

The dilemma of the Ethiopian progressives on Ethnic nationalism

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In the last half a century, the political landscape of Ethiopia has been dramatically shaped and reshaped by various ethnocentric movements and ideologies, chief among them being the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and similar entities. These movements have deeply impacted Ethiopian society today and reversed its advancements, arguably setting its civilizational progress back centuries. This regression can be traced back to the roots of secessionist struggles, exemplified by the Eritrean secession spearheaded by former Italian soldier Idris Awate, who transitioned from a bandit to a liberation movement leader under the banner of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).

Eritrean Federation and Annexation

The Eritrean secessionist struggle has its roots in a series of historical and geopolitical events, significantly influenced by the actions and policies of Emperor Haile Selassie and subsequent military junta DERG.

Eritrea became an autonomous region within a federation with Ethiopia in 1952. The purpose of this arrangement was to keep Eritrea's legislative, executive, and judicial powers in place while Ethiopia handled foreign affairs, defense, and other federal matters (Zewude Reta). Emperor Haile Selassie began to undermine Eritrea's autonomy, which culminated in the annexation of Eritrea in 1962 and making it the 14 provinces of Ethiopia. The violation of the federal arrangement and Eritrea's legislative autonomy by this act caused widespread resentment and laid the foundation for the secessionist struggle.

Eritrea's strategic location near the Red Sea triggered a conflict of interest between various foreign powers, who wanted to advance their geopolitical interests in the Horn of Africa. During the Cold War, Ethiopia was seen as a pivotal ally in the region first by United States when Haile Selassie was in power and later the alliance shifted to the Soviet Union and other East European countries. This external support helped to prolong the conflict, making it more difficult for the secessionist movements to achieve their initial objectives.

Following the toppling of Haile Selassie by the military and widespread mass protest in 1974, the circumstances for Eritreans did not lessen. The Derg, under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam, persisted in and even escalated its strategy of repression against the secessionist movements in Eritrea. The Derg opted for a military approach to address the crisis, including extensive bombing instead of an apolitical solution until toppled by the two northern forces from power.

This phenomenon was not isolated. With the advent of the Ethiopian student movement (ESM), which leaned towards leftist ideologies, the early Ethiopian political scene was entangled in a web of ethnocentric narratives while organizations OLF/TPLF were in the making. Despite its naivety, the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) inadvertently became a conduit for the aspirations of various ethnic groups demanding self-determination, extending to the point of secession. This progressive and broad-based movement did not aim for the disintegration of the Ethiopian state. Instead, its goal was to ensure the rights of the people were respected within the Ethiopian political framework. The early endorsement of ethnic self-determination by the ESM failed to recognize the secessionist ambitions of specific organizations. External influences, notably Arab Petrodollars, partly drove these ambitions. This oversight highlights a complex chapter in Ethiopia's history, where the push for ethnic rights and recognition unintentionally intersected with divisive secessionist agendas and foreign geopolitical interests.

The involvement of Eritrean secessionist leaders like Isaias Afwerki in training and influencing Ethiopian student leaders, more specifically prominent figures from the Tigrayan Student Association marked a pivotal moment in shaping Ethiopia's ethnocentric political environment. The formation of the TPLF under the guidance of Eritrean mentors underscored a strategic alignment of interests that, while initially seeming to champion the cause of ethnic liberation, gradually revealed a more sinister agenda aimed at destabilizing Ethiopia. This was further complicated by the passive stance of entities like the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) towards TPLF's activities, hinting at a broader regional strategy against Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), representing a broad spectrum of the Ethiopian left, sought to unify the country's varied ethnic narratives into a cohesive national vision, advocating for the rights of socially oppressed nations and nationalities. However, the EPRP's idealistic approach needed to acknowledge the deep-rooted interests and external

influences propelling these ethnocentric movements. This oversight led to its initial marginalization in Tigray and subsequent expulsion from Ethiopian politics, which became dominated by narrow ethnic nationalism.

One of the former EPRA leaders, a friend, shared an insightful piece of history with me. He mentioned that the EPRA could have neutralized the TPLF at its nascent stage. However, a significant faction within the organization's leadership strongly opposed this action. They argued that the EPRP was committed to the cause of oppressed nations and could not justify destroying organizations that purported to stand for such causes. This internal conflict of principles versus pragmatism highlights a complex layer of the Ethiopian political struggle, where ideological commitments often influence strategic decisions.

The realization that the support for secessionist entities among the Tigrayan and Eritrean populace was not as organic as presumed but rather orchestrated by foreign powers, including neighboring Arab states and Western nations, underscores geopolitical maneuvering that began in the aftermath of World War II. This manipulation aimed to weaken Ethiopia, block its access to the sea, and fracture its unity along ethnic lines, drawing parallels with the division of South Africa into Bantu homelands during apartheid.

The ramifications of these movements and external influences on Ethiopia have been profound. Today, Ethiopia is embroiled in a complex web of ethnic conflicts, political instability, and economic challenges. The vision of a unified Ethiopia, championing a collective national identity, seems increasingly elusive as ethnocentric politics dominate the discourse. The legacy of the TPLF, OLF, and similar movements, while rooted in the pursuit of ethnic liberation, has paradoxically contributed to the fragmentation of Ethiopian society.

This fragmented landscape has been further exacerbated by the manipulation of ethnocentric sentiments by external powers seeking to advance their strategic interests in the Horn of Africa. These efforts' success has undermined Ethiopia's sovereignty and set a dangerous precedent for the region. The creation of ethno-politically charged entities, mirroring the Bantustans of apartheid South Africa, has not only weakened the Ethiopian state but also sown deep divisions among its people, undermining any prospects for lasting unity and peace.

Political organizations such as the TPLF and the EPLF have brought suffering to the people they

claimed to fight for freedom. When comparing the current state of Eritrea to its condition during Haile Selassie's era before secession, the stark contrast underscores the unintended consequences of their struggle. Similarly, in Tigray, the liberation movement led by the TPLF failed to deliver peace and prosperity; instead, it precipitated war, political oppression, and widespread suffering. The two-year conflict serves as a poignant illustration of this tragedy, inflicting suffering and even acts of genocide on the people of Tigray, Amara, and Afar. This dire outcome was something the EPRP had warned about many years prior, predicting that the ultimate consequence of ethnic politics would be war, genocide, and the disintegration of the very communities these organizations purported to liberate.

The challenge for Ethiopia moving forward is to navigate this complex historical legacy while seeking pathways to reconciliation, national cohesion, and sustainable development. This will require a critical reevaluation of the role of ethnocentric politics and a concerted effort to forge a more inclusive national identity that transcends ethnic divisions. Moreover, Ethiopia must contend with the lingering influences of external powers and the legacy of past manipulations, striving to reclaim its international agency.

As Ethiopia stands at this crossroads, the lessons of its recent history are clear: the path to a more stable, unified, and prosperous future lies not in the further entrenchment of ethnocentric politics but in the cultivation of a shared Ethiopian identity that embraces diversity while striving for common goals and aspirations. The journey ahead is undoubtedly fraught with challenges. Still, it is also filled with the potential for renewal and transformation, offering a beacon of hope for a nation striving to reclaim its place on the world stage as a united and resilient Ethiopia.

The current state of the political landscape

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)'s active participation and eventual assumption of state authority as Beltsegena in 2018 have greatly disturbed Ethiopia's socio-political environment, intensifying inter-ethnic conflicts. The Oromo and Amhara peoples have a deeply intricate and deeply rooted connection, characterized by growing tensions over the past 33 years, particularly following the ethnic cleansing in Bedeno. The situation deteriorated over the past five years due to the ascent of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) to power. To effectively tackle these concerns, it is imperative to possess a comprehensive comprehension of the

historical backdrop and the many intricacies at play. One positive aspect throughout this unfortunate historical period is that many Oromo intellectuals, unlike Tigrrians, exhibited a positive inclination towards unity and actively resisted ethnic nationalism.

After the Tigray war was resolved in Pretoria, Abiy Ahmed initiated the redistribution of armed forces from Tigray to the Amhara region. Following this, he commenced a method of disarmament. The primary objective of his efforts was to disarm persons who were lawfully in possession of firearms, as well as those who were armed by the state during the Tigray conflict and had rendered aid to the government. The move above resulted in the cessation of militias' weaponry and the dissolution of legally established institutions inside the Amhara state. Abiy Ahmed and his Amara counterparts' actions were seen as a foreshadowing of a possible conflict, similar to Abiy's tactics used in Tigray, which resulted in a significant loss of lives.

The post-Pretoria accord measures and the conduct of Abiy Ahmed have contributed to the rise of the Amhara Fano, who have initiated efforts to save their community from what they regard as a possible genocide and a premeditated conflict orchestrated by the Abiy Ahmed administration.

Amidst the political, social, and economic difficulties in Ethiopia, particularly the divisions between different ethnic groups caused by the constitution created by the TPLF/OLF, the Amhara Fano and their opposition to politics based on ethnicity, as promoted by these two groups, serve as a source of optimism for Ethiopians of all ethnic backgrounds. Minorities across the country are experiencing a sense of insecurity due to the limited ethnic politics promoted by the present Oromo-dominated administration led by Abiy Ahmed, as they are concerned about the potential loss of their means of living. A significant level of apprehension exists regarding the government's aspirations to incorporate ethnic minority regions in the southern and southwestern parts of the nation. The Fano resistance is perceived as the sole means to address the existential threat faced by ethnic minorities. With it, Fano's ultimate goal should be to assume power and help establish an equitable government for everyone.

My sincere recommendations

Rather than persistently insisting on and demanding land, the Tigrian intellectuals (elites) should focus on fostering reconciliation between the Tigrian and Amara peoples that the TPLF has messed up.

This approach emphasizes the importance of building bridges and healing divisions over territorial disputes, which have long fueled tensions between these communities. By prioritizing peace and mutual understanding, the Tigrian intellectuals can play a crucial role in mending the historical rifts made by the TPLF and creating a more unified and harmonious future for both groups. Such a shift in focus could lay the groundwork for lasting peace and cooperation, benefiting the Tigrian and Amara peoples and the entire nation.

Achieving lasting peace and healing the rifts among the Amhara, Tigray, and Afar peoples require collective efforts. For such reconciliation to occur, the TPLF must critically reevaluate its longstanding and divisive principles and apologize to the people of Tigray and Amhara. This act of contrition is essential for mending the historical bonds and facilitating a process of healing and reconciliation among these communities, which have, for centuries, been foundational to the

Ethiopian nation. The Amhara, Tigray, and Afar peoples have been instrumental in establishing Ethiopia as one of the early civilizations along the Red Sea coastline, standing united against various invading forces over the last two millennia. It is disheartening to witness how the unity that fortified Ethiopia against external threats for centuries has been eroded over the last fifty years, particularly by the actions and ideology of the TPLF. In conclusion, the TPLF must adopt a decisive stance in repairing the fractured relationships between these peoples, thereby restoring the unity that has been a hallmark of Ethiopian resilience and identity.

It is imperative for Oromo intellectuals to express their disapproval of Abiy Ahmed's intentions and to condemn the actions carried out by የኦሮሞ ብልጽግና in the name of the Oromo people. They need to speak up, write, and campaign against the ongoing ethnic cleansing and the apartheidlike system የኦሮሞ ብልጽግና has established. Collaborating with Ethiopianists and supporting the Fano movement is necessary to counter these issues effectively.