Ethnic Politics and Its Effect on Democracy In Ethiopia

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Abstract

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic nation with cultural differences between its component ethnic groups. From the north to the south, the range in types of social system, dress, diet and languages far exceeds that to be found elsewhere in the world. This diversity has resulted into two major problems namely: conflict between ethnic groups and the hostility that derives from competition between people for wealth and power. Since EPRDF controlled the power throne in 1991, there are extreme conflicts among different Ethnic groups. EPRDF has been using boldly ethnicity to stay on power by creating conflicts among ethnic groups and to manipulate, to oppress, persecute, revenge, and disappearance of people who stand against the EPRDF propaganda. EPRDF higher officials and prominent figures are the main calibrates in creating conflicts between ethnic groups to assure continuation of the regime. This paper examines ethnic politics and its effect on democracy in Ethiopia.

Key Words: Democracy, Ethnic politics, Conflicts, Power, wealth

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic national state with socio-cultural differences between its component ethnic groups all of which have resulted into cultural dissimilarity. This cultural dissimilarity has been manifested by, for instance, the differences in language, diet, dress and types of social system. A rational observers have noticed that the recent event such as globalization have not significantly diminished these differences. This static situation has been due to a number of reasons: (1) the indigenous languages, which help to identify the various ethnic groups, are still spoken by the entire population of Ethiopia. (2) The style of life has not, for the majority people, changed to such a degree as to produce appreciably greater uniformity. Against this diverse background, many ethnic problems abound in Ethiopia, which arise principally from the hostility that derives from

competition between ethnically different peoples for wealth and powe[1]r. In all ethnic conflicts in the University[2] as well as in a population area, EPRDF (Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front) is the source of Ethnic conflict[3], inter-ethnic conflict for scarce valuable resources. This system and policy enforced by EPRDF to monopolize the power by creating ethnic conflicts among the groups.

After EPRDF has in power, the political situation of the co EPRDF is become worse as the EPRDF ethnic harassment, persecution, detention, disappearances and persecution are the key for stay in a power. The diversity nature of the society has made identification with the 'nation' a difficult task. Today, identification is easier at both family and ethnic levels. A consequence of this is that many of the citizens may never develop a proper concept of nation. This kind of ethnic group relation signifies a negative dimension and which may mean much for the Ethiopian political system and democracy process (Andent Tefaye, 2011). Therefore, a discussion on the effects of ethnic politics on the creation of democracy is or seems to be highly desirable. It even becomes necessary given the cry of political marginalization coming from various ethnic groups in the new democracy. In most political activities in Ethiopia, the factor of ethnicity is reflected. This is the fundamental policy of EPRDF to rescue ethnic groups such as Amara to be isolated by various ethnic groups, which is more than 2.5 million of Amara are eliminated systematically by EPRDF[4]. Those of who are against the EPRDF propaganda are persecuted, detained, face false accusation and died[5]. It is particularly obvious in areas like voting, distribution of political offices, employment and EPRDF general patronage of the citizens who are only support their mission. It is against this background that this paper discusses the effect of ethnic politics on democratic governance in Ethiopia.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

Like any other terminology employed by social scientists, the concept of ethnicism is a term that does not lend itself to easy definition. To fully understand this, some related concepts like 'ethnic

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[1] http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/07/201273075846287757.html

[2] http://www.ethiomedia.com/assert/5032.html

[3] http://www.zehabesha.com/the-main-cause-for-ethnic-conflict-tplf/

[4] http://moreshwegene.blogspot.com/

[5] http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/28/us-ethiopia-politics-idUSBREA3R0YC20140428

group' and 'ethnicity' need to be defined. Ethnic group is an informal interest group whose members are distinct from the members of other ethnic groups within the larger society because they share affinity, religious and linguistics ties (Cohen, 1974). This means that ethnic groups are social formations, which are distinguished by the communal character of their boundaries (Nnoli, 1978). In an explanation of the idea above, Nnoli emphasized that the most important or crucial variable in ethnic identity is language. This then means that an ethnic group consists of those who are themselves alike by virtue of their common ancestry, language and culture, and who are so regarded by others. Ethnicity is another related word, which needs to be conceptualized in this paper. By definition it means the interactions among members of many diverse groups (Nnoli, 1978). On the other hand, the term ethnicism denotes ethnic loyalty. This is a feeling of attachment to one's ethnic group (Pepple, 1985). The concept of loyalty in the above definition carries with it the willingness to support and act on behalf of the ethnic group. Thus, ethnic loyalty or ethnicism usually involves a degree of obligation and is often accompanied by a rejective attitude towards those regarded as outsiders (that is, members of other ethnic group).

From the conceptualization of these two related concepts, it can be seen that ethnicity is a phenomenon, which involves interaction among various ethnic groups and which by itself does not pose any serious threat to either development or democracy. On the contrary, it is the phenomenon of negative ethnicism (a hangover of ethnicity), which is the rejective attitude towards those regarded as outsiders that threatens development process. It is important to note that it was the phenomenon of ethnicity that was found among Ethiopians, while the second phenomenon (ethnicism) is a product of competition for both economic and political resources.

The problematic nature of ethnicism as conceptualized above can be explained in the context of some theoretical positions. In the first instance, one can examine the negative aspect of ethnicism by linking it to the theoretical framework of Talcott Parsons' pattern variables. To understand this, it is important to make reference to the 17th century belief, who argued that while developed countries are characterized by the pattern variables of universalism, achievement orientation and functional specificity, the under-developed ones are characterized by the opposites, namely particularism, ascription and functional diffuseness. For the under-developed countries to develop, they must adopt the pattern variables that are characteristic of the developed societies. Whatever

the criticism against this position, it is important to note that ethnicism breeds the pattern variables that are characteristic of under-development, particularly those of particularism, ascription and functional diffuseness.

Another explanation for why ethnicism has become a problem to contend with is possible in the context of conflict theory. Social conflict can be defined as a struggle over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain desirable values but also to neutralize, injure and/or eliminate their rivals. This is why Nnoli, (1978) has described conflict as an important aspect of ethnicism. The implication of this is that conflict is inevitable under conditions of inter-ethnic competition for scarce valuable resources. There is no doubt that this type of ethnic conflict will strengthen the in-group and out-group feelings of the members of ethnic groups involved in the conflicts (Barth 1970). The fact remains that such conflicts will have negative impacts on certain institutions of the society including the political institutions.

A conclusion that can be drawn from this is that it has led us to belief that ethnicism leads to primordial sentiments in multi-ethnic society. This position is supported by the theory of ethnocentrism. On a general note, the theory of ethnocentrism simply denotes differentiation according to origin. This is to say that it is a kind of behavior where a group of people look down on others and discriminate against them. Thus, one can see ethnocentrism as a belief in the unique value and rightness of one's own group. This human attitude manifests in form of prejudice and tribalism (ethnic communalism and conflict). The aspect of prejudice that is relevant to our discussion here is the one that has to do with group solidarity. Moreover, group solidarity provides security in situation of potential conflict and informal support when official agencies cannot or will not help. Prejudice can be turned to discrimination. If this happens, there will be strong pressure to exclude outsiders in the sharing of scarce resources such as political power.

At this point, it is necessary to give a brief insight into the concept of democracy. Democracy, just like ethnicism, is a concept that is not amenable to definitional unanimity, more so as there exist several versions of it. Common among the versions are the Athenian classical democracy, Liberal democracy, Marxist-Leninist democracy and lately, Radical democratic conception to mention a

few. Democratic discussion is often embroiled in controversies, over which ideally is true democracy, given scholars' divergence of views on the concept and practice of democracy. But this paper concerned with liberal democracy otherwise known as representative democracy and how it is aided or impeded by ethnic politics in Ethiopia. Democracy[6], in the liberal perspective, is government by popular representation; a form of government in which the supreme power is retained by the people, but is indirectly exercised through a system of representation and delegated authority periodically renewed; a constitutional representative government. Among the major features of democracy is equality of individuals before the law; freedom, liberty and universal suffrage enjoyed by the people[7]. The paper examines how competition for wealth and power among various ethnic groups in Ethiopia affects institutionalization of democracy in the country. Therefore, this paper also examines ethnicism and its resultant ethnic politics as an important factor that contributes to political instability and which subsequently has always threatened democratic rule in Ethiopia.

ETHNIC ISSUES IN THE ETHIOPIAN SOCIOPOLITICAL HISTORY: A REVIEW

Ethiopia is undoubtedly a plural society with different ethnic groups, religions, languages, cultures and institutional arrangements. As a heterogeneous society, more than 80 ethnic groups have been identified each interacting with one another in competition for power and wealth. This has resulted into ethnic conflict. A major contributor to ethnic conflict in Ethiopia is what many observers have described as EPRDF Cadres, and their political manifesto. The first constitutional development in Ethiopia was developed in 1931 during Emperor Haile Selassie, it advocates national integration of the country .This constitution was based on the Meiji constitution of Japan, a country that educated Ethiopians considered a model for its successful adoption of Western learning and technology to the framework of non-Western culture. Unlike its Japanese model, the Ethiopian constitution was a simple document of 55 articles arranged in seven chapters. It asserted the Emperor own status, reserved imperial succession to the line of Haile Selassie and declared that "the person of the Emperor is scared, his dignity inviolable, and his power indisputable." All power over central and local government, the legislature, the judiciary, and the military was vested in the

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[6] President Abraham Lincoln, democracy is government of the people, by the people, and for the people
[7] http://photos.state.gov/libraries/korea/49271/dwoa_122709/Democracy-in-Brief_kor.pdf

emperor. On the other hand, the current constitution consists of 106 articles, it provide for a federal government of nine ethnic-based regions governed by a parliament. Many political observers and commentators have observed that the 1995 constitution formed the beginning of the process of fragmentation along ethnic line in Ethiopia, after EPRDF in power. This constitution is highly advocated and circulated by EPRDF higher officials such as Mr. Abay Tsehaye, Mr. Bereket Semon, Mr.Meles Zenawi, Mr.Tewodros Adhanom and other EPRDF Cadres.

The Ethiopian constitutional changes along different government rule encouraged factionalism, which later resulted into ethnic nationalism. By definition, ethnic nationalism is seen in this paper as the tendency to see one's self as a member of an ethnic group rather than as a member of a nation. This tendency is shown in the allegiance individuals in this country pay to their ethnic groups. Consequently, many still suffer to ethnic based isolation, harassment, eviction, employment opportunities rather than forming democracy at the state. This manifestation of strong allegiance to ethnic group encourages primordial sentiments among Ethiopian people. Thus, the individuals are concerned with socioeconomic and political development of their own group and not the nation as a whole. It is important to note here that ethnic politics[8] has manifested itself in many ways in Ethiopia. Particularly interesting is the one that is related to party formation.

Currently, there are more than 47 opposition parties in the country, but one party (EPRDF) dominates state that a coalition. Elections were first held in Ethiopian under the provision of the current constitution in June 1994 to elect the membership of local government, general elections have since been held in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015. In the past 5 election process international organizations including human right watch has accused the EPRDF of stifling political dissent and criticism in Amhara and Oromia. Moreover, magazines including the New York Times reported that the Ethiopian government has recently imprisoned opposition leaders on false charges, passed laws to stymie intellectual and human right groups and silenced independent media. In response to the perceived threat of EPRDF domination, different political group founded a political party named All Ethiopian united party (AEUP), Blue Party, Ethiopian people's revolutionary democratic front and united Ethiopian democratic forces… Although it was originally conceived to be a national party, it could not escape from its regional thinking. The

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[8] http://nazret.com/blog/index.php/ethiopia-the-problems-with-ethnic-identify-politics?blog=15

political group soon disclosed its ethnic identity because of the close association between its birth and establishment of a regional cultural association. Though it is legal to form political institution in accordance to the constitution which is on the paper however it is not allowed to participate in a real ground when opposition party try to mobilize the people at large. For instance, the president of AEUP (All Ethiopian Unity Party) Mr. Mamushet Amare and other many members are in detention due to false accusation made by EPRDF.

Another interesting manifestation of ethnic politics in Ethiopia is the administrative division of the country into nine regions. Each of these regions is dominated by one of the nine ethnic groupings thereby reinforcing the popular philosophy of nine-player of ethnic game. Many things have been affected by this multi dimensional pattern. The fear, intimidation, disappearances extrajudicial[9] and killings continues till today just become an opposition party member and supporter. Moreover, outshining scholars (who are other than Tigray Ethnic group) who are able to challenge EPRDF propaganda are facing persecution, detention, killings and removal.

All Ethiopian united party (AEUP) is one of the opposition parties in the country that has established in 2002. Most of the party's executive committee including the president of the party have arrested[10] were arrested by EPRDF before the 5th national election launched .Though courts decided and ordered to release the AEUP president Mr.Mamushet Amare, the EPRDF police administrative refused to do so. Similarly, the youngest Ethiopian political party (Blue Party) officials confirmed that more than 100 blue party leaders have been arrested. This party is participated at national election for the first time, accused the ruling party of using authoritarian tactics to generate victory. Almost all the opposition parties faces problems during the election, the security forces and cadres of EPRDF continued in harassing, beating, arresting and killing candidates and potential observers of opposition parties without any valid reasons and order of courts. In June 2015 the leader of blue party (Mr. Samuel Awoke) was killed after being allegedly beaten by security forces. The head of the youth affairs for Ethiopian blue party side that Samuel faced death threats.

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[9] https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/ethiopia/report-ethiopia/
[10] http://www.hiberradio.com/archives/626

However, the government has denied these allegations. As Al Jazeera said, the May 2015 election was not election rather it was an organized armed robbery, EPRDF. In every election the ruling party (EPRDF) won or retain it control of the government. With regard to the 5th national election, that had undertaken in May 24. 2015, Partial results announced by the country's national electoral board of Ethiopia showed that the ruling party and its allied regional political organization have so far won 442 seats declared out of 547 seats parliament. The election was undertaken without international observant[11].

Many Ethiopians are terrified to discuss these issues openly, and EPRDF has denied visas to several journalists trying to cover the election and is restricting the movement of foreign diplomats.

CAUSES OF ETHNIC, POLITICAL PROBLEM AND ITS EFFECT FOR DEMOCRACY IN ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia is still searching for a new political order. The full realization of this objective has been made impossible because of EPRDF enforced the dominance of the factor of ethnicism, a factor which has affected the creation of democratic rule in Ethiopia. One of the main causes of ethnic problem is ethnic nationalism. By definition, this means a tendency to see one's self, first and foremost as a member of an ethnic group rather than as a member of a nation. In Ethiopia the ruling party has Tigray ethnic; and higher positions in the country are reserved for this ethnic. In other words the government advocates regionalization thinking among the society than nationalism. This tendency has been shown in some ways and particularly in the allegiance people pay to their ethnic group. In Ethiopian society today, EPRDF enforced identification[12] with their ethnic group rather than with the nation or even state. The above shows that EPRDF enforces ethnic policy which is a mechanism to stay in a power for indefinite period using division rule .The origin of ethnicism in Ethiopia is purely noticeable by the current regime EPRDF.

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[11] http://www.ibtimes.com/ethiopia-elections-2015-guide-no-western-observers-monitor-vote-already-marred-1933303

[12] http://www.ascleiden.nl/publications/ethnicity-and-conflict-generation-ethiopia-some-problems-and-prospects-ehno-regional

While living in democratic countries it jealousy the citizen of these countries to see them exercise their right to elect their officials at all levels of the government. Developed countries including USA possess more than 500,000 elected offices. Other thing being equal, the grater the number of offices subject to competitive election, the more democratic a political system becomes. Most Ethiopian is dreaming for the day that everyone will be able to choose leaders and officials without fear, harassments and intimidation. Unquestionably elections are the defining institutions of modern democracy. However, it is believed that election alone may not solve all problems and extended social conflict in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is facing multifaceted and complicated problems which need complex approach to solve it.

CONCLUSIONS

In general the following problems that need immediate attention should be given by Developed countries like Europe, USA and the people of Ethiopia.

The problem of Ethiopian state structure: the modern Ethiopian state has always been highly centralized state, where a single ethnic group (The Tigray ethinic) dominates over all others. Most Amaras are victims of [13]TPLF/EPRDF. This has created and still creating tensions and conflicts among different Ethiopian ethinic group. EPRDF is fueling the tension and using it as an instrument to divide and rule for the purpose of power extention. According to Azar (1986), highly centralized political structure are sources of conflict because they reduce the opportunity for a sense of community among groups, increase alienation and tend to deny to groups that means to accomplish their needs. He also suggested that for conflict to be enduringly resolved, appropriate decentralized structures are needed, designed to serve the psychological, economic and relational needs of groups and individuals within nation states. In order to overcome this obstacle, ethnic and national political organization should meet freely and discuss their idea and their approach to solve the pressing problem however the ruling party (EPRDF) will never create this opportunity. It is challenging to think that any kind of conflict resolution goal would be achieved if one excludes major ethnic political groups like Amhara and Oromia political parties that are representing significant number of population. Our diversity should not be taken as liability or as a bad thing. It is rather a beauty and an asset. It should be built on it, not fear it.

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[13] Tiray People Liberty Front

Current TPLF/EPRDF government in Ethiopia is a minority ethnic group imposing its wrong policies and programs upon the majority of the Ethiopian people. Due to EPRDF Ethnic policy, which is the pillars of the constitution, the programs and directions given by the top EPRDF officials might negatively affect some ethnic groups and it otherwise favors some ethnic groups. This further leads ethnic conflicts. Hence, this paper concluded that the ethnic policy enforced by EPRDF has adversely effect on creation of democracy in Ethiopia .In the past two decades EPRDF is failed to show up good governance and democracy, because it fundamentally lacks not only legitimacy to govern, but most importantly, it also lacks a capacity to govern. The USAID/Ethiopia paper also revealed the fact that Ethiopia is currently is a federal state, with nine regions broadly configured along ethnic group. However, these regions have no internal autonomy to exercise self-administration. There is a strict control of the central government, which creates tension between central and periphery. Regional, zonal and woreda administrators are being appointed by a ruling party without having a capacity to govern. The very nature of TPLF/EPRDF government makes it difficult to reform itself, and thus it has to be replaced if we seriously need to alleviate.

The other major Ethiopian problem is political culture: political culture refers to the overall pattern of beliefs, attitudes and values in a society towards the political system. As Ethiopia has always lived and still living under dictatorship, the citizens of this country see themselves as subjects of the government not as participants in the political process. Many fear to express themselves outwardly against the wrong doing of the authorities . Since, fear created citizens who outwardly conformed but in reality adopted strategies designed to ensure their survival: two persons in one body, people participated but only as subjects. Survival required certain cunning in the pursuit of self-interest (Levada, 2001). We Ethiopian do not deny that we all are two persons in one. It is not our fault; it is the result of the environment of fear that imposed on us by our rulers, EPRDF. But we have to recognize this fact and work hard to change it. The culture of fear and suspicions on each other should stop somewhere if we really want to enter into a serious problem solving people.

Besides, an uncompromising political culture of 1970s is still intact in the minds of the elite TPLF/EPRDF leaders. Those political elites in power are all the product of the 1970s political movement, and they have a problem of listening and understanding the position of their opponents. For them the game is always to win or lose. No win-win situation in their thinking. The opponents

should be in anyways defeated. This kind of political culture is still intact in EPRDF governing body and thus we should have to overcome this hurdle, if we really want to address our problems genuinely and solve them definitely. Moreover, developed countries must sure that their donated money and resources should be used for democracy development and they have to give only when there is a clear political will on the part of the recipient country to accept the assistance and implement for democracy development. Otherwise, there money is wasted and used to oppress innocent people and opposition members to lengthen their power.

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