

Can an individual contribute to the current resurgence of nationalism in Ethiopia?

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First of all, spelling out why the current protest has been necessitated is a confirmation of the ever-enduring sense of Ethiopian identity. Secondly, let us agree that three words summarise the issues: Ethiopian nationalist resurgence. Adding my voice to that of all Ethiopians, I will focus here on the first point, and address what I mean by the second point in another piece.

Supporting all Ethiopians, it has to be said that those who are now engaged in the popular movement are making the best outright defiance so far of the dictatorial state machinations of the last twenty-five years. Sacrifices have been made in the past, but this is the most comprehensive yet. Throughout the country, north, south, east and west, Ethiopians are rejecting those who have been dividing us along the lines of exclusive ethnicity, religious factionalism and economic exclusionism. Those in power have used instruments of domination, ranging from calling their ruling party by an ethnic name to forging a home territory they claim belongs exclusively to an ethnic group. Calling themselves woyane, they kill, maim, bribe, lie and steal to realize their project. To 'legitimize' what they do, they use a sham constitution and a fraudulent series of elections – now, in the twenty first century. Those who defy their blatantly bogus constitution and falsified elections debate these. The likes of Professor Messay Kebedde challenge them to abandon at least Article 39 and make room for a transitional government. All Ethiopians must join in defying the woyane's disgraceful barbarity.

While spelling out and reclaiming the identity of a people and country called Ethiopia, I have to state right away that those who promote exclusive ethnicity, religious factionalism and economic exclusionism depend on their guns and on curtailing the popular media in order to manipulate the history and steal the economic resources of Ethiopia. To confuse Ethiopians in all walks of life, the rulers sift history to promote the dismemberment of Ethiopia. Though a small group, they use state power to assert an exclusive political and economic hegemony over the whole of Ethiopia. Core to their self-privileging is their narrow logic of belonging to the Tigray community that they think deserves an exclusive ethnic communal boundary.

Their latest provocative strategy has been to expand Tigray territory at the expense of other farmers. Nothing is more a self-denial of Ethiopian identity than this. When they tried to use history to justify their manipulation, Professor Haile Larebo gave them a good reminder of the correct version, pointing out the history of the region they want to reshape. He also reminded them of the Ethiopian identity of their forefathers and themselves. I am glad he got there before me, because I would have reminded them of some of their turncoat ancestors. Of

course that would have been neither political nor constructive! After all they are in the business of deconstructing and denying the identity of our nation.

If I may divert, what the woyane are doing brings to my mind the famed resistance against fascist Italy – the gravest external enemy ever to defy Ethiopian identity in our long history. The fascists dispossessed people of their lands, giving away plots or whole regions to Italian farming companies and individual settlers. They were supported by local cronies whom they had bribed. The resistance fighters defied Italian claims to social, commercial or political superiority while putting down Ethiopians as mere ethnic groups. The guerrilla warriors successfully denied the would-be colonialist and stopped them from advantaging colonialist Europeans. For the purpose of dominating Ethiopia, the fascists claimed they had colonized Ethiopia, but the resistance fighters never acknowledged this, and they still call the five-year episode the period of Italian invasion, not ‘occupation’ thank you.

Faced by a similar economic strategy to that used by the fascists, people in Gondar, Tsegede, Tselemt, Addis Ababa and elsewhere are now dis-acknowledging the governmental nature of woyane rule.

The protestors are challenging the woyane practice of giving away large areas or land at dirt cheap prices to Arabian, Indian, European, and other companies to producing products that benefit their own countries. For instance, Arabians growing wheat for export to Saudi while ten million Ethiopians face dire starvation, is neither acceptable nor of sound economic advantage to Ethiopia.

The people have recognized the woyane so-called ‘investment program’ as a skewed and twisted version of a supposedly worthy economic measure for future growth. Even the responsible local officials, who have scammed the cash proceeds for their pockets, contribute nothing to the local economy.

The nearest to ‘development’ they have thought about is tearing down houses and homes (in the middle of the rainy season) to construct buildings owned by their members. They are also pushing people out of their lands so that their favoured farmers from their region can take them over. The character of their ‘investment program’, and its frequency and widespread implementation, has simply made those who are in power not only similar to fascist Italians but traitors.

Ethiopians in Gondar, Tsegede, Tselemt, Addis Ababa and elsewhere have had enough of such rulers. They are asserting their dignity as human beings. They support the rights of their communal leaders, their young people and the rest in Ethiopia who are denied their rights. The inhuman ways in which the ruling elite and their supporters subject those who defy them starts off by denying their Ethiopian identity through ethnic labelling that has helped the woyane encourage those they call an oppressed ‘minority’ to rise against those they brand an oppressor ‘minority’. They encourage ‘formerly oppressed minorities’ to commit horrendous crimes.

Their so-called police stand by as these push their ‘oppressors’ over precipices, cut their throats, or break their skulls with machetes. In other words, working along the lines of ethnic exclusivity, conveniently accompanied by scandalous labels, has allowed them to point their fingers at some as past ‘oppressors’ and to judge others as present-day criminal murderers. Could it be coincidental that the woyane give these supposedly conflictual minorities the very same ethnic group names that the Italian fascists used for the purpose of implementing their policy of ‘divide and rule’?! No wonder that the whole country is up in arms, so to speak, against those in power.

As we all know, being Ethiopian is being human – not named and enclaved groups divided to become ‘minorities’ without political or economic rights. Like the guerrilla fighters against the Italian fascists, the protestors are reclaiming our Ethiopian identity. We will see if the ruling minority continues to play with the same fire of encouraging groups to focus exclusively on the economic and political privilege of only their own cliquish Italo-woyane labelled tribe. None of the protestors now want to follow their example, let alone the ethnic names they have given, approved and sealed.

The current popular defiance is not concerned with media closure, nor is it cowed by the violence of police. The defiance is defeating the rulers’ challenge to the human qualities and rights of all Ethiopians, irrespective of the state machinery turning up its coercion and shutting down communication. I recognize Ethiopians when I see them. I am proud of Ethiopians in the highlands and lowlands, in the river valleys and mountains, in the gorges and deserts of Ethiopia. Our people have used these ecological features wisely and appropriately for millennia. They have been the owners of their own lands, minerals and other resources.

I am sure that Ethiopians are capable of owning and developing them further. Those engaged in the protests aim re-establish a country in which they can travel and mix without hindrance. They will forge and re-assert their renewed Ethiopian identity. They will form the Ethiopian government of their choice.

They are aware that being in politics simply means giving service for self-promoting prosperity and human development equal to all throughout the country. These movements are reclaiming what it means to be human rather than carriers of this or that ‘tribal’ identity. After all, the ethnic identity business has only made us susceptible to manipulation. The day will come when they will create new directions and liberate us from the killel-based political manipulations.