

The Political Fate Of The People Of Mixed Ethnic Heritage In Ethiopia

By Solomon Regassa
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Views may differ about the nature and magnitude of the problems we are facing, but everybody agrees that this is no ordinary time in Ethiopia. Changes of varying depth and width are being proposed and promised by different actors. Some of the propositions stand on opposite ends of the spectrum. The Government has promised to introduce electoral and administrative reforms and to answer the demands of the youth through job creation. Much of the opposition at home demands more progressive reforms such as re-instituting the Electoral Board, releasing political prisoners, and reforming civil society, media and security laws that are used to constrict the political space. The opposition and activists based abroad would like to see more radical changes that include the resignation of the government and even the dismemberment of the country.

Despite their opposing views, most of the above political actors have one thing in common, i.e., ethnic nationalism is their main organizing factor. The ruling party has been promoting what it calls “democratic ethnic nationalism” for a long time now. With its democratic credentials highly questioned, it has had relative success in the promotion of ethnic nationalism. The groups that are alleged or have claimed to be organizing the on-going protests, especially in Oromia, are pronounced ethnic nationalists. Most of the opposition parties at home are organized along ethnic lines. National or multi-ethnic political agenda has been under attack and some earlier promoters of such agenda are re-aligning themselves with ethnic-based organizations. In this context, it becomes important to ponder over the political fate of Ethiopians of mixed ethnic heritage – a large group of people who are not duly recognized by the Constitution of Ethiopia and fully accommodated by the various political movements in and outside the country.

The Constitution

The Constitution of Ethiopia is an expression of the interests and resolve of the “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” of the country, which represent groups of people who have or share large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory (preamble, and article 39). All sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples and they have the right to use and promote their language and culture, the right to full measure of self-government and an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession (articles 8 and 39). The Constitution does not define what constitutes “nations”, “nationalities” and “peoples” separately, but their combination is depicted as a solid entity with rights and obligations. Looking at the provisions of article 39 and the constituent elements of the Federal State under article 46 of the Constitution, it is observable that Nations, Nationalities and People are ethnic entities.

Despite some questions as to the fulfilment of the cumulative (cultural, linguistic, identity, psychological and territorial) criteria laid out under articles 39 and 46, the Afar, the Amhara, the Gambela, the Benshangul/Gumuz, the Harari, the Oromo, the Somali, and the Tigre people emerged as the people or ethnic entities that formed the States of the Federation. States such as Gambela and Benishangul/Gumuz combine more than one ethnic group, whereas there are differences of culture and custom within the people constituting other regional states (e.g., between the Oromos of Wellega and

Hararge). There are also a large number of people living outside the areas where their ethnic group constitutes a state. It is the challenge of giving ethnic identity to the populations of the cities of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa that resulted in their special/federal status. The same difficulty led to the unfitting nomenclature of a conglomeration of a number of ethnic groups by their geographical location, i.e., the State of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples.

The designation of ethnic groups as the owners and pillars of the Constitution is a direct result of the way the political forces that overthrew the preceding regime were organized. Those who were invited to the transitional period charter were also organized along ethnic lines. The ethnic question was mooted decades earlier (cf. Walleligne Mekonnen's 1969 piece), and many agree that there were group cultural and political questions that needed to be addressed. Although there were also religion-based claims of political marginalization, the powers that be steered clear from the difficulty that it could have caused and shaped the transition in their own image (the resulting Constitution made a single fleeting reference to "religious communities" by the side of ethnic constituencies, under article 3). Since the entry into force of the Constitution with its guarantees of the befitting rights to full cultural expressions and self-government, ethnicity has increasingly gone farther to occupy a central place in the political, social and even economic spheres of life in the country. Political parties are organized along ethnic lines, ethnicity appears on identity cards (ID) and businesses and academic institutions assumed ethnic bases or names. While the ethnic foundation of the state and its politics has been challenged by those who pointed to the dangers of division and proposed inclusive national political agenda instead, the very determination of how the members of ethnic groups are to be identified attracted comparatively less attention.

Determination of ethnicity

While it became a must to have one's ethnicity written on our ID, the determination of which ethnic group one belongs to primarily followed the criteria of self-identification or assumption based on patriarchal lineage. One would either claim or be considered to be belonging to an ethnic group (we often hear of contested claims of ethnicity especially of politicians). In any case, the lineage basis of identity in practice overrides the cultural, linguistic, psychological and territorial criteria. A person who descended from parents or grandparents, for that matter paternal predecessors, that claim to have Amhara heritage would be considered as an Amhara even if s/he or his/her parents were born and live in a village town in Oromia and hence do not fulfil any of the other criteria. Some people that lived on the borders between regions predominated by two different groups, e.g. between the now Tigray and Amhara, were 'assigned' ethnicity without a chance to determine it by themselves (the current dispute about Wolkayit relates to this). The issue of determination of ethnicity becomes more complicated where a person has mixed ethnic heritage.

If I take myself as an example, I was born in a small village in the Oromia region and grew up speaking Oromifa. My paternal grandfather reportedly came from the now Amhara region and my grandmother was an Oromo from Showa. My mother lost her parents when she was a kid and I lost her when ethnicity was not an issue worth investigating. I had a five-year battle with the Kebelle authorities of Addis Ababa who insisted that I must choose one ethnicity or that they would 'assume' one based on my paternal lineage. I argued that they should either leave the ethnicity section blank because I do not know my full ethnic heritage or that they should recognize that I am 'a mix'. In the first Kebelle where I lived, I was told that the computerized ID system does not allow printing the document unless they write one ethnicity, whereas in the one I moved to later, I was informed that they can only hand-write one ethnic identity on the ID. Despite my best efforts, my argument was seen as a rejection of the contemporary politics and the related policy of the government.

Despite the raging disagreement about how old Ethiopia is, nobody disputes the fact that its people have lived together or closely interacted for centuries. During this period, there have been migrations and intermarriages, especially among people with mixed and adjacent settlement patters. The reasons for this state of affairs include population growth, expansionist aspirations, military expeditions, the

creation of political alliances and the movement of people from one area to another simply in search of better livelihood opportunities. The latter is true especially in the last century. One result and testament of this history is the existence of people of mixed ethnic heritage. Mainly because of the attachment of minor importance to the ethnic question under previous regimes and the assumption that everybody has one (mostly paternal) ethnicity under the current one, official statistics do not capture the number of people of mixed ethnic origin. However, the historically progressive level of movement and interaction of the people and the absence of strict cultural norms against inter-marriages in most ethnic groups of the country point to the existence of persons of mixed ethnic heritage that may count in millions. The number would definitely increase as the aggregate population increases and as we go up the ladder of generations or ancestors to determine our ethnicity.

Incidentally, it is intriguing that some of the familiar faces of the diaspora Oromo ethnic nationalist movement, whom we hear denouncing the Ethiopian national identity and political agenda, have some form of mixed heritage. A self-styled 'leader' of the movement once chose to just mention the Christianity of his mother and whether she is an Amhara often attracts raging social media debate despite the fact that he takes Oromo nationalism to a new level. Considering the area he comes from, the chances of an orthodox Christian woman to be a non-Oromo is 99.99 per cent. Another leading voice who comes across as a Doctor although he is still a doctoral student was married to a Gondere Amhara, who abandoned him with his kid of obviously mixed heritage. These acolytes of ethno-nationalism may have settled for the self-identification doctrine, but following the lineage formula that is more in use indicates the extent to which even the unlikeliest of people could have mixed ethnic heritage.

Ethnic political positioning

The question of whether the existing constitutional architecture accommodates the identity of people of mixed ethnicity has been raised in some political discussions, especially in recent years. However, it has never received the response it deserves, particularly from the political forces that designed the Constitution as well as those with mandate to interpret it. In fact, the legitimacy of the views of these entities on the issue would be questionable because of their foundation in the assumption of clear ethnic divides (or one ethnicity per person). The question of mixed ethnicity may not have also been a really big issue so far, either because the practice of self-identification took care of it or the people concerned did not care to be recognized as such. Even if they wanted to be recognized as people of mixed ethnic heritage for any practical reason, there has been no appropriate forum for the articulation and entertainment of such a question.

In the last 25 years, ethnicity has become the most favoured feature of political organization in Ethiopia – to the extent that a multi-ethnic or national political model has been considered a facade to a political agenda that does not recognize ethnic diversity. As indicated earlier, the promotion of ethnic nationalism has been the linchpin of political mobilization on both sides of the aisle. By all reasonable standards, we have reached a stage in our nation's history where the ethnic form of political organization seems to be a norm we will have to live with for the foreseeable future. When one juxtaposes the heightened ethno-nationalist discourse with the culture of polarized political debates or positions in our country, it becomes hard to imagine what comes out of the current political impasse in which the country is caught up. At least for now, the ball appears to be in the Government's court. However, despite its apparent reckoning with the magnitude of the problems, it does not seem to be on course to taking the level of reforms that would at least placate the opposition and protestors in the home front and put the country on a path to democratic development. The measures under the State of Emergency may calm the situation down and buy the Government more time, but they do not settle the underlying political demands.

On the other hand, despite the acrimony emerging among the various groups, the opposition based abroad seems to have gained steam. Many have indicated that they will battle it to the fall of the incumbent regime. The talk of ethnic-based freedom charter (despite its unbecoming association with

the anti-apartheid movement's Freedom Charter in South Africa) and ethnic army makes the situation even more complicated. In the unfortunate eventuality of power vacuum at the centre, the proposed scenario of ethno-nationalist groups with their respective armies reaching an agreed political architecture that represents the whole population and moves the country forward becomes difficult to fathom. This is more so when one considers the failure of the proponents of such an agenda to consider the incumbent regime with its military and possible supporting ethnic constituency as a force to reckon with at any time in the future. Political negotiations and settlements among forces with their respective agenda have often been more a result of leverage and trade-offs rather than a meeting of minds on democratic ideals that equally benefit all people. The latter possibility cannot be counted out, but it would be very difficult to achieve at a stroke of pen among elites leading various ethnic and national political groupings with their respective demands, armies and ambitions. In fact, if there is anything that we can learn from the experience of countries such as Libya, the "charter and army per ethnic group" proposal, if it succeeds, may just turn out to be a perfect recipe for disaster.

What are the options?

By all standards, Ethiopia is at a crossroads and one can see dark clouds on the horizon. All people of the country need to be represented in the reform processes the Government may implement or in the transition that may follow its downfall. The prevailing mode of representation is ethnic and most of the existing national political groups both at home and abroad are associated with certain ethnic groups. In this context, articulating the political fate and potential role of the millions of Ethiopians with mixed ethnic heritage becomes a quintessential issue. In terms of political organization, there are basically three options for this group of people:

1. Aligning with the favoured mode of ethnic-based political organization based on patriarchal lineage or self-identification: There could be many citizens of mixed heritage who would go for this option based on their cultural association to one of their ethnic groups particularly by virtue of the place where they were born and/or live. There could also be many who either do not buy the determination of ethnicity based on patriarchal values or have difficulty getting at one ethnic choice even following that bloodline. Many may also identify more or live with one group, but find it difficult to 'abandon' the other heritage by aligning themselves to the first. Especially, where the polarization of the political views features actual or assumed tension or animosity between two groups to which a person of mixed ethnicity is related, the choice becomes more complicated. Even if one chooses one lineage over the other either comfortably or for lack of options, there are relatively high chances of his/her voice being overshadowed by other members of the ethno-nationalist groups. Such chances become even higher when one considers the existence of competitions among sub-groups within one ethnic group that are classified along clan, religious and other lines. When the ethnic question took a front seat in the socio-political discourse in the 1990s, there were distinctions such as 'pure' and 'tainted' Oromo (callaa and girdarii) depending on whether one is a Muslim or a Christian, respectively, in the Hararge region of Oromia.

2. Opting a national (multi-ethnic) political agenda: This appears to be a viable option in the light of the challenges and risks of joining a single ethnic grouping. Urban-based people of mixed heritage have largely demonstrated a tendency to go for this choice. However, the option may pose danger in terms of the genuine accommodation of ethnic diversity within national political groups. It is the actual and supposed failure of such political organizations to acknowledge group-specific historical injustices, cultural expressions and self-government that increasingly made them less favoured models. The huge gains of the national and multi-ethnic political coalitions in the 2005 elections, which probably received the support of most people of mixed ethnic heritage, have been countered over the last decade by the ruling party's propaganda that it would have rolled back the gains of federalism. This was exacerbated by the general clamp down on civil and political society in the last decade, which effectively decimated such political parties. The national political groupings have since been associated

with certain ethnic groups or political agenda that could make them a relatively less preferred choice for people of mixed ethnicity.

3. Establishing a political organization representing citizens of mixed ethnic heritage: this is another viable option that has not been seriously pursued so far. Such a political organization would represent the interests of and/or invite the membership mainly of Ethiopians who identify themselves as having two or more ethnic heritages that they may determine based on either or both of the patriarchal and matriarchal lineage. Such a political organization is both ethnic and national. It is ethnic because it represents the interests of people of mixed ethnic heritage and it is national because it is multi-ethnic.

One cannot be certain about the extent to which the possibly millions of people of mixed ethnic heritage will come out and seek representation by such a political party, but the model of organization should be perused for varying reasons. In the first place, such organization will represent the interests of the people with mixed ethnicity in the ethnic-based constitutional architecture and political negotiations that may happen in peaceful or chaotic reforms. In peace, it may promote ideals that extend to the constitutional recognition of the existence and rights of such a group of people. People of mixed ethnicity also need to stand for their rights and interests as they may be abandoned by the growing ethno-nationalist political discourse, which may even take a dangerous turn of imposing ones views and culture on others.

The organization of Ethiopians of mixed ethnicity could better accommodate different ethnic-based views without necessarily being structurally opposed to single ethnic-based or national political organizations. It may consequently become the all-important middle ground political platform that is now absent within the otherwise polarized political landscape. The national aspect of the mixed ethnic grouping could also make it the choice of the urban-based and often educated citizenry who do not want to identify with ethno-nationalist political groupings. Minority ethnic groups and people who live in areas predominated by other ethnic groups are also likely to find comfort in the mixed grouping rather than a party claiming to represent another ethnicity with which they may not have cultural practice and/or settlement cohesion. This is more so considering the attitude that has been forming about national or unifying political agenda.

The writer can be reached at fisehasolomonregassa@gmail.com