



The Problematic of Democratizing a Multi-cultural Society: The Ethiopian Experience

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I. Introduction

Following the change of regime in 1991, a model of federalism based on ethnic-linguistic criteria has been introduced to democratize the multi-cultural state of Ethiopia. And, in what appears to be a dual transition, the central project was to create a nation state of equals by empowering ethnic groups as collectivities as well as empowering individuals as citizens. To this end, a constitutional engineering designed to enshrine both groups of rights has been introduced to create a delicate balance between the two.

This paper argues that the practice of experimenting ethnic federalism has neither been easy nor appears to succeed. In fact, it seems to have created more problems than it set to solve partly because of the hegemonic aspiration of the ruling elite, and partly because of the tensions in the attempt to implement both collective rights, which is the moving spirit of competing ethnic nationalisms in the country as well as the individual rights of citizens, which are basic to the now universally accepted liberal version of democracy. Put differently, the most serious flaw in the Ethiopian experiment is its failure to meet neither the demands of competing ethnic nationalisms nor the individual demands of citizens as citizens. And, contrary to the expectation of the engineers of the Ethiopian ethnic federalism - it has contributed more to political polarization and fragmentation than to the building of a democratic polity.

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and democracy both at the theoretical and practical levels. The controversy is much more serious under situations of ethnically divided societies where political demands and their articulation easily take the ethnic fault-lines.

The controversy over theory arises as the result of competing interests, which leads to competing

argue for a balanced approach to ethnicity and its use in the reordering of the state. Especially, Ghai (*Ibid*: 18) underlines a need for 'autonomy arrangements ... negotiated in a democratic way' to ensure the much needed democratic governance, political stability and meaningful economic development in

modus operandi of the Ethiopian State, although it remained as an undercurrent up to the 1960s.

bloody and the fate of millions was left to the mercy of the conquistadors. The subjected peoples paid very dearly in land, produce and the corvée labour imposed on them by the military and quasi-military administrators and the soldiers under their command (Addis Hiwot, 1975; Gebru T., 1996). Furthermore, to grab the new opportunities created in Oromo areas and much of the South, the élite and the surplus population from the North flocked to these areas as administrators, court officials, soldiers, interpreters and priests. An alien system of rule known as a *neftegna* (settlers) system of political, military and economic control through the intermediary of the gun was imposed on the southern peoples (Markakis, 1974; Teshale, 1995). Notably, this was a vastly different system from that applied in the North. Underscoring the North-South dichotomy in the country's political economy until the democratic upsurge of 1974, Addis Hiwot presents the following picture:

After the creation of the multi-national empire-state by the Shewan feudal principality, especially after the conquest and the effective occupation and incorporation of the south, southwest and southeastern areas, a classical system of feudal serfdom was established. An extensive process of land confiscation and the enserfment of the indigenous peasants took place. The religious, cultural and linguistic differences between the feudal conquistadors and the process of enserfment gave a still more brutal dimension; the aspect of national and religious oppression accentuated the more fundamental aspect of class oppression. (Addis Hiwot, 1975: 30f)

As Addis Hiwot has correctly observed, oppression was very severe, and can be equated to 'internal colonialism', a term preferred by Oromo and Somali nationalists with the agenda of separation (Holcomb & Sisai, 1990; Asafa, 1993).

In a nutshell, Haile Sellasie, who emerged as a real successor to Menelik, despite his Oromo blood continued the 'nation-building' process on a much more naked and narrow ethnocentric basis, which further deepened national inequality among the varied ethnic groupings of Ethiopia, which in turn later led to the rise of ethnic-based liberation movements (Teshale, 1995; Gebru T., 1996).

3.2. The Rise of Modern Competing Ethnic Nationalisms

By 1960 the imperial regime began to show visible signs of decay, which had created a better condition for the forces of change to emerge. As Bahru (1991: 209) summed up the events of the day: 'Opposition to the regime ... had many facets. Peasants rebelled against increasing demands on their produce. Nationalities rose in arms for self-determination. Intellectuals struggled for their vision of a just and equitable order.' In the post-1960 period the new challenges against the regime increasingly began to take the form of either class or national struggles. To put more specifically, the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) began championing the common class struggles against the imperial regime while the Eritrean and Oromo movements became the bearers of the national and/or regional struggles (Kiflu, 1993).

Ethnic nationalism in the Ethiopian context was engendered, as indicated earlier, in a century of political, economic and socio-cultural domination of the Amhara élite over others (Getahun, 1974; Addis Hiwot, 1975). It was shaped by the collective action of the marginalized ethnic groups against political domination, land alienation and cultural suppression in 1960s and early 1970s (Gebru T., 1977; 1996; Asafa, 1993). As the ESM also recognized the multi-faceted injustice perpetrated against the marginalized ethnic groups, the national and class struggles against the imperial regime reinforced each other. In fact, political mobilization along class and national lines, which were to become the dominant forms of struggle in the post-1960 period, were largely the logical outcome of national and class oppression - the bedrock of most injustices under the imperial regime (Addis Hiwot, 1975; Markakis, 1987).

3.3.1. 'Garrison Socialism' and State Response to Ethnic Nationalism: The Regional Autonomy Formula

The Ethiopian military with its own limitations as inheritor of imperial Ethiopia wanted to transform the country without making a major break with the country's imperial past regarding the national question, which had been the major source of crisis of the Ethiopian State. Not surprisingly, when they assumed state power in September 1974, Ethiopia's military élite had no well-thought-out political programme of any kind, except the vague motto of 'Ethiopia *Tikdam*' (Ethiopia First). But they moved fast with the winds of the day, and began to flirt with the civilian lefts' political agenda of a socialist revolution soon after their take-over of power. To this end, it immediately adopted socialism as the official ideology on 20 December 1974, both to capture the imagination of the revolutionary youth, who were to be sent to the countryside to organize the peasantry for the support of the unfolding revolution and to compete with the civilian left for revolutionary leadership.

According to the then prescription, to be a revolutionary and to improve its socialist credentials, the military committee nationalized many private business firms throughout the country. Then came the March 1975 Land Reform Proclamation, which mostly addressed the main historical grievance of the varied ethnic groups in much of the South such as the Oromo. The decree on religious equality and the separation of Church and state in Ethiopia was also part of the new regime's response to the religious/ethnic inequality perpetuated under the imperial regime (Kiflu, 1993). However, a more programmatic and direct response to the rising demands of ethnic nationalisms came with the declaration of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) in April 1976. The regional autonomy formula was included in the NDR programme as part of building socialism in

The right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism.

The unity of Ethiopia's nationalities will be based on their common struggle against feudalism, imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and reactionary forces. This united struggle is based on the desire to construct new life and a new society based on equality, brotherhood and mutual respect. ... Given Ethiopia's existing situation, the problem of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded full right to self-government. This means that each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, use its own language and elect its own leaders and administration to head its own organs.

This right of self-government of nationalities will be implemented in accordance with all democratic procedures and principles Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC, April 1976).

On paper the NDR Programme was a radical proposal. However, after the departure of MEISON, which attracted a good part of the Oromo radical intelligentsia and was believed to be the main author of the NDR Programme, ethnic nationalism began to be portrayed as the most serious threat to the revolution. Furthermore, ethnic and regional movements began to be castigated as counter-revolutionary forces and the government's propaganda machine moved against them to complement the war of annihilation unleashed by the regime to destroy them altogether. The Eritrean movements, the Tigrayan, Oromo and Western Somalia liberation fronts had to face the military regime's much enhanced war machine, lavishly supplied by the Soviet Union military hardware (Dawit, 1989)

The regional autonomy programme was resurrected in the National Constitution of 1987, which

IV. The Post-1991 Experiments at Democratization

4.1. The Promises Made in the Early Years

The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its outer covering, the EPRDF assumed state

policy, and promotion of the oromiffa language as a working language in the Oromo areas and allocation of television and radio programmes to it were taken.

Following the proclamation of the regionalization policy of 1992, which was based on Article Thirteen of the Charter, the elections of the regional and local councils were scheduled for June 1992. To ensure the fairness of the process, a large contingent of international observers were invited and allowed to be stationed wherever they wanted to be. However, the much-publicized elections, the first acid test for the TPLF sponsored democratization was doomed to fail from the beginning. First, all of the multi-ethnic political groups, which had long years of experience were made out of the game from the start. Secondly, the newly created major political groups, such as Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Union (SEPDU), All Amhara People's Organization (AAPO) were maneuvered out of the game. Thirdly, and more importantly, the thin rope that tied the OLF to the TPLF-dominated T.G.E. was severed as distrust and mutual suspicion reached their climax. Consequently, the OLF, which was the major contender of power, was forced to withdraw from contesting the elections and subsequently from the T.G.E. itself, which made the elections totally an EPRDF affair. (See NDI/AAI Report, 1992)

Since the local and regional elections of June 1992, several national and regional elections were held in 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001 and 2005. The 1994 elections were for a Constituent Assembly, whose role was limited to the rubber-stamping of the TPLF authored National Constitution. The 1995 elections were to bring to a close, the long-delayed transition period and to manufacture public support and legitimacy to the new regime through "popular" elections as promised in the 1991 Charter. The 2000 national and regional elections and the local election that followed them in 2001 were all aimed at further consolidation of power by the TPLF/EPRDF while the May 2005 elections sent a shock wave to the regime.

VI. The May 2005 Elections as a Political Earth-quake for the EPRDF Regime

the restructuring of the NEB, which in effect left the EPRDF both as a “referee and player”. At any rate, when the opposition upon realizing that the EPRDF leaders were not moving on the central issue of restructuring the NEB and the donors’ pressure reached its limit it wisely accepted the offers on the table and moved fast to the election campaigns.

Candidates’ Registration and the Campaigns

Once the decision was made to participate in the elections, the next political business was voters’ as well as candidates’ registration, which were immediately followed by election campaigns. Here it is important to note that in a lot of areas, especially in areas where the opposition appeared to have strong support, serious attempts were made by the regime’s controlled *Kebele* associations either to selectively register or discourage registration of voters. In such deliberate scheme of things, the youth who were generally known for their opposition to the regime were specifically targeted for exclusion. Furthermore, some eligible voters did not bother much to register because of the widespread political apathy and their little faith in the ballot box emanated from Ethiopia’s past political trajectory, which appeared to have lowered the number of registered voters to 26 million from about 39 million eligible voters.

After voters’ registration came the candidates’ registration, which invited far more troubles from the incumbent party, which never faced hitherto real challenge from opposition parties. In fact, both candidates’ registration and the election campaigns had never been smooth. Hundreds of candidates were intimidated and forced to withdraw while hundreds of opposition members and supporters – including potential candidates - were detained and some were even killed. In fact, both stick and carrot were used to reduce the number of candidates. For instance UEDF, one of the two major coalitions did not know how many of its candidates stayed until the elections. What were positively unique and new in the country’s long recorded history were the national debates and the mass rallies during the campaigns. Put differently, albeit lately, the unprecedented national debate over key election issues between the ruling party and the opposition and the massive mass rallies across the country by the opposition parties, etc; moved millions for the history-making event. Television programs were eagerly watched and radios were listened to by the public while the turn out for opposition mass rallies was astonishingly high. As the result, the country’s hitherto repressed opposition as a whole was able to break its isolation and galvanized the support of millions with the genuine rising expectation that engulfed the nation. Consequently, despite the last minute alarmingly high harassment, people came out in force to vote for the candidates of their choice where in most places voters waited for several hours to cast their votes. In fact, the turn out of 26 millions was a record high in the country’s history of elections (see EU-EOM, 2005).

The Elections Day and after: From Rising Expectation to Rising Frustration

Despite mass arrests and harassment of opposition members and supporters at the eve of the May 2005 elections, as well as forcing away of party poll watchers to open the way for fraud, the elections day passed relatively peacefully. But the Prime Minister who had a better grasp of the overall situation and expected trouble, declared a semi-state of emergency in Addis Ababa during the evening of the Election Day, which was practically applied throughout the country by the zealot cadres.

On the morrow of the elections things started to turn for the worse when with the shock of losing Addis Ababa nearly 100%, the ruling party declared its victory in the major regions of the country and claimed to have won enough seats to form the next government (see *ibid*30.4(er)141938 4(nea4(gua)5.5(efu)8(y10)5.3)-6.-6.8rul(y)

and then the larger populace of Addis Ababa came out in their thousands to demand the investigation of the massive election fraud. The EPRDF leaders, who neither prepared to share power nor to give up power, responded with a massive show of the military muscle. And in what can be termed a post-election systematic state repression, tens of people were killed; thousands were wounded while several thousands herded to prisons (see

mechanisms did not provide an effective remedy. The human rights situation rapidly deteriorated in the post-election day period when dozens of citizens were killed by the police and thousands were arrested. Overall, therefore, the elections fell short of international principles for genuine democratic elections (EU-EOM 2005: 1).

The anger from the EPRDF side was not hidden. The Prime-Minister himself has broken diplomatic niceties and wrote a lengthy open letter accusing the head of the EU-EOM for being biased toward opposition.

The Report of the Carter center, which deployed a much less number of observers and covered a much less number of constituencies, put the government in a positive light, but it too has identified some of the major irregularities, especially during the investigation and rerun periods. At any rate, the stolen election thesis stuck in the minds of people and has become a rallying point for the anti-government forces at home and abroad, which has further undermined the legitimacy of the regime both in the eyes of the Ethiopian people and that of the international community.

The State of Ethiopian Politics Two Years after the Historic May 2005 Elections

About 90% of the elected members took up their seats in parliament partly because of the hope that the political landscape improves for the better and partly because of the government reaction against those who refused to join. Conspicuously, despite the increase in their number of seats from 12 in the last

hoped for Ethiopian democratic transition to a dead-end. Consequently, the country's political crisis has continued to deepen – with low intensity conflict in the Ogaden, Oromia and the Afar regions and politically a tense situation in the rest of the country.

The emerging academic consensus regarding the crisis of the Ethiopian state after the May 2005 elections also points towards the intransigence of the EPRDF regime for peaceful transformation. Both Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian academics have already converged in depicting the EPRDF as a road block to Ethiopia's hoped for democratic transition. For instance, Clapham (2005), one of a keen observer of Ethiopian politics since the last days of Emperor Haile Selassie has underlined that "the EPRDF has now reached a state at which it is almost impossible to imagine it winning a remotely fair election against any reasonable plausible and effective opposition". He has further argued that "It [EPRDF] has lost 'the mandate of heaven' and has envisaged three possible scenarios, i.e. that "The EPRDF government might leave power peacefully ---; The government might leave power violently;--- [and that] The government might succeed in retaining its hold on power, in the process converting itself into an overtly repressive regime ---".

Clapham's conclusion raises two important theoretical questions: (1) can a minority regime with a narrower political support base sponsor a successful democratic transition without committing - what I

rules set by the EPRDF nor did the EPRDF fully respect its own rules. What is happening is that, the EPRDF easily changes the goal posts at any stage of the game and at any time of its choice.

Major Road-Block 2: Perception of the EPRDF towards the opposition. Judged by its actions, the EPRDF appears to have never envisioned a role for opposition parties. If at all it has envisioned one, it appears, not to include winning of elections. Put differently, it has never considered opposition parties as

After two years, the sequel of the eventful May 2005 elections is still rocking the regime. Still there is no workable *modus vivendi* even between the opposition groups which joined the parliament and the

citizenry. To be sure, meaningful share of power and empowerment of citizens can only be done under popularly elected accountable governments both at the center and a regional as well as at the local levels. And, any smart political manipulation by the powers that be cannot replace a real institutionalization of democratic governance and/or a genuine decentralization thereof.

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