

CONTENDING POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES IN ETHIOPIA AFTER 1991: THE ROLE OF INTELLECTUALS

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INTRODUCTION

In Ethiopia, the 1974 popular Marxist revolution overthrew the 'feudal' order of Emperor Haile Selassie. However, instead of creating a genuine democratic revolution it brought to power a military dictatorship. Under the guise of socialism, colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam embarked upon exterminating any voice of dissent coming either from the side of supporters of the ancien regime or that of Marxist-Leninists who saw in the Derg - the ruling military committee he controlled - the abortion of their dreams for genuine socialist transformation.

Mengistu's regime, enjoying the support of the then Soviet-led socialist bloc, reigned in terror for seventeen years. Besides the realization of the much anticipated nationalization of land, little actual economic and/or social development was achieved. Famine, misery and wars continued to be associated with Ethiopia. Armed struggle against the government by a number of opposition groups - ethno-nationalist (TPLF, OLF), ethno-regional nationalist (EPLF) and Marxist state-nationalist (EPRP) - intensified. Though divided, these political groups were to a large extent products of the 1960s radical Marxist student movement of Addis Ababa University and that of the Ethiopian student diaspora in western Europe and the United States.

In 1991, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), an umbrella organization of ethnic-based organizations under the control of Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), came to power. At the same time, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) came to power in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea that de facto - and with the consent of EPRDF - became independent after a thirty year old secessionist war against the imperial and military centralist regimes of Ethiopia.

This paper discusses the contending political ideologies in Ethiopia after 1991, i.e. in the past decade. Such a discussion is of paramount importance if one aims to understand contemporary Ethiopian politics and controversies and at the same time situate oneself within the historical moment that gave birth to them. More precisely one has to investigate how current political ideologies are linked to the ways intellectuals have been 'produced' in Ethiopia. I am of the opinion that all political ideologies currently promoted in Ethiopia share the commonality of political exclusion. This means that all of them are based on particular characteristics that force other Ethiopian citizens to either accept them and thus deny their own ideological orientation or feel excluded from its political system. These processes create grievances and breed conflict.

In this past decade, 1991-2001, Ethiopia elevated ethnicity¹ the basic form of political organization expression. As article 8 of its 1995 constitution states: "All sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia" (Federal Negarit Gazeta, 1995, p. 4).

Ethiopia thus became a federal state consisting of nine regional states and two city administrations. Ethnic-based political parties mushroomed throughout the country. The rhetoric of democracy and liberal economics were adopted by the EPRDF leadership, setting the framework for the current political moment that is under consideration.

This new arrangement nevertheless did not bring about the much anticipated transition "from bullets to the ballot box" (Kinfe, 1994). Opposition to EPRDF continued either by armed groups promoting ethnic-based or religious-based libratory agendas (Oromo Liberation Front, Al-Ithad etc.) or legal opposition parties espousing both ethnic-based and state-nationalist agendas. Many of the legal opposition parties have incorporated a liberal democratic component into their programs and accuse the government for having adopted only a liberal rhetoric. Although legal opposition parties are operating within the new federal arrangement many of them seem to oppose it and in particular its provisions that allow for self-determination leading to secession. They nevertheless have so far shown great weaknesses and have provided no real alternative to the EPRDF.

This paper deals in particular with intellectuals' role in shaping political agendas and/or ideologies. In Ethiopia, a country with a nascent civil society, intellectuals play a significant role as party ideologues, as public opinion shapers (journalists), as producers of the little in numbers² future Ethiopian intelligentsia (academics) or finally as spiritual leaders of a people with rich and diverse religious history that has been marked both by conflict and peaceful coexistence (religious leaders). I therefore look at these four groups, namely journalists, academics, religious and political leaders as the ones who have the potential, the ability and the power to create and disseminate ideologies within the Ethiopian political framework.

According to Shils, intellectuals are divided among those who oppose prevailing norms, and those who work to maintain order and continuity in public life (Shils in Suny et. al. 1999: 7). In this respect three political ideologies are under consideration, namely the government sponsored ethno-nationalist, the radical and/or ethno-nationalist and the state-nationalist ones, the latter in both its liberal and Marxist versions. At the end, an assessment of these political ideologies is attempted, in an effort to identify if, and if so to what extent these political platforms are giving answers to long-standing political problems of Ethiopia. Intellectuals are the focus of this paper because, among other things, they are the ones out of whom solutions to the long-standing political problems of the country are expected. I am of the opinion that if any long-standing solution to the political problems of the country is to come, it will only come as a result of their activities and in their agreement on a modus operandi that will ensure peace and political stability, the preconditions for development.

I - THE TPLF/EPRDF ETHNO-NATIONALIST PROJECT

TPLF was created in 1975, in the midst of a radical left-wing student movement that shook the foundations of the empire. Drawing its support from the northern region of Tigray and its subsistence peasants, TPLF was a Marxist-Leninist liberation movement. Before capturing power, TPLF embarked upon creating - or assisting in the creation of - a number of ethnic-based political movements and ultimately EPRDF, an umbrella front. TPLF's domination within EPRDF and in particular its military and security aspects transformed it from a basically regional front into one with Ethiopian-wide aspirations and actions.

In 1991, and after a USA-sponsored negotiated and relatively bloodless transition, EPRDF came to power holding the majority of seats in the transitional government that aimed at drafting a new constitution for the country. By the time of the inauguration of the new federal constitution in 1995, TPLF/EPRDF managed to solidify its position in power. One can mention the following points as crucial in this attempt:

- a) the decommissioning of the Ethiopian national army and its substitution by TPLF's army,
- b) the break-up of relations with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), a partner in the transitional government and the forced demilitarization of OLF's military wing,
- c) the de facto independence of Eritrea,
- d) the new US-sponsored role that Ethiopia seemed eager to play in the region as a catalyst for stability and an enemy of radical Islam, and
- e) the absence of any opposition with an alternative program that could contest TPLF/EPRDF's.

TPLF/EPRDF, during the period of its transformation from a regional revolutionary movement into a country-wide power holder, also managed to adapt its political vocabulary to the fashionable lingo of democracy and free-markets. At the same time though it never abandoned either its organizational structure of a Marxist-Leninist party or its fundamentally anti-imperialist orientation and state-led economic practice. The fact that TPLF's members, having fought side by side for decades, had established a strong internal cohesion topped by the traditional - although somehow problematic - notion of Tigrayan suspicion towards outsiders created a cemented organization. This organization seemed able to absorb external shocks and pressure for economic, social and democratic political reforms for as long as strategic goals - such as federalism and transformation in Tigray itself - were kept high on the agenda of the party.

The TPLF-sponsored ideology of revolutionary democracy and agricultural-led industrial development has faced multifaceted challenges. The traditional intellectual elite, socialized along the lines of a unitary and centralist Ethiopia, saw in federalism the danger of Ethiopia's dismemberment, in particular following Eritrean independence. Ethno-nationalist intellectuals who supported the idea of federalism started realizing that in actuality TPLF's federalism remained on paper, while mechanisms of political control and exclusion were kept

intact, if not reinforced, over time. Concurrently, TPLF-led introduction of "free market policies" in effect created a number of TPLF-owned businesses with monopolistic tendencies that make analysts wonder about the actual desires of the government in the economic sector.

TPLF, caught between its original ideology and its adopted one, resembles the Janus-faced Roman god. While at the same time all liberal freedoms are guaranteed by the federal constitution, their application in cases related to the freedom of association and expression or to that of free and fair elections are restricted. TPLF affiliated intelligentsia - until the recent split within the TPLF leadership - had managed to dominate the ideological debate in the country thanks to:

- a) absolute control of electronic media and some control of written press,
- b) the fact that the elevation of ethnicity into official political doctrine paved the way for the creation of tens of political organizations with inexperienced leadership. Accordingly, this enforced the idea that TPLF/EPRDF is the only serious political organization, and
- c) the absence of a vibrant civil society.

The recent Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000) precipitated another metamorphosis of the TPLF/EPRDF. This time, the party that had championed Eritrean independence and had expressed its doubts about the very notion of Ethiopia and Ethiopian unity, rallied Ethiopians behind old-fashioned state-nationalist slogans. At the same time, it brought Ethiopia's development efforts to a stalemate and endangered its international position with isolation, in the midst of a drought. TPLF affiliate intellectuals, in collaboration this time with the old guard state-nationalist bred intelligentsia, managed to win the ideological battle by playing the patriotic card. Having won a war against Eritrea, contrary to the expectations of many foreign government political and military specialists, and at the same time having won the parliamentary elections in the midst of the war in May 2000 - this time with opposition parties running in them - TPLF/EPRDF seemed to have securely established its dominance in all political arenas.

II - RADICAL ETHNO-NATIONALISTS

Although TPLF opted for a federal political arrangement, it never questioned Tigray's belonging to the historical bloc that - together with the Amhara ethnies - constituted Abyssinia and created contemporary Ethiopia via the southern 'expansion'. After 1991 the contributions of Tigrayans to Ethiopian history and Ethiopia itself have been highlighted. The celebration of the obelisk of Axum as the archetype of Ethiopian civilization and Tigray's role in the Christianization of the country are examples of that tendency.

Such views are not shared by ethno-nationalists who support federalism and decentralization but see in TPLF's rule as another version of Abyssinian rule - that is domination by Tigrayans instead of the Amhara, its formerly dominant northern counterpart. Although federalism in paper allows for self-rule and cultural determination in terms of language, education and expression, in practice this has meant control by TPLF affiliates

under TPLF security supervision over non-Tigrayans. This practice has led on various occasions to open confrontation and clashes, to the realization of that centralist considerations are still in place and that coercion is the most common antidote to dissent³.

The Ethio-Eritrean war initially opened the space for a possible transformation of the TPLF-controlled army into a federal/national one. However, it rapidly gave place to renewed attempts for control over non-Tigray soldiers and officers as fear mounted over possible dissent coming this time from the uniformed, equipped and experienced non-Tigray conscripts and officers⁴.

Non-Abyssinian ethno-nationalist intellectuals still cannot see how relevant the mythical and much celebrated conception of Ethiopia as Orthodox Christian bastion is to them. They usually see it as an oxymoron to celebrate Ethiopian highland heroes who subjugated their grandfathers and grandmothers, who confiscated their land and still emphasize a semitic descent they do not share. Moderate and radical non-Abyssinian ethno-nationalists alike tend to suggest a different conception of the very notion of what Ethiopia and an Ethiopian is, accompanied by a process of true democratization⁵. The terms Ethiopia and Ethiopian have become exclusionary and are rejected by ethno-nationalists who see them as symbols of oppression and "passports" to what Keller referred to as "cultural suicide" (Keller, 1988: 160).

These ethno-nationalist intellectuals vacillate between feeling forced to follow the path of violence (OLF for the Oromo, Sidama Liberation Front, SLF, for the Sidama etc) and to struggle within the parameters set by a political system - parameters that are not always respected by those who rule. The Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000) was seen by some of them as having nothing to do with the actual problems of the country. Some went even further to suggest that this event was one more war game among 'highlanders' - Tigrayans and Amharas on the one side and Eritrean-Tigrinya speakers on the other - and that the actual issue at stake remained control over the fertile lands of Oromia and the south-western part of the country⁶.

In many instances, ethno-nationalist intellectuals seem to act as the mirror image of what they despise. They provide more of an antithesis without having managed so far to articulate an alternative functional political framework and the necessary mechanisms that would ensure its proper application in a genuinely democratic fashion. One cannot deny the importance of ethnic identification in the country and the need for any political arrangement to consider its role. On the other hand though, one should not deny one's possible desire to deny its importance on personal or on social/political level. The fear that it is usually the old state-nationalist guard that under the banner of pan-Ethiopian sentiments would ultimately deny a role to ethnic politics to those who wish so, should not prevent them from realizing that any attempt so far in Ethiopian political reality to prescribe political behavior by excluding an alternative view a priori has led to political confrontation and undemocratic practices.

III - THE STATE-NATIONALISTS

Ethiopian political formations since antiquity can be regarded as a constant battle between centripetal and centrifugal forces. In this respect, the modern Ethiopian state as of mid-nineteenth century a. D. underwent a simultaneous process of southward territorial expansion and centralization. Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974) was the most important figure in this attempt for state consolidation and bureaucratization. Especially in the post-World War II period (1946-1974), the Emperor intensified his modernization push by introducing and expanding up on modern education as well as controlling the power of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) while concurrently transforming it into an ideological functionary of the empire and bureaucratizing the army. These changes took place within the framework of patrimonial clientelism which "was deeply rooted in the political culture" (Teshale, 1995: 129).

What is of particular importance for this paper is the fact that modern educated intellectuals that started being produced during this period were all products of this centralist-oriented system and were all tailored to reproduce it in one form or another. As such they have been 'state-bound'. This means that their employment and career considerations and visions for change that different generations or groups of intellectuals have espoused had as a starting point as well as a target the state as a mechanism of power and control.

Many post-World War II Ethiopian intellectuals who were exposed to Western political systems and thought ultimately became an amalgam of this - at least in their outlook - with the autocratic, top-down and state-oriented ingredients of the patrimonial system that produced them. One can distinguish two sub-groups that sprung out of this process, the state-nationalists that recently have adopted a liberal component and the Marxist state-nationalists.

111.1 - The Liberal State-Nationalists

Horrified by the idea of federalization, liberal state-nationalists see in the current political framework the danger of disintegration and Ethiopia's dismemberment. They are mostly of Amhara and Orthodox Christian background and they more or less adhere to a vision of Ethiopia's "glorious past", a past filled with 'success stories' such as a literary past (Ge'ez), an indigenous Christian Church dating from the fourth century a.D., and the victory against colonial Italy (battle of Adwa, 1896) with the subsequent continuation as an independent polity. These latter of the "glorious past" package have been the cornerstones of Ethiopia's attractiveness to many non-Ethiopians and have cultivated on the almost mythical conception of Ethiopia's uniqueness. These elements that have been a powerful force in the hands of intellectual elites over the ages are coming back again in light of the fact that the purported TPLF-sponsored federalism has not solved the country's serious economic, social and political problems.

Still partly using this imagery, liberal state-nationalists attempt to surpass 'ethnicization of politics' by focusing also on the individual in a liberal political fashion. Many of them come from the North American Ethiopian diaspora or have espoused 'the Western creed'. In the words of Vestal:

This group included many of Ethiopia's "brightest and best" who entered professions, started businesses, and pursued higher education in their new surroundings... All experienced first hand the virtues and problems of democratic governance and free market capitalism. They comprised what had never existed before - a critical mass of Ethiopians who understood such concepts as democracy, constitutionalism, and human rights by having partaken of them and who earnestly wanted something similar for their fatherland once the demons of the Derg were expelled. These educated cosmopolitan democrats held starkly different views of the theory of governance from that of the authoritarian liberation front leaders for whom war and mass death were the only route to personal power and survival (Vestal, 1999: 6).

A critical aspect of this 'back to the future' approach is its lack of accommodation for ethnically-minded individuals and groups. Its pan-Ethiopian approach, besides being portrayed as an 'Amhara come back', contains the same exclusionary seeds of previous takes on Ethiopian politics that are based on a perceived unity of Ethiopians. Regardless of one's agreement or not with particular principles, one has to see them contextually and in particular examine their long-term applicability. In the final analysis, the question is not whether western-minded cosmopolitan intellectuals are good or bad for Westerners but whether they have something to contribute to their own country as a whole and not the limited circles of the capital and in particular the radius between the international airport of the city and its five star hotels.

One has also to assess particular political proposals in the light of the need for an alternative that not only pleases donors but addresses and permanently accommodates domestic grievances and mobilizes the entire population of a country for economic recovery, development and social progress.

III.2 - The Marxist State-Nationalists

Marxist state-nationalist are by and large the products of the radical left-wing student movement of the 1960s and 1970s at Addis Ababa University and within the Ethiopian student diaspora in Western Europe and North America. They are also products of the emperor's attempt to create a modern educated intelligentsia. Having experienced the failed attempt for political liberalization in Ethiopia in the 1960s, and having lived abroad during an interesting and concurrently critical period for the West, they became adherents of radical socialist ideas. Divided along party lines (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party - EPRP - and MEISON) they attempted at one and the same time to address the national question and surpass it by placing it within the Marxist-Leninist framework that prioritizes class.

The Ethiopian Marxist intellectuals were - together with socialism itself...- among the many victims of the military dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam. Some of the ones who survived the military's menace joined the EPRDF through one of its satellite parties, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM). Most of the rest - either disillusioned or confused, as most of the left in that matter in the post-Cold War period throughout the world - still follow the unitary notion of Ethiopia. This makes them perhaps the most interesting 'piece' in the political puzzle of the country because of their political orientation within federal Ethiopia. Their ability to analyze political problems, their experience in the aborted revolution and their current ambivalent position make them potentially key players in the ongoing ideological battle, provided that they see themselves first and foremost as critical intellectuals rather than future state power holders.

IV - THE CURRENT MOMENT AND SOME PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

The triumphant feelings after the victorious Ethio-Eritrean War (May 2000) and the athletic successes in the Sydney Olympics (September 2000) were not enough to overshadow the existing problems of Ethiopia. The war exacerbated an already weak economy, while Ethiopia lost much of its credibility from its donors who were not happy seeing the poorest country in the world engaging itself in a brutal confrontation they could not understand. In March 2001⁷, a division within the ruling TPLF, that it now appears has existed for quite some time, turned into an open political confrontation and ultimately the expulsion from the central committee of TPLF of ten of its members⁸.

This division within TPLF brought to fore previously non-public internal rivalries and because of the fact that many of the dissident TPLF members held key positions within the party, the regional and federal governments have practically frozen a number of activities. Although both sides tried their best to show that there are ideological differences - the 'reformist' group of prime minister Meles Zenawi against the 'anti-imperialist' Siyye group - most of the arguments articulated by both sides hint at personal rivalries and ambitions. Both groups were aware of the way TPLF ran and continues to run a number of TPLF affiliate businesses; both groups were aware of the particular tactical or strategic shifts the party had to make in its international orientation; both groups have engaged in policies favoring their "family", be they relatives or party friends.

The issue of the war with Eritrea and the suggested anti-Ethiopian stance of the prime minister by his refusal to capture the port of Assab, accompanied by the innuendo concerning his Eritrean ancestry from his mother's side signifies a shift in power towards 'the state-nationalist camp' and its demagogic repertoire. Both sides though within TPLF seemed comfortable distancing themselves from that camp and its repertoire for thirty five years of TPLF's existence, ten of which TPLF has been in power. The most recent anti-corruption campaign by the government through new legislation and through arresting tens of "corrupt" officials and businesspeople in actuality has meant a crackdown on most of TPLF dissidents who held government positions or were involved in 'TPLF-friendly' private business. Thus

the question of sincerity of the government rises. Its willingness to eliminate corruption is according to many analysts compromised by its desire to “eliminate” its opponents, this time through legal means.

The second key event that occurred was the student unrest at the Addis Ababa University (AAU). Previous dissatisfaction and its exhibits by tertiary education students in peripheral towns and cities of the country did not seem to be taken seriously by the government that relied on coercion. The most recent AAU events though have attracted the attention of most citizens, in particular since they are taking place in the midst of the TPLF crisis.

One can observe that a series of mistakes on behalf of the parties involved in handling the AAU student crisis managed to:

- a) radicalize the students by their indecisiveness on a number of matters such as the undemocratic nature of the selection of the University's management, the oppression of student unionism and the presence of a police station within the University campus with the subsequent violent police interventions on a number of occasions,
- b) help students gain support both within the University by other students' groups that were skeptical initially⁹ and outside by high school students, and finally
- c) push the students into more 'political' demands such as the reinstatement of the fifty University lecturers who were fired in 1993.

At the same time as of the TPLF crisis and the student unrest one can observe the virtual absence of any political opposition that could capitalize on the government's weaknesses as discussed above. In particular one can see that intellectuals in the country are mere spectators of the unfolding events without a vision that could possibly alter the course of things without redividing Ethiopians and excluding some of them from the political game by negating their chance in shaping the future of their country. Divided among those who oppose ethnic politics and those who claim that ethnic politics was in actuality never practiced, they both share the common desire to exclude the other from a future arrangement and thus perpetuate political conflicts.

The case of the recent arrest of two prominent intellectuals, Professor Mesfin Wolde Mariam and Dr. Berhanu Nega, is quite interesting in that connection. Both were charged as having formed an illegal organization aimed at unconstitutional activities and as instigators of the student movement, the demands of which all government officials found legitimate. Intellectuals were divided between those who support the ideas of the two and those against them and not based on whether intellectuals in year 2001

Ethiopia should be allowed to voice their dissent.

Without claiming to carry the remedy for Ethiopia's problems, one can suggest that openness, experimentation and a genuine adherence to democratic processes and respect for human life and dignity should accompany any intellectual activity aimed at developing a stable and politically conducive environment anywhere on earth. In that respect, one can imagine that experimentation on the basis of a political framework that is primarily democratic, inclusive and allows for political representation both at individual and group levels should not be excluded a priori.

NOTES

2. In Ethiopia the terms nation, nationality and people are in common use to explain phenomena that much of the related literature refers to as ethnicity and ethnic group. Differences among nation, nationality and a people in Ethiopia are related to numerical size of the particular group.
3. Only 1% of the College bound population in Ethiopia continues studies in tertiary education.
4. See reports and news releases' on the refusal of the EPRDF affiliate Hadiyya party to hand over power to the winner Hadiyya National Democratic Organization (Mebreq, November 16, 2000), on student unrest in Awassa (*The Reporter/Amharic*, December 12, 2000 and Goh, December 30, 2000), Oromo students' unrest at the Addis Ababa University (*Oromo Students at Addis Ababa University, Press Release*, December 23, 2000) ; opposition parties statements by South Ethiopia People's Democratic Union (Tomar, April 27, 2000, *Mebrek*, May 18, 2000 and *Tobbia*, March 15, 2001), the Coordinating Committee of Ethiopian Opposition Political Parties, May 2000, during the May 2000 campaign and subsequent elections, interview of Dr. Shako Otto, chairman of Konso Peoples Democratic Union (*Tobbia*, January 4, 2001), statement by the Yem Democratic Movement (*Tobbia*, January 18, 2001); letter to Oromo Regional State and Federal authorities by the Mecha and Tulema Development and Cooperation Association (*Seife Nebelbal*, November 10, 2000) and circular letter (*ibid*, December 9, 2000); as well as reports on human rights violations by the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (*Ethio-Time*, September 27/99 and *Mebreq*, January 24, 2001), Human Rights Watch Report (*Mahlet*, November 7, 2000).
5. See report on alleged control over mostly Oromo generals (*Ethio-Time*, October 8, 2000), report on two Oromo generals being under house arrest (*Goh*, October 14, 2000), report on the decision to have the annual Ethiopian Air Force celebration in Mekelle, the regional capital of Tigray Regional State instead of Debre Zeit. Oromia Regional State (*Maibel*, March 31, 2001) and finally a report on the decision of the government in the aftermath of the Ethio-Eritrean war to appoint only Tigrayan soldiers as guards in the Grand Palace. This report refers to alleged mistreatment of non-Tigrayan soldiers that led three Oromo palace guards to commit suicide (*Goh*, March 31, 2001).
6. See Merera, 2000 and Leenco, 1999.
7. Personal communications.
8. Since events are taking place concurrently with the process of writing this paper, further consideration and analysis will follow until the final version of this paper.
9. The dissident group, known by the name of one of its members, Siyye, was composed initially of twelve members but two of them re-joined the majority pro-Meles central committee majority.
10. Initially Oromo students - as well as students from the southern region of Ethiopia - did not actively participate in the student mobilization claiming that when they were victimized a couple of months ago, they did not receive the support of their Amhara fellow students but on the contrary they were seen as collaborating with the police

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