

Ethnic-Based Politics in Ethiopia

By Teklu Abate

According to the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, there are 79 political parties registered under Proclamation No573/2008. Of these, only 29% have country-wide (national) identity whereas 71% are regional parties that are organized around ethnic lines. Of those parties dubbed to have national outreach, some such as All Amhara People's Organization (AAPO), Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Front (EPRDF), Geda System Advancement Party, Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement, and All Oromo People Democratic Party do actually have, as their names indicate, ethnicity as their organizing logic. Several armed groups and parties are also following suit. Stated simply, Ethiopian politics is heavily smeared with ethnicism. On average, each nationality (ethnic group) has got its own political party.

That means, the political philosophy of the EPRDF (ethnic federalism) seems to have gotten popularity from the opposition. By necessity, affinity, and/or rhetoric, the majority of opposition political parties make ethnicism their core. Meaning, ethnic federalism is what unifies EPRDF and the opposition. Although the former has got the power/legitimation to enforce the ideology, the latter have been playing a no-less-than-important role in giving it real life.

Some people tend to mistakenly trace the commencement of ethnic politics in Ethiopia to the political participation of the late Professor and accomplished surgeon Asrat Woldeyes. Following the ratification of the FDRE Constitution and in response to the rampant persecution and mass killing of the Amharas, which is still the reality, Asrat was 'forced' to form the AAPO. Although the party was technically formed to 'fight' all the injustices made against the Amharas, the party was tasked to demand and safeguard freedom and democracy at the national level.

In fact, Professor Asrat's public speeches, some of which are available on YouTube, aimed at ensuring national unity, peace, and freedom. From the beginning, it was only the great surgeon who opposed the endorsement of the Constitution on the grounds that it undermined Ethiopia's interest as an independent and unified nation. From that point onwards, Asrat attracted a lot of negative energy from the ruling party. Despite all the odds that happened to him (e.g. he was fired from Addis Ababa University), Asrat intensified his struggle for the freedom of the poor. His formation of the AAPO was not in support of ethnic politics but was an immediate reaction to the massacre of the Amharas. Had Asrat been allowed to lead his life and career, we would have seen the immediate 'translation' of the AAPO into a national party.

Ethnic politics in reality has its roots in the now Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The founders of this party happened to champion the interest of the Tigray people. After the 17 year protracted war with the Derg, with strong support from the West and with a little bit of luck, they managed to emerge victorious. At the eve of the victory, 'sister'

political parties were formed representing major ethnic groups such as the Amharas, Oromos, and lately the Southern Nationalities. That fabric metamorphosed into ethnic federalism, which defines current Ethiopian politics. Consequently, the creator and God father of ethnic politics in Ethiopia must be the ruling party. The majority of the opposition political parties just contributed to draw its huge public face- they played a legitimating role. But what is an important question is not who started it but what unwanted consequences are there in relation to ethnic politics.

Implications

Seen at the surface, there seems not to be a problem in practicing politics along ethnic lines. There are several people who even argue that such model of politics allows grass-roots-level participation and is an expression of improved democratic governance, equality, social inclusion, and political consciousness. Theoretically and potentially, this argument seems to hold some water.

It is, however, a practical rarity to successfully fight for freedom and democratic governance while staying dear and near to one's own ethnicity. I strongly advocate for democracy, the rule of law, and presence of alternative voices, but when it comes to ethnic-based political parties, I do have serious reservations. I rather claim that practicing ethnic politics is not the right strategy to fight injustices and to bring genuine democracy.

One, such political fabric bears no fruits so far. Ethnic politics has been on the horizon since 1991. Political parties proliferated over the years since then. But their contribution to 'fighting' injustices is nearly unnoticeable. The reason is not only because the ruling party is systematically narrowing down the playing field but also because of the divided and symbolic nature of the opposition. The opposition is itself seriously divided along ethnic lines and some even see each other as potential threats. Ethnic political parties have a problem going beyond their own localities.

Two, forming ethnic parties is thus limiting, both physically and psychologically. The parties are known only to their respective ethnic groups and to the Electoral Board. The Oromo-based parties, for instance, hardly work in Northern Ethiopia. All the promotion and campaigning is done within their own localities only. They could not compete or win members, resources and names elsewhere within the country. They are thinking within their own boxes.

Three, ethnic parties just confuse the general Ethiopian public. Several ethnic groups each have more than two political parties. It is made unnecessarily confusing to join or support either party. They just frustrate the public. Several people seem to consider opposition parties as hopeless, powerless, disorganized, and fragmented and the like. This kills public motivation to get involved in politics. Ethnic parties retard and at best kill opposition politics much more than what EPRDF does to the latter.

Four, ethnic politics falsely communicates the presence of freedom and political participation and inclusion. There are several who think that forging a party of some kind is itself a success. Their leaderships, who seem to secure tenurships, roam around villages when elections are around. They proudly talk how their ethnic groups are represented in Ethiopian politics. This sends a false signal to at least people external to Ethiopian politics; they are in fact the voiceless voices. They are noises that constantly irritate the public.

Five, national agendas and interests are being undermined mainly because of ethnically-charged politics. Parties tend to exclusively focus on their own constituencies' practical matters, albeit unsuccessfully. It is hard to get ethnic parties that raise issues related to Ethiopia's borders, state of the education sector, unemployment and standard of living, individual freedom, the exodus of the youth to foreign lands, the Ethiopian Diaspora, Ethiopian history and future. Because of the obsession and compulsion with ethnic politics, our future integrity and prospect as a nation seem to be less discussed.

Six, ethnic politics contributes little or no to future peace and cooperation. The more parties love their own ethnic groups and cultures, the less they stand on the common platform- being Ethiopian. Along with other aggravating conditions, ethnic politics could be considered a recipe for future conflict and war among the over 80 nationalities.

Concluding remarks

Ethnicism seems to define Ethiopian politics. It is a common denominator to the ruling party and the opposition. The two, precisely speaking, have a lot in common than their differences. If they differ at all, it is related to getting supremacy and power. The less the difference exists between the ruling party and the opposition, the more frustrating and meaningless would be the political struggle. That is mainly why we do not see any promising development both from Ethiopia and abroad. If the opposition really care about and for Ethiopian politics, they must think and act out of their boxes- their ethnicity. Ethiopia is much more than the sum of all the political parties and ethnic groups.

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