A Quiet Case of Ethnic Apartheid in Ethiopia

Internal Colonialism and Uneven Effects of Political, Social, and Economic Development on a Regional Basis

By Girma Berhanu, University of Gothenburg

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It is not an exaggeration to state that Ethiopia is at a dangerous crossroads.

The overall situation is critical. The country has been engulfed by protests and clashes on a continuous basis since about 2 years ago. The general unrest and dismay by the general public is an accumulation of years of frustration from other ethnic groups who claim they have been marginalized by the brutal Ethiopia’s governing coalition apparatus, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)[1], which is dominated by the party from the small Tigray region, the Tigrean People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). The general public, and in particular the two major ethnic groups – the Amharas and the Oromos – have been almost effectively excluded from the country’s political process and the economic development. The current clashes and widespread demonstrations, which have cost thousands of lives and hindered the flow of goods and services across the nation, expose the underlying issues that are structural, political, and economic inequalities between the regions in Ethiopia.

‘Since seizing the government by force of arms in 1991, the TPLF-controlled Ethiopian regime has maintained monopolies over economic and political power ever since, and has therefore dominated all other nationalities and ethnic groups. It is this refusal to share political power and wealth on the part of the TPLF that is causing the violent demonstrations of
dissent within the Oromo and Amhara states’ (Ethiopia at an Ominous Crossroads, Jan. 02, 2018 )[2]. The past several months of 2017 have also been characterized by unabated political protests and clashes that have swept through Ethiopia causing growing concern about the ability of the government to rule. The power struggle within the governing party has intensified. Both the panic characterized by intense power struggles within the ruling party, as well as between the ruling political coalition and the nationwide protests, are a serious threat for the regime’s survival. The government seems to be seriously worried about loss of control, in particular because the Amhara and Oromo opposition has coalesced. In addition, the unrest and protests are mass based and anchored at grass root levels and the political landscape is shifting beneath them fast, resulting in a serious threat to the regime. According to Western observers “the situation could get worse if it’s not addressed – sooner rather than later.” This could be seen in the recent chain of events in which the government has admitted to arresting tens of thousands of protesters during its crackdown on dissent and has announced plans to release all its political prisoners, close a notorious jail where prisoners were allegedly tortured, and “widen the democratic space” in what it said was an attempt to “foster national reconciliation.” This is yet to be seen. It is unclear exactly who will be released – or when it will take place[3]. At the time of writing this article (Jan 8/2018) a lot of confusion has emerged as to who is a political prisoner. The state machinery is full of contradictions, dirty tricks and underhand activities and machinations in political and government affairs. Many informed observers characterize the behavior and action of the government as malicious and contemptible. The system may be characterized as an embodiment of Ethnic apartheid manifested in the form of Internal Colonialism[4]. Internal colonization[5] is a theory that seeks to explain how persistent and pervasive inequality and domination in all aspects of life are maintained in a society when there is not
necessarily a foreign power ruling. An internal colony – in this case the rest of Ethiopia excluding Tigrean region – produces wealth for the benefit of those areas most closely associated with the regime, its allies, and the ethnic constituency the rulers claim to represent. So it is a form of colonialism originating from within a country. The theory of internal colonization looks at how we produce our own forms of racial/ethnic domination within a society. Therefore, the “internal colonies,” the regions within a country, are subdued by their own government or ruling elite. Different racial and ethnic groups are subject to forms of oppression forced on them by a dominant group in society, in our case the TPLF (see Howe, 2002[6]; Wolpe, 1975[7]). In other words, other than seeing the ethnic inequality as merely an individual action or event, it can be viewed as deeply engrained in the society and originating from within a country in the form of ethnic apartheid. It is not an external process. The Colonies are spaces governed by what Partha Chatterjee calls “the rule of difference”[8]. This difference surpasses sole economic exploitation as professed by some theorists. Instead, colonies are sites of multifaceted exploitative structures in various domains, including economy, politics, culture, sexuality, and religion[9]. There are significant amounts of data that support this scenario from the present Ethiopia.

In this paper I am not going to delve into the theorization of the concepts; a full-length research paper will soon be ready. My ambition here is to share some of my ideas that are incorporated in the larger version. This specific paper is motivated or instigated by a recent interview given by Brigadier General Tekleberhan Woldearegay, Director General of the Information Network Security Agency (INSA)[10] in Ethiopia. The General arrogantly discussed the “innate qualities” of the Tigrean ethnic group. A quick analysis of his interview excerpts clearly shows ethnic superiority rhetoric. He believes that ‘the Tigeans are hardworking; they are disciplined; orderly; they are endowed with impulse control;
are capable of governing; have leadership skills; and have qualities of perseverance and endurance; the Tigrean people have a superior moral value as regards human dignity and worth; their measures and actions are based on knowledge, truth, and sciences; they have a “comparative advantage’ to invest on as people; Tigreans need to educate their children in technology and other desirable fields as they have no natural resources as in other parts of Ethiopia; the Tigrean region is a source of historical relics and civilization, etc.’ [11][ Guest Author on Thursday, December 7, 2017 @ 2:32 am].

The General went on to say many shocking things in the above line of thought and ideology. The interview protocol tells a story of racial/ethnic schism and how it came to be, dividing the country into a hierarchy of races. It’s important to be historically specific when discussing ethnocentrism or any other form of ethnic or national antagonism. The General seems to be unaware of the fact that ethnicity or race[12] is a historical and social construct without biological basis, yet he attempts to explain social outcomes based on supposed innate differences. In blunt terms, it is a “lie” which claims to explain why people act differently, are smarter/dumber, successful/ unsuccessful, and so forth, but because people believe the “lie” it becomes structured into our world through the law, culture, politics, and social practice. So there is no difference between an Ethiopian from the deep South and a Northerner; however, when a security officer treats the Oromo or the Amhara or the Gambelia man differently, Ethnicity or race becomes very real as we witness this injustice in current Ethiopia (see Berhanu, 2017[13]). The General’s thesis is not new. The whole purpose or the basic reason is power – power derived from weapons, military force, property, or economic resources and of course full control of political and social institutions[14]. This is a typical example of exploiting ethnicity to divide rather than to unite. This exploitative culture has created “Tigrean privilege” which can be equated with “White privilege” that is “the ability for Whites to
maintain an elevated status in society that masks racial inequality.”[15] Tentatively I define “Tigrean privilege” as an institutional set of unearned benefits granted to Tigrean people. It refers to the myriad of social advantages, benefits, and courtesies that come with being a member of this dominant ethnic group (For comparison see Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Cheryl, 1995; Lund, 2010).[16]

The TPLF and its allies holding superior power in the society have established a system of inequality by dominating less-powerful groups. This system of inequality is then maintained and perpetuated through social forces and propaganda/lies as the General reiterated. Similar comments[17] have been heard on power corridors in Ethiopia and have also been observed in reality as a day-to-day fact. That is, different ethnic groups are unequal in power, resources, prestige, and presumed worth. So the purpose of this paper is therefore partly to debunk the myth of ethnic hierarchy. It is imperative to deconstruct the ideological myth of a superior ethnic group and the resulting conviction of a superior culture. As we all know through racist ideologies that led to a distinct classification of Hutu and Tutsi and a falsified history of Rwanda, Europeans successfully birthed an ethnic divide that ultimately led to the Rwandan Genocide. The General’s cultural message is clearly intended to work to the disadvantage of young promising non-Tigrean Ethiopians. Crane (1994)[18], having given a detailed and convincing argument in his acclaimed article, concluded that “…it is not surprising that we should find no evidence of genetic differences in intelligence between races. Race is fundamentally a socially and politically defined concept. It is not by any means clear that any one race is genetically homogeneous enough and genetically distinct enough from other races to make sense as a biological category” (p. 205). Similarly, Gould (1996, p. 399)[19] rightly stated that we will need many years, and much pondering, to assimilate the theoretical, conceptual, and iconographic implications of this startling reorientation in our views about the nature and meaning of human diversity.
Unfortunately the General and the ruling elites missed the science proven facts and are not in tune with the state of the art.

2) A Self-Fulfilling Prophesy and the So-Called Matthew Effect

It is obvious that the haves are in an advantageous position to perform better and excel in many ways and fields. The so-called Matthew effect is relevant here. In his recent book, Gladwell (2008[20]) argues that people do not just happen to become successful. A long line of support systems including cultural legacies, familial, and a lot of other background factors play a crucial role. Selection, streaming, and differentiated experience are also important factors. The best example of this is the experience of hockey players in Canada:

The way Canadians select hockey players is a beautiful example of what the Sociologist Robert Merton famously called a self-fulfilling prophesy, a situation in which a self-definition in the beginning evokes a new behavior that makes the original false conception come true. Canadians start with a false definition of who the best 9- and 10-year-old hockey players are. They are just picking the oldest every year. But the way they treat those all-stars ends up making their original false judgement look correct. As Merton puts it, “This specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophesy perpetuates a reign of error for the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning.” (Gladwell, 2008, p. 33).

This is also true at group (e.g., ethnic and sex groups) and nation levels. A good example is the phenomenon of what psychologists call stereotype threat. Members of stigmatized groups lag behind others partly because they have internalized the stereotypes. Some minorities do worse in academic and other settings merely because they expect to do worse. Their negative expectations produce stress and interfere with cognition. It is not only blacks in western countries, but also girls, disabled persons, and even older people who can also become victims of their own low expectations (Time, 2009, June 1)[21]. Unfortunately, signs of these malaises and
disorders are already observed in Ethiopia. During my brief visits in Ethiopia in 2015 I raised these questions with ordinary people and my observation then was that many feel dissatisfied or unhappy with their life but feel unable to change their situation, usually because they do not seem to realize the magnitude or systemic nature of the problem that is a deep and deadly vice. That is state-orchestrated intellectual genocide. These are subtle devastating mechanisms for a people to feel victims of their own low expectations.

For two decades or so I have been engaged in discussions of equity issues in the field of special education. My general areas of research interest are race, ethnicity, and special education. Of particular interest to me is “group-based inequalities” in scholastic achievement and minority students’ learning and development in a globalized and post-colonial world. How people view phenomena such as inclusion-exclusion and normality-deviation in the research field of special education is an area that is of great interest to me and can easily be tied into my own field of research. Surprisingly, I have been oblivious or unsuspecting and ignorant of what happened in my own country during the past 26 years, in terms of “Ethnic hierarchy”[22].

The reason I raised this matter is because while I was busy dismantling the tenets of Western racist scholars[23], my homeland is busy with divide-and-rule games and portraying one ethnic group as “gold,” as “chosen,” and as the rightful master of the nation. This nonsense politics reminds me of what we educators call The Pygmalion effect, or Rosenthal effect[24]. The Pygmalion effect, or Rosenthal effect, is the phenomenon whereby higher expectations lead to an increase in performance. The effect is named after the Greek myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor who fell in love with a statue he had carved, or alternately, after the Rosenthal–Jacobson study (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). A corollary of the Pygmalion effect is the golem effect, in which low expectations lead to a decrease in performance; both effects are forms of self-fulfilling prophecy. By the Pygmalion effect, people
internalize their positive labels, and those with positive labels succeed accordingly. The idea behind the Pygmalion effect is that increasing the leader’s expectation of the follower’s performance will result in better follower performance. Within sociology, the effect is often cited with regard to education and social class[25].

In the Ethiopian context we can relate it to the psychological phenomenon in which lower expectations placed upon individuals of ordinary citizens or those who belong to “the wrong ethnic groups” either by the political elites, managers, the new rich or the Tigreans. This effect is mostly seen and studied in educational and organizational environments, which I plan to delve into in my future work. It is a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. The only thing the rulers have for now is abundant possessions of the material wealth illegally gained, which I fear is in the process of being used to create group-based inequalities in scholastic achievement. Dimetros Birku (August 26, 2016[26]) outlined what the Tigreans should realize sooner than later. Worrisome in all this is that neither TPLF nor its base in Tigray seem to get the point that Ethiopians no longer accept any form of Tigraian chauvinism and exclusive privilege on the basis of Tigrean identity at the expense of the rest of Ethiopia. The way forward for Tigreans to reverse hate, and save themselves, is by making an informed choice between supporting Ethiopians’ quest for freedom from TPLF and its brutal repression. They need to weigh the matter with accuracy as to which one is in the long-term interest of Tigreans[27]. For antithesis, see Hanesey Kedusey (Tigrai Online, June 1, 2015)[28]: Tigreans are not “Silent”, but chauvinists chose not to hear them).

Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Manipulation: Collective Guilt Versus Individual Responsibility

As I mentioned earlier, I do not wish to delve into the details of material resource abuses, economic inequalities, corruption, military aspects, and political and institutional
intransigencies/malfunctions. I can only critically discern the overall situation prevailing in the country as “perplexing colonialism” spearheaded by the TPLF. The rulers and their allies are supposed to be Ethiopians by “standard measures.” However, most measures they take are uncharacteristic of being Ethiopian in the true sense. I presume the final goal of their measures is successively to build up “a greater Tigray” carved out of “proper Tigray” and the rest of Ethiopia in a bizarre redrawing of the country’s natural borders. At the time of writing this paper a leaked legislative document shows Oromia region is pushing for extensive rights in the capital city Addis Ababa. The draft proclamation to determine Oromia’s special interest in Addis Ababa contains tens of measures. Here are just a few examples: The official name of the city shall be Finfine; Afaan Oromo shall become “the working and official language” of Addis Ababa along with Amharic; Oromo residents of the city shall be entitled to the right to self-determination; Oromia government and Oromo residents in the city shall have priority right to use common areas such as “public squares, centers, halls, and stadiums”; the city boundary shall be determined by a mutual agreement of the city administration and Oromia state government. One wonders why now? What is the overall intention? Why not focus on policies and expectations that serve the interests of all ethnic groups, irrespective of their differences? In Quartz Africa, Gardner (July 06, 2017) maintained that “nine months into a state-of-emergency imposed to quell popular unrest, Ethiopia’s ruling party, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), has unveiled its first significant political concession. But the furor surrounding the draft bill presented to parliament last week reveals just how deep tensions in Africa’s second most populous country still run. At stake is the answer to a highly charged question: who owns Addis Ababa?” Obviously, this piece of legislation requires thorough analysis. A person without professional or specialized knowledge in the field can discern the intention of the regime, though. Ironically, this draft bill framed in
the name of restoring justice is in fact a recipe for cultural genocide. Divide-and-rule strategies and discourses of superiority have dangerous consequences sooner or later. A number of Ethiopian scholars I interviewed informally told me that the discourses in the power corridor, in some government affiliated social media and among adherent supporters of the regime, are characterized by a steady stream of derogatory remarks about the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups. Some of these remarks are retardates, feeble minded, cowardice and invertebracy (the state or quality of being without a backbone, hence, metaphorically, spinelessness). These are derogatory and disparaging terms expressed in a spiteful tone (see for a further analysis and evidence Professor Alemayehu Gebre Mariam’s recent article: Ethiopia: Rise of the “Amhara Retards” and Oromo “Criminals and Terrorists” in 2016? I actually witnessed some of these remarks hurled at me personally in an argument with ardent supporters of the TPLF at a pub in Sweden. These race-linked pejoratives expressing contempt or disapproval are a recipe for a long and protracted hatred. “Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it.” The quote is most likely due to George Santayana, and in its original form it read, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” The phrasing itself certainly is catchy. It’s a big one, not only because it is so common, but also because if it is true, and if history is ugly (hint: it is), then this saying ought to guide our public and private policy. It is hard to disagree with. Over our history, wars ended with confiscatory terms of surrender inevitably breed more wars. Revolutions that give an individual absolute power inevitably end up as brutal dictatorships. Even individuals are subject to this advice. Couples who do not learn from their fights break up. People who don’t learn from their mistakes don’t mature.

All this government orchestrated propaganda and a culture of belittling other ethnic groups will backfire. We should learn from history! The colonial changes to ethnic identity have
been explored from the political, sociological, and psychological perspectives. Ethnic manipulation manifested itself beyond the personal and internal spheres. Scott Straus from the University of Wisconsin describes the ethnic identities that partially contributed to the Rwandan genocide. In April 1994, following the assassination of Rwanda’s President Juvénal Habyarimana, Hutus of Rwanda turned on their Tutsi neighbors and slaughtered between 500,000 and 800,000 people in just 100 days. While this situation was incredibly complex politically, the influence ethnicity had on the violence cannot be ignored. Before the German colonization of Rwanda, the identities of Hutu and Tutsi were not fixed. Germany ruled Rwanda through the Tutsi dominated monarchy and the Belgians continued this following their takeover. Belgian rule reinforced the difference between Tutsi and Hutu. Tutsis were deemed superior and were propped up as a ruling minority supported by the Belgians, while the Hutu were systematically repressed. The country’s power later dramatically shifted following the so-called Hutu Revolution, during which Rwanda gained independence from their colonizers and formed a new Hutu-dominated government. Deep-seated ethnic tensions did not leave with the Belgians. Instead, the new government reinforced the cleavage. Clearly the responsibility lies with the elites. Fearon and Laitin (2000) found considerable evidence linking strategic aspects of ethnic identity construction to violence and more limited evidence implicating discursive systems. The most common narrative in these texts analyzed by the authors has largescale ethnic violence provoked by elites, often motivated by intra-ethnic conflicts. Followers follow, despite the costs, out of increased fear of thugs and armies “let go” by elites (both the other side’s and their “own”) and often in pursuit of local grievances that may have little ethnic component. Several other mechanisms are also discussed, including the role of discursive systems in conditioning publics for violence and the role of violent efforts to enforce “everyday primordialism” by policing supposedly
primordial ethnic boundaries (Ibid). The noted political scientist, Hannah Arendt, whose book Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, caused heated controversy throughout the intellectual world, wrote on “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship.” That specific book and a number of her articles in The New Yorker dwell on the topic from a philosophical perspective. Hannah Arendt referred to the post-war climate in Germany–where those personally innocent during the Nazi period all admitted to their “collective guilt” while the real criminals showed no remorse as “the quintessence of moral confusion” (Arendt, 1987). The concept of collective guilt, as opposed to individual guilt, is “senseless,” Mrs. Arendt said, and only serves as an effective “whitewash” for guilty individuals to hide behind. I raise this point because I would like to reflect on the consciousness of the TPLF supporters including the Tigreans. I am sure all of them do not support the regime. I want to believe that they also live under fear and control. Of course there is a great deal of brainwashing. I am sure all do not benefit from the new opportunities. That is what I want to believe, although some of my respondents tell me different discourses. However, my position is that it is not right to collectively blame an entire group because members of the group commit genocide or massacre or show indifference to the plight of others. Legal analysts and philosophers still argue about the phenomenon of collective guilt. The English dictionary defines collective guilt as defining guilt that is shared by a group of people over an act or actions that are seen as shameful. It is not talked about, but does manifest. For instance, Afrikaners of South Africa have a collective guilt over Apartheid. So do the Germans on the Holocaust. In this regard it is probably high time to hear voices such as “Not In My Name”, from the ethnic Tigreans. The phenomenon of collective responsibility also known as collective guilt is highly a contentious matter in the Ethiopian context. Are the Tigreans responsible for the actions of TPLF; by tolerating, ignoring, or harboring them,
or actively collaborating in these actions? The practice of blaming the Jews for Jesus’ death is the longest example of collective responsibility. In this case, the blame was cast not only on the Jews of the time but upon successive generations. This comes from Matthew 27:25-66 New International Version (NIV) 25: “All the people answered, ‘His blood is on us and on our children!’”. This collectivist idea that groups of humans can bear guilt above and beyond the guilt of individual members, and hence individuals hold responsibility for what other members of their group have done, even if they themselves didn’t do this, is problematic in my view. However, at least a symbolic resistance or some form of manifestation is morally expected from the Tigran people and their civil societies because the crime is being committed in their names. If they do not ally with oppressed segments of the Ethiopian population, history will judge them. One expects some form of dissent or disagreement with the methods, goals, and policies of the political party and government.

Finally, this is a wakeup call for the Tigreans as these are matters of very real and growing concern to people living in Ethiopia and beyond. Nonetheless, all Tigreans should not be held collectively responsible for the crimes of their elites; however, they have a moral responsibility. The key components of the basic notion of moral responsibility, as David Risser[29] accurately captured, are deeply rooted in the fabric of every society and are constitutive of social life. Without some conception of moral responsibility, no amount of imaginative insight will render a society recognizable as a human society. While there is broad, often tacit, agreement regarding the basic model of moral responsibility as it applies to individuals, there is considerable debate about how this notion might be applied to groups and their members. Professor Girma Berhanu teaches at University of Gothenburg, Sweden. He can be reached at Girma.Berhanu@ped.gu.se

[1]TPLF is the main and most powerful party within
the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the so-called ruling political coalition which consists of four political parties. The TPLF-backed Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front took power after the collapse of the Derg in 1991.


[4] The recent history of the concept of inner or ‘internal’ colonialism began in the 1960s when it was used both to describe the status of African-Americans in the United States, as well as that of Québécois in Canada. In 1975, Michael Hechter’s book made the term more fashionable, and strongly associated the concept with his definition of a ‘cultural division of labor’ developed through his study of Britain’s ‘Celtic fringe’. See M. Hechter, Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966 (Berkeley, 1975). It was also in 1975 that the Dene Nation in northern Canada issued its declaration that it was indeed an ‘internal colony’ of Canada. By 1979, a special issue of Ethnic and Racial Studies was devoted to the concept, and included an article on Quebec: K. McRoberts, ‘Internal colonialism: the case of Québec’, Ethnic and Racial Studies, ii (1979), 293–318. The late 1970s, however, signaled the high point in the career of ‘internal colonialism’ as a category of analysis, and by 1984 Robert Hind dismissed these various studies as ‘offering too many explanations, and making too many deductions in an ad hoc or an ex post facto manner. … [They] imply an improbable degree of cohesion and identity amongst specific social groups, and they oversimplify complex social structures and relationships. … Their nature is such that they tend to assert or assume that which they are endeavoring to demonstrate or prove, a practice which leads to intellectual incoherence and a distortion of historical


For my purpose, I use ethnicity and race interchangeably. There are of course some conceptual differences.


I will get back to this issue in my final report. The late prime minister Melese Zenawi who belongs to the same ethnic group as the General expressed similar positions and propaganda in public which by many viewed as “racist” discourse.


Time (2009, June 1). Why your memory may not be so bad after all. New data on how internalizing stereotypes affects boomers (By John Cloud).

Intelligence by Satoshi Kanazawa (2008) In Educational review.


[26] TPLF created a Tigrean psychological image – one that paints Tigreans (or tegaru as they call it) as invincible, hardworking and valorous while the rest of Ethiopians are painted in light of all forms of derogatory attributes - including coward. The late Meles Zenawi, for example, told a stadium full of crowed in Tigray that Tigryean are (note the implied us and other here) golden people. And apparently majority of Tigreans seem to have believed the new TPLF manufactured images of themselves and other Ethiopians. Perhaps it is even possible to find a good number of Tigreans who tend to think that the world revolves around TPLF, that TPLF is benevolent and that Ethiopians owe TPLF praise and support. Also, ample circumstantial evidences seem to exist that suggest TPLF worked hard to make the rest of Ethiopians believe in the narrative but to no avail.


[29] Risser, David T., “Power and Collective Responsibility.”