

Circumstances Hindering Ethiopian Stability and Peace

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Since the 1974 revolution which deposed the monarchy and eventually was hijacked by the armed forces, the Ethiopian political climate has remained tense for almost four decades. The military regime that usurped the February Revolution of 1974 is gone but only to be replaced by a more sophisticated dictatorship. So much has been written in papers about the general condition of the country, but no equitable solution has been materialized. This is largely because the political arena has been dominated by two extreme forces: those who wish to portray Ethiopia as a nation without divergence, on the one hand, and those who question the very existence of Ethiopia as one inclusive sovereign state, on the other.

Consequently, the illusive posturing of these two forces has confused ordinary citizens at home and in the diaspora for decades. As a result, many citizens have been turned away from the effort they were engaged in to democratize the country and some others have been swayed to fight with separatist forces. Thus, many Ethiopians have been put into a dilemma, and hence an identity crisis, in the name of “national liberation” instigated by narrowly focused regionalists, including those currently ruling the country. Because of these forces, the political climate remains complex and muddled. In other words, the unity of the Ethiopian people and enduring stability in the country remains fickle. The current regime claims to have solved the question of nationalities by creating ethnic based decentralized states on paper. In reality, all of them are under the direct control of the ruling party that highlights whatever differences there may be among the people and uses that to divide and rule.

The ethnic based grievances the current rulers and some separatists are using for their adverse objectives are cumulative effect of the courses of actions of the past regimes. At the same time the regional movements, who fomented hatred by wrongly considering innocent people responsible instead of holding the regimes accountable for their policies and actions, also share in the responsibility for the ensuing crisis.

The positions of the two sides can be summarized as follows: one side tries to concoct the political history of Ethiopia as events where no one has ever been privileged or discriminated against because of his/her ethnic origin and/or religious affiliation. This group does not acknowledge the dominant role of the Amharic speaking ruling class during the monarchy, nor the abuse inflicted on the various language groups and religions by the ruling class. This group neither shows any willingness to understand the wrong doings of the past regimes, nor does it express any concern regarding the feelings of the members of the groups who have been linguistically or religiously disregarded. In the name of “one nation” and “one people,” this category of Ethiopians plays a destructive role in the effort to unify the people and to preserve Ethiopian unity. According to the spokespersons of this category of Ethiopians, it has been the Amharas and the Tewahido Church that preserved the history and independence of Ethiopia. To portray the Amharas as sole preservers of the history and independence of Ethiopia is simply untrue. On the other hand, the role the Ethiopian Church played to preserve the unity of the Ethiopian people is noteworthy.

That being said, the protagonists on the other end of the spectrum are repelled by anything that has to do with unity. They deny that any relationship has existed among the Ethiopian nationalities and ethnic groups except that of a “colonizer” and a “colonized” or “oppressor” and “oppressed.” At the same time, they refute the existence of Ethiopia as a sovereign independent state and its long history. As far as they

are concerned, Ethiopian history is legend and myth. The proponents of this idea do not acknowledge the existence of Ethiopia as nation before European colonization of Africa. They also try to identify Ethiopia as a colonizer. Some of them talk about “Ethiopian colonialism” while some others call it “Abyssinian colonialism.” There have been some who, strangely, used the words “Amhara colonialism” as well. Some others talk about “Tigrean colonialism” since the current rulers came to power. In reality, none of the above characterization makes sense and the last two are particularly outrageous.

Those who use the first label, state that Ethiopia did not exist before the epoch of European colonialism. According to them, Ethiopia and Eritrea were created as nations at the same time by European colonialists. The promoters of this theory have been the Eritrean fronts and some leaders of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front. Needless to point out, the purpose of such an argument is to refute the historical ties between the Eritreans and other Ethiopians thereby advocating for and legitimizing Eritrean separation from Ethiopia. These groups branded the relationship between Eritrea and the rest of Ethiopia as that of colonized and colonizer.

Some other regional organizations that have been formed within Ethiopia asserted that, at the end of the 19th century, Ethiopia participated in the repartition of Africa and colonized regions which are today part of Ethiopia. It is interesting to note that these groups are created by those elements who fail to recognize the very existence of Ethiopia itself before the advent of the European colonialists. It may be better to leave it to them to answer how a country that had not existed colonized others.

It is true that many Ethiopian nationalities were annexed and treated by the aristocratic ruling class as second class citizens in their own country. However, that is history now thanks to the concerted struggle of Ethiopians from all nationalities who rose up united in 1974. However, the 1974 revolution did not achieve its intended goal, i.e. empowering the people. This failure cannot be attributed to the usurpation of power by the armed forces only; some polarizing elements in the society had to take its share of the blame as well. Namely, those who were still living in the past resenting what happened to their ethnic groups in the history of the nation and, as a result, abandoned the united effort and embarked on forming local “liberation” fronts instead of trying to rectify the wrong doings in the society together with others. The Tigray Peoples Liberation Front and The Oromo Liberation Front are good examples in this regard. There were also those diehard elements who wanted to keep alive the old system where a few landlords kept the country stagnant. Because of those obstacles, the goals of the revolution that got underway by the united insurgency of various segments of the Ethiopian society which erupted in 1974 and ousted the regime of Emperor Haileselassie have remained unattained. These polarizing positions have been a serious obstacle to the formation of a stable, cohesive and democratic Ethiopia.

Various arguments have been produced to deny the existence of Ethiopia as an independently evolved nation before the advent of European colonialism to Africa. The most challenging argument in this regard has been the theory contending that capitalism and industrial revolution are a *sine qua non* prerequisite for the emergence of nations. It had been argued that the concept of nation as a community of people living in a juridically defined territory under a single government is directly tied to the development of capitalism and industrial revolution. According to those who uphold this theory the European nation-states were formed because of those circumstances and the countries found in the continents that were colonized by the Europeans were created by the colonizers.

What does a nation mean anyways? Webster defines the word nation as follows: 1) “A people inhabiting a certain territory and united by common political institutions; the country or territory itself. 2) An aggregation of persons speaking the same or cognate language and usually sharing common ethnic origins.”

The second definition is about similarities of people who may or may not co-exist in one country but who share a common ethnic origin. For example, Arabs who live in different countries may consider themselves members of one nation/nationality. The French, the Germans and the Italians whether they live in their respective republics or in Switzerland belong to their respective nations in that regard. In our geopolitical region, the Afars, the Somalis, the Tigrayans etc. inhabit different territorial states but when it comes to their nationality they each are one nation. The word nation used in that sense therefore applies to linguistic and cultural groups that have not to belong to one juridical territory/country.

On the other hand, Webster’s first definition quoted above deals with people contained within a definite political entity, hence, a country and a history that they identify with and common heroes. When it comes to Ethiopia, for example, the victory of Adwa belongs to all Ethiopians and war heroes such as Alula Engida, Abebe Aregay, Gobena Dache, Belay Zeleqe, Zeray-Derress etc. are heroes of all Ethiopians. The same goes for internationally renowned sports title holders such as Abebe Biqila, Derartu Tulu, Haile Gebreselassie, Fatuma Roba, Mammo Wolde, Miruts Yiffter, Qenenisa Beqele, Tirunesh Dibaba, etc. They are Ethiopian champions that make all Ethiopians proud.

Anyway, if we agree with this Webster’s definition, it can be concluded that nations existed long before the industrial revolution and the development of capitalism. Capitalism and the industrial revolution are important factors that played a significant role in the development of nation-states. However, these factors have not been the only ones; neither were they the most decisive elements. Hence, to maintain that the development of capitalism and the industrial revolution were the only prerequisite for calling a certain territory a nation seems too deterministic.

The rise of nations took various forms of evolution in different epochs and different parts of the world with many common characteristics. Ethiopia is one of them, in fact one of the earliest. Without getting into the details of the sociological phenomena of the formation of a state, it would be imperative to point out the events that urged social and societal groups to put themselves into larger coalitions. The oldest and probably most common aspect that induced human beings to organize into political entities and played a very important role in the endurance of the entities (city-states, nations, and empires) is the security problem. Conflict and security problems have always been at the center of human history. Since prehistoric times, the leaders of small and weak political groupings/units such as tribal chieftains, community leaders, etc. established alliances for common security. This, in turn, alerted other groups to do the same. In that fashion, various entities were created.

The coming together of various groups had not always been voluntary. There had been entities that were annexed by force and remained permanent parts of larger or more powerful entities. In most cases, however, the need for protection persuaded groups to unite voluntarily. The divisions and contradictions amongst themselves had been reduced to a secondary level and the fear of outside attack urged many of them to organize into larger political units that could guarantee protection. In other words, when outside powers became imminent dangers to certain geographical regions, the basic political entities, nationalities, ethnic groups etc. opted for larger nationalism. The unity of Ethiopians to collectively defend their region

from foreign invasions is a good example of this. Such unity was displayed: 1) when the Aksumite kingdom of Ethiopia defended its region from being annexed by the Islamic-Arab Empire that had been rapidly expanding ever since Prophet Muhammad founded Islam, and mainly after his followers conquered Mecca in 632 A.D. That movement quickly spread out to areas stretching to the whole Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, to the borders of China, North Africa and South-West Europe in a short period of time. Ethiopians saved their region from being annexed by such a potent world-power. 2) The Ethiopians defended themselves also from repetitive invasions of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries; and the Egyptian and Mahdist/Dervishes incursions, again, in the 19th century. 3) It is also a well known fact that the united Ethiopians defended their independence by defeating the Italian invaders in 1896.

Events and accomplishments like those encouraged smaller units to yield to the political support of the stronger and to recognize its authority. They shifted their support to whoever possessed the power of protection from alien invasion. As a result, leaders of a given region who accumulated power of protection and common security for fellow human beings living within their boundary developed some type of legitimacy. Such a region tended to become a basic political entity, a nation. Incidentally, the invention of firearms, which also preceded the capitalist mode of production and industrial revolution, was an important factor that bolstered the military means of defense and, as a result, facilitated a territory's ability to stand sovereign. The more the political regions united, the more they became stronger and reliable defenders of themselves. As a result, more people transferred their political loyalties from their local leaders to a greater authority who could guarantee wider protection not only from eventual alien aggressor, but also from internal insecurity such as the safe movement of trade and other interactions.

In ancient times, some of the political entities grew into sovereign and powerful empires in the fashion mentioned above. Some of those powers, for example the Roman Empire and Arab-Islamic Empire, disintegrated while some others, such as the Ethiopian, Chinese, Iranian/Persian, and Turkish/Ottoman survived till the present-day as historically evolved territorial states or nations. The borders of these nations might have expanded or contracted and, in some cases, the names and political centers might have varied from time to time. However, the cores of these nations remain basically the same and they demonstrated their independently evolved existence with their uninterrupted continuity. This should be the context in which the development of the Ethiopian state and its continued existence should be viewed.

Ethiopia evolved independently as a multi-ethnic nation, and proved its uninterrupted existence for well over 2000 years. An Italian historian, Carlo Conti Rossini, once described Ethiopia as a "mosaic of people". A mosaic is a charming combination of a variety of things joined together. Hence, the fact that Ethiopia is home to various nationalities or language groups is a beautiful gift that we all should be proud of and cherish. We should benefit from that richness of various languages and cultures by accommodating all and helping them flourish. I sincerely think it is a blessing to have a country like that if our hearts are big enough to accept it and if all of us cooperate to make the house warm enough for all of us.

Someone may rightfully argue that all territories that today make up part of Ethiopia had not always been integral parts of the historic Ethiopia that has existed since ancient times. This may be true and there are other regions that were part of it and they are not anymore. In any case, the core has always uninterruptedly existed. The Zagwe Dynasty inherited the same nation the Aksumites constructed and ruled. The Aksumite Empire itself developed as a continuation of the Daamat civilization that started to

evolve about 500 B.C. in northern Ethiopia. Likewise, the Shewa based dynasty, the so-called Solomonic Dynasty, succeeded to the same nation that the Zagwe Dynasty governed; in fact claiming that they were more legitimate heirs of the Aksumites. By the way, many of the Shewan kings used to go to Aksum for coronation and that is another demonstration that the country was one united nation. Ahmed Gragn, the Gonderine kings and modern time emperors like Tewodros, Teklegiorgis, Yohannes, Menelik and Haileselassie; and contemporary leaders as well, all are inheritors of the same nation.

Another example of national continuity is the way in which the emperors who came to power from different regions of the country at different times, even centuries apart, chose their coronation names in honor of previous kings that came before them. For instance, if we take the name Tewodros, the first one reigned around 1411-1414 and he was from Shewa, the second one reigned 1855-1868 and he was from Gonder. If we take the name Yohannes, the first one reigned around 1667-1682, the second one reigned for some months in 1769 and the third one reigned in 1840-1841. Three of them were from Gonder area, but belonged to different family trees. Yohannes the fourth reigned 1868-1889 and he was from Tigray.

Yet another example of national unity sentiment was demonstrated even during the Zemene-Mesafint (the Era of Princes), when anarchy prevailed in the kingdom. The contending princes did not opt for separation of their regions to create another country. Each one's aspiration was to become king of kings of the entire nation. Parenthetically, it is important to note that the country never remained without a legally crowned king even during the Zemene-Mesafint. These are some small examples to show that Ethiopia has continuously existed as one sovereign nation for many centuries.

Moreover, towards the end of the 19th century, the united people of Ethiopia proved their country's solid existence as a sovereign independent nation and officially secured its nation-state status when the European powers colonized other African regions. Ethiopians of today should recognize that, at least since then, all of us have been an integral part of one sovereign nation. And that should be sufficient to meet the requirements to be considered indivisible members of one nation and to live in harmony. Some may have been annexed by force, but this is not unique to Ethiopia. Mergers of political entities in the world did not happen always voluntarily as mentioned above. There were times when weaker entities were annexed by stronger ones and then integrated or assimilated gradually. To try to reverse those integrations or assimilations would be another detrimental venture. There are also a lot of cases where the same language groups had been territorialized in different nations by the colonialists. To try to correct that in order to establish nation-states based purely in language and culture groups would be another utopian gamble.

We will seldom find in the world a country composed of only one ethnic group or tribe. Even those European nation-states today are known as the most unitary were originally constituted by different ethnic groups. Let us cite three nations referred to as the most unitary states: France, Italy, and Spain. Early on, France was established by peoples or tribes like the Gauls, Franks, Celts, Teutons, Latins etc. The people of Italy are descendants of many tribes such as the Etruscans, Greeks, Latins etc. Spain originally was composed of peoples like Celts, Phoenicians, Greeks, Arabs, Moors etc. Now they are all mutually assimilated in their respective nation-states and they are known as French, Italian or Spanish/Spaniards. Much more can be said about diversities in other nations.

Hence, Ethiopia is not the only country with various nationalities or language groups; and relationship among them has not been worse than it has been in many other countries. The Amharic speakers in

general, and the northern Shewans in particular, have been blamed for oppressions against other nationalities in the country during the monarchy because of few aristocrats. The beneficiaries, however, were just a few landlords. The conditions of Northern Shewans or other Amharic speaking masses were not better than that of other Ethiopians. Therefore, even though injustice had been committed against various nationalities in the past, the Ethiopian regional political movements, instead of ruminating on the wrongdoings committed in the past and consequently advocating for division, should try to promote unity and harmony among the Ethiopian people. Likewise, the other side should not pretend as if injustice has not been perpetrated in the Ethiopian society. Someone said “freedom will come when the oppressor feels the pain of the oppressed.” So recognizing the unfairness committed in the past will accelerate our concurrence. Nevertheless, the fact that injustice has been committed in a nation or the fact that there are various language groups in one nation does not mean that the citizens of that nation are not one people. Hence, it is not our diversity that divides us; it is our inability to recognize it. After all, who said that being ruled by local leaders, per se, will bring better governance? In fact, in some regions even worse repressions have been committed by local brutal self appointed leaders. The main thing is to endeavor jointly to create a democratic society. One of the most important things lacking in Ethiopia today is national cohesion. Once you have that you have stability and peace. Once you have reliable stability and peace, all other things such as democracy and economic development improve with time.

Currently, both the ruling party and some opposition groups are the cause of division and instability. Many of the current Ethiopian politicians, whether they are in power or part of the opposition, put their sectarian interest above the national interest. Most of them capitalize on what separates us instead of stressing what unites us. This is a step backwards compared to the previous generations. For example, The Ethiopian students and other nationalists who struggled raising the slogan “land to the tiller” during the monarchy were not only those who were born in the areas where the landlords directly oppressed the owners of the land, but also students who came from other parts of the country. They clearly believed that problems occurring in one region were problems of all Ethiopians. They knew that “when one organ suffers the entire body suffers.” That generation viewed Ethiopia as one inclusive nation.

In contrast, today many Ethiopians, including some of those who aspire to be leaders of the country, do not demonstrate nationwide concerns. For example, many of them do not voice anymore any concern about the northern Ethiopian territories such as Badimme, Irobland etc. illegally awarded to Eritrea and citizens abducted from those areas by the Eritrean armed forces. Although Irob community in North America, Irob Rights Advocacy Association and other Irobs such as facebook groups have provided detailed information about those territories and abductees; and repeatedly appealed to all Ethiopians to voice against the injustice being committed, to this date most of the Ethiopian organizations are not heeding to their call. Another point of concern is that some of the political organizations are not talking anymore about the importance of a sea access for Ethiopia and those who raise the question talk about the port of Assab only. The question of sea access should stay high on the agenda of Ethiopian political parties. And, in my opinion, the question of Assab should not be seen separated from Afar people and their land. Concerns for all citizens and for all parts of the nation should be reflected in the political parties’ strategy and public expressions. Advancing national agenda where every Ethiopian would feel included is absolutely necessary. All leaders and citizens must have a collective consciousness of nationhood. Localized ventures will not get us anywhere.

All of us must be aware that ‘united we stand and divided we all fall’. The only ones who will benefit from our divisive politics are the enemies of Ethiopia. Therefore, we must free ourselves from clannish mistrust and politics of hatred and revenge, which could only harm all of us. I think it was Gandhi who said: “an eye for an eye would make the world blind”. If we cannot get out of politics of revenge we will all lose.

At the time others argue about what they think to be right or wrong for their countries and people, or about rightist views or leftist views, or again, conservative or liberal ideologies, we still talk about Amharas, Oromos, Tirayans etc. What a shame! Both the current government and some opposition groups must be reproached for this and both are responsible for keeping Ethiopia in limbo. The leaders of the opposition camp must be reprimanded also for not being able to settle their differences and coordinate the struggle of the Ethiopian people to build a common democratic house and durable stability with or without the party currently in power; with, of course, if the party changes the policy it has been following so far and become ready to accommodate.

Conclusion

One can still hear some Ethiopians identifying themselves with their regional identities, instead of saying I am from Ethiopia, when asked where they are from by other people. Still worse, there are some of those currently ruling the country, and in fact occupying the highest office, who have openly affirmed that if things do not go the way they want they will declare independence of their region. They also said that they are ready to attack Ethiopians in defense of another country. This is identity crisis and treason and it is one of the reasons that motivated me to write this article.

If we all are really aspiring to survive as a people and prevail as a nation, all of us must act in the framework of one sovereign country to build up a nation where all its parts feel at home. Neither trying to separate its parts, nor trying to dominate its parts by one group will work or benefit any of us. How many generations should suffer before we become a good example of unity? How long will it take us to unite and rectify our ailing nation? If we do not operate in the framework of one nation, none of us will succeed. This includes those in the diaspora who, united as one Ethiopian community, would have achieved so much in their host country.

The two extreme views mentioned above are still existing problem and that mentality is, to a certain extent, behind the impossibility of the opposition parties to unite today as well. A moderate voice that would keep the balance is long overdue. If we are unable to get out of that vicious circle we will not embark on a right road. Hence, the first thing that should be a common denominator for all Ethiopians is, the acceptance and recognition, that everyone in Ethiopia belongs to one nation and act accordingly. There are still some Ethiopians who do not accept that all Ethiopian nationalities and language groups are a community of people of one inclusive nation. Working within the framework of a united nation is the only viable step in the right direction. The problems we have are shared; therefore, a solution can be obtained by common endeavor, acknowledging both our diversity and unity.

Memo: The first part of this article was initially published in Meskot magazine in 1994 under the title “Ethiopia: Myth or Reality”. Due to the discontinuation of Meskot, the following part was delayed to this date. Hence, taking into account the length of time elapsed between now and then, the author has chosen to incorporate it herein with some minor modification without changing the main content.

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