism? Are geographers going to partition the country in to administrative zones considering human activity, the contour, temperature, climate, rivers and lakes? Or are we going to continue fantasizing that the thirteen provinces that existed at the time of Emperor Haile Selassie were merely geography based that did not give recognition to ethnic realities? The cornerstone of the thirteen provinces, Eritrea excluded, seems to be ethnicity and sub ethnicity. Arsi-Oromo, Bale-Oromo, Ilubabor-Oromo, Welega-Oromo, Sidamo –Sidama, Tigray – Tigre, Hararghe – (Harari), Kaffa, GamuGofa, Begemder -Amhara, Gojjam-Amhara, Wollo – Amhara, and Shoa – comparable to the present Southern Region.Or it is true that if the classification was geography based, it had unintended result that the settlement groups created became ethnic and subethnic categories. Further observation indicates that there was a deliberate attempt to promote unity and nationalism instead of division and regionalism. The cause of Ethiopia will be better served if we honestly admit that deliberate or otherwise, the provincial system that existed in the pre-1974 era did not repudiate the need to give some level of recognition to ethnic realities in our country. Just some level!

The educational, political, and technological reality that existed about seventy years ago was completely different from what we have at present, and it would be meaningless to judge that period with the criteria of today. The political decisions made seventy or so years ago were based on the realities of the then and not of the 21st century. The governing question of the time was building strong, undivided, and efficient system of administration that could withstand any aggression be it by Europeans or by hostile neighbors. The mindset right after the Second World War was a dichotomy between them (the Italians/Europeans) and us (Ethiopians/Africans). What we see at that timewas an intent to build undivided and strong Ethiopian nationalism. Also it is senseless to expect that there was sufficient awareness on ethnic questions the way the concept is understood today. At that time there was a significant shortage or even total absence of educated or skilled manpower and alluding that they deliberately put a system in place to oppress ethnicities in Ethiopia

is simply ridiculous. In fact, that system gave some level of recognition to ethnic diversity and again names of provinces and the people included in respective administration units of the time speak for themselves.

One might question as to why that system had four predominantly Oromo provinces instead of just one. The answer should be simple and straight forward. A country is divided in to small manageable units so that it may be more convenient to address the uniqueness of a particular region with some level of local administration. That being the objective, creating large provinces negates the very justification for having provinces in the first place, which is the creation of small manageable administration units. It should be noted that if they were completely insensitive to ethnic issues, nothing could have stopped them from using numbers or unrelated pronouns with no single reference to any ethnic or subethnic group in Ethiopia. It is also evident that they could not imagine Oromia, a concept created by Oromo secessionists as an alternate/parallel universe that would exist side by side with Ethiopia. Ethiopians of the 1940s and 1950s were at least aware of Italia's intent to divide and rule through its Italian East Africa map. And evidently they had no reason to follow suit using ethnic nationalism as a means to exercise domination through division. The concept of independence to the people of that time was conceived only vis-à-vis independence of Ethiopians from dangers of European colonialism and simply they could not even conceptualize an idea like, independence of Oromo from Ethiopia. Please note the Emperor himself was, ethnically speaking, Oromo.

However, as Ethiopians get exposure to western education and then communist ideologies, they begun to challenge the status quo on the basis of alien concepts ,among others ,ethnic oppression and self-administration up to secession. That is what transpired OLF, TPLF and hence the present ethnic based political system in Ethiopia. As people get enlightened and as new ideas and possibilities are available to them, it is normal to expect that they would come up with new needs. The right thing is to monitor such changes and be in a position to provide timely answers by making adjustments to the system. The thirteen provinces did give some recognition to the existence of different ethnicities in Ethiopia and it was not a geography based configuration of longitude and latitude lines. The challenge is how to learn whether or not that system or the present one has, somehow failed to improvise with the changing reality, and identify the improvements that could be introduced today without losing the soul of Ethiopia that helped our forefathers defy European colonialism, Ethiopianism.

What would have been the consequence if Emperor Haile Selassie introduced the use of local languages in the then provincial administration units like Oromigna in Bale or Sidama in Sidamo? Would such introduction turn the system in to a federal one? We need to keep in mind that Federation is not only about language, and it is about the general degree of political autonomy exercised at local government level. Mere addition of local language in governance may not change a unitary system in to a federal structure. Federalism is a system that bestows the administrative units with some level of autonomy in managing their affairs without or with minimum interference of the Federal government in things like raising tax, spending, managing natural resources, electing their own leaders, enacting local laws etc. The second question is if the introduction of local languages by the Emperor as a medium of provincial administration would have resulted in a political system that would be divisive, undermining Ethiopian unity and/or leading the nation to balkanization. Again, the answer to this question is not in the affirmative. Ethiopians had had been using their languages for centuries and enhancing the stature of a local language to that of official level should only be gratifying to the speakers of that language. It should then be a positive force bolstering confidence of ethnicities and promoting positive ethnic relationships leading to pride in Ethiopian nationalism. We can have a unitary system that operates with local languages at local level. When it is coupled with some level of autonomy then it could be considered as Ethnic Federalism. The key here is if the autonomy outlaws ethnic parties and similar discriminations through related proxy identity politics, ethnic politics becomes extinct paving the way for true unity in diversity, Ethiopian nationalism. It is as simple as that! Ethnic federalism does not necessarily imply the malice of ethnic politics.

Diversity in administration language of provinces or regions is not a problem by itself. The problem is when politicians use it as a means to divide and rule or use ethno nationalism, to an open or hidden secessionist agenda, while in the meantime awarding some special benefits to members of particular ethnic group at the detriment of other ethnicities. Ethnic diversity becomes a problem when inclusions and exclusions in a political party or supports/oppositions to political agenda are based on senseless blood lines rather than commonality of belief in policies that promote democracy and development of the nation in general. Once the constitution clearly establishes the administrative units, the right of the units to preserve and develop local languages, the agreed level of autonomy and democracy within the umbrella of Ethiopia, there is no reason for allowing ethnic political organizations which by their very nature are divisive, unfair and discriminatory. Also why would we have such large regions like Amhara or Oromiya instead of smaller provinces that are better suited for better addressing the demand of locals effectively without creating a suspicion, as such regions are seen by most, as antitheses to Ethiopia? The smaller administrative units enable us to preserve and develop even the cultural sub diversity within major ethnic categories as in Bale vs Wollega or Gojam vs Wollo. Doing away with such large regions does not in any way infringe upon the right of ethnicities to preserve and develop their languages and cultures. Such alteration to the present administrative units or regions is, however, to those who support ethnic nationalism as a road to secession, seen as a death sentence. In the interest of permanent peace, stability and democracy, these extremists need to be educated and corrected by the majority who I believe are moderate.

Be it in religion or science a citizen's correct perspective in Ethiopia should be to see himself/herself as a human being first, then African (black or white), Ethiopian, the Ethnicity, and the individual. When this is the correct order going from broader domain to narrow species in science, or Adam and Eve and varieties in religion, ethno centrists propagate that they are who they are in the reverse order. With this deranged outlook, they put their ethnicity above and beyond the nation, Ethiopia. Ethiopia to them becomes dispensable! This is the essence of ethnic politicians, seeing Ethiopia as a mere conglomeration of the member ethno states, which if needed and when needed are handy to be a country on their own right. Ethnic political parties contend that the party and the administration unit that the party claims to represent are inalienable and inalterable. The ethno centrists consider the ethnic group as some kind of 'ethnic chicken that lay the region as an egg', and hence it does not in any way recognize sense of ownership to people of other ethnicities. There is no recognition for the price the other ethnicities paid in blood, defending the land for generations. Nor there is any recognition to the historical interethnic ties due to migration, marriages, beliefs, psychology, history and economy. Even the status of the men in uniform, soldiers, is sublimely reduced to that of a mercenary level. According to the "up to secession concept" an Oromo soldier has no business fighting in a hypothetical war with Djibouti in Afar border or a Somali soldier defending the country in a hypothetical border war with South Sudan. Equally there is no reason for an Ethnic Gurage soldier to fight in a hypothetical war with Northern Sudan as he has no say in the destiny of Amhara region when that region decides to secede from Ethiopia. Also it will be idiotic to expect an equal treatment when residing in a state other than the state of origin, when regions are run by ethnic parties that are by their very nature discriminatory forcing other ethnicities in that state feel alien in their own country. These are some of the dangerous fallacies we find in ethnic politics of Ethiopia that recognizes an 'up to secession right' to self-determination.

A politician is to a country as a physician is to a biological being. The role of politicians among other things is to prescribe a winning policy and implement the same once accepted through a democratic process making its constituents better off. However, as we cannot afford to have a physician who prescribes a treatment for an ailment in the 'heart' while ending the 'life' of the person, it will be senseless to have politicians who are overly consumed with narrow ethnic political agenda and whose goal is to blindly benefit a particular administrative unit causing irreparable damage to other regions or the country, Ethiopia. If secession of a state from Ethiopia is acceptable in ethnic politics, taking a political stance without a single consideration to the decision's impact on

other regional state(s) should also be the norm. And it is like having a treatment to Gambella even if that treatment means a death to Southern Region. This can be avoided when politicians and political parties recognize that there is a greater good to be served, Ethiopia and Ethiopians. The face of ethnic politics is favoritism, exclusion, discrimination, corruption, division, ethnic hostility and instability. If one wishes then to have a political system that addresses the needs of all through a mechanism that allocates resources based on fairness and consideration to others, ethnic political organizations and discrimination through including proxy identity politics should be eliminated or outlawed.

In summary, considering the growth of ethnic sentiment in the last quarter of a century and the prior situation that culminated to the power shift in 1991, we need to consider ethnic federalism that is built on a non-dispensable Ethiopia, with no room for Ethnic politics or proxy identity politics. It is Ethnic political parties that work against national unity, openly promote nepotism/discrimination of a grand scale, and subscribe to division ultimately killing the soul of Ethiopia. Political organizations should not be venues for openly promoting nepotism, favoritism, and discrimination among citizens based on their belonging or lack thereof to a particular ethnic group. Ethnic politics which is synonymous with ethnic favoritism and discrimination should be seen as the highest offence of the land punishable likewise. Ethnic federalism on the other hand is the creation of federal administration units with autonomy that include the right to promote local language and culture. Such impartial system would provide opportunities to all by availing language education so that an individual is not excluded because of language proficiency. It is quite different from Ethnic politics which could even be manifested in a unitary system enabling people to organize in proxy organizations so as to blindly favor one ethnic group or race at the detriment of another(s). It is not uncommon to hear about some western political parties in Europe or America as secretly promoting the interest of this or that race. We should not assume that whenever there is ethnic federalism there will be ethnic politics where people organize and operate around blood lines, instead of the prime directive/ the greater good, Ethiopianism founded on democratic unity in diversity.

A few words on the situation in Oromia. I am saddened at the recent violence and killings in Oromia. I believe the natural growth of Addis Abeba should be nurtured. The small farmers around Addis Abeba should be beneficiaries and not victims of Addis expansion. When eminent domain is exercised, small farmers or others should be paid at the market rate at which the land is to be sold. The role of government should be protecting the rights of small farmers that they are paid at the market rate of the land they are giving away less government's share of taxes. That way, the small farmers in and around Addis or elsewhere would be turned to millionaires. They can use the money to buy machinery and land in another location, securing their future as successful farmers. Every farmer would then be praying to get that opportunity instead of standing against expansion of Addis or other city. Snatching the land from farmers with minimal payment is against the principle that justified government ownership of land. If the principle is to protect interest of farmers, the practice should not have the unwanted outcome of hurting farmers. When a practice of a principle works against the very assumption that it was put in place, it is high time that we revise the principle to 'private landownership'. No matter what, interest of land owners should be respected!

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