

Is pluralism a fiasco in Ethiopia?

Solomon Ali¹

This paper addresses a fiasco pertaining to the application of a pluralist politics in Ethiopia. Ethio-diversity exhibits the dichotomy between democracy and ethnic politics. The fiasco in applying a pluralist politics rests either in the 'democratization of ethnicism' or in the 'ethnicization of democracy'. The continued shift of political paradigms and regroupings by political actors expressive, at best, of their lack of accommodation, and, at worst, of crisis and desperation indicate the fiasco.

Introduction

The specter of democracy is everywhere in the world. The old boundaries that divided mankind into two systems -communism and capitalism -have disintegrated. The former, that lost the world political game, left among its exponents a contagious legacy of interpreting social reality along class and ethnicity lines. This is also the case for Ethiopia's leftist elites since the 1960's. The Ethiopian leftists euphorically welcomed the import of socialist ideology and sang to the tune of that famous 1848 Communist Manifesto's: "The specter of communism....". Surprisingly, it is that same generation who are today singing the 'specter of democracy haunting the whole world'. History happens to them "twice: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce" (Marx. 1983:12). With the change of the tune they are compelled to pass through the litmus paper of western democracy: free market, pluralism, freedom of the individual and the like. However, the foundations on which both communism and capitalism were and are supposed to blossom in Ethiopia still remain predominantly backward to sustain the various imported and homemade ideologies.

The legacy of the country's autocratic/authoritarian culture and the absence of a strong civil society further affect the democratization drive in Ethiopia.... Sadly, the autocratic/authoritarian culture continues to have a pervasive effect both on the behavior of the competing elites and the *modus operandi* of the Ethiopian State. One such effect is its hampering of the development of civil society-a crucial factor in pluralist democracy. Merera (2003:8)

Whether the historical tuning effects a sad melody or not one has to accept them as zigzags of great events of one and the same process of a single human history. There were such turning points in the history/legacy of different nations, the problems of which were settled on various battlegrounds. The hitherto economic, political, cultural, psychological, ideological, military battles are nothing but chapters in the continuing annals of human history.

This article enquires at how pluralism is detrimentally affected by a dwindling role political actors in Ethiopia have been playing in the last four decades. It tries to indicate

¹ The author is currently working at the ministry of culture and tourism; solomonali222@yahoo.co.uk

that the problem rests in the irreconcilable shifts of ideologies that are derailed from the socio-cultural and economic realities of Ethiopia.

Conceptual Framework

Pluralism... is the guarantee that the diversity in modern society of ideological and spiritual trends, social groups and institutions, economic interests and alliances, professional roles and functions, political organizations, parties and instances will be recognized and approved, and that they will have scope for free activity to the extent to which they, for their part, approve and support the state and constitutional order that is necessary for all the plurality of forces to enjoy their rights, and that they will have the protection and opportunity to act in an environment of mutual respect, exchange, competition, and conflict. Schewan and Schewan(1974) cited in Shakhnazarov (1982:156).

What is understood by pluralism is that it is a conception irreducible to a single principle (*Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1984: 329). Pluralism is opposed and is an alternative to communalism and individualism. Communalism is argued against because it unifies people coercively by undermining their individual rights and interests, creating, in most instances, unstable, monist political systems. Individualism is also rejected since institutional arrangements in democratic political systems require common understanding and commitment. Connolly (in: *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought*. 1987:376). Consequently, features of pluralist ideology in a democratically pluralist system necessitate competitive contradiction varying from syncretism, equality, stability on one hand, to diversity, ideational elimination, cleavage, and etc. on the other, Archer (1988:245; 270).

Multi-ethnic societies complicate the democratic character of pluralism when socio-cultural dynamism is added on top of it and create cultural pluralism. Archer (1988:67). This dynamism makes the application of a pluralist politics more intricate in traditional societies like Ethiopia, which is lacking both the subjective and objective conditions qualifying it for a politically pluralist society. Inglehart (1990:24) stresses the dialectical relationship between cultural patterns and economic development. According to him for economic development and modern democracy three factors seem particularly crucial: (a) the emergence of a politically powerful commercial-industrial bourgeoisie;(b) the development of preconditions that facilitate mass participation in politics; and (c) the development of mass support for democratic institutions, and feelings of interpersonal trust that extend even to the members of opposing parties. Inglehart (1990:22).

The origin of the fiasco

By way of the above conceptual framework it is clear that modern understanding of democracy in multi-ethnic Ethiopia confronts the so-called national question/ ethnic nationalism. The genesis of the fiasco starts in the 1960's with the Ethiopian Students Movement (ESM). ESM's four decades ideological evolution is marked by mutually contradictory agenda and series of double defeats (see Merera 2003: 97-99) that can be characterized as full of hatreds and intrigues. The saga of forty years can be outlined as follows: a) the leftist ESM and its offshoots attempted to solve the national question from a Marxist point of view within the wider socialist unitary state context; b) part of the offshoots opted for secession shifting the Marxist class ideology to a chauvinist/narrow nationalist ideology and c) today various political forces in Ethiopia are claiming positions ranging from a sort of feudal-monarchic unitary, liberal democracy, revolutionary democracy and ethno-nationalist ideologies. The following

quotation² is a very good political autobiography for a personality who passed through a litmus paper of '...isms:

The history of organized politics in Ethiopia goes back to the early 1960's. From the very beginning there have been two forces at work: the ethnic/regional movements and the multi-ethnic political forces. From the outset the two groups have had a love-hate relationship (Kiflu, 1993& 1998; Andargachew T., 1993).

The first major political force to pursue a multi-ethnic agenda was the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM). Moreover, the MEISON group (1968) and the EPRP (1972), which dominated the country's politics in the early days of the Ethiopian revolution were the direct offspring of the student movement in terms of their leadership, membership composition and political agendas. They have been multi-ethnic movements both organizationally and ideologically, despite their present shift in ideological orientation from their Marxist past.

Ironically, in spite of their adherence to the same political philosophy and the similarity of their political programmes... they fought each other more than they fought the military regime and the national liberation movements. MEISON was lured to the side of the military regime and worked with it to destroy the EPRP while the EPRP on its part was lured to the side of the Eritrean liberation fronts to undertake the armed struggle. Again ironically, the unholy alliance both groups forged did not work for long. The Military later turned against MEISON and decapitated it, while the EPLF turned against EPRP and helped its destruction at the hands of the TPLF.... MEISON and EPRP were all but defeated by the military regime in the 1970's....

From the early 1980's multi-ethnic parties have been forced to live in the shadow of the much larger national/ethnic movements. Moreover, the defeat of the multi-ethnic parties also led to mass defection of their members to the ethnic-based parties and, as is usually the case, defectors tend to turn very hostile to their former associates. Merera (2003:108-109)

The continued shift in the political paradigm (ideology) by political actors expressive, at best, of the lack of accommodation, and, at worst, of crisis and desperation indicates the fiasco. The continuation of the same old story masked with new versions of regroupings³ from the 1970's up to present is nothing but the transformation of the fiasco into a double tragedy.

The tragedy of multi-ethnic parties in Ethiopia, and for that matter the tragedy of political movements in the country generally is their tendency to subscribe to zero-sum game politics. That is to say, like the power elites they have been playing a political

² In the quotation MEISON refers to *Mā'ison* (the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM); EPRP (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party); TPLF (Tigrayan People's Liberation Front) and EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front).

³ Almost all leading members of the now existing political parties and organizations in Ethiopia are offshoots of the Ethiopian Students Movement (ESM) in the 1960's, whose members on the various political and ideological battle grounds of the 1970's, the 1980's the 1990's and the 2000's, clustered into AESM, EPRP, TPLF, Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) to mention but few. Today some of these turned out to be Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), Union of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), Oromo National Congress (ONC), Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party (EDUP) and the like. For instance, today, some members of CUD are former EPRP and WPE; some members of ONC are former AESM, EPRP and WPE; some OLF are WPE, AESM, etc.; some UEDF are EPRP, AESM, WPE and some EDUP are WPE and the like....During the Military regime, some WPE were EPRP, AESM, OLF, TPLF....

game of take-all-or-lose-all. This has been and continues to be the malaise of Ethiopian politics for which there appears to be no easy medicine. Merera (2003: 110)

Yes, to the malaise of Ethiopian politics. Does this malaise mean to the Ethiopian elites or to the Ethiopian peoples who have always been suffering whenever and wherever the elites 'bend the twig too far' so that the twig 'will lash back with destructive ferocity'. The difficulty in the search for the cure is further aggravated when the search for a democratic option is marred by the 'ethnicization' of democracy.

...ethno-nationalism becomes inflamed and dangerous if it develops a sense of collective humiliation, either real or imagined. This can arise, too, from a sense of being swamped by a numerically dominant culture, or of being overwhelmed by one that presents itself as being superior or of simply assuming a proprietary right to a dominant position. Then ethno-nationalism can take on an assertive aggression. The Oxford philosopher, Sir Isaiah Berlin, who has written much on this subject, uses the vivid imaginary of the poet Schiller to liken cultural nationalism to a bent twig. Bend the twig too far, Schiller warns, and it will lash back with destructive ferocity. (Sparks. (1996) In: *The Power of Culture* (1996:100).

The degree of the destructive ferocity pluralism is facing in Ethiopia is expressed in the desperate shift of identity of the multi-ethnic political forces to ethnic-nationalism - a shift indicative of political identity crisis the consequence of which is hard to imagine in theory leave alone in practice.

One case in the 'bent the twig...' issue in the Ethiopian elite politics is the "Land to the Tiller" slogan articulated as mass mobilization by the ESM in the 1960's. The issue is that the mass interest is *economic*. The bent is that the interests of the masses were met by a Marxist-Leninist political *ideology* the ESM were articulating then. The ESM ideology also prescribed a national operation theory 'inviting the masses for history making' without taking into account the objective historical context. Merera (2003:96;182). This justifies the gap between the 'wrong' importation of ideologies that were and are still fashions of political elites and the objective reality of the Ethiopian people that by then were languishing under the yoke of feudalism.

According to many observers, the land issue was the best weapon of mass mobilization for the Oromo and the other southern Ethiopian elites.... following the 1975 land reform, the OLF lost its best weapon... to the military regime. For the Ethiopian peasantry... who had been mercilessly exploited and suffered as tenants under a back ward agrarian feudalism much effort was not needed... following the land nationalization of the 1975. In other words, it was the land that the military regime used to sustain itself by mobilizing the peasantry for its military ventures and to stay in power. The present regime is trying to do the same. Merera (2003:183).

Though the origin of the fiasco in applying the pluralist politics rests both in the theoretical interpretation and practical application of the dichotomy and/or nexus between democracy and nationalism, this does not necessarily mean that the masses are the sources of the problem. The problem rests in how the masses were mobilized by the political actors. The former were and are captives of homebred and imported '*isms*', which were and are designed to serve the 'zero-sum game politics'. At one time this game divided the Ethiopian society on class bases and at another time on ethnic basis. The dividing, however, remains cosmetic at all times. Why? The answer is, partly and mainly, found in the absence of both the subjective and objective conditions that qualifies the Ethiopian scenario as democratic and politically pluralist society in the real sense of the word. The theoretical basis upon which either socialism or ethnic-

nationalism or democracy are supposed to rest are missing, namely the socio-economic and politico-cultural basis. Subjective condition refers to political culture. Lack of political culture breeds distrust and lack of interpersonal cooperation, a sign characteristic of traditional societies in general. Inglehart (1990:24).

Is the Constitution a fiasco?

The best thing the Ethiopian Constitution has done is to get rid of the fiasco. The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, in its PREAMBLE, precisely resolves the dichotomy and/or the nexus between ethnic-nationalism and democracy.

We, the Nations Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia:

Strongly committed, in full and free exercise of our right to self-determination, to building a political community founded on the rule of law capable of ensuring a lasting peace, guaranteeing a democratic order, and advancing our economic and social order;

Firmly convinced that...this objective requires full respect of individual and people's fundamental freedoms and rights, to live together...;

Further convinced that by continuing to live with our rich and proud cultural legacies in territories we have long inhabited, have, ... built up common interests... and a common outlook;

Fully cognizant that our common destiny can best be served by rectifying historically unjust relationships and by further promoting shared interests;

Convinced that to live as one economic community is necessary in order to create sustainable and mutually supportive conditions for ensuring respect for our rights and freedoms and for the collective promotion of our interests;

Determined to consolidate, as a lasting legacy, the peace and the prospect of a democratic order which our struggles and sacrifices have brought about. *Federal Negarit Gazeta* (1995:2).

It is worth noting here that the Constitution, in its Preamble, makes unity in diversity a *sine qua non* referring to phrases like: "...that to live as one economic community is necessary.... for insuring respect for our rights and freedoms and for the collective promotion of our interests." Note also the significance of phrases like: ".... to building a political community founded on.... guaranteeing a democratic order...."; ".... to live together...."; "...with our rich and proud cultural legacies...."; ".... that our common destiny...."; ".... by rectifying historically unjust relationships and by further promoting shared interests".

There is a difference between what the Constitution assigns to resolving the national question within the framework of democracy, rendering the question a pluralist and federal fervent, as opposed to the ethnic nationalism responses of the narrow and chauvinistic origins -origins devoid of democratic element. The dialectics between ethnic nationalism and democracy is permissible, in the Ethiopian context, in as much as political actors respect the principle of *diversity in unity*. Basically, *diversity* in Ethiopia's context connotes group rights and freedoms i.e. ethnic pluralism, and, individual rights and freedoms, provided both do not contravene/infringe upon the democratic system. Hence the political solution is *democratic federalism*; '*in unity*', by addressing individual rights including cultural rights of the group, each group taken as an individual entity, refers to democratic unity, hence *democratic republic*. Consequently, 'federal democratic republic' in the Ethiopian context denotes

democratization of the national question/ethnic-nationalism. In view of this, pluralism is not merely the intercultural co-existence of the nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. It is an emphasis of the diversity of cultures and of ideas with their attendant institutions and all the differences, contradictions and syncretism of the *federal and democratic* co-existence of the republic called Ethiopia. Now what makes this feasible coexistence marred with fiasco is the fact that the historical evolution that makes a democratic society stable is far from complete in the Ethiopian case⁴. Assefa (2004:4, f18) asks an important question: "Could one state in the Ethiopian case that the constitutional lacunae is deliberate because during the constitutional bargain the forces of diversity prevailed over the forces of unity?"

Unless for its unique application in the Ethiopian case, the forces prevailed in the formation of the federal state, as precisely mentioned in the Preamble are forces of unity that are convinced to live in one 'economic order' (see the Preamble of the Ethiopian Constitution quoted above). The Unique character in the Ethiopian case, as I have argued above is the dialectical inseparability of 'unity *in* diversity' not unity *and* diversity. After all a constitution is a bargain between political forces. As an expression of the highest forms of political will, it is a game political actors play. The game extends not only to influencing the provisions of the constitution, but also to the extent that individuals and groups define themselves by the respective political aims. It was obvious by 1991, even prior to that, with the ascending forces of the national liberation movements, that the ancient unitary regime was not able to sustain itself by forcefully holding a unitary model not because 'all snakes are poisonous'. It was also obvious by then that the undemocratic coming together of ethnic-nationalisms was also not feasible because 'no snakes are poisonous'. It was only through experience that one can know the truth that 'some snakes are poisonous' though the dictates of one's sub-conscious does not trust snakes for the inbuilt assumption that all snakes are poisonous.

The histories of nation building in developed nations justify that they first unfolded their economy on the edifice of which they democratized the superstructure. Neither in the unfolding nor in the 'perfection' of European industrialization can one find emphasis on ethnicity.

Ethnographic considerations have, therefore, played no part in the formation of modern nations. France is Celtic, Iberic and Germanic. Germany is Germanic, Celtic, and Slav. Italy is the country in which ethnography finds its greatest difficulties.... The British Isles, taken as a whole, exhibit a mixture of Celtic and Germanic blood, the proportions of which are difficult to define.

The truth is that no race is pure, and that to base politics on ethnographic analysis is tantamount to basing it on a chimera....

⁴ Assefa (2004:1-4) argues that there is an 'exaggeration', a 'dilemma' and a 'contradiction' in the creation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, in 1995, comparing it with previous formations of the federal states else where in the United States of America, Germany, Nigeria and Switzerland etc. Providing some evidence, according to him: "The Preamble, taken together with other provisions of the text, may be considered as evidence to prove the considerable importance that ethnicity and the accommodation of diversity has in contemporary Ethiopian politics. Nevertheless, the federation is incompatible to the states and cantons, for instance, of the United States and Switzerland...In short it is a federation established from a formerly unitary state.... The dilemma in the Constitution, in relation to its origin as well as the combination of ethno-nationalism and self-determination that principally challenges the structure of the state with the possibility of breaking away on the one hand and federalism which on the other hand, tries to accommodate diversity in unity inherently *limiting both forces of unity and diversity*, among other things explains some of the contradictions incorporated in the federal constitution."

The fact of race, therefore, while vitally important at the outset, tends always to become less so. There is an essential difference between human history and zoology. Renan (1882; trans. by Zimmer (1939). Cited in Ebenstein (1960:760-761).

Contrary to the European experience, the relationship between pluralism and the national question stands on its head upside down. The third world dilemma predominantly lies first in the discovery of some ideology; most precisely, in importing it. Only when the ideology seems to suit, then developing nations look for some fixture in the economy. So continues the search for other formulas, which sounds like a *tone of the epoch* - a tone that does not wear but rest out before no one knew it. That explains why the different political groupings and regroupings come and go - a political identity crisis that casts its shade on all levers of societal transformation needed for sustainable development.

A concluding remark: is pluralism feasible?

Political pluralism as a system is the democratization of political institutions, devoid at least of racial and ethnic denotation (not connotation). The fact that Ethiopia is multi-ethnic does not contravene with the application of a pluralist politics in as much as one does not advance the hate/love zero game. In other words, to advance democracy and ethnic politics at one and the same time in a situation where one can be a nationalist without being a democrat and a democrat without being a nationalist is catastrophic. At any rate, the nexus between democracy and 'ethnicism', as rightly put in the above mentioned Preamble of the Constitution, is to engender a political community founded on the rule of law capable of ensuring a lasting peace, guaranteeing a democratic order, and advancing our economic and social order. What matters is the democratization of ethnicism, not the vise-versa, i.e., not the 'ethnicization' of democracy. Ethnic nationalism and democracy uphold two different values. By analogy the relationship between them is like a planet and the sun, say in a given solar system. As a planet is to ethnicity, so is the sun to democracy. A planet is subordinate to a sun.

Inglehart (1990:65) argues that mass democracy is almost impossible without a certain amount of economic development, though the later does not produce democracy. If economic development does not go in tandem with the unfolding of political culture and civic social structures, the result may be not democracy but any of a variety of alternatives short of democracy. The point here is not a choice of alternatives. The alternatives are clear. The choice is more of a choice between democratic options that presuppose the democratization of ethnic-politics. The danger of the option lies in the over doing of the ethnic politics.

If you overdo it, you shut yourself within a prescribed culture, which you regard as a national culture. You are confined and immured, having left the open air of the great world outside to shut yourself up in a conventicle together with your compatriots. Nothing could be worse for the mind; and nothing could be more untoward for civilization... man, apart from being penned up within the bounds of one language or another, apart from being a member of one culture or another, is above all a reasonable moral being. Renan (1882; trans. by Zimmern (1939). Cited in Ebenstein (1960:763).

Political forces, the history of which is identified as dwindling, conflicting and irreconcilable, contribute to the continuation of the fiasco. They should, seriously, engage in a dialogue of resolving differences and start building a viable trust of not incriminating one another.

.... interpersonal trust is... essential to effective political participation in any larger democracy. A sense of trust is also required for the functioning of the democratic rules of the game. One must view the opposition as *loyal* opposition, who will not imprison or execute you if you surrender political power to them, but can be relied upon to govern within the laws, and to surrender political power reciprocally if your side wins the next election..."Almond and Verba (1963) quoted in Inglehart (1990: 23).

For over forty years political forces in Ethiopia have learned and thought how to hatch ideologies in order to use them as weapons. They have to learn and teach how to bury a hatchet. Only then they start to learn how to forgive and how to forget. Only then they replace the fiasco with success -a success glittering in the remote *tukuls*, far from ideologies, but nearer to the earth.

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